



## Exploration of Male Views and Patriarchal in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*: Masculinity and the Gaze

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### Abstract

**Background:** This study aims to examine the representation of masculinity and intends to look into Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, attempting to explore how male views represent patriarchal anxieties in the Korean cultural context, with an emphasis on the male character Mr. Cheong (Yeong-Hye's husband), the brother-in-law, and the father. **Methods:** This research adopts a qualitative approach as a methodology, supported and discussed under textual analysis. It is mainly performed by close reading of *The Vegetarian*; particularly emphasizing passages that show how male behaviour portrays the male gaze and the deployment of traditional patriarchal domination. **Results:** By analysing gender, power dynamics, and social norms, an intersectional perspective is rendered, which offered an opinion on how to explain patriarchal forces and functions through the male gaze and how they respond to Yeong-Hye's deviance. The main focus revolves around male characters' inspection, evaluation, and control of Yeong-Hye's conventional gender role through textual analysis. The examination of key scenes in which Yeong-Hye's body and choices are influenced and men's power, desires, and frustrations have also been identified. **Conclusion:** In *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang ably explored the fragile patriarchal notion of masculinity within the grid of masculine anxiety and the suffocating ways of the male gaze. While it zeroes in on Yeong-Hye's father, brother-in-law, and husband, the



novel exemplifies how the structures of patriarchy use violence, objectification, and domination as strong modes of suppressing women's agency. When conventional masculinity is faced with female agency, Mr. Cheong's inability to negotiate Yeong-Hye's vegetarianism with his strict desires for a submissive wife highlights how insecure it is.

**Keywords:** The Vegetarian, Male Perspective, Masculinity, Patriarchy

## **Introduction**

*The Vegetarian*, written by Han Kang, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2024. *The Vegetarian* was also heavily criticized for its unsettling depiction of gender, body control, and bodily rights. The novel's ordinary female protagonist, Yeong-Hye, elected to abdicate meat consumption after being traumatized by one of her abnormal dreams, which created various types of confusions including her family as well as in the society. The reactions of her husband, father, and brother-in-law reflect deep-seated patriarchal fears as her passive resistance transformed into complete disengagement from societal norms. This is further evidence of how the novel scrutinizes masculinity through the reactions and views of the male characters over Yeong-Hye's metamorphosis. Her male characters reveal through their perspectives that the "male gaze" is a control mechanism to possess, define, and control the female identity including their physique. Their growing irritation and obsession with Yeong-Hye's choices reflect broader concerns over the ways in which traditional masculinity has become unstable within a rapidly modernizing society. The masculine reactions to Yeong-Hye's defiance are examined in this study in order to investigate how *The Vegetarian* challenges patriarchal structures. By using their eyes as weapons, these men try to regain control, but their responses show how weak masculinity is in the face of female independence. As a theme, the novel offers a potent commentary on the concerns surrounding changing gender roles and shows how resistance, even in its most subdued manifestations, can upend strongholds of power.

## **Methods**

This paper explores the male gaze, patriarchy and masculinity by using textual analysis through close reading of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. It especially focuses on the how male behaviour depict the male gaze and the portrayal of traditional social patriarchal dominance. Likewise, feminist side lens also helps to explore the male dominance in the society: through the analysis of Yeong-Hye's father, brother-in-law, and husband in order to evaluate how patriarchal social hierarchy which excavate the violence, objectification, as well as dominance towards female agency. For the appropriate analysis of Kang's novel, Bell Hook's theory on patriarchy tends to be reliable and appropriate— as a political and social component that potentially emphasize male as a superior and dominant force having right to rule over women and children – would be suitable to analyse and relate masculinity and patriarchal dominance in contemporary Korean society.

## **Literature Review**

Besides being highly studied for its feminist, psychoanalytical, and postmodern concerns regarding resistance, oppression based on gender, and bodily autonomy, Han Kang's *Vegetarian*



has been extensively examined since 2007. Although the focus of many scholars' research canters on Yeong Hye's transformation and female agency, little emphasis has been placed on how the novel critiques masculinity as reflected through the male gaze and patriarchal anxiety. The following are some significant elements or themes in *The Vegetarian* that are being investigated by existing research.

Rose Casey's article, "Willed Arboreality: Feminist Worldmaking in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*," situates the novel within transnational feminist discourse and maintains that Yeong-Hye's "vegetal non-mastery" is a critique of patriarchal violence and a "model of radical non-mastery and transnational feminist world-being" (2020).

