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Representation of Masculinity in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Letter of Approval

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Representation of Masculinity in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Mr. Tilak Rai has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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Abstract

This thesis explores how The Vegetarian *by Han Kang represents and critiques hegemonic masculinity in contemporary Korean society. While the novel is frequently interpreted through feminist, ecofeminist, or psychological lenses, this study shifts the focus toward the male characters Yeong-hye's husband, father, and brother-in-law and examines how their identities are shaped, performed, and destabilized in response to Yeong-hye's silent rebellion.* The Vegetarian *exposes the fragility, emotional repression, and performative nature of hegemonic masculinity. When Yeong-hye resists patriarchal control, the male characters react with coercion, violence, and detachment, revealing how masculinity relies on female subordination for its survival. The study is grounded in Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, which defines masculinity as a culturally dominant and socially constructed practice that sustains male power through everyday gendered performances. Han Kang presents masculinity as unstable and harmful both to women and the men who perform it. Mr. Cheong's desire for a passive wife, the father's violent assertion of control, and the brother-in-law's objectification of Yeong-hye all demonstrate different but interconnected expressions of patriarchal masculinity. Their identities collapse when Yeong-hye withdraws from expected roles, suggesting that masculinity is not natural or fixed but a vulnerable performance dependent on power dynamics. This research is significant because it fills a gap in scholarship by offering a masculinity-centered reading of* The Vegetarian*. It contributes to a deeper understanding of gender power structures in Korean society and shows how literature can critique dominant ideologies.*

Keywords: Hegemonic Masculinity, Patriarchy, Resistance, Power Dynamics

Introduction

This study explores the representation of masculinity in Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian*, focusing on how male characters embody, perform, and struggle to maintain hegemonic masculinity in a patriarchal Korean society. While *The Vegetarian* has received significant scholarly attention through feminist, ecofeminist, psychological, and posthumanist lenses, the construction and crisis of masculinity within the novel remain relatively underexplored. This research shifts the focus toward male characters and their responses to a woman's quiet but radical resistance, aiming to fill the gap in existing literature by analyzing how masculinity is shaped and destabilized in the text.

The research problem guiding this study arises from key textual moments where male characters Yeong-hye's husband, father, and brother-in-law react with emotional detachment, coercion, and violence when their authority is threatened. For instance, Mr. Cheong's discomfort with his wife's vegetarianism and his desire to control her body, along with the father's physical aggression and the brother-in-law's erotic objectification of Yeong-hye, reveal how masculinity is expressed through dominance and control. These details motivated a closer examination of how gender power dynamics operate not just through female subjugation but also through male identity performance. Preliminarily, masculinity is "conceived totally based upon the nature of man's body" (Mosse 5). Masculinitry, hence, designates all that is related to the male's body.

In connection to this research problem, the hypothesis of this study is that *The Vegetarian* critiques hegemonic masculinity by exposing its fragility, its dependence on female subordination, and its harmful emotional repression. The male characters' identities are constructed through their ability to control women and uphold social

expectations of manhood, and when these structures are challenged by Yeong-hye's nonconformity, their masculinity begins to unravel. The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, which defines masculinity as a set of practices shaped by cultural expectations, social institutions, and power relations. Connell argues that masculinity is not fixed or innate but rather performed in relation to gender hierarchies. Her ideas are supported by insights from Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), Rachel Adams and David Savran, and scholars on East Asian masculinities such as Gongning Ma et al., whose work contextualizes masculine identity within Korean cultural and historical norms.

Set in modern-day South Korea, *The Vegetarian* tells the story of Yeong-hye, a woman who suddenly refuses to eat meat and slowly withdraws from society. Her transformation disturbs her family, especially the men, who struggle to understand or control her behavior. Through its tripartite narrative from the husband's discomfort, to the brother-in-law's fetishization and to the sister's grief the novel traces not only Yeong-hye's alienation but also the emotional collapse and moral crisis of the male characters. By focusing on these men, this study reveals that Kang's novel is also a subtle but powerful critique of masculinity and the gendered structures that sustain it.

Kang, born on November 27, 1970, in Gwangju, South Korea, is an acclaimed writer known for her emotionally intense and symbolically rich works. In 2007, she published *The Vegetarian*, a novel that brought her international acclaim when it was translated into English by Deborah Smith and awarded the 2016 Man Booker International Prize. The novel's exploration of personal rebellion, bodily autonomy, and psychological disintegration marked her as a powerful literary voice.

Kang's *The Vegetarian* presents a haunting exploration of the psychological consequences of rejecting societal norms, with a particular focus on how traditional

masculinity responds to female resistance. The novel follows Yeong-hye, a seemingly ordinary South Korean woman who abruptly decides to stop eating meat after a disturbing dream. Her decision, though personal and nonviolent, triggers a chain of reactions that expose the oppressive nature of patriarchal expectations. Narrated in three parts through the perspectives of her husband, brother-in-law, and sister, the story reveals how each male figure attempts to reassert control over Yeong-hye's body and identity. Her husband, embodying the ideals of conventional masculinity, perceives her vegetarianism as a threat to social order and his authority as a husband, eventually subjecting her to psychiatric treatment when she refuses to conform. Her brother-in-law, an artist, appears more liberal but ultimately objectifies Yeong-hye by projecting his own desires onto her, using her body as a canvas for his fantasies rather than acknowledging her autonomy. Both men, though different in temperament, represent masculinity's impulse to possess, define, and suppress the female will. Yeong-hye's retreat into silence and her belief that she is becoming a plant symbolize a radical withdrawal from a world dominated by male control and violence. In contrast, her sister In-hye provides a counterpoint by offering emotional depth and reflection, exposing how both women suffer under the weight of male expectations. Through this layered narrative, Kang critiques the societal structures that equate masculinity with dominance and conformity, while illustrating the devastating impact such expectations have on individual freedom and mental health. Yeong-hye's quiet rebellion becomes a powerful act of defiance, revealing how the female body becomes a site of conflict in a culture governed by patriarchal norms, and how silence itself can be a form of resistance.

