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A Resistance to Patriarchy in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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## Letter of Recommendation

This research entitled “A Resistance to Patriarchy in Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*” has been successfully completed under my supervision by Sunmita Lama partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in English. I would like to recommend this research be examined by an external examiner.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “A Resistance to Patriarchy in Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur by Sunmita Lama has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee.

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## A Resistance to Patriarchy in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

### Abstract

*This paper explores resistance to patriarchy in Han Kang's The Vegetarian from a feminist perspective. A woman making a choice on her own in a patriarchal society is largely a matter of suspicion and more importantly a rejection of male chauvinism. Women's choices are based on the patriarchal doctrine and if they trespass the boundary, either they are considered as a 'mad-woman' or they are discarded from their iconic position as 'good-woman.' Han Kang's The Vegetarian articulates a similar issue, portraying Yeong-hye, the protagonist who becomes vegetarian after seeing a brutal and bloody dream. Her choice is never considered to be valid nor is she treated humanely. When she gradually loses her mental control, she rejects the patriarchal values by disobeying her husband and father and also engulfs herself in social taboo. With this in mind, this paper investigates the woman's action or the performative resistance against male chauvinism in light of Judith Butler's notion of performativity and Rosi Braidotti's concept of becoming a woman. Focusing on the protagonist—Yeong-hye, the study inspects women's choices to overcome the patriarchal notion of women's subjectivity. In doing so, it claims that locating women in societal discourse demands a restless stand on their choice which gives pace to their retaliation and consolidates the process of becoming a woman. This study discloses the construction of gender as a matter of choice that continuously wrestles against patriarchal forces. Moreover, it unpacks that women achieve alternative positions in human society that defy the patriarchal regulation by embodying self-reflexivity, if they are not considered as the subject themselves.*

Keywords: patriarchy, conventions, dominance, subjectivity, self-reflexivity, and embodiment

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007), The Man Booker International Prize Winner 2016, provides an alternative way of becoming a woman, resisting the patriarchal notion of male chauvinism and prioritizing women's subjectivity. The novel reflects women's self-reflexivity, embodying the celebration of their choices, and dispels the asymmetric division of inequality between males and females through the performance of two women characters, namely, Yeong-hye and In-hye. Providing the protagonist with a subjective choice to reject meat in a patriarchal family, the novel enforces females to feel the autonomy of will to establish their position even in the real-life world. To what extent males are concerned about women's choices and how they behave upon the choices are the vantage points of the novel that obstruct the way of women's identification. Nevertheless, strictly speaking, *The Vegetarian*, rather than a passive reinforcement for women's autonomy, is a depiction of a tactical way to redraw the boundary of women's position in a patriarchal framework that provides a guideline to rupture male chauvinism, focusing on self-decisiveness.

The novel unpacks Yeong-hye's story through the layers of narration in three different chapters. 'The Vegetarian,' the first chapter, is narrated from an unknown rebellious perspective and Yeong-hye's husband, Mr. Cheong's perspective. In this chapter, the novel unfolds through the fractured perspectives of a family shattered by Yeong-hye's unexpected rebellion. The story begins with the seemingly ordinary life of Yeong-hye and her husband Mr. Cheong. Their marriage is a quiet one, devoid of passion but marked by a comfortable routine. One night, Yeong-hye wakes from a disturbing dream of violence involving raw meat. This dream triggers a profound change within her. She becomes repulsed by the idea of eating meat and throws away all the meat in the house. Mr. Cheong is bewildered and frustrated by this sudden shift. He sees it as a rejection of him and their life together. He tries to reason with

her, but Yeong-hye remains resolute. This act of defiance sets off a chain reaction that dismantles their carefully constructed normalcy. The narrative then shifts to Yeong-hye's husband, Mr. Cheong. He feels increasingly isolated and humiliated by his wife's behavior. He seeks solace in an affair with a co-worker, but it brings him no real satisfaction. He becomes obsessed with forcing Yeong-hye back into her old role, hoping to restore their semblance of a normal life.

The second chapter is 'Mongolian Mark,' which is narrated from In-hye's husband, Yeong-hye's brother-in-law's perspective. The unnamed character, brother-in-law, is ambitious, materialistic, and driven by societal expectations. When he happens to see his sister-in-law naked, he is sexually stimulated, which provokes him to conspire against his sister-in-law for sexual molestation. Ultimately he succeeds in exploiting Yeong-hye for his gain, manipulating her for a sexually suggestive art performance. When In-hye discovers the videotape of the art performance, she admits Yeong-hye and her husband to the mental hospital.

The third chapter 'Flaming Trees' is narrated from In-hye's perspective. Although the novel revolves around the story of Yeong-hye, in the last section the centrality of the story tilts to In-hye, the elder sister of Yeong-hye. In this section, the novel shows the pathetic condition of Yeong-hye, who is mentally retarded and yet not ready to surrender her verdict of vegetarianism. In-hye, becoming rather robust, divorces her husband and strengthens herself to acknowledge those bygone days as nightmares in this section. Throughout the novel, the reader experiences the story through the fragmented perspectives of these characters. Each perspective sheds light on the impact of Yeong-hye's actions while revealing their own inner struggles and societal pressures.

