

Rejecting “His” Food: An Animal Ecofeminist and Eco-Deconstructive Reading of Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* (2007)

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the sexual politics woven into the dietary choices in Han Kang’s novel, The Vegetarian (2007). It unveils how these culinary preferences reflect the complex social dynamics among characters. The novel focuses on one woman’s transformative shift to vegetarianism and its effects on her relationships. Utilising Jacques Derrida’s eco-deconstructive theory and ecofeminist perspectives, the study reveals how dietary choices shape gender and power relations. That is, eating transcends mere preference, becoming a battleground for sexual politics. Male characters are deeply rooted in a carnophallogocentric mindset, raising consciousness on how they attempt to dominate women and animals alike. In this patriarchal framework, meat consumption symbolises hierarchical control. This paper concludes by arguing that the narrative is a call to view eating as a commentary on the intersected issues of gender, power, and identity in societies, generally marked by exploitation and subjugation.

Keywords: Animal ecofeminism; carnophallogocentrism; patriarchy; South Korean literature; vegetarianism

INTRODUCTION

This study analyses the social dynamics in Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*, based on the premise that cultures, identities, and choices are almost always connected with the complex interplay of human relationships with nature. First, the text is chosen as her work transcends storytelling, examining the essence of existence and the forces that both unite and divide people, and second, due to her recent accolade, the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature, which bolsters her position as an accomplished writer. Central to this investigation is the hypothesis that dietary choices significantly influence social interactions. The novel illustrates the consequences when a woman challenges patriarchal norms by rejecting meat consumption, which might result in both personal and societal crises. Specifically, this paper aims to deconstruct the interconnected dynamics of family structure, cultural norms, and gender roles in the novel, demonstrating how defiance against culinary tradition generally destabilises established power relations, disrupts familial bonds, and precipitates broader social turmoil. This paper hopes to continue the dialogue that a woman’s radical food choice challenges the foundations of identity and belonging within a conformist society. Meat, in this context, symbolises social status and male identity because it intersects with issues of masculinity and systemic oppression faced by women and animals. According to Carol Adams (2010), meat is a “symbol and celebration of male dominance,” and the rejection of meat consumption may “threaten the structure of the larger patriarchal culture” (Adams, 2010, p. 62). Seen in one way, Han’s novel stands as a cry of eco-resistance against patriarchy. It tells a story of a woman who metamorphoses into a plant as can be seen in, “roots are sprouting out of my bands. . . they delve down into the earth. [...] I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch, I spread them wide” (Han, 2007/2015, p. 133). Against the oppression of a violent patriarchal system, Yeong-hye’s resistance seeks to shatter the cycle of patriarchal abuse by

gradually beginning to mimic a plant. By examining characters' reactions to this dietary shift, the study reveals layers of conflict, alienation, and transformation.

Scholarship on Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* interrogates the novel's thematic preoccupations with trauma, gender, and resistance, as well as its innovative narrative structure and sociopolitical critique situated within contemporary South Korean society (Ahn, 2024; Carretero-González, 2019). The novel's fusion of realism and surrealism foregrounds the protagonist Yeong-hye's radical refusal of meat as a challenge to patriarchal and anthropocentric norms. Some scholars interpret her act as both feminist and ecofeminist resistance against the "carno-phallogocentric" order (Al-Bayomy, 2020; Casey, 2020; Kim, 2019; Mayo, 2021; Sands, 2023). Ecofeminist readings further position Yeong-hye's bodily and psychological disintegration as abjection. Such readings transform the female protagonist into both a site of suffering and a vehicle for transgression (Nie & Kaur, 2025). To this end, the novel's tripartite structure, narrated through multiple perspectives, facilitates a discerning exploration of trauma as both individual and collective, reflecting broader historical and social wounds (Hameed et al., 2025; Nie & Kaur, 2025).

Critics emphasise the novel's critique of rigid gender roles and the subjugation of women in Korean society, with Yeong-hye's so-called madness read as an act of resistance to dehumanisation (Rogers, 2023). The narrative's disruption of linearity and blending of reality and fantasy mirror the psychological fragmentation experienced by characters. This reinforces themes of trauma and resistance while destabilising conventional notions of identity and social order (Hameed et al., 2025). While extensive scholarship addresses feminist, posthumanist, and trauma perspectives (Stobie, 2018), few studies have engaged with animal ecofeminism, and none have yet examined the novel through an eco-deconstructive lens. By advancing the aforementioned premises posited at the beginning of this paper, it is argued that *The Vegetarian* remains a significant work that continues to inspire critical debate in world literature.