Kang's *The Vegetarian* has been widely analyzed through various critical lenses, including ecofeminism, posthumanism, Marxist feminism, and translation

studies. Scholars have explored the novel's engagement with gender, power, and ecological oppression, shedding light on its complex themes and symbolic depth.

Rincy Chandrani and Geetha R. Pai interpret *The Vegetarian* from an ecofeminist perspective. They argue that "the subjugation of women and nature is deeply interconnected under patriarchal and capitalist systems" (22). They highlight how Yeong-hye's alignment with nature serves as an act of resistance against male domination. The present study takes the similar line. However, its focus is on the construction of masculinity in the South Korean society.

Similarly, Devika Kakkat and Sulagna Mohanty focus on vegetarian ecofeminism, asserting that "food functions as a powerful metaphor for desire, identity, and rebellion," framing Yeong-hye's vegetarianism as a critique of patriarchal expectations (223). Kakkat and Mohanty make critical observations of food as well as nature in relation to resistance. While the present dissertation agrees with the argument Kakkat and Mohanty make, it departs in exploring the construction and critique of masculinity.

Caitlin E. Stobie challenges interpretations that reduce Yeong-hye's transformation to mental illness. She argues, "Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat is not a symptom of madness but an embodied response to trauma and the violent structures of South Korean society" (788). Stobie thinks that Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is response to trauma and violence of the South Korean society. She also links the novel to posthumanism, veganism, and postcolonial ecocriticism.

Theodora Tsimpouki also engages with posthuman ethics, drawing parallels between Yeong-hye's metamorphosis and the Ovidian myth of Daphne, suggesting that it "represents a posthuman critique of anthropocentric and patriarchal structures"

(207). Though the present study derives from such studies, it markedly moves towards a different direction: construction of masculinity in the Korean society.

From a Marxist-feminist angle, Jasmine Anand reads Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat as a symbolic rejection of patriarchal and capitalist violence but notes that "her defiance leads to further subjugation and suffering" (70). Anand makes a very different kind of observation. She argues that her resistance leads Yeong-hye to further subjugation. However, the present thesis argues against such stance regarding the protagonist's act.

Meanwhile, Won-Chung Kim examines food and suffering in the novel, stating that "Yeong-hye's refusal to consume meat disrupts the carno-phallogocentric order," positioning her as a victim of a society that equates masculinity with control over both women and food (2). Whereas the present study agrees with this line of argument, it departs from it as the present one focuses on how the Korean masculinity has been represented in Kang's novel.

Translation studies have also contributed to the discourse on *The Vegetarian*. Min Young Godley examines the controversy surrounding Deborah Smith's English translation, arguing that "the backlash against Smith's translation is not merely about linguistic accuracy but reveals deeper anxieties about female subjectivity and cultural authority" (194). This highlights how translation debates intersect with gender, colonialism, and national identity.

Adelia Savitri applies a postmodern feminist lens, particularly LuceIrigaray's theories, to Yeong-hye's transformation, asserting that "Yeong-hye's so-called 'madness' is not an illness but an act of resistance" (2). Her work contributes to feminist readings that frame the protagonist's rebellion as a radical reclaiming of bodily autonomy.

While these analyses provide rich insights into gender, ecology, and posthumanism in *The Vegetarian*, there is still a gap in the study of masculinity. Scholars like Kim and Stobie touch upon masculine control over women and food, but comprehensive research on masculinity's construction, power dynamics, and cultural significance is limited. My study will address this gap, examining how Kang critiques patriarchal systems and the formation of masculinity in contemporary Korean society.

This research uses a qualitative method to study the representation of masculinity in Kang's novel *The Vegetarian*. A qualitative approach helps to deeply understand the meanings and ideas in the text rather than using numbers or statistics. This study focuses on reading and interpreting the novel closely to find how masculinity is shown, performed, and questioned in the actions and words of the characters. The male characters in the novel show different forms of masculinity, shaped by cultural and social beliefs. By carefully studying the text, this research tries to explain how these male characters reflect the larger patriarchal society and how their authority is shaken when a woman refuses to follow the expected roles.

The Vegetarian is selected because it shows how men's identities are controlled by patriarchy. The story clearly presents how one woman's resistance challenges and weakens traditional masculinity. These reasons make *The Vegetarian* a strong and meaningful text for studying masculinity.

The primary data for this study comes from the words, sentences, and paragraphs of the novel itself. By reading and analyzing the text carefully, the study looks for the ways in which masculinity is represented and questioned. Secondary sources include books, journal articles, and essays about gender studies, masculinity, and Korean literature. These sources were found through online searches, library visits, and discussions with the research supervisor. All these materials help in

building a clear understanding of masculinity theories and their application in the novel.

