

## Transcending Constraints: Female Bodily Discipline and Resistance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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### Abstract

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2015/2007) has been the subject of numerous scholarly explorations. Nevertheless, few studies have applied Michel Foucault's theory of the body to examine the protagonist Yeong-hye's struggle against societal norms. This paper fills this gap by analyzing how Yeong-hye's body is disciplined, constrained, and reimagined within the frameworks of patriarchy and biopolitics. Through Foucault's concept of the body as a site of power, we argue that Yeong-hye's refusal to conform to societal expectations, such as her rejection of meat consumption and her attempts to "become a plant," represents both a personal rebellion and a tragic reflection of the limitations imposed by patriarchal structures. This paper explores how her body, marked by both physical and psychological violence, becomes a battleground for identity reconstruction. This interpretation contributes to ongoing discussions on the intersection of gender, power, and the body, offering a fresh perspective on the existential and symbolic dimensions of Kang's novel.

### Keywords

Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, female bodily discipline, female bodily resistance, women's resistance consciousness

### Introduction

The recipient of the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature, Han Kang (1970 –) is a prominent figure in South Korea's new generation of writers. Her novel *The Vegetarian* (2015/2007) garnered the Man Booker International Prize in 2016, making her the first Asian author to win the prestigious award. Since its

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publication, *The Vegetarian* has attracted significant scholarly attention, with research exploring various aspects of the text, including literary and medical studies (Marchalik and Jurecic 2017; Read 2017), comparative literature (Alexandrescu 2016; Licher 2016), and posthumanist readings (Stobie 2017). Scholars have also engaged with the novel from an ecofeminist perspective in recent years, analyzing the protagonist's existential crisis and the broader implications of "becoming a plant" (Bayomy and Mohamed 2020; Kim 2020; Mayo 2021). Others have examined the metaphorical significance of plant imagery (Casey 2021; Kim 2019; Sands 2024). Despite this extensive scholarship, only some studies have explored the novel from the perspective of female bodily discipline and constraints.

Historically, "the body" has been central to intellectual discourse. As Long observes, from the time of Socrates, the body has often been viewed as opposed to the soul, a focus of philosophical and literary debates (34–57). For centuries, the body is associated with physical desires, marginalised by rational thought, and relegated to a subordinate status. Nietzsche, however, challenges this dualism by affirming the value of the sensual, desiring body (Golden). By the 20th century, thinkers like Michel Foucault redefine the body as a biological and cultural construct deeply intertwined with ethics, society, and power (Wehrle 56–71). Foucault argues that the body is shaped and disciplined by discourses, knowledge, and power, viewing it as a dynamic process rather than a fixed entity (Jackson; Palm). According to him, power is not limited to overt political forms but permeates everyday life, influencing individual posture, speech, and social interaction (Hoffman). Foucault defines power as

a mode of action that does not act directly or immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future [...] it incites, it seduces, it makes [it] easier or more difficult; in the extreme, it constrains or forbids absolutely. (220)

Gallagher notes that "on this view, power is understood as something that is exercised, not possessed" (397). In *Madness and Civilization*, he explores how reason suppresses and confines the body, rendering individuals obedient (Foucault). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault examines how power and knowledge regulate and transform bodies into disciplined subjects: "Knowledge is linked to power; firstly, because it assumes the authority of the 'truth' and, secondly, because it has the power to make itself true" (Lilja 108). Foucault argues that:

Disciplines are the bearers of a discourse, but this cannot be the discourse of right. The discourse of discipline has nothing in common with that of law, rule, or sovereign will. The disciplines may well be the carriers of a discourse that speaks of a rule, but this rule is not the juridical rule deriving from sovereignty but a natural rule, a norm. The code they come to define is not that of law but that of normalisation. (44)

In *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault highlights the relationship between power and sexuality, showing how sexuality can function both as a tool of power and a potential site of resistance. As Cook notes,

Foucault insisted (almost *ad nauseam*) that this investment has been not merely repressive but productive: by investing in the body, training it, subjecting it to exercise, and normalising it, power also helped to produce the modern individual. (157)