The study aligns with "animal ecofeminism," or "vegetarian ecofeminism", which seeks "to identify the interrelated oppression of women and animals" (Adams, 2010, p. 20). It posits that "the domination of the rest of nature is linked to the domination of women and that both dominations must be eradicated" (Adams, 2018, pp. 71-2). Gaard (2017) discusses this type of ecofeminism, forming a standpoint that "centres other animal species, makes connections among diverse forms of oppression, and seeks to put an end to animal suffering" (Gaard, 2017, p. 35). In addition, Sangeetha and Rathna (2021) note that ecofeminists study "the subjugation and exploitation of women and nature, homogeneity in the traits manifested by them and similarity in the plight of women and nature under various contexts [...] such as race, class, caste, and so on" (Sangeetha & Rathna, 2021, p. 160). Moreover, it shifts discussion "away from traditional approaches to inter-animal conflicts focused on falsely dualistic dilemmas and truncated narratives" (Emmerman, 2022, p. 182). In the same vein, Lori Gruen (2015) advocates for a redefined relationship with animals through "entangled empathy" to "make the world a better place for all animals, human and nonhuman alike" (Gruen, 2015, p. 4). Adams (2010) finds that women's power depends upon plant-based economies while male power centres around animal-based economies (Adams, 2010, p. 59). Therefore, animal ecofeminism adopts a non-anthropocentric approach "whereby both human and nonhuman animals find themselves as crime victims" (Boonthavevej, 2021, p. 67).

The very act of rejecting meat consumption becomes a powerful rebellion against a deep-rooted ideological framework that perpetuates the subjugation of these marginalised entities. From this foundational perspective, one can embark on a critical examination of the

carnophallogocentrism, a term crafted by Jacques Derrida to articulate the worldview of those in positions of dominance—individuals whose authority and hegemony are inextricably linked to their carnivorous practices. Within the narrative of *The Vegetarian* (2007), this paradigm is vividly embodied in the characters of the protagonist's father and husband, whose authoritarian and hegemonic traits and adherence to meat consumption serve as a microcosm of the broader societal dynamics at play. The analysis shall illuminate the interplay between these figures, revealing how their actions and beliefs encapsulate the pervasive influence of carnophallogocentrism and its implications for both gender and animal rights.

AN ANIMAL ECOFEMINIST TRIPTYCH

The Vegetarian (2007) is a remarkable work by the South Korean novelist, Han Kang. Han is celebrated as a leading voice in the literary arena of modern Korean literature. She skilfully explores the intricate journeys of solitude that women face. Her narratives navigate the fine line between harsh realism and the uncanny, weaving together elements of the surreal. Each story unfolds like a dream, drawing readers into a world where the familiar becomes strange. Han's mastery lies in her ability to illuminate the profound complexities of women's experiences, revealing both their struggles and their strength. Often lauded as part of a vanguard of writers who "openly turned their attention to describing women's lives in contemporary society" (Elfving-Hwang, 2010, p. 1). In her narrative, she questions the intimate landscapes of female existence within modern Korean society. She boldly challenges the deep-rooted patriarchal structures that seek to confine and define women.

Han's remarkable oeuvre has gained international acclaim as she received the prestigious Man Booker International Prize in 2016 and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2024. These prizes assure her profound impact and universal resonance. *The Vegetarian* (2007) is composed of three parts that render it a novel with a unique and evocative format. It intricately interweaves three distinct narratives in three parts—"The Vegetarian", "The Mongolian Mark", and "Flaming Trees"—each capable of standing alone as novellas yet enriched by their interconnections. Through this innovative structure, Han invites readers to explore the multifaceted experiences of her female characters. She illuminates the complexities of women's identity, desire, and the struggle for autonomy in a world that often seeks to suppress them. In this paper, the intricate narratives of Han Kang's novel will be analysed to reveal the layered complexities of identity, autonomy, and societal structures. The analysis illuminates the effect of the individual dietary choice on the collective expectation of the patriarchal society. Each part within this triptych intricately unfolds the broad effects of Kim Yeong-hye's embrace of vegetarianism. This decision has an impact on her life and the lives of those around her.

The first part, "The Vegetarian", serves as a crucible for the most striking societal reactions to the protagonist's radical dietary choices. Within this part, the pivotal moments of Yeong-hye's metamorphosis—her resolute renunciation of all animal-derived products are disclosed. She renounces not only meat but also eggs, milk, and leather. This transformation is emotionally chronicled through the eyes of her husband, Mr. Cheong. Mr. Cheong is a young executive whose authoritarian and emotionally frigid disposition renders him utterly incapable of grasping the depths of Yeong-hye's convictions. His desperate attempts to impose control over her autonomy catalyse a profound crisis not just for the couple, but for the entire family.