The main theory used in this study is Raewyn Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity. This theory explains that masculinity is not natural but is created by society to keep men in a position of power. Hegemonic masculinity is the strongest and most accepted form of masculinity, which suppresses both women and men who do not fit the dominant male role. In *The Vegetarian*, the male characters try to control women and maintain their authority. However, Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat and her rejection of social rules threaten their power and expose the weakness of their masculinity.

By reading the novel closely, this study examines how the male characters show violence, power, and emotional weakness as ways to maintain control. Yeong-hye's resistance becomes a turning point that makes the male characters struggle with their identities. Their efforts to remain powerful show that masculinity is not something fixed but something they must constantly perform. When Yeong-hye resists, it reveals how fragile and unstable their masculine identity really is. This analysis shows that patriarchal masculinity is harmful not only to women but also to the men who try to live up to its expectations.

Connell's theory helps to explain the social pressures that shape how men behave in the novel. It shows that some men are seen as more masculine than others and that this system keeps them in power. But the novel also shows that this power is weak when faced with those who refuse to follow the rules. Yeong-hye's rebellion is not only a personal choice but also a challenge to the entire system of masculine power. Through this, the novel criticizes the cultural beliefs that support male dominance.

This research focuses on how masculinity is built and broken down in the novel. Through reading the novel and supporting it with theories of masculinity and gender, the study tries to fill a gap in research. Most previous studies on *The Vegetarian* focus on its feminist, psychological, or ecological themes. This study looks at the male characters and shows how they too are trapped by patriarchal ideas. The study gives importance to the male experience in the novel, showing that masculinity is a social performance that causes harm to both men and women. This approach helps in understanding the complex power structures in Korean society as shown in the novel.

According to Connell, "There could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones" (Connell 833). This quote explains that masculinity is not permanent; it can change over time. New types of masculinity can replace old, dominant ones when challenged by people or ideas that do not fit the old norms. This idea helps explain how Yeong-hye's quiet resistance challenges the older, dominant masculinity of her husband and father. When she stops eating meat and refuses to obey, their authority weakens. Her actions show how new ways of being can threaten the traditional masculine power structures, just as Connell suggests, "Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals"(Connell 836). He adds Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting" (836).For him masculinity is not something people are born with. It is built through actions, behaviors, and relationships in different social situations.This helps analyze how each male character in *The Vegetarian* expresses masculinity differently. Her husband shows it through emotional control, her father through physical violence, and her brother-in-law

through art and fantasy. Yet, they all try to control Yeong-hye, proving that masculinity is shaped by how they interact with her, not by their personality or biology.

In addition, Connell asserts, “Hegemonic masculinities can be constructed that do not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men. Yet these models do, in various ways, express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires” (838). According to connell dominant masculinity often comes from idealized images even if no one fully matches them, they still influence how men think and behave In *The Vegetarian*, Mr. Cheong chooses Yeong-hye because she fits his fantasy of a quiet, obedient wife. When she changes, he feels humiliated and rejected. His reaction shows how powerful masculine ideals can be, even when they’re unrealistic. The pressure to live up to those ideals shapes his behavior and identity.

In this connection, Connell argues, “It is men’s and boys’ practical relationships to collective images or models of masculinity, rather than simple reflections of them, that is central to understanding gendered consequences in violence, health, and education” (Connell 841). Masculinity affects behavior not by simple imitation, but through how individuals connect with social models of what it means to be a man. For connell the behaviors and thoughts of Yeong-hye's husband. He becomes angry and violent when she stops obeying him, because it breaks his idea of what a wife and a man should be. His sense of masculinity depends on staying in control, and when that control is lost, his identity collapses. This shows how deeply these masculine images are rooted in his actions.

Regarding how masculinity is built, Connell claims, “Masculinity is defined as a configuration of practice organized in relation to the structure of gender relations” (Connell 843). This quote means masculinity is built through repeated actions and

depends on how power is shared or divided between men and women. In *The Vegetarian*, masculinity is shown through how the men act toward Yeong-hye. Their sense of being men depends on her silence, obedience, and physical control. When she resists, their power and identity fall apart. This shows that masculinity only works when women follow certain roles, making it a performance based on unequal gender relations.

Young Hye's husband (Mr. Cheong) thinks of his masculinity in contrast to his wife's passivity. He observes, "The passive personality of this woman in whom I could detect neither freshness nor charm or anything especially refined, suited me down to the ground" (Kang 3). He prioritizes his wife's passivity over charm or sophistication. It shows the significance of female passivity to maintain masculinity. He adds, "So it was only natural that I would marry the most run-off-the-mill woman in the world" (4). His expression shows that the average woman without any special or subversive qualities will not challenge his masculinity. He wants to protect his masculinity anyhow as it ensures him privileges in the patriarchal society."Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action . . ." (Connell 836).According to connell masculinity is shaped through repeated social behaviors like Mr. Cheong's preference for submissive women who will not threaten his dominance.

Mr. Cheong wants to control his wife's appearance to maintain his masculine pride in public. He states, "I would have preferred her to go around wearing one that was thickly padded, so that I could save face in front of my acquaintances" (Kang 5). This line highlights the masculine obsession with social image and the urge to regulate the female body."Among dominant groups of men, the circuits of social

embodiment constantly involve the institutions on which their privileges rest." (Connell 852).For connell institutions like marriage and public image help maintain men's power, as seen in Mr. Cheong's desire to protect his reputation by controlling his wife's body. When a husband controls his wife's body, it means he tries to manage more than just her appetite, sleep, or sex life. He also wants to control what she wears, how she looks in public, how much freedom she has, and even her daily movements. This shows that her body is treated like property to protect his pride, not her choice. In Mr. Cheong's case, control becomes a way to keep his masculine image strong in society.