The novel concludes with an ambiguous scene. Yeong-hye is confined to a

mental institution, having seemingly regressed to a primitive state. However, the final image leaves the reader questioning whether this is a form of surrender or a deeper connection with nature. It is quite difficult to speculate the right and precise answer since the novel is open-ended; however, thematically, being based on the issue raised in the novel counteracts human brutality. To validate this argument, in the same context, when Krys Lee, the journalist, questions Han Kang about the issue of the novel in an interview, she replies, “Violence is part of being human, and how can I accept that I am one of those human beings? That kind of suffering always haunts me” (64). In Kang’s response, she associates violence with human nature and her indispensability with violence. However, in her darker statement, she further opines, “Although humans have embodied this violence, as they view this around and in themselves, they also have a natural instinct to confront or move in a different direction” (64). This statement, with an optimistic tone, reflects upon the characteristics of humans which are natural by nature and violence as received attributes. This discussion is based on the premises of the novel and she defines the novel not merely as a projection of vegetarian and non-vegetarian discourse but as uncovering the philosophical nature of human brutality and the impossibility of being kind in the world of death and despair. Analyzing Kang’s proposition, Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia interestingly remarks upon the thematic issues of the novel deeply in the following ways:

The name of the novel has proven to be misleading as readers have tended to approach it as a tale of the woman who becomes a vegetarian, but that is really just the first plateau. Early on in the novel, Yeong-hye becomes a vegan. Little has been remarked upon this aspect and, in regard to the vegetarian angle, sparse critical discussion has emerged regarding her desire to become a plant. (101)

Maria's analysis remarkably parallels Kang's assumption in denying the manifested issue of vegetarianism. But she slightly takes a turn and hints toward ecocriticism, politically choosing the non-human dialogue of the protagonist. However, as Caitlin E. Stobie argues, "The recent translation and popularity of *The Vegetarian* is a prescient example of ethical eating's controversial positioning in modern society" (787), Maria should not deny the contemporary debate regarding the ethical issues haunting society by creating certain dichotomy in relation to human's food habit. For, Caitlin E. Stobie "a careful analysis of vegetarian movements and their terms reveal that an interest in animal ethics does not necessarily allow one to feel a common purpose with other humans" (788). Furthermore, she stresses, "First, the Oxford English Dictionary records that 'vegetarian' was used by British and American writers to ambiguously refer to [a] member of a Chinese religious sect which enjoins lifelong abstinence from meat" (788). In this relevance, Caitlin's investigation shows vegetarianism is not merely an individual choice but a politics to distinguish self and other, especially between East and West. What is more prominent in Caitlin's analysis is the alternative perspective to observe vegetarianism and the ideological tussle in the taxonomy of the word.

Caitlin is not alone in capturing the political essence of the novel, especially relating to vegetarianism. Carol T. Christ, for instance, argues, "this is a story of sexual politics . . . but Han Kang's fiction takes you even further to the limits of the human as Yeong-hye seeks to withdraw from embodiment itself, an act that precipitates violence in those around her as they try to force her" (521). Carol not only delves into sexual politics but also infuses the protagonist's self-detachment in the patriarchal body and refuses to impart her in the recommended setting. Carol's propositions are persuasive in the sense that the protagonist is involved in sexual

taboo by participating in sexual intercourse with her sister's husband and she refuses to accept her husband and her old-aged father's enforcement. But more than her denial, her subjective decision is more crucial. Rather than denying the patriarchal notion, to a large extent, she is trying to make her own choice no matter what her husband, family, and society say.

Far from other scholars, Jesook Song et al. in their article, "Against Confinement: Degeneration, Mental Disability, and the Conditions of Nonviolence in *The Vegetarian*" investigate *The Vegetarian* within the minority politics of South Korea, which provides context and ground for their argument. They assert:

I read *The Vegetarian* as a text not only about degeneration as a cause, and a result, of violence, but also about mental disability, nonnormative desire, and desirelessness, which are connected to the history of state-enforced institutionalization and of violence against disabled people, along with other minoritized populations. (142)

For Song et al., the novel articulates the impact of asymmetric social functioning that behaves differently to the abnormal people in South Korea. They underscore the novel as a casualty of violence and the result of governmental violence against indifferent people. Noticeably, Song et al. elasticizing the domain of research and associating the protagonist's mental issues with contemporary Korean society, assert: "*The Vegetarian* by Han Kang tells the violent story that unfolds over Yeong-hye's changes, which include ceasing to eat meat, have sex, and sleep" (140). Moreover, they emphasize, "She experiences repeated nightmares, marital rape, physical violence, and a suicide attempt, which lead to her hospitalization and divorce" (140). For Song et al. the novel is a compact articulation of Korean society where the (dis)able people or minorities are discarded as the vegetarian. Perhaps Song et al. are

true in contextual reference; however, I argue, that the protagonist in the novel is not a vulnerable character and her story of brutality and her mental disturbances are the weaker points. Yeong-hye is a self-determined character who owns subjectivity regardless of societal hindrances. The reflection of her vulnerabilities is the patriarchal gaze over women who surpass the boundaries of male prescription. The issue of patriarchy seems to be the point of discussion for Yeong-hye's decision for specific reasons. As Maria Thomas examines the novel:

The two major patriarchal figures in the first section of the novel are her husband Cheong and her old-aged father who forces Yeong-hye to eat meat at the family intervention. Cheong though a modern man, still holds onto several regressive sexist attitudes. He is still very traditional considering the roles of a husband and a wife. Cheong's masculinity is also underscored by the fact that he is an avid meat eater. (72)

Thomas considers Yeong-hye to be engulfed in the nexus of family and her denial of accepting the male's choice. As she further argues, "Yeong-hye's newfound vegetarianism challenges the social and cultural setup of the society in which she lives" (72). Moreover, "As for her feeling that she is a tortured animal is never explicitly articulated," Maria maintains, "but her dreams speak volumes. In those dreams, she herself feels like a piece of meat, butchered and consumed by her egoistic husband" (72-73). Thomas, though remarkably hits the issue of male chauvinism, fails to realize that there is no necessity for Yeong-hye's realization in the novel because her subjectivity and choice of vegetarianism are the result and consequences of her realization. It is not necessary to know the door when it is already open. Because as the husband in the novel says, "As Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way" (3) which reflects the

changes in Yeong-hye. Thus, what is more important is how her consequences of realization overturn the assumption of family, society, and culture embellished by patriarchy. Hence, in more critical reflection, Kaushani Mondal contends: “*The Vegetarian* is the story of her unfinished quest, a story of her ‘becoming’ a body without organs driven by psychosis, schizophrenia, anemia, insomnia, and anorexia” (56). Further extending the argument, Mondal pursues, “But ‘consuming meat’ whether cannibalistically or consumptively comes with power-flexing, auto-hegemonization and subjection and subjugation of the other. This informs a system of empowerment where meat-making, meat-consuming and meat-delivering discriminate the vegetarian, the non-fleshly, and the non-carnal” (58). Mondal throws an argument like a stone in the pond and starts talking about the trees nearby. The point is she initiates the issue of becoming but shows her face towards the debate between vegetarian and non-vegetarian, where the latter subdues the former.

Mondal is indeed right that the novel narrates the story of a girl who is converting herself into a body without organs and is driven by psychosis. Nevertheless, her body transformation is a process of becoming a woman, who is engrossed by womanness. Yet, “Yeong-hye’s refusal to eat meat in such an androcratic society is itself an act of resistance, resilience, and revolt” (Mondal 56). In this sense, for Mondal, “She stands at the intersection of a capitalist and patriarchal society where her voice is barely given a space and her journey is narrated in three parts by her husband, her brother-in-law, and her sister” (56). Ironically, the protagonist undergoes multiple transformations including her subjectivity, self-reflexivity, and embodiment. In this relevance, the protagonist's transformation is not simply personal but a deliberate act that challenges the dominant social order in Korean society. Her changes are the observations from the dominant male’s

perspective, which is guided by his inner supposition of superiority. Since the issue dominantly is the protagonist's choice to be a vegetarian, implicitly it is her reflexivity that is questioned by her male counterparts. This is a reflection of women's subjectivity and the reaction of the protagonist's husband is the projection of patriarchal gaze in demolishing women's embodied reality. Moreover, the bodily dejection of meat, sex, and sleep is a portrayal of embodied women's performativity of resistance and revolt against male chauvinism. Thus, this research delves into the issues of the two important characters: Yrong-hye and In-hye, from the feminist perspective to expose how they strive to project an alternative way to create a woman's paradigm and how they perform a fluid way of womanhood in becoming women. In doing so, this research delves into Judith Butler's notion of performativity and Rosi Braidotti's concept of becoming a woman.

Judith Butler, an American philosopher and gender studies scholar, is well known for her theory of performativity. In her book *Gender Trouble*, she argues that gender is not a fixed identity but a "specialized form of repetitive action." The locus of her argument is that gender and sex are two different things; since they are different, "it does not follow that to be a given sex is to become a given gender; in other words, 'woman' need not be the cultural construction of the female body, and 'man' need not interpret male bodies" (152). In case of the gender, she puts: "This radical formulation of the sex/gender distinction suggests that sexed bodies can be the occasion for a number of different genders, and further, that gender itself need not be restricted to the usual two" (152). In fact, for Butler, "gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort" (152). Moreover, she claims, "gender is a kind of action that can

potentially proliferate beyond the binary limits imposed by the apparent binary of the sex” (152). In Butler’s view, gender is neither a socially constructed phenomenon nor an inscription of sexual binary, but rather a continuous process of becoming. Thus, in this research, Butler’s concept is deliberately used to investigate the performance of the characters in becoming women.