In *The Care of the Self* (1978), he introduces the concept of “aesthetics of existence,” where individuals actively shape their bodies and lives as resistance to the normalising forces of power, allowing the body to become a vehicle for creative self-expression and liberation (Fornet-Betancourt et al.; Shusterman; White). As Foucault clearly explains in one of his discussions of an ancient text, “You have to take care of yourself: it is you who takes care; and then you take care of something which is the same thing as yourself, [the same thing] as the subject who ‘takes care’ (qtd. in Smith 41). Thus, as Smith notes, according to Foucault, “the concept of ‘care of the self’ should therefore be understood in two ways: both as the subject who performs the caring and as the object of that care” (41). This dual perspective on self-care is crucial for understanding the complexities of bodily autonomy and societal control, particularly in patriarchal contexts where women’s bodies are often subjected to strict discipline and punishment. In the following section, we will explore Yeong-hye’s female bodily discipline and punishment in the patriarchal society, examining how her physical and psychological struggles reflect the broader societal constraints placed on women.

### **Female bodily discipline and punishment**

In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye’s body becomes a central motif. The novel’s fragmented narrative, told from multiple perspectives, reveals Yeong-hye’s long history of repression and endurance. Initially, her “abnormal” behaviour, such as her refusal to eat meat and subsequent rejection of societal norms, appears as an act of madness. However, closer examination reveals that her body has long been subjected to both physical and psychological repression. She is silent, refuses to meet her husband’s demands, and dares not express dissatisfaction. The male characters, such as her father, husband, and brother-in-law, represent the patriarchal structures that shape her body and identity. Years of a loveless marriage weigh heavily on her, and the novel traces her journey from a “suffering body,” imprisoned by societal and marital constraints, to one in search of liberation. Yeong-hye’s body transcends the physical realm, symbolising a larger quest for personal renewal.

Yeong-hye’s body, then, is not only a reflection of her suffering but also a symbolic representation of the “lost” body in both Eastern and Western traditions. Historically, the body has been viewed as a vessel of the soul, often an

obstacle to spiritual transcendence. As Grosz argues, women's bodies are often treated as objects, their existence framed by patriarchal logic as secondary, inferior, and subjugated. This treatment of the female body reflects broader social dynamics, as women's roles have been traditionally confined to the private sphere, where they are reduced to objects of domestic labour and submission (Bilezikian 2006; Falola and Amponsah 2012). Jo Little notes that women have often been "imprisoned" within the private sphere, repeatedly performing mundane domestic tasks (335–342). Yeong-hye, the embodiment of traditional womanhood, structures her life around caregiving and domestic labour: "Every morning, she got up at six a.m. to prepare rice and soup, and usually a bit of fish" (Kang 10). In this arrangement, Yeong-hye becomes little more than a "part-time employee" in the male-dominated family structure, her agency constrained within predefined roles. In this space, she is exposed to both psychological and physical abuse.

Foucault's theory of the body provides a valuable framework for understanding these experiences as part of broader power structures. In Foucault's view, power works through overt political structures and the everyday regulation of bodies. In *Discipline and Punish*, he argues that power operates through micro-regulations, shaping the body in subtle but significant ways. Yeong-hye's body, marked by violence and control, exemplifies Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. Sangwha highlights that in male-dominated family structures, implicit hierarchical ideas are deeply entrenched, granting men, especially fathers, the absolute authority within the family (17). Yeong-hye's life vividly illustrates these dynamics. From a young age, her body is subjected to her father's violent control, as seen in her frequent physical punishment: "As small children, their young cheeks were frequently left throbbing by their heavy-handed father" (Kang 89). Even as her sister and mother eventually escape this abuse, Yeong-hye remains under her father's dominance.