The subsequent part, “The Mongolian Mark”, the narrative focus follows Yeong-hye's brother-in-law, who is married to her older sister In-hye, in the third person. The brother-in-law, who is not named, develops a sexual obsession with Yeong-hye when he learns that she has a Mongolian mark on her buttocks. The brother-in-law is an artist supported by his wife, a contrast to Yeong-hye's husband, who works in an office. Unlike Mr. Cheong, the brother-in-law sees Yeong-hye as someone special, valuing her nonconformity with social standards. However, the outcome is not very different, as the brother-in-law, unable to recognise her as an agent, objectifies her and transforms her struggle against standards into a sexual fetish. Yeong-hye has no sexual interest in her brother-in-law, but only in the plants that he painted on the body of a colleague. Yeong-hye remains quiet and impassive during sex. She completely ignores the apology and immediately asks to turn on the light. This is because until now the lights had been off, but for her, all that matters is seeing the flowers painted on their bodies. The protagonist asks to turn on the light instead of responding to her brother-in-law, demonstrating her disinterest in the sexual act and her eagerness to see the body paint right away.

In the third and final part of the book, “Flaming Trees”, the point of view of the narrative shifts to In-hye, Yeong-hye's older sister. Unlike her sister, In-hye has always been appreciated by everyone for her femininity, her domestic skills, and her ability to earn money. She, who owns a cosmetics store and provides financial support for her family, is constantly associated with makeup and even plastic surgery. However, in this part, we see her profoundly changed by her experience with her sister. Through her eyes, we follow a very physically and mentally weakened Yeong-hye who has decided not only to stop eating meat, but to stop eating altogether. Admitted to a mental hospital paid for by In-hye, who is the only one in the family who has not abandoned her, Yeong-hye says she wants to become a tree, and plants banana trees, hoping that roots will grow from her hands and flowers from her crotch. Over time, Yeong-hye even stops talking, but she still resists the nurses who try to feed her with determination. Zolkos (2019) states that while the other two point-of-view characters (Mr. Cheong and his brother-in-law) seek to appropriate Yeong-hye out of patriarchal desire, In-hye's “attitude is that of care and unconditional fidelity to Yeong-hye” (Zolkos, 2019, p. 109).

PATRIARCHAL EXPECTATIONS: A BREADWINNER AND A HOUSEWIFE

One of the principal themes of Han's novel is the clash between the traditional patriarchal male and the avant-garde vegetarian female. This conflict is vividly expressed through Yeong-hye's decision to forsake the consumption of meat, milk, and eggs. This decision is juxtaposed against her family's fervent attempts to reverse her choice. In a patriarchal society, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism emerges not merely as a challenge to dietary norms but as an affront to male dominance. According to Adams (2010), vegetarianism is “a rebellion against dominant culture [...] It resists the structure of the absent referent, which renders both women and animals as objects” (Adams, 2010, p. 217). The narrative structure further illuminates the immense pressure bearing down upon Yeong-hye. “The Vegetarian” is narrated in the first person, with Mr. Cheong's voice guiding the reader through the tumult. Drawing upon Altman's (2008) narrative focus analysis, one can assert that Mr. Cheong serves as a protagonist-narrator, actively participating in the very story he recounts. Moreover, Mr. Cheong's tone is interpretive, as he consciously colours the facts with his subjective perspective: “In first-person narration, single-focus longing for self-creation is mirrored by a desire to tell one's own story, listing accomplishments or confessing

faults as markers of individuality” (Altman, 2008, p. 121). To illustrate this point, one may examine his words at the very beginning of the first part in which he describes his wife: “Before my wife turned vegetarian, I’d always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way [...] her timid, sallow aspect told me all I needed to know” (Han, 2007/2015, p. 12).

The impression Mr. Cheong seeks to convey is that Yeong-hye is an austere woman, lacking in sophistication and exuberance. His discourse aims to portray her as devoid of any remarkable traits: her stature is unworthy of specification, as is her hair. She is described as “timid” and “sallow” to indicate the depths of Yeong-hye’s devaluation—so insignificant is her appearance that even her personal aspect merits no note. It is noteworthy that this absence of colour is attributed to an alleged timidity in expressing style or personality. In other words, characteristics such as inelegance, mediocrity, and insignificance would likely be employed by Mr. Cheong to depict his wife.

The essence of their marriage stems from a shared sentiment of insignificance. Mr. Cheong employs no language that conveys affection, gratitude, or love for Yeong-hye; indeed, his view of their union is more accurately characterised as utilitarian. After five years of marriage, he observes, “since we were never madly in love to begin with, we were able to avoid falling into that stage of weariness and boredom” (Han, 2007/2015, p. 14). He expresses disdain for excess and reveals how this principle has governed both his personal and professional life: as a child, he dominated younger boys; as an adult, he settled into a job that ensured a modest income. Consequently, “In keeping with my expectations, she made for a completely ordinary wife who went about things without any distasteful frivolousness.” (Han, 2007/2015, p.13). From Mr. Cheong’s perspective, it can be asserted that, in this context, marriage represents a social contract benefiting the man, who, being viewed as the provider of household resources, cannot—and should not—engage in domestic duties. According to Luna and Herrick (2019), in the stereotypical image of patriarchal marriage, “men hold primary power in family, government, religion and society. Women do not. It’s just locker room talk” (Luna & Herrick, 2019, p. 25). This status creates a sense of power imbalance between men and women. This image gives the right for men to mistreat women and to consider them non-significant others. This idea is underscored by Mr. Cheong’s assertion that Yeong-hye rises each day before him to prepare his breakfast. He further claims that his wife contributes to their expenses through what he refers to as “sub-contracted,” implying that, beyond her domestic responsibilities, she undertakes external work. This suggests that Yeong-hye is a burdened individual. In any case, not even this reality seems to incite a change in Mr. Cheong, as he regards his wife’s labour with a degree of contempt.