In relation to Butler’s conception, this research also embodies Rosi Braidotti's concept of becoming a woman. In her seminal paper entitled, “Becoming Woman, or Sexual Difference Revisited,” she argues, “the subject of feminism is not Woman as the complementary and specular other of man but rather a complex and multi-layered embodied subject who has taken her distance from the institution of femininity” (11). For Braidotti, to be a woman does not mean to be a counterpart of a man, in fact, there are layers of embodiment that help to construct a woman, and those multilayered embodiments are associated with femininity. More specifically, focusing on the binary of gender subjective location, she asserts:

‘She’ no longer coincides with the disempowered reflection of a dominant subject who casts his masculinity in a universalistic posture. She, in fact, may no longer be a she, but the subject of quite another story: a subject-in-process, a mutant, the other of the Other, a post-Woman embodied subject cast in female morphology who has already undergone an essential metamorphosis. (11-12)

Braidotti problematizes the conventional notion of female as the binary to the male. For her, indeed a woman is other to a man but beyond that, she is also other of other concerning her male counterpart. In other words, neither female is a fixed category of people nor she is a conventional woman—who has to be identified from gendered ideology, but rather she is a phenomenal creature who has undergone multiple

transformations, trespassing the boundaries of prescribed male doctrine. More interestingly, neither the males nor the the society ruled by them are aware of their far going. Braidotti discusses this issue in the following ways:

What is changing is not merely the terminology or metaphorical representation of subjects, but the very structure of subjectivity, social relations, and the social imaginary that support it. It is the syntax of social relations, as well as their symbolic representation, that is in upheaval. (14)

Braidotti exposes the trajectory of how women's subjectivity was framed within the limitation of patriarchal determination and reveals how it has changed over time. Hence, since their subjectivity has been converted structurally, the way they have to be perceived in social cartography indeed has to be changed. Taking these notions into account, this research strives to illuminate how Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* discloses the subjectivity of women and how their performativity shapes the process of becoming women in an embodied patriarchal, male chauvinistic society.

Women are evaluated in terms of what they do not do rather than what they do. It is because what they generally do is what males prescribe them and what they do not do is how they defied the rules made by the superior gender, male. Importantly, in the words of Luce Irigaray, "The decline of sexual culture goes hand in hand with the establishment of different values which are supposedly universal but turn out to entail one part of humanity having a hold over the other, here the world of men over that of women" (8). Thus, when women override the cultural codes of the society imposed by males, she is overloaded by males' supposition. Similar happenstances are opportune in Kang's *The Vegetarian* when Yeong-hye refuses to consume meat. She is forced to change her verdict regarding vegetarianism by her husband or forcefully compelled to eat meat by her father. In either case, Yeong-hey's subjective

choice is undermined and neglected. Neither her father nor her husband ever asks the intended reason behind her decision and makes a pale assumption based on their supposition. For instance, her husband, Mr. Cheong says:

As far as I was concerned, the only reasonable grounds for altering one's eating habits were the desire to lose weight, an attempt to alleviate certain physical alignments, being possessed by an evil spirit, or having your sleep disturbed by indigestion. In any other case, it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as mine had done. (14)

Cheong, instead of operating any significant investigation behind her assertion, passes his comment regarding the shift of choice, which he points out, is because of two reasons. Basically, he considers either people turn vegetarian for physical consciousness or to disobey their husbands. Rather than accepting eating habits as individual choices, Cheong exclaims the desire merely as pathological discomfort and ill-nature to conspire against male counterpart. What Cheong does not acknowledge is women's subjectivity and their right to make their own choices and desires. In such relevance, a triggering question is why Mr. Cheong believes it is his wife's stubbornness to go against her husband's wish when she goes vegetarian.

The reason behind Cheong's unfathomable assumption is he is not prone to accept the change in Yeong-hye. His wife was always a benevolent recipient of his words and never did she disobey her husband. In fact, "she was a woman of few words" (4). Mr. Cheong says, "It was rare for her to demand anything of me, and however late I was in getting home she never took it upon herself to kick up a fuss. Even when our days off happened to coincide, it wouldn't occur to her to suggest we go out somewhere together" (4). In Cheong's words, it is visible that Yeong-hye was a docile wife, and she never demanded anything from her husband. The relationship

was one-way traffic, led by Mr. Cheong. Her only unusual respect for Mr. Cheong was “she didn’t like wearing a bra” (5). The center of Cheong’s assumption and understanding of his wife relies upon the performance she acts. Cheong was satisfied with his wife until she was obedient to him. However, in such a condition, Cheong forgot the autonomy of his wife but his liberation in dominating her. As Simone De Beauvoir argues, “In marriage, they [boys] seek an expansion, a confirmation, a confirmation of their existence but not the very right to exist; it is a charge they assume freely” (454). Moreover, she maintains, “So they can question its advantages and disadvantages just as the Greek and medieval satirists did; for them, it is simply a way of life, not a destiny” (454). In contrast, “the woman receives a piece of the world as property; legal guaranties protect her from man’s caprices; but she becomes his vassal” (454). From Beauvoir's perspective, women lose their grip on individuality as soon as they get married. But in such happenstance, men celebrate their triumph. This is what happens in the novel when Yeong-hye ties herself with Mr. Cheong. When Yeong-hye is shattering into pieces for her husband, Cheong is almost satisfied and never passes any comment upon his wife; but as soon as she retaliates against the non-vegetarian husband she has to confront the repulsive nature of her male counterparts.