This type of "swerve" or "inclining" is exactly what Yeong-Hye's will to arboreality entails. She is portrayed as a profoundly peaceful creature that leans towards tree life rather than as a controlling human subject who "works upon the world." Her "continuity with atoms" propels her to become entangled in a materially constructed, phenomenologically experienced world, rather than being an attribute that she possesses (Casey, 2020). Casey emphasizes that the change is a philosophical rejection of patriarchal violence rather than an insane one. "Her body takes on arboreal qualities" to run away from "psychological diminishment to recurrent rape" (2020).

According to Kim's analysis, *The Vegetarian*, within a wider theoretical framework, explores the suffering, gender, as well as dietary resistance. Yeong's way of suffering expresses the violation inherent within patriarchal and carnivorous beliefs, "posing a provocative question to our meat-eating culture" (2019)

Kim argues that *The Vegetarian* represents suffering as the psychological, physical, and spiritual impact of diet resistance in male-dominant Korean society (Kim, 2019).

Another critical perspective is offered by Carol Adams' feminist-vegetarian critique in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, which contends that "patriarchy is a system of sexual discrimination inherent in the relation between humankind and animal" (Adams, 2015, p.20).

Savitra investigates the historical development of Korean literature, emphasizing the transition from realistic to experimental forms. Young Hye's novel "*The Vegetarian*" defies societal norms through vegetarianism, self-inflicted assault, and refusal to eat, while also highlighting feminist themes (2018). The novel explores Young Hye's husband's description of her physical characteristics as ordinary; "Middling height; bobbed hair, neither long nor short; jaundiced, sickly-looking skin" (Savitra, 2018, p. 3). This objectification serves as an example of how male characters in the book enforce patriarchal control over women by holding them to ideals of femininity and beauty (Savitra, 2018). Finally, Young Hye's transformation into a tree symbolizes her liberation from social restraints. She declares that she wishes to exist as a non-human being. "I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread my leg; I spread my wide" (Savitra, 2018, p. 8).

O'Key challenges the ecofeminist reading of the novel's dramatic form, stating that "*The Vegetarian*'s generic and narrative ambiguities on the one side, and its celebrated position within contemporary world literary publishing culture on the other, suggest that there are limits



to reading *The Vegetarian* as a radically post-humanist tale of becoming-plant” (O’Key, 2021, p. 1262). Similarly, he also highlights "the novel's underlying narrative and generic ambivalences [...] attenuate the very possibility of an affirmative counter-reading" (O’Key, 2021, p.1265).

Ravikesh argues that "*The Vegetarian*" excavates the transformation of Yeong Hye from a submissive person to a rebellious character opposing patriarchal standards, by using a critical lens to explore trauma, gender hierarchy, and social expectations towards women (Ravikesh, 2018). "The novella unravels the human psyche that consciously/unconsciously engages in building up a wall to combat with traumas that one’s body undergoes" (Ravikesh, 2018, p. 248). Likewise, Ravikesh finds that the protagonist Yeong-hye’s husband views her resistance as an individual slight. "To her husband, this powerful and assertive version of Yeong-hye becomes a matter of disappointment and anger" (Ravikesh, 2018, p. 254). According to the study, Young Hye's violent and blood-stained dreams represent her internal trauma, and her psychological decline is interpreted as a defence mechanism and subjectivity. "Her body, like" the blood-soaked body of the animal in her dream, struggles to fight for life, for liberation" (Ravikesh, 2018, p.252).

Many research demonstrates a thorough evaluation of patriarchal and masculine perspective in *The Vegetarian*, specifically, the gender hierarchy in patriarchal society, male dominants towards female in individual attributions and sovereignty, authority, sexuality and so on. Thus, this study attempts to analysis the male perspective and patriarchal anxiety in Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*. In order to critique patriarchal oppression, *The Vegetarian* depicts male characters as violent as well as exploitative when they encounter Yeong-Hye; a woman who is claiming her bodily autonomy. The vulnerability of patriarchal control is revealed, and conventional gender roles are questioned in this portrayal.

### **Textual Analysis: Masculine point of view**

*The Vegetarian* by Han Kang examines, through the perspective of individual rebellion, the breakdown of social and familial norms.