VEGETARIANISM: A DREAM AND A RESISTANCE

The vegetarianism of Yeong-hye initiates the rift that emerges between her, her husband, and her family. The first to perceive this patriarchy-resistant transformation is Mr. Cheong. One fateful night, he notices that Yeong-hye is not in bed. Then, he discovers her obsession with the refrigerator. She is in a catatonic state, as she is awake but does not seem to respond to other people. She justifies her peculiar behaviour as a consequence of a dream. The following morning, Mr. Cheong discovers her bent over near the refrigerator. She is nestled among plastic bags, all filled with thrown-away meat. When he asks her about her actions, she responds briefly: “I had a dream” (Han, 2007/2015, p. 18). Mr. Cheong, bewildered, concludes that “Have you lost your mind?” (Han, 2007/2015, p. 18). The reader gains insight into Yeong-hye’s dreams through

interludes scattered throughout the narrative, each distinctly set apart by being rendered entirely in italics. These interludes grant voice to Yeong-hye, free from the silencing influence of Mr. Cheong, the protagonist-narrator: “*Dark woods. No people. The sharp-pointed leaves on the trees, my torn feet. This place, almost remembered, but I'm lost now. Frightened. Cold*” (Han, 2007/2015, p. 19; italics in the original).

The manner in which the narrative unfolds captures the fantastical moments characteristic of dreams. It embodies a stream of consciousness technique by which “the author attempts to give a direct quotation of the mind, not merely of the language area but of the whole consciousness” (Bowling, 1968, p. 364). In the narrative, Yeong-hye recounts her experiences in a successive flow. Her stream of consciousness manifests as a free indirect discourse, marked by the absence of the author's interference. According to Bowling (1968), the framework of the stream of consciousness technique “introduces us directly into the interior life of the character, without any intervention by way of comment or explanation on the part of the author” (Bowling, 1968, p. 364). Moreover, Yeong-hye's thoughts proceed in an associative manner, rather than a logical sequence. As the character gradually loses her grip on reality, these narratives begin to weave in impressions from her day-to-day life, alongside vivid recollections.

It is worth noting that the device of dreams is used as a “parallel narrative” (Glinski, 2012, p.131). These narratives are rich with metaphors that reflect Yeong-hye's personal metamorphosis. Her dreams present a world that has its own rules and narrative. Her vegetarian dream creates a parallel universe that gives a voice to oppressed consciousness and helps her to find an alternative path resistant to patriarchy. It is crucial to assert that Yeong-hye's rationale for embracing vegetarianism is intricately linked to her dreams, which haunt her with vivid images of bloodied bodies, knives, and violence. Her dreams incite an overwhelming revulsion towards the consumption of meat.

Yeong-hye's metamorphosis generates a great crisis. It lays bare the oppressive forces that overpower her. By opting for a meat-free existence, she clashes fiercely with her family, husband and patriarchal society. In a patriarchal world, “Meat eating measures individual and societal virility” (Adams, 2010, p. 48). Therefore, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism “acts as a sign of disease with patriarchal culture” (Adams, 2010, p. 217). Her dietary choice is met with resistance and hostility from those she loves. These conflicts expose the shadows lurking within their relationships. The tension reveals deeper truths. Her struggle highlights the discomfort of conformity. Each confrontation unveils the harsh realities of their interconnected lives. Yeong-hye stands alone, a beacon of defiance in a society that demands compliance. The opposition to vegetarianism begins with Mr. Cheong. As the narrator, it is through his lens that we perceive the unfolding events. Thus, he shapes them according to his patriarchal worldview.

As previously noted, Mr. Cheong harbours no affectionate sentiments toward his wife. He perceives her more as a domestic servant: “‘This is unbelievable. You're telling me not to eat meat? I couldn't let those things stay in the fridge. It wouldn't be right’ (Han, 2007/2015, p. 21). This recounts a particular evening when Mr. Cheong returns from work, only to find the dinner table set with dishes composed solely of grains and vegetables. There is no meat or dairy on the table. Deeply unsettled, he rises to inspect the refrigerator. Upon discovering that Yeong-hye has discarded all the meat, he requests that she fry him an egg instead. This situation may seem ordinary and innocuous. However, it reveals man's request for a woman's submissiveness. Yeong-hye has prepared an entire dinner consisting of “[...] lettuce and soybean paste, plain seaweed soup without the usual beef or clams, and kimchi” (Han, 2007/2015, p. 20). Mr. Cheong ignores her efforts and demands an egg as a supplement to what he deems inadequate: “‘Just make

me some fried eggs. I'm really tired today. I didn't even get to have a proper lunch" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 21). In other words, Mr. Cheong overlooks Yeong-hye's own fatigue. He presumes his weariness to outweigh hers. Thus, he expects her to abandon her meal to prepare him an egg. The absurdity of the situation is starkly illuminated through his reflections; not only does he entirely disregard Yeong-hye's desires, but he also characterises her as "so self-centred" and her expression "of cool self-possession" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 21).