Yeong-hye indeed was dominated by her husband in the name of docility. However, for her, it was always her choice and she was never constrained by any of the forces she was deemed to. In other words, when she was obeying her husband it was her decision, when she was non-vegetarian it was her choice and now, when she has turned to vegetarian it is her inner desire. She never interrogated her husband not because she was condemned but rather because she never tried to prove superior for her liberation. This is because as Irigaray informs, “One of the distinctive features of

the female body is its toleration of the other's growth within itself without incurring illness or death for either one of the living organisms" (39). From Irigaray's point of view, Yeong-hye's harmonious behavior remarks upon the quality of her womanhood. Thus, neither does she fear losing her grip on supremacy nor she aspires to dominate her husband. If so, what is she trying to do then in turning vegetarian? For that, I argue, Yeong-hye is celebrating her subjectivity and becoming a woman because, "In order to obtain a subjective status equivalent to that of men, women must therefore gain recognition for their difference" (Kang 41). Moreover, concerning their agency as subjects, "They must affirm themselves as valid subjects, daughters of a mother and a father, respecting others within themselves and demanding that same respect from society" (Kang 41). In this relevance, earlier she was obeying the social structure and prescription which was allowing her to be a traditional woman who inherits the narratives of the male but now she is restructuring herself as a woman again prioritizing her subjectivity. Interestingly, to shape her mode of recognition, she repeatedly performs certain acts, negating the requests of her husband and old father, and having a sexual relationship with her brother-in-law, for instance, which are beyond the compass of patriarchal dogma. Indeed, the patriarchal atmosphere is the crudest huddle to establish herself for her validation; nevertheless, more than that she, instead of combating patriarchy, is enmeshed in the process of becoming a woman.

The choice Yeong-hye makes is not encroached upon by any other agency. To be more precise, her decision to be a non-vegetarian or vegetarian is solely her inner will. Yeong-hye was non-vegetarian by choice. Interestingly, "her signature dish had been wafer-thin slices of beef seasoned with black pepper and sesame oil, then coated with sticky rice powder as generously as you would with rice cakes or pancakes, and dipped in bubbling shabushabu broth" (Kang 14-15). When she had a dream where

she encounters disturbing images of meat-eating scenarios: “My clothes still wet with blood. Hide, behind the trees. Crouch down, don’t let anybody see” (14). The dream is further instse with the images: “My bloody hands. My bloody mouth. In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood” (14). This horrible dream compels her to abstain from meat and rejoice in vegetables. She even throws eggs out and gives up milk. Observing her behavior, Cheong says, “How on earth could she be so self-centered?” (13). The problem with Cheong's statement is that when Yeong-hye obeys Cheong’s every request and decision she never complains to him nor does she retaliate against him but now the only choice she makes contrary to her husband, he reckoned her ‘self-centered.’ Cheong’s opinion resonates with the nature of male dominance as Sheila Rowbotham argues, “When he has an attitude of benevolence and partnership towards a woman, he applies the principle of abstract equality; and he does not posit the concrete inequality he recognizes” (14). Moreover, “But as soon as he clashes with her, the situation reversed. He will apply the concrete inequality theme and will even allow himself to disavow abstract equality” (14). The point is that Cheong was providing equal recognition and rights unless she was a loyal servant of her husband, but when she made a choice, she was even discarded from the right that was her own, personal autonomy.

Yeong-hye did not commit a crime, nor she was against any social regulations. The only thing she did was respect her inner spirit. However, as soon as she stands on her decision this does not merely disrupt the volatility of her husband but also for her father. As if she were to be protecting the fame of her father, when he arrives at home and scolds Yeong-hye, since she does not reply, he feels sorry for Mr. Cheong. And when her mother requests her to eat the meat she says, “I won’t eat” (Kang 37). In

fact, after she converted herself to vegetarianism she was drastically changed, mentally and physically. She avoids sexual relationships with her husband, does not sleep well, does not communicate properly, and does not eat as needed, which has changed her into a mummified human. But, when she rejects her mother's request, "For the first time in a long while, her speech was clear and distinct" (37). This shows that despite being weak and thin and losing her physical strength, she was yet powerful enough in her clear rejection. She is so determined that she is neither affected by love nor by force. When her father enforces her and says, "My heart will pack in if this goes on any longer! . . . Don't you understand what you understand what your father's telling you? If he tells you to eat, you eat!" (38). She does not lose her grip, she rejects her father instead. In-hye, her sister, even consoles her to eat, her mother and her husband but she is not ready to surrender. Observing this scenario, her father thrust the pork on her lips. In doing so, none of the characters realize her choice and subjective will. In fact, instead of letting her enjoy the decision she has made, she is brutally treated inhumanely. This not only shatters her stands but also ruptures the ground of personal autonomy. As Marilyn Friedman says, "Personal autonomy has to do with behaving or living according to what is, in some important sense, 'one's own.' In brief, it involves an agent acting from and according to wants or values that she has reflectively considered under conditions that were not unduly coercive or manipulative" (180). Thus, from Friedman's perspective, the entire family was against her autonomy and compelling her to surrender to patriarchal decorum.