#### **Mr. Cheong’s Domestic Control**

Mr. Cheong, Yeong-hye's husband – narrates the first part of the novel – is a prime example of traditional masculinity; he expects his wife to play the part of an obedient wife. "She made for a completely ordinary wife who went about things without any distasteful frivolousness. Every morning, she got up at six a.m. to prepare rice and soup, and usually a bit of fish" (Kang, 2015, p.10). Mr. Cheong compare Yeong-hye’s worth with her ability to serve domestic work. Her deviation represents as a personal insult and reflect the patriarchal dependence on psychological detachment.

Kang challenges conventional gender norms and the brittleness of male identity associated with patriarchal authority through Mr. Cheong's viewpoint. This paper examines how secondary reasons take a places Mr. Cheong's insecurities and attempts to manipulate Yeong-hye within larger societal concerns. Mr. Cheong’s narrative during the novel's beginning section demonstrates his incapacity to understand Yeong-hye's meat-refusing behaviour, witnessing it



as a personal slight rather than a sign of independence. Similarly, Mr. Cheong's outlook in this novel is connected in traditional Korean patriarchal structure and his lack of ability to grasp Yeong Hye's autonomy - manifested with her physical and dietary rebellion- demonstrates the constraints and violence of a patriarchal logic. He outlooks her duties as an ordinary wife. He reflects frustration over her insistence to conform- "She was always so submissive—outwardly, at any rate. And for a woman who wasn't quite all there to start with to be taking medication every day, well, she's bound to get worse, and that's all there is to it" (Kang, 2015, p. 45).

His response to Yeong Hye's vegetarianism and subsequent attributes is guided with sense of victimhood; "Now don't go making me out to be some kind of villain. Anyone can see that I'm the real victim here" (Kang, 2015, p. 45). His insistence that Yeong-hye come back to her previous state illustrates his desire to control her body and choices. When he accepts and even takes part in her family's efforts to force-feed her meat, this is further supported; "If she eats it once, she'll eat it again." It's preposterous everyone eats meat" (Kang, 2015, p. 29). This statement symbolizes the male dominance and patriarchal anxiety.

In Vegetarian Mr. Cheong consider Yeong- hye as an object for imposing patriarchal norms, image and comfort rather accepting individuality and autonomy, which completely aligns with Bell Hook's theories on patriarchy - emphasizes on social and political dominating force having right to rule over women. It depicts how men control or entitle social rules over vulnerable segment of the traditional society such as women and children. Mr. Cheong marries Yeong Hye because she really had been the most ordinary woman in the world (Kang, 2015). He was dissatisfied by Yeong - Hye's vegetarianism because he thought it affected social life and image. *The Vegetarian* in depth analyses the arbitrary perception of her relatives towards Yeong- hye after diving deep into how her vegetarian journey has started and made an effect in her life.

*The Vegetarian* demonstrates how protagonist's rejection of meat (a symbolic representation of patriarchal expectations connects with Korean culture) causes social anxiety towards male characters. Her resistance on masculine traits demonstrates volatility of their patriarchal identities. Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is going through personal challenge, emphasizing husband's dissatisfaction with her autonomy and conventional gender roles. As Mr. Cheong, perceives these novel critiques; how patriarchal institution collapses in the face of female's autonomy, rebellion and individual existence. It also represents the authoritarian male identity which potentially seemed supported and build by patriarchal practices such as male gaze and female dominance.

### **Brother-in-law's Erotic Perspective**

Furthermore, Brother-in-law's gaze is essentially visual; he reduces Yeong-hye to an aesthetic object for his photography project. He is infatuated with her body, more the Mongolian mark on her buttocks, which he describes as; tiny bruise, about the size of a finger. It was a pale blue-green colour, similar to ancient or pre-evolutionary markings. Despite its vegetal nature, it seemed sexual, indicating a connection to pre-evolutionary photosynthesis (Kang, 2015). His fascination is not empathetic but possessive; he considers her body a canvas for his desires.