Her husband corroborates this continued discipline, recounting, "According to my wife, he had whipped her over the calves until she was eighteen years old" (20). Foucault contends that the body is not merely a biological entity but a passive object shaped and controlled by social power through disciplinary mechanisms (Alim 13–24). These mechanisms regulate behaviour and normalise societal expectations, making the body a central site of power relations. Yeong-hye's body, marked by the violence she endures, exemplifies Foucault's concept of disciplinary power: It becomes an object of control within the patriarchal family, shaped first by her father's physical abuse and later by the societal demands imposed by her husband regarding her appearance and role within the household. This regulation extends beyond overt violence to subtler forms of control, aligning with Foucault's notion of "biopolitics," namely, the governance of bodies and lives through power. Through this lens, Yeong-hye's bodily suffering can be seen as a reflection of the pervasive disciplinary mechanisms that

seek to confine women within prescribed roles, ultimately denying them agency over their bodies.

Yeong-hye's body continues to be controlled after marriage. Her husband subjects her to verbal and physical abuse, and such mistreatment is normalised within their relationship. When confronted with her severed finger, he is angered: "Damn it, what the hell are you doing squirming like that? You have never been squeamish before" (Kang 13). Yeong-hye's subjugation is further reflected in the sexual violence she endures. In one scene, her husband describes how he "grabbed hold of [his] wife and pushed her to the floor," deriving perverse satisfaction from her resistance (26). In this context, Yeong-hye's suffering embodies the societal violence that underpins the gendered control of women's bodies. As Chinese novelist Eileen Chang states, marriage often feels like "long-term prostitution" (Wang 195–267), where women are not only expected to bear domestic labour but also to fulfil other unreasonable "duties." To her husband, Yeong-hye is nothing more than an ordinary, unremarkable wife. As he states, "In keeping with my expectations, she made for a completely ordinary wife who went about things without distasteful frivolousness" (Kang 3). This statement reflects the husband's narrow view of Yeong-hye, seeing her merely as a conventional figure fulfilling her wifely duties. It underscores the initial lack of understanding and empathy he has for her inner world and the changes she undergoes. Yeong-hye once tries to communicate with her husband, attempting to engage him through the absurd content of her dreams, but he responds with indifference, repeating monotonous words. The writer frequently uses negations such as "no" and "never" to emphasise her husband's apathy and the lacklustre nature of their marriage. When confronted with Yeong-hye's abnormal behaviour, her husband simply declares, "You are insane! You have completely lost it" (7), reflecting the patriarchal structure's control over her body. Her husband further insists that he will never take her to see a psychiatrist, deeming it "a shameful matter" while upholding his own "man's pride."

Foucault's theory of biopolitics is also relevant here. Yeong-hye's bodily suffering is not only a reflection of personal trauma but also a microcosm of the broader systems of social control that regulate women's bodies. The power dynamics in the narrative reflected through Yeong-hye's father's physical abuse and her husband's psychological violence resonate with Foucault's concept of the body as a site of disciplinary power. These forms of control align with broader cultural expectations, such as the societal pressures on women's appearance and behaviour. For example, Yeong-hye's refusal to wear a bra symbolises defiance against cultural norms, reflecting her struggle to reclaim control over her body. As Yeong-hye's husband notes, "The only respect in which my wife was unusual was that she did not like wearing a bra" (3). As far as patriarchy is concerned, women who refuse to wear underwear are often viewed as "monstrous" and "immoral." Throughout history, the stigmatisation and abuse of women's bodies

have taken various forms, such as female genital mutilation in Africa, foot-binding in China, and the corsets worn by European nobility after the Renaissance, all of which represent different forms of violence against women (Blake 1994; Davies 1982; Odukogbe et al. 2017; Zhao et al. 2020). From the perspective of early human beings and primitive civilisations, the body was initially naked and later culturally adorned. This progression of bodily adornment can be explored through the biblical story of Adam and Eve, where the first humans are depicted as living in innocence and without shame, symbolised by their nakedness in the Garden of Eden. However, after they ate the forbidden fruit, their awareness of their bodies and their nakedness brought about a sense of shame, leading them to cover themselves with fig leaves. This shift from innocence to self-awareness marks a significant moment in the understanding of the body, reflecting a more profound cultural and moral transformation that aligns with the human tendency to adorn and protect the body to express identity, shame, and societal norms. Indeed, Foucault's theory of the body also helps explain how women's bodies are disciplined and transformed within male-dominated social structures, becoming symbols of obedience and submission. The shaping of women's bodies is not merely a cultural product but a reflection of power relations, constituting part of the "disciplinary" process Foucault describes (Driver 425–446).