He asserts physical power over her to enforce control. He recalls, "I grabbed her wrist, trying to prise the bags from her grip" (Kang 10). This moment exemplifies physical domination, a direct manifestation of masculine control as theorized by Connell in these words: "Masculinity is defined as a configuration of practice organized in relation to the structure of gender relations" (Connell 843).This theory relates to how masculine identity is built in opposition to female submission and enacted through dominance, like physical force.

He resists the disruption of domestic authority when she rejects meat. In disbelief, he asks, "'So you're saying that from now on, there'll be no meat in this house?'" (Kang 13). Meat is culturally and symbolically associated with masculinity, and its absence threatens his authority. "Hegemonic masculinities can be constructed that do not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men . . ." (Connell 838). Mr. Cheong represents an ideal of masculinity rooted in symbolic control, such as enforcing gendered eating norms, even if that ideal doesn't reflect real strength. Masculinity and meat are linked because both represent strength and control in many cultures. Eating meat is often thought of as a manly habit, while refusing it can seem

like going against male authority. When Yeong-hye stops eating meat, Mr. Cheong feels his power and role as a man are questioned. This shows how food is used to keep male dominance and protect the image of masculinity.

Likewise, he views sexual compliance as a right within marriage. He reflects, "In the past, she'd generally been willing to comply with my physical demands . . ." (Kang 16). In the words of Connell, "It is men's and boys' practical relationships to collective images or models of masculinity . . .that is central . . ." (Connell 841). Connell here shows how men learn that dominance and sexual entitlement are part of masculine ideals, which justifies the husband's sense of sexual ownership.

Yeong-hye's husband believes women must be passive to preserve masculine dominance. He reflects, "[H]adn't women traditionally been expected to be demure and restrained?" (Kang 21). Connell makes similar kind of observation: "Challenges to hegemonic masculinity arise from the 'protest masculinities' of marginalized ethnic groups…" (Connell 847).Connell shows how hegemonic masculinity is threatened by women who challenge their roles, which explains the husband's panic at Yeong-hye's resistance.

The husband links meat-eating with masculinity. He asserts, "Meat-eating is a fundamental human instinct . . . vegetarianism goes against human nature" (Kang 23). This is how the man defines what is right and wrong in patriarchy. Moreover, this expression also helps one understand how hegemonic masculinity is constructed out of such privileges. Connell points such a phenomenon in these words: "There could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced . . ." (Connell 833).According to Connell how symbolic acts like eating meat uphold male dominance, and Yeong-hye's vegetarianism disrupts that power. His masculinity manifests through coercive sex. He admits, "So yes, on nights when I returned home

late and somewhat inebriated . . . . I would grab my wife and push her to the floor" (Kang 30). Connell also echoes this sort of idea: "A pattern of practice… that provided such a solution in past conditions but not in new conditions is open to challenge…" (Connell). Connell's insight reveals that old masculine norms like sexual dominance are being challenged, as Yeong-hye resists this abuse. Connell asserts, "Hegemony may fail. The concept of hegemonic masculinity does not rely on a theory of social reproduction" (Connell 854). This confirms that Yeong-hye's resistance represents a potential collapse of traditional masculine authority.

The disturbing image, "Her skin was a pale green… sap began to flow out from her vagina…" (Kang 96), reveals how masculinity in its extreme form fetishizes and dehumanizes the female body. Yeong-hye's transformation into a plant-like being becomes a fantasy object for male desire silent, passive, and stripped of agency. This dehumanization aligns with militarized Korean masculinity, shaped by discipline, control, and dominance during compulsory service, as shown in "Warriors in Suits: A Bourdieusian Perspective on the Construction and Practice of Military Masculinity of Korean Men." Jin Lee et al. argue, "Masculinity . . . formed during military service is later transferred to organizational structures, reinforcing dominance and control" (14). The theory explains that masculinity is not just personal, but institutional males internalize dominance and use institutions like marriage, art, and psychiatry to maintain power. Yeong-hye's objectified body becomes the perfect symbol for such masculinity: controllable, voiceless, and consumed without resistance.

The narrator's inner turmoil, "Was he a normal human being? More than that, a moral human being? A strong human being, able to control his own impulses?" (Kang 61), uncovers a masculinity in crisis, defined by the failure to regulate sexual desire. His shame stems not from his actions alone, but from his inability to uphold

masculine ideals of self-control. According to Adams and Savran, traditional masculinity centers male desire while demanding its regulation to uphold moral authority (*The Masculinity Studies Reader* 9). The theory illustrates that masculinity equates emotional restraint with moral legitimacy. The narrator's guilt thus exposes a conflict between internalized masculine codes and personal obsession.

The statement, "Even priests who enter the temple don't take their austerities too far…" (Kang 36), shows how male characters use patriarchal logic to invalidate Yeong-hye's resistance. By labeling her defiance as excessive, masculinity masks control as rational concern. As Ma et al. argue in Hegemonic Masculinity in East Asia, this form of masculinity operates "under the guise of social moderation but enforces strict obedience" (2405). The theory explains that hegemonic masculinity often disguises coercion as balance, framing female autonomy as dangerous. Thus, this quote reflects how patriarchal discourse suppresses women by portraying nonconformity as unnatural.