The intention of the brother-in-law to capture Yeong-Hye's florally painted body—a project he claims is “Starting from the nape of her neck, he began to paint. Half-open buds, red and orange, bloomed splendidly on her shoulders and back, and slender stems twined down her side. When he reached the hump of her right buttock he painted an orange flower in full bloom, with a thick, vivid yellow pistil protruding from its centre. He left the left buttock, the one with the Mongolian mark, undecorated. Instead, he just used a large brush to cover the area around the bluish mark with a wash of light green, fainter than the mark itself, so that the latter stood out like the pale shadow of a flower.” (Kang, 2015, p. 52)—exposes his amalgamation of art and eroticism. Brother-in-law physically attached with Yeong Hye throughout artistic pretence. His obsession with the biological trait i.e. Mongolian mark – represents how patriarchy makes women to surrender for beautiful and sensation.

His insistence on capturing her “primal essence” reflects patriarchal anxiety over female autonomy. The brother-in-law's project minimise the Yeong-hue into an inactive thing of his gaze. His recording of Yeong's naked and flowers painted body examine as a male gaze; where females are represented as an aesthetic as well as erotic presentation for masculine consumption. When Yeong-Hye resists, refusing to comply with his vision, he becomes unhinged, revealing his desperation to assert control: “her eyes would seem to reflect a kind of violence that could not simply be dismissed as passivity or idiocy or indifference, and which she would appear to be struggling to suppress” (Kang, 2015, p. 53). His anger highlights the vulnerability of patriarchal authority when faced with female agency. He considers Yeong-hye as a thing or passive object while avoiding female agency. Which looks like a patriarchal trap to exploit the artistic roles. His obsession with hye is not mere as an artistic expression rather the sense of wild or erotic. He uses her body not for her salvation or healing, but for self-gratification and artistic validation. The brother-in-law's eventual collapse—when Yeong-Hye's rebellion culminates in aggression—represents the inadequacy of the patriarchal perspective to subdue her. His film project disintegrates as Yeong-Hye's body, once an object of his fantasy, becomes a site of resistance. In the final confrontation, he wails; The mere contemplation of the traditional, routine, and vulgar lips upon her body instilled in him a sense of shame, as he could not envision their bare bodies twist together, rendering the act both offensive and aggressive (Kang, 2015).

Her brother-in-law's viewpoint in *The Vegetarian* reveals the convergence of desire, and patriarchal apprehension into art. His artistic work, portrayed as a pursuit of beauty, reflects broader social tensions surrounding masculinity and female agency, exposing them in violent assertions of control. Han Kang's critiques the male gaze not merely as a visual act but as a mechanism of oppression, destabilized by Yeong-Hye's radical refusal to conform. The connection of surveillance, desire, as well as patriarchal anxiety is revealed through the viewpoint of the brother-in-law in *The Vegetarian* - framing his artistic endeavour as a quest for beauty, it degenerates into a violent display of power, reflecting larger conflicts in society regarding female agency and masculinity. Yeong-Hye's extreme defiance of convention



destabilizes the male gaze, which Han Kang criticizes as a tool of oppression as well as a visual act.

### **Father's Militarized Masculinity**

Finally, Yeong-Hye's father represented as a strict and aggressive Vietnam ex-soldier. His force-feeding scene represents the ultimate height of patriarchal anxiety—an effort to regain control through physical dominance. His military identity to control female agency through forceful act is shown in the novel – He tried force-feeding the pork into her mouth and waved Yeong-hye away. She closed her mouth tightly and moaned. (Kang, 2015). – exemplifies the masculinity effort to regulate female bodies through violation.

As illustrated, her father's behaviour fits with Bell Hook's feminist theory – as a political and social component that potentially concern male figure as a superior and dominant force having right to rule over women. The father's supreme level of violation and bodily control on Yeong hye to eat meat consider as humiliating and shocking act. – Eat it, eat it, otherwise I'll push it into your throat (Kang, 2015) – he considers vegetarianism as a crime, and intends to show an optimum level of patriarchal control over female autonomy. Precisely, Bell hook's theory advocates how patriarchal traditions support men to feel dominant and cruel handling of disagreements with women.