Social expectations for women extend far beyond clothing. Regarding diet, Yeong-hye's freedom of choice is also severely restricted, as those around her pressure her to eat meat. Her father even goes so far as to force-feed her through violent means, and because she does not conform so is regarded as a "monster." As the novel states, "Look at yourself, now! Stop eating meat, and the world will devour you whole" (Kang 35), revealing the brutal consequences of societal violence. Through the suffering of the female body, Han Kang profoundly explores the complex relationship between women, society, and their oppressors. Foucault's theory of the body suggests that the body is not merely a biological entity but also a vessel for power and societal control (Turner). It is disciplined by social norms, with its natural, biological state shaped by the society in which it exists. In this context, Yeong-hye's body is not only a physiological existence but also a symbol of oppression, domination, and control exerted by societal norms and power structures. Through the figure of Yeong-hye's body, Kang explores how societal norms, including those governing consumption and appearance, control and subjugate women.

### **Female bodily resistance**

In the first part of *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang adopts the perspective of Yeong-hye's husband, who observes and questions the protagonist's unusual behaviours. Yeong-hye repeatedly responds, "I had a dream" (Kang 5). In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault explores the classical understanding of "madness," noting

that “the dream-like nature of madness was one of the common descriptions in the classical period” (Foucault). We argue that Yeong-hye’s dreams, such as the dark forests and bloodied meat, serve as symbols of her illness, visions that overwhelm her and become too unbearable to confront. Upon waking, she continues to reject the reality of consuming meat. As Williams observes, Foucault argues that madness is not merely a physiological disorder but a rupture between the individual and societal norms (110-119). In this sense, Yeong-hye’s “madness” can be interpreted as a form of rebellion against these societal expectations.

Foucault’s theory of the body emphasises that the body is not merely a biological entity but a site for enacting social power and norms. As Ransom explains, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that the body is a “political field,” shaped and controlled through several disciplinary mechanisms. Within these social disciplines, Yeong-hye’s body is both oppressed and regulated. Her protest first manifests as her vegetarianism, a refusal to consume meat. As a fundamental source of sustenance, her mother admonishes her to eat meat:

Holding a steaming paper cup in one hand, my mother-in-law grasped my wife’s hand in the other. “This...” Her eyes welled with tears. “Take this. Ah, look at your face.” My wife obediently took the paper cup. “It’s herbal medicine. They say it strengthens the body. Why, in the old days, back before your marriage, we had the very same medicine made up for you, remember?” (Kang 52)

This interaction underscores the tension between Yeong-hye’s personal choices and the expectations placed upon her by her family and society. However, Yeong-hye remains indifferent, relinquishing even her basic bodily needs and turning hunger into a form of self-harm. She strips herself of sustenance, ultimately becoming what her husband describes as a “vegetable wife,” embodying a passive form of resistance.

Foucault’s theory of power suggests that power operates through overt violence and the “micro” dimensions of daily life, controlling and shaping individual bodies and behaviours. Yeong-hye’s resistance is also seen in her attempts to assert autonomy over her body. Confronted with the male gaze, she takes two significant actions: First, Yeong-hye is portrayed as an ordinary woman, distinctly different from the fashionable female characters often depicted in modern urban literature. Her most notable trait lies in her refusal to wear a bra, a detail repeatedly emphasised in the text. She justifies her choice by stating, “She tried to justify herself by saying that she could not stand wearing a bra because of the way it squeezed her breasts and that I had never worn one myself, so I could not understand how constricting it felt” (12). This refusal to conform, whether in private or public spaces, challenges traditional societal norms and highlights her resistance to the constraints imposed by patriarchal expectations. Through this depiction, the author conveys a powerful metaphor: Those breasts,