Indeed, in his aggression, Yeong-hye's father succeeds in throwing meat in her mouth but what he forgets is: "When men's aggressiveness and physical forcefulness are bolstered by social norms that legitimate their dominance, women become systematically subordinate, a consequence but that cannot have an effect on

women's desires, fears, values, and commitments — indeed, on their very character” (178). Instead of normalizing things in common, as a result, she cuts her wrists: “the shock of red splashed over white china” (41). The point here is not to reflect what happened in the novel but rather to articulate Yeong-hye’s commitment to hold her decision and robustness in fulfilling her desire. She is ready to die but not prone to accept her defeat. No matter how hard it could be for her to sustain her choice, she is ready to tolerate the consequences but seldom is she ready to reverse her idea. In such a condition, to reflect upon who she is, she time and again shows her powerful dismissal of the request which not only acts against the conventional notion of docility but also establishes a way to deject patriarchy and pave the way for womenness.

The repetitive act of Yeong-hye’s rejection is the contrapuntal melody of her voice, where she sings the song of her way to liberation and aversion of the past days. Historically, Yeong-hye had been victimized by her patriarchal father and a scapegoat in her family. She rarely enjoyed her freedom and built her own space to consume the autonomy she was meant to. Revisiting the past, In-hey projects Yeong-hye’s past in the following ways:

Yeong-hye had been the only victim of their father’s beatings. Such violence wouldn’t have bothered their brother Yeong-ho so much, a boy who went around doling out his own rough justice to the village children. As the eldest daughter, In-hye had been the one who took over from their exhausted mother and made a broth for her father to wash the liquor down, and so he’d always taken a certain care in his dealing with her. Only Yeong-docile and naive had been unable to deflect their father’s temper or put up any form of resistance. Instead, she had merely absorbed all her suffering inside her, deep into the

marrow of her bones. (157)

The reason behind her silence and her obligatory behavior lies in her historicity. Those bodily tortures are still imprisoned in her deeper physicality. “As an intentionally organized materiality,” Butler argues, “the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention” (521). More specifically, she contends: “The body is a historical situation as Beauvoir has claimed, and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation” (521). In this sense, when Yeong-hey tolerates the tortures in the past, the way she expresses her choice in the present is the dramatization of repressed emotions, which were always inscribed in her body.

Yeong-hey was segregated from all the opportunities, firstly as ‘a girl,’ and secondly, as a younger sister. As Braidotti suggests, “the category Woman, despite all the differences that actually exist among individual women, is very clearly identifiable as suffering from common culturally enforced assumptions” (157). However, in contrast, she states, “different women may be from each other in other respects, all women are excluded from higher education” (157). Importantly, Braidotti stresses, “And why is that? Because this culture has a certain preset idea of Women that results in the exclusion of all women from educational rights. This is the traditional representation of a Woman as irrational, oversensitive destined to be a wife and mother. Woman as body, sex, and sin. Woman as ‘other-than’ Man” (157). Yeong-hye, in this sense, was not merely victimized by patriarchal domination but also destined to be an ‘other man,’ conflated with individuality and detached from subjectivity. However, fascinatingly, she never regretted nor did she condemn her father. If so, wasn’t there any problem with her? And if she was satisfied, why did she seem to be retaliating against her husband and father? More than vengeance, she is

reconstructing her gender not as a discursive prescription of femininity but as a female with her own set of rules, values, and more importantly, her subjectivity. In Butler's view, "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (523). Furthermore, she stresses, "From a feminist point of view, one might try to reconceive the gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence or fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguist" (523). Thus, in this sense, the way she is constantly negating the requests of her husband and father is symptomatically a process of gender formation. She is not merely prioritizing her inner will to stand on her position but also reformulating the grammar of a patriarchal society.

Yeong-hye's deterioration of health and mental instability leads her to be an abnormal character. In such happenstances, "Since her behavior after the initial change had grown increasingly strange — culminating in her wandering around topless — her husband had decided that her vegetarianism was proof that she would never be 'normal again'" (Kang 70). Her husband never tries to fix the problem but rather never fails to pass pessimistic comments. However, mentally retarded she might be, even in such a condition she does not give up her choice, she persistently keeps on performing the act which she is destined and determined to and deliberately challenges the male-dominated norms, instead. More as a phenomenal condition:

The moment she'd tried to take her own life had been a turning point. Now, there was nothing anyone could do to help her. Every single one of them — her parents who had force-fed her meat, her husband and siblings who had stood by and let it happen — were distant strangers, if not actual enemies. (67)

In this context, Yeong-hye distances herself from the bond of emotions and sympathy and constructs her way of life to substantiate her position. Thus, she gradually

disrobes the patriarchal fabrics and embraces her pure nature of herself.