The narrator's confession, "After the first time, it was easier for me to do it again . . ." (Kang 31), exposes emotional numbness and repeated violation as tools of patriarchal dominance. His detachment reflects how violence becomes normalized under masculinity. Men, Masculinities & Development asserts that masculine power is sustained through d ualities like active/passive and dominance/submission, erasing consent (*kim* 6–7). The theory reveals how hegemonic masculinity turns sexual aggression into a routine, silencing moral responsibility and reinforcing gendered control.

Yeong-hye's cry, "Why are my edges sharpening what am I going to gouge?" (Kang 33), reflects how the violence of hegemonic masculinity is internalized as self-destruction. Her pain manifests not as rebellion, but self-harm. Connell and

Messerschmidt write, “Hegemonic masculinity is not violence in itself, but it is often supported by force” (841). The theory shows how women, under constant control, turn inward, punishing themselves for their resistance. Ma et al. add that masculinity enforces a rigid hierarchy that leads to female subordination and trauma (2405).

When a voice commands, “Grab her arms, quickly. You too, Mr. Cheong” (Kang 39), the collective enforcement of control reveals how hegemonic masculinity is sustained through social complicity. Even hesitant men are expected to help control women’s bodies. Connell and Messerschmidt explain that “it is men’s and boys’ practical relationships to collective images or models of masculinity…that is central” (841). This theory shows that masculinity is a group performance, reinforced by shared rituals of domination.

The image, “He’d kept his arms folded…gazing up at the dancers’ eager faces” (Kang 55), portrays the brother-in-law’s calculated posture of emotional detachment as a display of masculine authority. His control is shown through stillness and judgment. Connell and Messerschmidt argue that “hegemonic masculinity embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” (832). The theory explains how emotional suppression becomes a tool to maintain dominance and appear superior.

The brother-in-law’s reflection, “There had been nothing for him in the booming electronic music, the gaudy costumes, the showy nudity. . .” (Kang 56), reveals a deliberate distancing from sensual pleasure, aligning masculinity with inward control. Ma et al. write that East Asian masculinity emphasizes “indirectness . . . emotional suppression in male roles” (2406). His self-denial is a cultural performance of masculine discipline, not mere apathy.

The line, “He had to force himself to accept that the middle-aged man . . . was himself” (Kang 57), confronts the character with the fear of losing sexual relevance, which undermines his masculine identity. Ma et al. argue that aging men in East Asia feel “inferior in sexual relationships when failing societal masculine standards” (2407). The theory explains how masculinity is fragile, depending on youth, strength, and performance to sustain social value.

In addition, the expression “He had to rush . . . but he kept on standing there . . . staring fixedly at the blazing flower that was her body . . .” (Kang 119) captures the husband’s paralysis as Yeong-hye’s bodily transformation escapes his control. His masculinity crumbles when female agency resists objectification. Connell and Messerschmidt state that “masculinities are configurations of practice . . . accomplished in social action” (836), showing that male dominance must be constantly enacted and fails when challenged by unpredictable resistance.

Yeong-hye’s plea, “Please let me out of here, People are always telling me to eat... they force me” (Kang 156), exposes how psychiatric care is used as an institutional tool to control female bodies. Warriors in Suits explains that Korean masculinity, shaped by military service, is “reproduced through disciplinary power” in civilian institutions (Lee et al.14). The theory reveals how patriarchy uses structured systems like medicine or psychiatry to punish women who refuse to conform.

In a flashback, the narrator recalls, “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” (Kang 66). The father's war background and violent enforcement of obedience reflect the embodiment of military masculinity within the family. His identity as a war hero legitimizes control and physical dominance, especially over female resistance. This reflects what Lee et al. describe as the

construction of military masculinity: “Military masculinity, as a form of hegemonic masculinity, mirrored an image of the warrior hero, who has a strong mentality, goal-oriented attitude . . . and is emotionally controlled” (Lee et al 2). The father's actions reproduce this image by disciplining his daughter as if she were a soldier under command. The theory helps explain how the military ideal of masculinity founded on discipline, force, and emotional control is transferred into civilian life, where it reinforces patriarchal authority and erases female agency.

In-hye’s final reflection hints at hope beyond trauma: “Perhaps this is all a kind of dream . . . but surely the dream isn’t all there is?” (Kang 182). Her quiet question challenges the permanence of suffering and control imposed by patriarchal structures. This moment gestures toward a life beyond hegemonic masculinity toward transformation and emotional recovery. Greig, Kimmel, and Lang emphasize, “If the differing roles and responsibilities ascribed to men and women are socially constructed, then, by definition, they may be changed by society, by us” (3). This theory underlines that gender roles are not fixed but fluid, and that change is possible. In-hye’s line becomes a subtle act of resistance imagining liberation beyond inherited gendered trauma.

The metaphor, “The pain feels like a hole swallowing her up . . .” (Kang 166), reveals the depth of emotional collapse left behind by masculine absence and repression. This image captures not only personal anguish but also the psychological consequences of living under patriarchal expectations. Both Yeong-hye and In-hye endure emotional neglect as a result of rigid gender norms that silence vulnerability and demand female endurance. Greig, Kimmel, and Lang argue, “Understanding the ways that gender is constructed can create a space within which women and men may envision different ways of being together” (Greig,kimmel and lang3). This theory

clarifies how patriarchal gender roles cause deep psychological harm but also highlights the possibility of healing and reimagining relationships outside those destructive norms.