In different traditions and cultures, meat is associated with male sexual desire. It is believed in myth and tradition that the "bull god represented great strength and virility and the masculine passion for war and subjugation" (Rifkin, 1992, p. 9). Moreover, it is also believed that "the blood flowing through red meat confers 'strength, aggression, passion and sexuality', all virtues coveted among beef-eating people" (Rifkin, 1992, p. 239). In the novel, after killing the dog, the meat is served to Yeong-hye, in the belief that: "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. No, in fact I ate an entire bowlful with rice" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 49). Therefore, there is an association between meat and masculine energy, specifically in Korean culture and the consumption of dog meat.

Another aspect of the relationship between meat and patriarchy/masculine energy is that, combined with the duty of women to prepare meals, if a woman does not prepare meat for her husband, she is denying him her own masculinity (Kim, 2019, p. 6). This makes Yeong-hye's vegetarianism especially shocking to her family, which is why her mother and father are so ashamed and guilty towards their daughter's husband. Mr. Cheong complains to his mother-in-law about his wife's vegetarianism: "And what's more, she's even imposed this ridiculous diet on me—I can't remember the last time I tasted meat in this house" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 34). Upon hearing this story, the mother-in-law was shocked. Mr. Cheong blames his wife for the lack of meat in his diet and implies that he is unhappy with her for this reason. The mother-in-law's indignation can be explained not by the fact that Mr. Cheong does not eat meat because he did not want to, but because of his wife.

Yeong-hye's decision to stop eating meat in *The Vegetarian* operates as a complex ecofeminist gesture that transcends mere dietary preference. Rooted in a dream, her vegetarianism emerges as a visionary act—one that not only resists patriarchal and familial control but also gestures toward alternative, embodied ways of being in the world. This refusal can be read as an assertion of agency over her own body and an ethical stance that aligns with ecofeminist principles of care, multispecies justice, and embodied ethics. By rejecting meat, Yeong-hye disrupts the carno-phallogocentric order. She refuses complicity in systems of domination over both women and animals. Moreover, her insistence that her husband also abstain from meat complicates the narrative. This suggests that resistance itself can blur into control, and that the politics of food are deeply entangled with questions of power and relationality. Thus, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism functions not only as an act of resistance but also as a catalyst for transformation and a site of tension. It opens up possibilities for reimagining subjectivity, care, and justice. Meanwhile, it exposes the ambiguities and potential pitfalls of embodying such resistance within oppressive structures.

THE CARNOPHALLOGOCENTRIC PARADIGM

Jacques Derrida's animal philosophy introduces a concept rarely explored: carnophallogocentrism. This concept is complex as it interweaves three concepts together: carnivorism, phallogocentrism, and logocentrism. Adams and Calarco (2017) explores each term based on Derrida's theory. For him, "carnivorism" is anthropocentric as it involves "a quintessentially human, animal-flesh-eating subject" (Adams & Calarco, 2017, p. 33). Phallogocentrism, in turn, is androcentric as it focuses on "the quintessentially virile and masculine aspects" in Western conceptions of subjectivity (Adams & Calarco, 2017, p. 33). The third term, logocentrism, involves the "privileges and priorities granted by Western philosophy to the rational, self-aware, self-present, speaking subject" (Adams & Calarco, 2017, p. 45). The strength of the term, carnophallogocentrism, lies in the notion that forms of domination—political violence, sexism, and speciesism—are inseparable. This intersectionality helps us grasp Derrida's animal philosophy, aiming to dismantle all manifestations of political and symbolic violence against animals. Derrida's philosophy examines not just what humans do to animals, but what animals—perhaps called "beasts" to set them apart—do to humans. This understanding hinges on his exploration of the paradigm, which is inseparably linked to the animal question. Derrida (2008) suggests that with animals, "the deconstruction of 'logocentrism' had, for necessary reasons, to be developed over the years as deconstruction of 'phallogocentrism,' then of 'carnophallogocentrism'" (Derrida, 2008, p. 104).