In the process of revealing her disguised femininity, she moderately slams the door of patriarchal normalcy and strengthens her building block of subjectivity. She divorces her husband, for instance, and lives alone, which symbolizes her independence. Moreover, her bold appearance is more palpable when she discloses herself naked in front of her brother-in-law. The situation in which she projects herself unhesitatingly is described by the brother-in-law in the following ways:

She was coming out of the bathroom. The real shock, though, was that she was naked. She stood there blankly for a moment, as though she too was somewhat startled, and without the slightest trace of moisture visible on her naked body. But then she began to pick up the scattered clothes one by one and slip them on. She did this quite calmly, not in the least flustered or embarrassed, as though getting dressed was merely something demanded by the situation, rather than something she herself felt to be necessary. (73)

It is almost beyond imagination to disrobe or unclothe a woman in front of a brother-in-law in a patriarchal society. Moreover, a woman who is doomed by the normative values of male dominance is not allowed to appear audaciously without clothes. She picks up the clothes merely to show how patriarchy forces women to react to such conditions but not to feel the necessity of doing it. In doing so, Yeong-hye revalues her notion rather than what society expects her to value. This is in a sense dignifying her subjectivity and signifying an alternative way of women's subject. To this, Braidotti believes “the redefinition of the female feminist subject starts with the reevaluation of the bodily roots of subjectivity, rejecting the traditional vision of the knowing subject as universal, neutral, and consequently gender-free” (6-7). Moreover, Braidotti stresses, “This ‘positional’ or situated way of seeing the subject states that

the most important location or situation is the rooting of the subject into the spatial frame of the body” (7). In this relevance, Yeong-hye’s audacious nature to jeopardize males’ prescription of female action befits consolidation of a female subject, which sets a tremendous gap between convention and reality. Women are always in the shade of male description but when they are opportune to reflect themselves, they are incredibly distinct from patriarchal imagination. For instance, when the brother-in-law feels sorry for his unalarmed incoming, Yeong-hye says, “It’s just that I enjoy like this when I’m on my own” (74). This suggests that when they are comforted with self-reflexivity, they can trespass the limits of males’ prescription but it is the patriarchal normalcy that is becoming the constraint for their autonomy. For this, Yeong-hye unconditionally reacts to the value system and paves the way for becoming a woman in a new way.

Yeong-hye distances herself from the idealized values of males and submerges herself in the ocean of taboos, where the relics of patriarchy haunt and dispel her identity as a good woman. In doing so, she mocks patriarchy and spits over its assumption by deliberately going beyond the horizon of males’ restriction. And in doing so, she locates the situatedness of her body by dismissing the conventions of women’s sexuality. For Braidotti, “The first and foremost of locations in reality is one’s own embodiment” (7). Thus, she adds, “Rethinking the body as our primary situation is the starting point for the epistemological side of the ‘politics of location,’ which aims at grounding the discourse produced by female feminists” (7). Following Braidotti’s position, in the novel, Yeong-hye localizes her body and vocalizes women’s self-reflexivity through sexuality. She is sexually involved with her brother-in-law and does not hesitate to participate openly in sexual pleasure with strangers like J, her brother-in-law’s friend. From a closed perspective, it is also possible to

observe Yeong-hye's nudity as disrobing the fabric of patriarchy. How can she become a new woman if she still dresses conventional values? Thus, symbolically, since she enjoys her nakedness she loves to unleash the norms of patriarchy by plunging herself into the domain of nature itself. She does not want to customize herself with male discursivity. Indeed as Butler asserts:

There are norms into which we are born - gendered, racial, national - that decide what kind of subject we can be, but in being those subjects, in occupying and inhabiting those deciding norms, in incorporating and performing them, we make use of local options to rearticulate them in order to revise their power. (117)

The more one is involved in the conventional notion the better it serves the interests of persistent power, which since history has been defining the society. In the words of Butler, "Norms cannot be embodied without an action of a specific kind, and they cannot continue to enforce themselves without a continual action" (117). Thus, Butler highlights, "It is in the thinking through of this action that change can happen, since we are acting all the time in the ways that we enact, repeat, appropriate and refuse the norms that decide our social ontology" (117). Thus, delinking this continuity of repetitive action which perpetuates the norms, subjectivity, and self-reflexivity of women plays a crucial role. Yeong-hye, in this sense, is a catalyst who shows these qualities, while rejecting to be non-vegetarian, nudging herself in front of her brother-in-law and breaking the taboos of sexuality.

Similarly, Yeong-hye's affinity towards nature and her intense desire to commute with the painted flower suggests that she wants to accept herself naturally rather than socially and culturally. When J refuses to record the artistic performance and leaves the set because of sexual stimulation, the brother-in-law attempts to hunt

her sexually because he is rather charged while filming them naked. As Yeong-hye denies to accept his request, he asks, “Why shouldn’t we? Because I’m your brother-in-law?” (106), in response Yeong-hye says, “No it’s nothing to do with that . . . . It wasn’t him, it was the flowers” (106). The flower painted on J’s body was the reason that she was ready even to have sex with him, which literally shows her love for nature. It seems quite valid because since she is turning vegetarian she might be in connection with nature. However, analyzing it from a distinct perspective, her love for nature is a desire to dissolve her polluted social identity infused by patriarchal values and a new beginning to rewrite her way of identification. In this sense, her affection for nature is symbolically a process of becoming a woman by defenestrating the filth of convention and starting a mode of the female through her continuous performance which is a reciprocity of her subjectivity.