half-restrained and half-released, seem to be breaking free of their shackles, waging a struggle for freedom. Drawing a parallel with Eve in Western culture, before consuming the forbidden fruit, she is naked and free of shame. The forbidden fruit marks the beginning of civilisation; from that point on, culture begins to imbue primitive clothing with symbolic meanings and impose behavioural norms on humanity. This cultural conditioning instills a sense of shame and ostracises those who violated established rules, subjecting them to societal criticism and rejection. In the novel, Yeong-hye, faced with her husband's repeated nagging, boldly bares her upper body at home as a statement of her stance. She even questions, "Why are my edges all sharpening, and what am I going to gouge?" (24). This may resonate as the collective voice of countless women burdened by societal norms, revealing their desire to break free from constraints and seek inner liberation.

Second, under the influence of her brother-in-law, she paints her body with plant patterns. Yeong-hye's desire to transform into a plant reflects her wish to shed her former self and return to nature. As some scholars note, "The body industry and civilisation of humanity have greatly obscured our natural, naked bodies, making humans not only mentally enslaved but also physically enslaved" (Copeland). We argue that Yeong-hye's wish to become a plant stems from her realisation that her body no longer exists in a primal, biological sense but survives through a violent, bloody struggle, reflecting the brutal laws of the jungle. Her desire to become a plant is, in essence, an attempt to rebel against the societal constraints that violently govern her body and return to a more natural state.

However, Foucault's theory also emphasises that bodily "freedom" is not simply achieved through resistance or liberation but is constructed within specific historical and cultural contexts. Yeong-hye's transformation into a plant can be viewed as a denunciation of mainstream cultural values, yet ultimately, her resistance fails. As Uddin contends, in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, the protagonist's death symbolises complete self-denial and erasure, representing rebirth, liberation, and self-redemption. However, Yeong-hye's situation differs in that she is neither allowed to live nor die. When the doctor forces her to undergo a feeding procedure using modern medical instruments, the intervention is far removed from the forced feeding administered by her father. Despite still having the potential to "break out," the medical instrument directly inserts food into her stomach, effectively rendering escape impossible.

Yeong-hye herself remarks, "It is your body; you can treat it, however you please. The only area where you are free to do just as you like. And even if that does not turn out how you wanted" (Kang 124). The relationship between life and the sick person often mirrors the hierarchical dynamics of gender. Yeong-hye's wish to shed her human form and "become a plant" reflects her desire to escape the violent, bloodstained world that governs her existence (O'Key 1262-1288; Kim 1-14). However, as Foucault might argue, this desire for bodily

freedom is ultimately constrained by the societal structures she seeks to escape. While symbolising resistance, Yeong-hye's body is also a site of failure, namely, failing to break free from the power structures that ultimately govern it. In this light, Yeong-hye's bodily rebellion does not lead to ultimate freedom but instead underscores the limitations imposed by societal power. Her transformation into a plant is both an act of resistance and a tragic commentary on the impossibility of true liberation within a world that relentlessly seeks to control the body.

As Casey notes, in *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang uses the female body as a form of resistance against patriarchy and the societal structures built upon it (347-360). By positioning the body as a site of struggle, Kang integrates elements such as life, gender, culture, and power, using the body's natural form to defy the disciplined appearances imposed by the standards of civilisation. Traditional civilisation confines women to the narrow space of the family, reducing them to subordinates of men, physical beings, and objects of sexual desire (Waters 193-211). Under society's "panoptic surveillance," women undergo intricate regulatory systems that govern their attire, bodily posture, eating habits, and more (Van der Meulen & Heynen). Any deviation from these norms leads to marginalisation, often labelling them as "witches" or "bad girls." The attainment of freedom, therefore, requires experiences that transcend bodily constraints. Women's transgressions against the cultural shackles imposed on them signal the beginning of their resistance.

