

Transgressing Gender Norms: Blurring and Transformation in Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract	Article Info.
<p>This paper examines the gradual process of breaking social gender expectations and transforming into a tree-like state as a metaphor for acquiring identity as a liberated individual in Han Kang's novel <i>The Vegetarian</i>. Yeong-hye, originally a dutiful wife to Mr. Cheong, begins to defy her husband and family, particularly when she refuses to eat meat and rejects physical intimacy, declaring herself to be a tree. This rebellion is interpreted by feminists as a challenge to societal conformities rooted in patriarchal psychology. Yeong-hye's emotional and physical detachment from her husband represents a transcendence of social barriers and conformity. Drawing on the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the paper extends the discussion of 'woman as other' as a social construct, proposing that culture cannot define gender and sexuality rigidly, and individuals have the right to be unique within their families. Methodologically, the study employs textual interpretation of selected thematic lines from the primary text, connected with theoretical insights from Beauvoir and Adichie. The conclusion suggests that Yeong-hye's plant-like state symbolizes her firm resistance to patriarchy, even at the cost of her physical well-being.</p> <p><i>Keywords:</i> blurring, gender, plant-like existence, transformation</p>	<p>Email nbmukhiyakumal@gmail.com</p> <p>Article History Received: 2025, August 08 Accepted: 2025, November 12</p> <p>Cite Mukhiya, N. M. (2025). Transgressing gender norms: Blurring and transformation in Kang's <i>the vegetarian</i>. <i>International Research Journal of Parroha (IRJP)</i>, 4(1), 89–96. https://doi.org/10.61916/prmn.2025.v04i01.009</p>

Introduction

Transgressing gender expectation is still a taboo in a modern society. A woman willing to cross the established norms has to meet dreadful consequences posing a threat to her existence itself. Resisting such taboo requires strength and patience. This is observed in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* which is structurally set in three parts: Yeong-hye's decision and her family's reaction narrated by her husband, Mr. Cheong; the second is from her brother-in-law who was obsessed with Yeong-hye's body; and the third is narrated from In-hye, sister of Yeong-hye. In the three parts, the dominant

character who revolves around is Yeong-hye whose defiance to society's conventions and expectations is a central concern. From the point of view of her husband, she is a 'completely unremarkable in every way'. Her husband, Mr Cheong, is disturbed and it leads to social tensions which Yeong-hye has to face alone. Despite her physical fragility, she struggles hard though her body. Speaking from medical science, she almost ceases to function which she never accepts suggesting her strong impulse to resistance to patriarchal norms.

A series of resisting acts are observed in the novel. For example, her act of throwing meat away

from the freezer and declaring she is a vegetarian shock everyone in the family. The reason she gives to the family is the dream she sees where she was soaked with blood. The family agrees she has a problem and needs to be treated. This is what she firmly denies saying she is like a tree and needs neither food nor any medicine. Her parents, husband, and sister struggle with her sense of familial responsibility, but everything was in vain. She continually resists as a rebel. The interrogation if she is a rebel and liberal who was simply a confirming her autonomy is a prime concern for the study.

This research follows a qualitative research redesign adopting textual analysis as research method. It follows interpretivist approach as a research philosophy to reach the conclusion. Extracting key lines from the primary text and integrating them to Beauvoir and Adichie's feminist ideas, this paper concludes that transgressing gender expectations is a means to enjoy autonomy of the female body.

Literature Review and Methodological Underpinning

Several critics have interpreted the novel from human-nature existential point of view, ecofeminist perspective, and as a resistance novel. For example, Hakyoungh Ahn (2024) reads the novel as a resistance novel: "The Vegetarian revolves around the protagonist Yeong-hye, who is introduced in the beginning of the narrative as a passive Korean housewife living in modern-day Korea, whose sudden decision to stop eating meat disintegrates the entire social fabric of her life and results in her destruction" (p. 279). The novel moves around Yeong-hye, who is the protagonist and she was first a passive Korean housewife living as an appendage of her family and husband but later on, she challenges all the entire social fabric of her life by declaring she is a vegetarian. She further asserts, "As a form of political activism, vegetarianism as resistance is inevitably linked to the concept of empowerment" (Ahn, 2024). Yeong-hye is politically guided where she thinks she is

enjoying her true identity as a human. Similarly, Miller (2016) asserts, "A South Korean woman's sudden vegetarianism begins a parable both serene and violent" (p. 1). Ahn's idea of sexual agency is perceived through violence upon established norms.