Yeong-hye's refusal to obey her husband's command-"She just lay there unmoving, her body curled up like a fetus" (Kang 48)-represents a silent yet powerful resistance to masculine authority. In this moment, her passive posture is not weakness, but an embodied refusal to perform the submissive gender role expected in a patriarchal marriage. The husband's frustration arises not from physical rebellion, but from the disobedience of gender norms. Greig, Kimmel, and Lang explain, "Masculinities are shaped by social norms that prioritize male control and authority over women's behavior" (3). This theoretical insight shows how patriarchal masculinity constructs gender through control and compliance, where women are expected to act in accordance with male-defined roles. Yeong-hye's fetal stillness, rather than submission, becomes a radical act that disrupts the gender order. Her silence challenges the expectation of female emotional labor and sexual availability, exposing how deeply masculinity relies on female compliance to sustain power.

Mr. Cheong's response to Yeong-hye's nudity reflects his investment in the image of a respectable patriarch and his fear of losing control. When he discovers her naked in the middle of the night, he responds not with concern but with embarrassment: "'Why have you taken your clothes off?' I asked her, trying to force out a laugh" (Kang 32). His nervous laughter masks the fear that her public defiance will tarnish his reputation. Later, as he tries to justify himself, he pleads, "Now don't go making me out to be some kind of villain..." (Kang 70), portraying himself as a misunderstood husband rather than a complicit enforcer of social norms. His self-victimization signals his fragile masculinity, threatened by a wife who refuses to

perform obedience. Kim argues, “Becoming ‘a respectable family man’ is set against ‘dangerous masculinities of the undomesticated male’ and signals maturity in boys based on the role they assume as head of the family” (Kim, 295). According to kim,Mr. Cheong’s authority depends on the maintenance of domestic order and his wife’s conformity. When Yeong-hye rejects that order through non-normative behavior, his sense of masculine respectability begins to crumble exposing the social construction of masculinity as performance rather than essence.

Yeong-hye’s rejection of meat becomes an act of resistance against patriarchal control. During a family gathering, “Her father . . . had actually struck his rebellious daughter in the face and physically forced a lump of meat into her mouth” (Kang 66). This violent act of force-feeding reflects the father’s attempt to discipline her body into conformity. Yeong-hye’s refusal of meat disrupts traditional gender expectations that associate obedience and docility with femininity. She defies submission by reclaiming bodily autonomy. Peng Lai notes, “Whereas eating is often considered the origin of subjectivity, force-feeding demonstrates the act itself seeks to generate an enforced subjectivity through force . . . her insistence on rejecting meat… attests to her stance against the animals and her relatively marginal identity” (Peng Lai, 4). For Peng Lai, Yeong-hye’s rejection of meat is a symbolic rejection of enforced identity, where masculine authority tries to inscribe its will through the act of feeding. Her resistance reveals how subjectivity can emerge through refusal rather than compliance.

The male artist’s identification with Yeong-hye reflects narcissistic masculinity and homoerotic projection. In a moment of artistic obsession, he reflects, “He knew that it was himself; that, in fact, it could be none other” (Kang 60). The male gaze collapses into self-absorption, blurring the boundaries between creator and

object. The woman's body becomes a canvas onto which he projects his erotic desires and artistic identity. Halder explains, "Shelley's novel, introducing a homoerotic perspective that offers an alternative lens to examine the relationship between Victor Frankenstein and his creation" (Halder 7). Applying this lens to *The Vegetarian*, the man's identification with his female subject mirrors Frankensteinian creation, where masculine control merges with repressed homoeroticism. The drawing is less about Yeong-hye and more about himself demonstrating that masculinity often constructs the feminine as an extension of its own ego.

Yeong-hye's refusal of sex challenges the masculine fantasy of control and visibility. As her brother-in-law tries to film her in a sexualized performance, he is struck by her transformation: "This was the body . . . from which all desire had been eliminated" (Kang 85). According to Kang, the female body is the location of desire. He, therefore, later wonders, "Who could he find to have sex with her? . . . He needed authenticity" (Kang 95). Her body, now 'vegetal,' resists not only physical reproduction but also visual reproduction refusing to function within the male fantasy of sexual availability. Honratty observes, "Her husband's recording of he and Yeong-hye covered in flowers . . . would dissipate without the exposure of the non-reproducibility of Yeong-hye's vegetal sexuality" (Honratty 53). In connection, how Yeong-hye's transformation resists the logic of visibility and reproduction, which are central to patriarchal control. Her desiring refusal becomes a form of anti-performance that destabilizes the male gaze.

Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat signals her first act of bodily autonomy, which her family immediately reads as rebellion that must be suppressed through violence. In a flashback, the narrator recounts, "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" (Kang 66). This act of force-feeding is not simply about diet, but about control reasserting patriarchal power through physical dominance. The father's status as a war hero adds a layer of legitimized violence; masculinity here is equated with militarized authority and the right to discipline the female body. As Cynthia Zhang argues, "Yeong-hye's conversion towards vegetarianism marks an end to her previous 'passive personality' as she begins to instead start asserting control over her own body . . . such attempts at autonomy are viewed as threats by patriarchal authorities and punished accordingly" (Zhang 258). Zhang's framework clarifies that Yeong-hye's rejection of meat and by extension, her rejection of patriarchal structures is interpreted as deviance and punished through physical coercion. Her father's response is not unique but emblematic of how masculinity enforces conformity, revealing that patriarchal violence is often justified under the guise of restoring family order and disciplining female resistance.