The carnophallogocentric paradigm is described by Derrida (1991) as an "interiorisation of the phallus [...] through the mouth, whether it's a matter of words or of things, of sentences, of daily bread or wine, of the tongue, the lips, or the breast of the other" (Derrida, 1991, p. 113). This paradigm is an important basis of patriarchal society. Kim (2019) argues that those who see the ideology of meat consumption as a 'cultural reality' are seriously threatened by Yeong-hye who proposes to unveil such ideology as in fact a "cultural fiction" (Kim, 2019, p. 3). In this reactionary logic, "the body of animals and women both become the object of consumption and exploitation" and "women are lumps of meat" (Kim, 2019, p. 6). Another notable characteristic of the carnophallogocentric subject is the tendency to dominate nature: "The subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh" (Derrida, 1991, p. 114). Carnophallogocentrism springs from two interwoven concepts: logocentrism and phallogocentrism, which point to the dominance of the logos and the father. This justifies the supremacy of the male human through patriarchal attitudes, the possession of reason (the word), and the sacrifice of the other, the animal. According to Adams and Calarco (2017), Derrida uses carnophallogocentrism "to name the primary social, linguistic, and material practices that go into becoming a subject within the West and how explicit carnivorism lies at the heart of classical notions of subjectivity, especially male subjectivity" (Adams & Calarco, 2017, p. 33). Derrida shows that, to be recognised as a full subject, one must be a carnivorous male and possess an authoritarian ego that speaks.

Derrida's (1991) carnophallogocentrism, thus, critiques meat-eating, masculine subjectivity, and rationalist discourse. Meanwhile, it can productively analyse patriarchal domination in *The Vegetarian* (Kim, 2019) but risks "unexamined imperialism" if applied uncritically to Korean contexts (Spivak, 1987). Korean subjectivity is shaped by "the Confucian tradition, the colonial legacy, and the internecine civil war" (Moon, 2002, p. 91). Chong (2006) points out that women's involvement in the Korean context "is a reaction to the problems generated by the forces of modernity and sociocultural transformations across societies, especially those affecting family and gender relations" (Chong, 2006, pp. 699-700). The Korean subjectivity

diverges from Western individualism. It necessitates careful contextualisation. Adapting the framework to address Korean Confucian collectivism and intergenerational dynamics avoids theoretical overreach and foregrounds the novel's unique contributions to global discourse.

MR. CHEONG: A CARNOPHALLOGOCENTRIC HUSBAND

In Han's narrative, Mr. Cheong embodies the archetype of the carnophallogocentric male—authoritative, meat-consuming, and dismissive of Yeong-hye's vegetarianism. He adamantly opposes her choices, viewing her reluctance as mere obstinacy: "it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as mine had done" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 22). This disdain reflects a worldview that marginalises women's autonomy. Warren (1997) asserts that "language which feminises nature in a (patriarchal) culture where women are viewed as subordinate... reinforces and authorises the domination of nature" (Warren, 1997, p. 12). Cheong's carnophallogocentrism transcends dietary habits, manifesting in knowledge monopolisation and the silencing of perceived inferiors. At a couple's dinner, he believes Yeong-hye's quietness will benefit him, rationalising, "there's nothing wrong with keeping quiet; after all, hadn't women traditionally been expected to be demure?" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 28). Yet, discomfort arises when her vegetarianism becomes a topic of scrutiny, and as she attempts to articulate her motivations — "I had a dream"—he silences her, appropriating her narrative instead (Han, 2007/2015, p. 31).

Cheong's dominance is palpable, driven by his obsession with both meat and control over Yeong-hye. His perspective aligns with a phallic rationale, where femininity is subordinated: "Authority and autonomy...are attributed to the man...rather than to the woman" (Derrida, 1991, p. 114). Yeong-hye's refusal of meat disturbs him, challenging the patriarchal norms he upholds. Her abstinence signifies a rejection of the societal hierarchy that equates meat with masculinity, making her a threat to his status (Adams, 2010, pp. 25-6). Cheong's insistence on meat reflects his belief in its association with strength, as he views his wife's vegetarianism as a challenge to his masculinity (Adams, 2010, p. 57). This extends to his treatment of women as mere objects for gratification. His gaze fixates on In-hye, his sister-in-law, whom he objectifies, equating her physicality with his ideals of femininity (Han, 2007/2015, p. 35).

The violence of Cheong's carnophallogocentrism culminates in sexual domination. He recounts a brutal encounter with Yeong-hye, where he overpowers her, drawn to her resistance (Han, 2007/2015, p. 38). This act symbolises a deeper cultural violence against women, linking sexual dominance with consumption (Adams, 2010, pp. 65-6). Yeong-hye's suicide attempt, prompted by her father's coercion to consume meat, further alienates her from Cheong, who views her as a burden rather than a partner: "I would no longer have to look at this woman" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 52). His transition from calling her "my wife" to "this woman" signifies his contempt and the dissolution of their marital bond. Ultimately, when Yeong-hye lies incapacitated, Cheong's primary concern is his reputation, demonstrating his abandonment of her when she no longer fulfils his needs.