Ahn's reading of the novel raises an important question about upliftment of woman's identity in male-dominated society like the Korean society where Yeong-hye was taught to be a good wife ignoring her personal desires and aspiration. Ahn (2024) mentions:

The dynamics of resistance in the second section are significantly more complicated than those in the others because they involve Yeong-hye's sexual agency and consent while subverting sociocultural norms, allowing Yeong-hye to experience a temporary sense of liberation. While critics generally agree that she is sexually exploited by her brother-in-law in this scene, they have not deeply explored the nuanced power dynamics at play in this exploitation. (p. 278)

The act resistance in the second section is visible, Yeong-hye is sexually active playing the role of agent. Yeong-hye's sexual agency further goes on subverting sociocultural norms. She was first sexually exploited by her husband and brother-in-law in the second section, but she resists both; with her husband, she does not share the bed and with her brother in law, she acts in the intercourse.

Similarly, Sulistya Ningtyas and Natasya Amanda Azzahra (2023) read the novel as human-nature relation especially paying attention to Yeong-hye's transformation into a tree which is her desire to enjoy her freedom. They assert, "The Vegetarian by Han Kang is a literary work that discusses environmental problems caused by human behavior. The novel tells the story of a woman named Yeong-hye who becomes a vegetarian due to the trauma she experienced in her childhood and her dreams about the atrocities committed by humans against animals" (Ningtyas & Azzahra, 2023, p.167). The environmental

problems are the result of human centric activities, caused by human behavior. With this, the novel's protagonist— Yeong-hye's frustration about the atrocities committed by humans against animals leave her traumatic.

Ningtyas & Azzahra (2023) show how nature is powerful which can even heal human: "Human existence and its role cannot be separated from nature. Nature as a subject means a right and obligation to be protected from damage. Nature has a strange characteristic that does not separate between exterior and interior, which results in humans feeling complete freedom when they are in nature"(p. 168). Yet, despite the power of nature, it suffers human atrocities. Humans get satisfaction when they go to nature. Yeong-hye's rejection of anthropocentrism is visible in her attempt to become a tree: "The non-anthropocentric perspective is depicted by the protagonist, Yeong-hye, in her overall intention to transform into a tree" (p. 169). With this, Kang's novel gives a good space to nature: "Han's narrative provides space for nature, particularly plants, so that they are on an equal level with humans. She used personification for the zelkova tree to show the tree's behavior, and further, the tree's emotions"(p.169). Her understanding of nature or tree as a friend, the one whom she can share her experience establish a ground for tree agency.

Beauvoir (1949) stresses that women's autonomy requires a hard struggle as the patriarchy is strong: "Her liberation must be collective, and it requires the economic and social evolution of woman's condition" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 732). The liberation is possible only when they resist being defined in relation to men and gain equal social footing. Beauvoir's famous remark: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, physical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the enuch that is called feminine" (p. 293) set foundation for the feminism. She questions who a woman can be if she is not

a complete individual: "If she is not a complete individual as a wife, she becomes it as a mother: the child is her joy and justification. She reaches sexual and social self-realization through him; it is thus through him that the institution of marriage has meaning and reaches its aim. Let us examine this ultimate step in woman's development" (p. 536). Beauvoir asserts that women are compelled to perceive their sense of belonging through other.

Adichie (2014) argues that freedom comes through resistance when girls are raised without restrictive gender rules and social conventions that burden them. Both see resistance and rejection of established norms as a pathway for freedom. She argues that males enjoy their privilege of being men as they are free to make choice. She finds problems with the different ways male and female children are grown up. Her radical idea emerges as "I want to be respected in all my femaleness" (p.39). Here, Adichie enjoys her femaleness in similar manner the post-feminist critics have focused.