The course of action in which she rejects the notion of patriarchy, at the same time deconstructs the role of women and their prescribed norms. And importantly, when she denies the convention, meanwhile, she constructs a new way of definition through which she could imagine a better place for women. Indeed, one may argue that Yeong-hye and her brother-in-law, after In-hye finds the tape of their sexual intercourse, are sent to the mental hospital, where Yeong-hye seems to collapse her life, though it is not revealed in the novel, cannot provide an alternative way for women’s position. Although this argument is fundamentally true if the textual evidence is concerned because the purpose of feminism is to provide them liberation and autonomy rather than making them psychologically retarded like Yeong-hye, the way Yeong-hye stands robustly on her determination even in such a meager condition is the demand of feminism so that they could break the chain of history and construct a new foundation in which they would be the master of their narrative, being the

interpreter of their own. It sounds impossible to bring such an assumption into the pragmatic domain; nevertheless, how it is possible Butler defines it in the following ways:

There are social contexts and conventions within which certain acts not only become possible but become conceivable as acts at all. The transformation of social relations becomes a matter, then, of transforming hegemonic social conditions rather than the individual acts that are spawned by those conditions. Indeed, one runs the risk of addressing the merely indirect, if not epiphenomenal, reflection of those conditions if one remains restricted to the politics of acts. (525)

Butler simplifies the acts by showing the patterns of behavior society adopts in the process of performing certain acts. She explains that even an uncanny act can be made a social practice through a series of practices. More importantly, when society is prone to accept the change, an individual's act of peculiarity no longer remains anomalous but becomes a norm that regulates society on its own premises. In this relevance, the point is that the firmness of a woman's position should not be so fragile, which can be easily demolished by a supple infliction. Her ground must be consolidated with the rigidity of her subjectivity and self-reflexivity, no matter how powerful force tries to uproot her foundation like Yeong-hye. She is a patient in a mental hospital, she is weak and light like air, she is nearly unconscious, and she is about to collapse her life; nonetheless, she is not ready to surrender, she is yet fighting for her choice. Never does she lament, nor does she change her decision.

Indeed, it is not easy to change track because when a new set of values emerges neither society nor individuals are prone to accept the chance. This situation resonates with the situation Yeong-hye confronts in the hospital. Showing her

dissatisfaction and inquisitiveness against the medical persons, Yeong-hye says, “No one can understand me . . . the doctors, the nurses, they’re all the same . . . they don’t even try to understand . . . they just force me to take medication and stab me with needles” (156). The point here is an abrupt change in an individual becomes a mad person like Yeong-hye in society, who despite several struggles never been understood for her thoughts. Rather all people observe the changed individual with a jaundiced eye and try to inflict it like Yeong-hye is stabbed by the needles. However, as the nurse in the mental hospital informs:

It’s not that she isn’t aware of her surroundings, or that she doesn’t speak . . . she’s different from other catatonic patients. Up until yesterday, we’d been having to force her back into the ward; but no matter what we did she just started up with the handstands again as soon as she was in the ward, . . . so we can’t even force her to stop. (146)

To change a society where patriarchy rules the subjective domain, one has to adhere to Yeong-hye’s way of resistance, who tries to turn things upside down, and if it is not possible she becomes upside down so that the society has to alter the perspective to observe her exact position. Medically, she is considered to have schizophrenia and other mental disturbances; nevertheless, her determined action shows that she is more mentally stable than physically. And, as Ramesh Kumar Sharma argues “consciousness needs a body in the larger sense for there to be a conscious experience. Embodiment is thus a necessary condition for there to be not only manifestation of the self but also knowledge of the world other than the self” (2), Yeong-hye’s embodiment is unbelievably powerful to carry on her consciousness despite her fragile body.

The argument here is not to deal with what Yeong-hye does in the novel but to

show how she does it. Importantly, when Yeong-he is involved in every restriction or engulfed in taboo, she repeatedly rejects the prescription and validates her subjectivity through her self-reflexive process. In doing so, she establishes a new domain of women which is in totality becoming women. As Butler argues, “The first point to understand about performativity is what it is not: identities are not made in a single moment in time. They are made again and again” (116). Thus, Yeong-hye’s continuous rejection and valuation of her choice is a process of constructing identity, especially for women’s identity in the regime of males. However, as Butler stresses, “This does not mean identities are made radically new every time they are made, but only that it takes some time for identities to be brought out; they are dynamic and historical” (116). What is more crucial is “if we ask what is distinctive about 'being' human, it will probably turn out that human being is always about becoming” (116). In this sense, since Yeong-hye goes through several changes, earlier as a traditional woman, later a mad woman, and at last a new woman, her performative acts resemble the process of becoming a woman.

In conclusion, women are vulnerable in a male-dominated society; nevertheless, as soon as they cross its boundary, prioritizing their subjectivity and self-reflexivity, they set a new trial to construct the marker of a new woman. To this, Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* depicts an alternative way to reconstruct women from their perspective. It is impossible to imagine an entirely new way of identification; however, to redraw the maps of self under subjectivity can be a better version of self than the self-discoursed by others.

Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*, more than a depiction of social reality, is an apparatus through which the picture of society can be altered and bring a new dimension of the gendered world into visibility. The novel urges women to establish

their ground, disrobing themselves from the patriarchal fabric, and suggests that women should never surrender if they need their autonomy and liberation. The repetitive act of performing their subjectivity and art of implying their self-reflexivity, embodying a sense of womanness is the process of becoming a woman. Hence, unless they prioritize their value they remain a slave to their male counterparts.

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