Mr. Cheong's initial attraction to Yeong-hye is rooted not in affection or admiration, but in her perceived passivity and lack of resistance. He reflects, "The passive personality of this woman, in whom I could detect neither freshness nor charm nor anything especially refined, suited me down to the ground" (Kang 3). His description of her is notably void of emotional intimacy she is chosen precisely because she appears manageable, predictable, and non-threatening. His preference for such a partner reveals a need to maintain authority and avoid the challenges of emotional reciprocity. Minjeong Kim's theory of compensatory masculinity explains this dynamic well: "These subaltern men . . . enact various aspects of local hegemonic masculinity" as a form of compensatory masculinity, emphasizing "heterosexual desirability and virility" in reaction to symbolic rejection and socioeconomic marginalization (Kim 13). Although Mr. Cheong is not economically marginalized in

the same way as the rural men Kim studies, he similarly uses marriage as a means to affirm his masculine identity through dominance and control. Yeong-hye's passivity offers him a space to perform a socially acceptable masculine role one that masks his emotional emptiness and fear of female agency. This pairing of Kim's theory with Mr. Cheong's calculated marriage choice reveals how patriarchal masculinity often depends on the strategic suppression of female autonomy to sustain its fragile foundation.

Getting back to Yeong-hye's act of resistance in the form of the practice of vegetarianism, she declares, "I don't need to eat, not now I can live without it. All I need is sunlight" (Kang 154). Here, she models herself on plants. She just needs sunlight but not meat at all. She imagines a bodily autonomy that defies both masculine control and consumerist logic. In withdrawing from eating often associated with care, discipline, and social ritual Yeong-hye embraces a posthuman identity where survival is not about consumption but coexistence. Claudia D. Johnson's account of Indigenous attitudes toward wolves illuminates this transformation. She writes, "Some tribes, like the Ojibwas, focused on the wolf's family structure and faithfulness. Others, like the Oneidas, especially admired the wolf's endurance and courage" (Johnson 225). Johnson's insight highlights how masculinity, in these traditions, is not rooted in conquest or force, but in responsibility, endurance, and mutual care within the ecosystem.

This study has examined how Kang's *The Vegetarian* represents and critiques hegemonic masculinity within the context of contemporary Korean society. It sought to address a noticeable gap in existing scholarship, which has predominantly focused on feminist, ecological, and psychological interpretations of the novel. While much critical attention has been paid to Yeong-hye's resistance and transformation, the

corresponding responses and identities of the male characters her husband, father, and brother-in-law remain understudied in terms of how they reflect and enforce patriarchal norms. Motivated by specific textual moments that revealed male characters' obsession with control, violence, emotional suppression, and the regulation of female bodies, this research explored how masculinity functions as both a personal performance and a collective system of power.

The central hypothesis of this study is that *The Vegetarian* exposes the fragility, toxicity, and performative nature of hegemonic masculinity by illustrating how male characters react with fear, violence, and shame when their authority is challenged. To explore this idea, the study employed Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity as its primary analytical lens. Connell's framework highlights how masculinity is socially constructed, historically contingent, and maintained through social action and relationships. This study also engaged with supporting insights from scholars such as Rachel Adams, David Savran, and Gongning Ma et al., as well as secondary sources that examine the cultural construction of masculinity in East Asian contexts. By applying these theoretical concepts to the novel's textual details, the study has illuminated how masculinity is not an innate or stable identity, but one constantly shaped and destabilized by power relations, social expectations, and acts of resistance.

The textual analysis has shown that male characters in *The Vegetarian* perform masculinity through domination, emotional distance, sexual entitlement, and physical violence. Mr. Cheong's sense of masculinity is built upon the passive compliance of his wife, whose sudden refusal to eat meat disrupts his domestic and public identity. His obsession with her appearance and behavior reveals how male authority is sustained through the control of female bodies. Likewise, Yeong-hye's

father responds with rage and physical aggression when she resists patriarchal norms, illustrating how generational masculinity is maintained through coercion and fear. Her brother-in-law, while seemingly more sensitive, enacts a different form of masculine control by projecting his fantasies onto Yeong-hye's body, thus reducing her to a symbolic object of aesthetic and erotic desire. These varied performances demonstrate that masculinity in the novel is not uniform, but dependent on the social roles men occupy and their perceived need to uphold dominance.

The male characters' reactions to Yeong-hye's defiance ranging from disbelief to violation demonstrate that their masculine identities are threatened by her refusal to conform. Their need to reassert power through violence or artistic appropriation reflects an underlying fragility within hegemonic masculinity, as theorized by Connell. The novel depicts how masculinity relies on external validation and hierarchical gender roles to survive. When Yeong-hye withdraws from these roles, the male characters face an identity crisis. Their actions reveal a desperate effort to restore control and reaffirm their masculine authority, often at the cost of her autonomy and well-being. These patterns emphasize that masculinity, as portrayed in The Vegetarian, is inherently unstable and often harmful not only to women but also to the men who are trapped by its rigid expectations.