These readings have not substantially discussed female agency in post-modern context where women do not only break the social gender expectations, but also they locate their identity in the gender fluidity where other humans may not understand her actions because they look the things from traditional stereotypical orientation. This paper fulfills this gap drawing theoretical insights from Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*) and Adichie (*We Should All Be Feminists*). They both argue that women should break the gender expectations of society to liberate themselves. They also differ in the sense that Beauvoir's ideas are more philosophical and universal and Adichie's ideas are more culture specific.

Blurring Gender Expectations and Transformation in The Vegetarian

The Nobel Prize winning novel *The Vegetarian* by Hang Kang presents a female character Yeong-hye who challenges the established patriarchal norms in silent mode. The gender expectation of male as masculine and female as feminine is disrupted in the novel from the beginning part

itself. For example, the moment of not wearing bra is unusual for Yeong-hye's husband Mr. Cheong: "The only respect in which my wife was at all unusual was that she didn't like wearing a bra" (Kang, 2016, p. 5). Mr. Cheong worries his wife who appears without bra. Since she gives a reason that it does not feel comfortable with it. Adichie (2014) asserts, "Gender roles are socially constructed and restrictive" (p. 12). Thus, wearing bra is a part of social construction not a biological need and scientifically verified. The problem lies in the fact that the dominant groups dominate the powerless one: "For centuries, the world divided human beings into two groups and then proceeded to exclude and oppress one group. It is only fair that the solution to the problem should acknowledge that" (p. 41). Adichie shares that the world is divided into strong and weak representing male and female.

Yeong-hye's strange behaviors continues and she finds peace in darkness alone: "She was standing, motionless, in front of the fridge. Her face was submerged in the darkness so I couldn't make out her expression, but the potential options all filled me with fear. Her thick, naturally black hair was fluffed up, disheveled, and she was wearing her usual white ankle-length nightdress" (Kang, 2016, p. 7). Her reluctance to talk with her husband and share the bed is outcome of her frustration resulted from patriarchal norms imposed on her from the childhood. This echoes what Beauvoir (1949) as refuse to confinement: "To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her" (p.283). The refusal to confinement is visible when Yeong-hye shows no sign when he flirts with her: "When I put my hand on her shoulder I was surprised by her complete lack of reaction" (Kang, 2016, p. 7). Giving no response, she wishes for a liberated person. She cannot be his vassal: "In marrying, the woman receives a piece of world as property; legal guaranties protect her from man's caprices; but she becomes his vassal" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 454).

Beauvoir's strong argument: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (p. 283) is applicable

to Yeong-hye as she understands what does it means to become a woman which she ignores as she has an awakening one. Thus, she even does not to go to bed in bedtime: "She didn't come to bed until around five in the morning, and even then, I couldn't say for sure whether she actually spent the next hour asleep or not" (Kang, 2016, p. 13). She resisted the conventional gender responsibility. She is enjoying her femaleness, in the words of Adichie: "I want to be respected in all of my femaleness because I deserve to be" (39). Adichie tells that femaleness is not a mark of inferiority: "Since he is the producer, it is he who goes beyond the family interest to the interest of society and who opens a future to her by cooperating in the contribution of the collective future: it is he who embodies transcendence" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 455). Her point is that a woman should reach to transcendence which is experienced by Yeong-hye by enjoying her bodily autonomy.

As a part of bodily autonomy and continuous refusal to confinement, Yeong-hye's avoidance of meat eating in Korean culture is another sight of resistance to patriarchy: "Here. Come on, hurry up and eat. Mouth closed; my wife stared at her mother as though entirely ignorant of the rules of etiquette. Open your mouth right now. You don't like it? Well, try this instead, then. She tried the same thing with stir-fried beef, and when my wife kept her mouth shut just as before, set" (Kang, 2016, p. 37). The family members forced her to eat meat which Yeong-hye understands as limitation of her freedom: "Her liberation must be collective, and it requires the economic and social evolution of woman's condition" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 332). Yeong-hye's has to do household chores: "Haven't you even ironed my white shirt? There was no answer. I splashed water on myself and rummaged in the laundry basket, searching for yesterday's shirt. Luckily it wasn't too creased" (Kang, 2014, p.10, 11). She rejects doing household chores.