Thus, we argue that the key images in the novel, such as "meat," "underwear," and "the dark forest," symbolise Yeong-hye's entrapment. In contrast, "dreams," "vegetarianism," and "plants" represent her acts of rebellion and self-redemption. The body becomes a nexus for various elements in the novel, with Yeong-hye's nudity, vegetarianism, exposed breasts, dreams, and plant-like transformation all serving as a means to expose the hypocrisy of civilisation and unravel the facade of patriarchal dominance. As Ahn notes, Yeong-hye's body in *The Vegetarian* functions as a site of oppression and resistance, a canvas on which the forces of power and societal norms are inscribed (277-293). Through Foucault's framework of the body, we see how Yeong-hye's body is disciplined and controlled, reflecting broader gendered power dynamics. While her transformation into a plant represents an act of resistance, it also exposes the failure of the individual to escape the broader forces of control. The novel *The Vegetarian* thus becomes a profound commentary on the power relations that shape not only individual bodies but also identities (Munir 97-110), questioning the possibility of true freedom in a society that regulates every aspect of human existence. Moving forward, the following section will delve into the theme of Women's resistance consciousness, analyzing how the patriarchal structure in South Korea has historically disciplined and controlled women's bodies. This exploration will highlight how, over time, women's resistance consciousness has grown, with increasing numbers of women joining

movements against oppression. Han Kang's works, including *The Vegetarian*, serve as a testament to the awakening of female self-awareness and the evolving journey of resistance.

### **Women's resistance consciousness**

Karl Marx once stated that every person knows that no great social change can occur without the involvement of women. The status of women can precisely measure the progress of society (MacKinnon 519). This statement highlights the pivotal role of women in societal transformation. As Hyun puts it, the awakening of women's consciousness in Korea can be traced to the 1920s when female writers began to rise, asserting that a woman is neither weak nor ignorant; only by not forgetting herself can she genuinely love others before becoming a wife, she must first become a whole person (Choi). Literature became essential for female intellectuals to voice their concerns about societal roles. In the 1980s, dual-income families led some Korean women to achieve financial independence, which contributed to challenging patriarchal norms (Park 711-733). This momentum continues with the 2016 Gangnam Station murder (Kim 37-60) and the subsequent *MeToo* movement in 2018 (see Castle et al. 926-941), sparking a resurgence of interest in female writers like Han Kang.

Kang's work *The Vegetarian* exemplifies this growing awareness of female resistance that is expressed through complex psychological and social pressures. The protagonist Yeong-hye's rejection of meat and her gradual withdrawal from societal norms symbolise her rebellion against patriarchal expectations. Indeed, Han Kang's exploration of female resistance is not limited to *The Vegetarian*. In her other works too, female characters embody traditional Korean feminine qualities, yet they all grow up under the weight of various forms of oppressive authority. Han Kang uses fantastical elements to metaphorically explore the conflict between a woman's inner world and external reality, deepening the reflection on the struggles faced by women in South Korean society. The story not only portrays the oppression and alienation of women within a patriarchal system but also reveals their yearning for freedom and self-realisation (Kim 327-340; Canavas 559-569; Lee 61-67). Caspari puts it that in *The White Book* (2017/2016), Han Kang reflects on the death of a newborn sister, exploring themes of memory, loss, and the fragility of life through poetic and fragmented meditations. The sister's untimely death becomes a metaphor for the erasure of women's voices in a patriarchal society, while the narrator's attempt to reclaim her sister's memory serves as a subtle act of resistance against societal neglect and oppression. In *Greek Lessons* (2023/2011), Han Kang tells the story of an unnamed woman who loses her speaking ability and journey toward self-expression and healing. We concur with the view that the unnamed woman's muteness symbolises the silencing of women in a male-dominated world (Lee 61-

67). However, her inner struggle and eventual reclamation of her voice represent a profound act of resistance.