YEONG-HYE'S FATHER: A CARNOPHALLOGOCENTRIC FATHER

Yeong-hye's father stands as another carnophallogocentric subject. Yeong-hye's childhood memory of her father's killing of a dog that had bitten her and then serving it as dinner is central to the protagonist's trauma. According to Kim (2019), "Yeong-hye is a victim of meat-eating culture and her refusal to eat meat is caused by her trauma of being forced by adults to eat dog

meat when she was a child" (Kim, 2019, p. 4). The scene also explores the relationship between carnivorism and patriarchal power. Based on the theory of Monteiro et al. (2017), Kim points out that the attitude of Yeong-hye's father in torturing the dog and killing it with exquisite cruelty is an example of "carnistic domination". This kind of domination is "a more hostile, hierarchy-enhancing category of carnistic beliefs than the carnistic defence which provides justification for meat consumption" (Kim, 2019, p. 5). Within this ideology, there is a need to violently perpetuate the established hierarchy. This can be seen in the comment made by Yeong-hye's mother, who is worried about her daughter: "Stop eating meat, and the world will devour you whole" (Han, 2007/2015, pp. 55-6).

The violence inherent in the social hierarchy becomes glaringly apparent when Yeong-hye defies her father and rejects eating meat: "Father, I do not eat meat" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 46). He embodies patriarchal authority: a man, a war hero, a patriarch. The slap he delivers to Yeong-hye's face underscores his authoritarian ego's inability to tolerate any actions he deems transgressive. Much like Mr. Cheong, he refuses to acknowledge or even hear his daughter's reasoning. Enraged, he demands that they restrain her while he attempts to force-feed her: "her father, the Vietnam War hero, had actually struck his rebellious daughter in the face and physically forced a lump of meat into her mouth" (Han, 2007/2015, pp. 73-4). The patriarchs practice hierarchical violence, whether towards animals or towards women. Such violence is present within the family that seeks to maintain patriarchal power. In the protagonist's family, this power emanates from the figure of her father, a very violent man. He is described in Korean and in the translations as follows: "It shocked me to hear this patriarchal man apologise—in the five years I'd known him, I'd never once heard such words pass his lips. Shame and empathy just didn't suit him" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 37). This happens when the father-in-law, after being informed that Yeong-hye refused to eat or cook meat, calls Mr. Cheong and apologises. Mr. Cheong is surprised because he thinks that apologising does not suit his father-in-law. Yeong-hye's father is a patriarchal man who is very authoritarian. Then, Mr. Cheong thinks of other facts that corroborate his surprise: his father-in-law is a Vietnam War veteran who boasts of having killed seven Vietcong, and he was an extremely abusive father who beat Yeong-hye with a cane until she was seventeen years old. The use of the word "patriarchal" to refer to the male head of the family signifies the systemic oppression and a social order that goes beyond the personal characteristics of the character in question. The word describes the father-in-law's attitudes and connects them to a social order. In this sense, the reader can connect the father-in-law's attitudes with systemic behaviours in patriarchal society.

Mr. Cheong seems to respect his father-in-law for his aggressive and authoritarian behaviour, and in turn reproduces violence. At the beginning of the novel, he shows indifference towards his wife's personal life, ideas and feelings, and delegates all the housework to her. Through Yeong-hye's stream of consciousness, it is discovered that aggressive and impatient words are recurrent on her husband's part, which greatly bothers her. Soon, this violence intensified when the woman became insubordinate by becoming a vegetarian, culminating in episodes of marital rape. At the climax of the first part, the father forces Yeong-hye to eat meat in an act analogous to rape. The father "thrust the pork at my wife's lips. A moaning sound came from her tightly closed mouth [...] My father-in-law mashed the pork to a pulp on my wife's lips as she struggled in agony" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 47). This situation can be interpreted in terms of sexual rape. The phrase "a moaning sound" is suggestive as it strongly describes the sound that Yeong-hye makes when she is unable to open her mouth. In this context, there is a very disgusting sexual connotation. As a result of her father's aggression, Yeong-hye becomes animalistic: "my wife growled and spat out the meat. An animal cry of distress burst from her lips" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 47). The phrase,

"growled and spat out the meat," conveys the idea of an animal sound. Finally, Yeong-hye releases an "animal cry of distress". This phrase, in combination with the description of a roar, reveals the human-animal motif in the novel.

THE BROTHER-IN-LAW: A CARNOPHALLOGOCENTRIC ARTIST

Yeong-hye's brother-in-law stands as a carnophallogocentric subject. Stobie (2018) states that Yeong-hye's brother-in-law's "supposed concern for the physical and mental well-being of his family member is rendered ironic by abusive imagery" (Stobie, 2018, p. 796). His artistic ambitions reveal more violent feelings, such as the depiction of a "faceless man with his arms around her neck, looking as if he were attempting to throttle her" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 68). Another depiction is when he describes her as a "cornered animal" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 74). The feelings culminate in a one-sided sexual relationship, in which both Yeong-hye's consent and mental health are ambiguous, and for this reason, it can be considered rape.