Ironing shirts for husband, is simple things, but the way her husband speaks to her reminds the master and slave relation. Judith Butler (1986) "If

gender is the variable cultural interpretation of sex, then it lacks the fixity and closure characteristic of simple identity. To be a gender, whether man, woman, or otherwise, is to be engaged in an ongoing cultural interpretation of bodies and, hence, to be dynamically positioned within a field of cultural possibilities" (p.36). Butler opines that gender is a fluid entity and it lacks the fixity and closure characteristic of simple identity. Yeong-hye's transformation into tree-like existence is seen in her remarks: "I need to water my body. I don't need this kind of food, sister. I need water" (p. 148). It is her self-acquired liberation. Her infatuation to her brother-in-law is more psychological need rather than physical one: "The first thing he saw when he woke from his brief sleep was her. Her skin was a pale green. Her body lay prone in front of him, like a leaf that had just fallen from the branch, only barely begun to wither. The Mongolian mark was gone; instead, her whole body was covered evenly with that pale wash of green" (Kang, 2014, p. 96). It is what Adichie remarks: "Some people will say that a woman being subordinate to a man is our culture. But culture is constantly changing" (p. 42). This is not accepted by Yeong-hye and she is a rebel: "Rebellion is even more violent in the frequent cases when the mother has lost her prestige" (Beauvoir, p. 320). Thus, Yeong-hye's resistance is strong in underlying level.

Yeong-hye remembers how she was taught to be feminine reminding of Adichie's remarks: "We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls: You can have ambition, but not too much" (Adichie, 2014, p. 26). While forcing her to eat meat, her husband remarks: "My father-in-law took up a pair of chopsticks. He used them to pick up a piece of sweet and sour pork and stood tall in front of my wife, who turned away. My father-in-law stooped slightly as he thrust the pork at my wife's face, a lifetime's rigid discipline unable to disguise his advanced age. "Eat it! Listen to what your father's telling you and eat" (Kang, 2014, p. 38). She goes on resisting eating meat, blood comes out of her mouth as she is firm in her decision: "With one hand my wife pushed away his

chopsticks, which were shaking silently in empty space. "Father, I don't eat meat." In an instant, his flat palm cleaved the empty space. My wife cupped her cheek in her hand. "Father!" In-hye cried out, grabbing his arm" (Kang, 2014, p. 38). They tried to convince her saying "'Meat-eating is a fundamental human instinct, which means vegetarianism goes against human nature, right? It just isn't natural" (p.23), but she does not accept it. As Beauvoir asserts, "She refuses to confine herself to her role as female because she does not want to mutilate herself; but it would also be a mutilation to repudiate her sex. Man is a sexed human being; woman is a complete individual, and equal to the male, only if she too is a sexed human being. Renouncing her femininity means renouncing part of her humanity" (p. 739). Beauvoir does not accept that woman is incomplete human.

Her transformation begins when she finally stops eating meat and foodstuffs and she experiences tree-like existence. Then she goes on breaking the social norms listening to what heart asks her to do. Butler (1986) and Adhikari (2020 a;b) while talking on *The Second Sex* writes: "Sex is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspects of the female body, whereas gender is the cultural meaning and form that that body acquires, the variable modes of that body's acculturation" (p. 35). Thus, Yeong-hye feeling of tree experience is seen in the lines: "Look, sister, I'm doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands. . . they delve down into the earth" (p. 127). She experiences the leaves growing on her hands. Adichie's point is that freedom and liberty come when girls are raised without restrictive gender rules and Beauvoir asserts that that women's freedom is possible only when they resist being far from other's definition of her. They see resistance as a refusal to be confined by gender expectations to enjoy autonomy. The autonomy of Yeong-hye is visible.

My wife was sitting on a bench by the fountain. She had removed her hospital gown and placed it on her knees, leaving her gaunt collarbones, emaciated breasts and

brow nipples completely exposed. She had unwound the bandage from her left wrist, and was slowly licking at the sutured area as though the blood was leaking out. Sunbeams bathed her face and naked body. (Kang, 2014, p. 51).