Indeed, South Korean women in these works face both internal psychological oppression and external societal pressures, deeply rooted in traditional Confucian values that emphasise male dominance and represent women as “second-class” citizens. Accepting their fate is common for women without a sense of resistance, but those fighting for self-independence often pay a high price. This dynamic is starkly portrayed in *The Vegetarian*, where the protagonist, Yeong-hye, seeks meaning beyond survival, opting for the fantasy of becoming a tree as a form of resistance against societal and familial pressures, symbolising her desire to break free from patriarchal constraints. As is vividly illustrated above, economically, the women in Han Kang’s works are predominantly housewives or part-time workers, reflecting a society where financial independence is often out of reach for women. The traditional gender roles of men working outside, women staying at home limit their independence and force them into roles of childbearing and household maintenance. In Han Kang’s portrayal, marriage is often an obligation rather than a source of personal fulfilment, where many women are deprived of the joy of romantic love and instead focus on their roles as wives and mothers. Another significant theme in Han Kang’s novels is the lack of educational opportunities for women. As Judge notes, in line with traditional beliefs such as “a woman’s virtue is in her lack of talent,” many women are denied education in favour of their male counterparts (765-803). This biased cultural norm further marginalises women, limiting their opportunities to break free from patriarchal expectations.

As Jin notes, in the 1990s, the influence of Western feminism sparked a broader awakening of Korean women’s consciousness (131-135). This shift leads female writers, including Han Kang, to focus on female subjectivity and resistance. No longer merely a tool to oppose male-dominated discourse, female narratives began exploring women’s autonomy and self-actualisation in a patriarchal world. Han Kang’s works engage deeply with the theme of female resistance, portraying women who either overcome adversity to realise their full potential or become lost in their rebellious acts. Regardless of the outcomes, these narratives shed light on Han Kang’s reflections on female agency and the socio-cultural forces that shape their destinies. We posit that Han Kang, as a realist writer, urges women to break free from societal constraints, encouraging them to take ownership of their historical roles, social responsibilities, and life choices. Her works highlight the importance of recognising women as independent agents who can assert their value and contribute meaningfully to society. Han Kang’s narratives provide a profound insight into personal struggles and societal issues surrounding women’s empowerment in contemporary South Korean society.

## Conclusion

We contend that the novel *The Vegetarian* presents a profound exploration of the intersection between gender, power, and the body, using Yeong-hye's rejection of societal norms as a lens to interrogate the oppressive forces of patriarchy. Through her body, which is both a site of suffering and a weapon of resistance, Han Kang delves into the complexities of female identity and the limitations imposed by patriarchal structures. Yeong-hye's refusal to conform, whether through her vegetarianism, her desire to "become a plant," or her ultimate acts of self-destruction, embodies both personal rebellion and a tragic reflection of the broader societal forces at play.

By applying Foucault's concept of the body as a site of power, this paper has explored how Yeong-hye's body becomes a battleground for identity reconstruction, highlighting the physical and psychological violence women endure in a patriarchal world. Through a close analysis of the novel, we have examined how Yeong-hye's body is disciplined and constrained by familial and societal expectations, from her father's physical abuse to her husband's psychological control. Her acts of resistance, such as refusing to wear a bra, rejecting meat, and attempting to transform into a plant, symbolise her struggle to reclaim autonomy over her body and identity. These acts, while radical, also underscore the tragic limitations imposed by patriarchal systems, as her ultimate self-destruction reveals the high cost of resistance.

Furthermore, this paper has situated Yeong-hye's story within the broader context of South Korean society, where traditional Confucian values and modern patriarchal norms continue to shape women's lives. By drawing on Foucault's theories of biopolitics and disciplinary power, we have demonstrated how societal norms regulate and control women's bodies, reducing them to objects of domestic labour and submission. Yeong-hye's journey reflects the struggles of countless women who navigate oppressive systems, seeking to assert their agency and redefine their identities.

Finally, *The Vegetarian* calls for a reevaluation of how gendered bodies are controlled and constricted, offering a compelling critique of modern patriarchal civilisation while amplifying the voices of women fighting for their autonomy and self-expression. Through this lens, the novel provides a powerful commentary on the existential and symbolic struggles that define the female experience within restrictive societal structures. By reiterating the key findings of this study, Yeong-hye's bodily resistance, the application of Foucault's theories, and the broader societal implications, we conclude that Han Kang's work not only critiques patriarchal oppression but also invites readers to envision a world where women's bodies are no more extended sites of control but spaces of liberation and self-determination.

## Acknowledgements

The authors extend their sincere appreciation to the editor and anonymous reviewers for their valuable and thought-provoking suggestions, which have significantly enhanced the quality of the paper.

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