Knowing the mental disorder of his sister-in-law, he asks an artist to paint plants on his body and goes to meet Yeong-hye. It is true that the brother-in-law, superficially, understands and appreciates the insubordination of his wife's sister. However, he seeks to free himself from an oppressive society. This is a theme that he explores in his art. For him, this freedom is built on violence against others: paternal abandonment, the accumulation of work for women, and marital rape. In the case of Yeong-hye, he uses her desire for flowers as a device to fulfil both his sexual fetish and to film her for the sake of his art. His disinterest in Yeong-hye's ideas and feelings is clear: "With her words sounding in his ears like a lullaby, one he could make neither head nor tail of, he plunged over the edge of consciousness and into a seemingly bottomless sleep" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 121).

In this scene, Yeong-hye speaks to her brother-in-law about her dreams. Once, she believed it was all about the flesh. But now, that is no longer sufficient. Faces torment her, shadows of her mind. She finally realises, they originate from within her. All of these questions are extremely important to understand Yeong-hye, and they anticipate ideas that the reader will only be able to explore in the final part of the book, because the brother-in-law, who is the narrative focus, is not at all interested in them. Instead of listening to her, he begins to feel sleepy and compares her words to a lullaby. This shows the carnophallogocentrism of the brother-in-law, who fetishises Yeong-hye but is not interested in her words, and is even incapable of understanding them. After the sexual act, Yeong-hye's brother-in-law apologises: "'I'm sorry,' he said, reaching out for her face in the darkness. 'Can I turn on the light?' she asked. She sounded perfectly composed" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 119).

DOCTORS AND NURSES: CARNOPHALLOGOCENTRIC CARERS

In the third part of the novel, readers meet a carnophallogocentric medical team that treats Yeong-hye for her mental disorder. Due to Yeong-hye's serious condition, the medical team decides to try one last time to force-feed her: "the carer wrestles Yeong-hye's sunken cheeks back into his strong grasp, and the doctor inserts the tube into her nose" (Han, 2007/2015, p. 179). This scene strongly recalls the first part of the book, when the father tries to force a piece of meat into his daughter's mouth. The vocabulary, rhythm, situation, and posture of In-hye are similar. In-hye notices the violence and tries to stop it, but not with enough force. Along with the presumed rape

in the second part of the book, each of the three parts features a rape (symbolic or literal) as its climax.

Zolkos (2019) states that the attempts by the father and the doctors to force-feed Yeong-hye can be understood as "attempts to sustain undamaged the fiction of the human in defence of his sovereign right to decide about the death and life of nonhumans" (Zolkos, 2019, p. 106). In the scene with the father, analogous to a rape, the father seeks to reaffirm his patriarchal power in front of a daughter who, by deciding to stop eating meat, repudiates him: "his cruelty not only represents interpersonal violence, but is also symbolic of gendered trauma which lingers after periods of colonisation or systemic control" (Stobie, 2018, p. 794). In this scene, the doctors, who also exercise their masculine power by asserting themselves as hierarchically superior to the patient, are considered insane. In this way, just as Yeong-hye turns against carnist and patriarchal oppression, she also resists against asylum oppression, a resistance that in itself denounces her social friction. While in the first part, Yeong-hye played the role of an animal oppressed by human beings (her father, her husband), in the third part, Yeong-hye is a plant oppressed by animals (the doctors and nurses).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007) serves as a reflective exploration of the ties between dietary choices and societal structures. Through the eyes of Yeong-hye, one can notice a radical rejection of meat as a paradigm that challenges patriarchal norms. This act of defiance is not merely personal; it reverberates through her family and community, exposing deep-rooted tensions and conflicts. The novel illustrates how a woman's choice can disrupt traditional roles and expectations. Yeong-hye's journey embodies the struggle against the patriarchal system that seeks to silence her. Seen in one way, her metamorphosis into a plant symbolises a yearning for freedom and connection to nature, starkly contrasting the oppressive forces surrounding her.

In conclusion, *The Vegetarian* (2007) powerfully denounces male dominance within that very society. It critiques the intersections of gender, species, and power and reveals how carnophallogocentrism pervades patriarchal societal norms to reinforce male dominance and the objectification of both women and animals. Through this lens, the narrative invites readers to reconsider their own complicity in these structures. Ultimately, Han Kang's work stands as a call for resistance, urging humans to reflect on their choices and their broader implications. In the act of rejecting meat, Yeong-hye not only reclaims her identity but also challenges humans to envision a world where empathy and respect for all beings prevail. Yeong-hye's tragic decision illustrates the profound power of oppression within the patriarchal society. The figures of the authoritarian, patriarchal men are designated as carnophallogocentric subjects who enforce the "other" to act and feed according to their will. Such a behaviour represses and subjugates the will of others, powerfully projecting male dominance into that very society.

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