The quote brings the viewpoint of Mr. Cheong who is frustrated to see how his wife sitting on a bench beside the fountain without paying attention to medical consultation where she goes on avoiding medicines. Her body is fragile, and she is with her unclothed body resisting all the social chores. In this regards, Simone de Beauvoir argues, “Whenever one ignores an established conventions, one becomes a rebel. A flamboyantly dressed woman is lying when she ingenuously claims she is simply dressing to suit herself, and that is all: she knows perfectly well that suiting herself in an absurdity” (740). Going beyond the established conventions and a set of rules is to become a rebel according to Beauvoir and this applies in the character of Yeong-hye as she has challenged the status-quo. For this, she undergoes a physical pain which for Kim (2019) is psychological more than physical: “In *The Vegetarian*, suffering becomes a psychological, physical, and spiritual effect of dietary resistance to male-dominated Korean society” (p.1). Her psychological pain is deeper than what appears at the surface.

By resisting the social codes and chores, Yeong-hye gains her identity. In the words of Beauvoir, she attains autonomy: It is a strange experience for an individual recognizing herself as subject, autonomy, and transcendence, as an absolute, to discover inferiority – as a given essence – in herself: it is a strange experience for one who posits himself for himself as One to be revealed to himself as alterity” (p. 222). Yeong-hye is a subject, autonomy, and transcendence, as an absolute, and she is equal to male. O’Key, D. (2021) opines, “Yet Han suggests that Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism derives not so much from conscious but unconscious decision-making, that is, from a repulsive reaction to the claustrophobia

of gendered social relations and violence across gender and species lines” (p.1267). Her desire to be a vegetarian is unconscious one for O’key. This unconscious motive is her deliberate search for freedom.

There is a growing recognition of the urgent need for more research on gender issues, especially focusing on the socio-cultural norms and psychological barriers that define and constrain gender roles. This is vividly illustrated by Yeong-hye’s rebellion in Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*, which highlights the tension between individual identity formation and societal pressures. Understanding these dynamics in various cultural settings is crucial for informing inclusive policies that foster gender equity and personal autonomy within families and communities.

Building on the work of Mishra et al. (2024) on transformative leadership in Nepalese institutions, it is evident that leadership plays a critical role in fostering social change, including gender inclusivity. Nonetheless, significant gaps remain, demanding deeper inquiry into leadership’s impact on organizational and societal gender dynamics. Similarly, Mishra and Chaudhary (2018), Mishra and Bhandari (2018), and Mishra and Regmi (2017) emphasize the importance of rigorous empirical assessments and contextual analysis in institutional performance, methodologies that can be adeptly applied to study gender dynamics and improve policy effectiveness for cost effective work through performance in operation and project.

Their work emphasizes that ethical culture-building in organizations is critical for nurturing values that go beyond compliance, contributing to sustainable social change (Mishra & Aithal, 2023).

Conclusion: Transformation for Freedom

The paper concludes that Yeong-hye’s decisions—such as avoiding physical relations with her husband, choosing vegetarianism by rejecting meat, and removing her bra—represent a deliberate challenge to social conformity and entrenched gender norms. Her transformation into a tree-like existence symbolizes her desire

to live as a liberated individual within her family, standing firm like a tree. Contrary to Mr. Cheong's perception that her rebellion is unremarkable, her acts represent a quest for freedom. By discarding meat and declaring herself a vegetarian, Yeong-hye opens a new avenue of human behavior, asserting that individuals should not be confined to familial roles but have the right to live freely according to their own will. This stance deeply conflicts with the expectations of her parents, husband, and sister, highlighting her role as a rebel.

Breaking social gender roles and undergoing this plant-like transformation is Yeong-hye's assertion of unique individual identity. Her declaration that she is a tree places her in the category of feminist rebellion against societal conformities. She transcends social barriers, challenging conformity rooted in human psychology. Drawing on the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the paper argues that the notion of 'woman as other' is a social construct that must be dismantled. As culture evolves, it should no longer rigidly define gender and sexuality; instead, each person should retain the right to be a unique individual within the family. Yeong-hye's plant-like state thus represents her located identity—a powerful symbol of resistance and selfhood.

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