Yeong-Hye's father's physical assault as a child, coupled with a dog bite incident, suggests internalized violence, as Yeong-Hye recalls the animal's death from exhaustion, strangling, and bleeding. Yeong-Hye's parents view her stubborn disobedience towards her husband as a reflection of their disobedience, leading her to sever her wrist and attempt to control her body (Emanuel, 2020). Domestic violence as a form of patriarchal oppression is also depicted in the novel. Hye's father makes her to eat meat against her will, signifying patriarchal control over her independence: "He mashed the pork to a pulp on my wife's lips as she struggled in agony" (Savitri, 2018, p. 5). He shoved the pork at her lips and shook Yeong-Hye away. She closed her mouth tightly and let out a moan but couldn't say a single word with fear that the meat would get inside her mouth when she opened it to speak (Kang, 2015). The father's violence upholds male authority and demonstrates how physical abuse occurs when women defy social norms (Savitri, 2015). The patriarchal punishment system, which subjects disrespectful women to violence and coercion, can be used to explain this act. By demonstrating the desperation and eventual helplessness of patriarchal authority in the face of opposition, his failure to control Yeong-Hye serves as a larger critique of the system.

Likewise, novel portrayal; Yeong-Hye's father is a violent, extremely patriarchal man who has mistreated his family since they were very small. The fact that he still likes to eat meat and has been awarded the Order of Military Merit during his service in Vietnam never gets old to him. Therefore, Yeong-Hye's refusal to eat meat has been interpreted by some critics as her protest against the patriarchal violence that her father represents (Kim, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

In *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang ably explored the fragile patriarchal notion of masculinity within the grid of masculine anxiety and the suffocating ways of the male gaze. While it zeroes in on



Yeong-Hye's father, brother-in-law, and husband, the novel exemplifies how the structures of patriarchy use violence, objectification, and domination as strong modes of suppressing women's agency. When conventional masculinity is faced with female agency, Mr. Cheong's inability to negotiate Yeong-Hye's vegetarianism with his strict desires for a submissive wife highlights how insecure it is.

The brother-in-law's artistic gaze turns into a violent declaration of dominance, shattering his voyeuristic project that turns Yeong-Hye's body into an aesthetic object. He wants to commodify her primal essence, as can be discerned from his fixation with her Mongolian mark and petal decorations, but his subsequent collapse underscores the futility of this instrumentalization. The father's forced meat-feedings and his final breakdown at the end, suggest another instance of patriarchal violence in a hopeless desire to wrest power back through force of the body. The failures of both characters illustrate how inherently unstable systems are that rely on subjugation to cling to power.

Yeong-Hye's turning into a tree and then radical disengagement and passive resistance are powerful modes of critique against patriarchal oppression. Her non-fitting-into thus points to the inconsistencies in the structures of patriarchy and undermines the identities of the male characters. Thus, the novel challenges that resistance necessarily implies direct confrontation by framing her incomppliance as a liberatory act. Instead, even passive resistance like abstaining from meat or taking to the trees can topple entrenched hierarchies. In placing these dynamics within a Korean cultural context; particularly in a rapidly modernizing society where traditional gender roles are increasingly challenged- "*The Vegetarian*" heightens its discourse on global patriarchal fears. The collective disintegration of the male characters reflects larger social conflicts and shows how patriarchal structures break down in the face of uncompromising independence. In the end, Han Kang's work presents the male gaze as an active instrument of oppression, rather than a passive observer helpless against radical female subjectivity.

According to the above arguments and interpretation, all sample male characters, such as Mr. Cheong, the brother-in-law, and Yeong-hye's father, use patriarchy as a weapon to control Yeong-hye's body and autonomy. Mr. Cheong considers her refusal to eat meat as a social image and a patriarchal norm to his masculinity. The brother-in-law's obsession with Yeong-hye's body marks male dominance and control in the aspect of artistic creativity. Similarly, Her Father's force-feeding is depicted as a violation, treating the choice of one's diet as a rebellion that should be punished. All those sample characters of this research are an attempt to utilize various masculinity and patriarchal tools to dominate female agency in the physical, emotional, social, and political aspects.

Yeong Hye's action of becoming a vegetarian disturbs traditional Korean social structure and male identities. Her husband treats her as mad, rather than self-autonomy, for her vegetarian rebellion. Brother-in-law's gaze that objectifies her into an object that is the representation of insecurity associated with patriarchal society.

Her father's military norms and practices connected with masculine identities, which were portrayed as a method to control domestic power, and her resistance became a threat to





patriarchy. This analysis not only confirms the importance of the novel as a feminist critique but also calls for further research regarding ways in which modern literature resists changing gender roles. *The Vegetarian* continues to be a powerful illustration of the tenacity of resistance, challenging readers to reevaluate the limits of their own agency and the transnational power of nonviolent protest.

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