Summing up, this study has ultimately shown that *The Vegetarian* is not only a feminist critique of patriarchal oppression but also a powerful dissection of how masculinity is constructed, maintained, and destabilized. It demonstrates that hegemonic masculinity is both a personal burden and a cultural system sustained through violence, performance, and social complicity. The novel reveals the emotional repression and moral disintegration that result from adherence to idealized masculine norms. Through the symbolic transformation of Yeong-hye and the

unraveling of male characters around her, Han Kang presents a stark commentary on how deeply patriarchal values are embedded in cultural identity and personal behavior. The present study's significance lies in its focus on masculinity as a critical site of analysis in a novel primarily known for its feminist and ecological themes. By shifting attention to male characters, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender in The Vegetarian, highlighting that patriarchy harms all individuals involved. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of literary texts in exposing the contradictions and consequences of dominant gender ideologies. Additionally, this study opens the door for future research on East Asian masculinity in contemporary literature, particularly in relation to trauma, militarization, emotional regulation, and the intersection of gender with ecological and posthuman discourses. It invites scholars to further interrogate how masculine identities are shaped by sociocultural forces and how literature can act as a space for challenging and reimagining them.

Yeong-hye's radical departure from human society and her retreat into a vegetal existence represents not only a rejection of patriarchal violence, but also a symbolic turn toward a non-dominant model of life one that reflects ecological harmony rather than human control. By aligning herself with plants and light rather than flesh and violence, Yeong-hye symbolically gestures toward an alternative model of masculinity one that echoes the wolf's relational endurance rather than the human male's domination. This moment reimagines what strength and survival mean, suggesting that masculinity, too, can be rewritten through ecological ethics and embodied resistance.

Mr. Cheong chooses Yeong-hye not out of love but because she appears passive and manageable: "The passive personality of this woman in whom I could

detect neither freshness nor charm nor anything especially refined, suited me down to the ground" (Kang 3). This chilling admission reveals that Cheong values his wife not for her individuality but for how easily she fits into a patriarchal mold. His attraction is rooted in the control she affords him, as her silence and obedience offer no threat to his masculinity. His preference reflects a deep insecurity, seeking validation through domination over someone perceived as

weak. As Minjeong Kim explains, "Especially subordinated men... perform what gender scholars have described as compensatory masculinity... by conforming to hegemonic ideals" (Kim 299), Cheong's projection of dominance over Yeong-hye mirrors the strategies of rural Korean husbands who assert authority in response to their own social marginalization, using relationships to mask or compensate for their perceived failures as men.

When accused of neglecting Yeong-hye, Mr. Cheong defensively states, "I've never once been hard on her. I've never hit her, never cursed at her. What more do you expect from a husband?" (Kang 33). His comment reflects a minimalist and superficial understanding of masculinity he believes that simply avoiding physical abuse entitles him to the role of a 'good' husband. This reveals how masculinity can be performed through the absence of visible harm while still sustaining structures of emotional neglect and power imbalance. As Kim, citing Schrock and Schwalbe, notes, "Masculinity . . . [is] a configuration of practices that men do to claim their membership in the dominant gender group "(Kim 298). Mr. Cheong's performative non-violence is part of this configuration his behavior is not rooted in care or equality but in conforming to a social standard that still places him above his wife. This idea of masculinity as performative, rather than inherent, reveals how gender roles are continually reproduced through such strategic, self-justifying behaviors.

After Yeong-hye's mental withdrawal, Mr. Cheong laments, "There hadn't been any hint of insanity in her family . . . I can't understand how she could do this to me" (Kang 47). His concern is not for Yeong-hye's well-being but for how her deviation threatens his reputation. Her resistance is interpreted as a personal insult, a disruption of the social order that reflects poorly on him as a husband. Masculinity here is deeply tied to social image and relational control; Yeong-hye's noncompliance destabilizes the gendered expectations that define his identity. As Kim writes, "These men negotiate hegemonic masculine ideals...
intersecting with inequalities on the basis of socioeconomic status, region, and . . . wives' nationality" (Kim 300). Although Mr. Cheong is not a rural husband, his response aligns with Kim's observation that masculinity is constructed through layered dynamics his masculinity is threatened not only by Yeong-hye's rebellion but by the potential loss of social standing it entails. Like the rural husbands in Kim's study, Cheong attempts to reclaim dominance by framing female resistance as a betrayal of gender norms and societal duty.

Yeong-hye's brother-in-law expresses disappointment when she no longer conforms to expected gender roles, stating, "I just didn't expect her to be this weird. She was quiet, obedientshe used to do what she was told" (Kang 101). His reaction reveals that what unsettles him is not her mental condition but her refusal to remain within the boundaries of submissive femininity. Her transformation challenges the relational structure in which his masculinity was affirmed through her docility. Masculinity here is not portrayed as innate strength, but as something fragile dependent on the subordination of women. The brother-in-law's sense of self is destabilized precisely because Yeong-hye no longer plays the role that supported his gendered identity. As Minjeong Kim explains, "Most men's gender practices are

intended to approximate hegemonic masculinity, which is constructed in relation to both other men and women" (Kim 298). Kim's framework helps clarify that masculinity is not fixed but relational built and sustained through the contrast with obedient femininity and through recognition by other men. When Yeong-hye breaks from these norms, it threatens the masculine structure around her, exposing how deeply patriarchal power depends on the controlled behavior of women. Her refusal to perform passivity is read not only as deviance but as a direct threat to male legitimacy, echoing Kim's argument that masculinity, particularly when fragile, responds to such disruption with anxiety, control, or withdrawal.

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