

# Symbols and Functions of Four Kinds of Violence in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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## Abstract

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, acclaimed for its poignant and poetic narrative that delves into historical traumas and the delicacy of human existence, profoundly resonates with the literary community and reshapes readers' understanding of societal and humanistic concerns. The novel employs the metaphorical imagery of 'meat', 'knife', 'dream', and 'breast' to deconstruct the violent underpinnings of a patriarchal, carnivorous society. This paper examines the plight of women within such a framework through the character of Yeong-hye, leveraging Lakoff and Johnson's metaphorical analysis to elucidate the nexus between four dimensions of violence, namely corporeal, psychological, symbolic, and sexual violence, and Yeong-hye's existential crises and self-imposed incarceration. The cumulative effects of physical and psychological violence engender a pervasive sense of entrapment, catalyzing her retreat into solitude and a quest for identity. Yeong-hye's metamorphosis into a tree symbolizes a critique of patriarchal constraints, juxtaposing the arboreal emblem of natural liberty against the oppressive structures of patriarchy, thereby articulating a yearning for liberation from such dominance. The narratives' rich connotations and aesthetic merits serve as a catalyst for introspection on gender subjugation within patriarchal constructs and the spectrum of resistance strategies available to women.

## Keywords

*The Vegetarian*; metaphorical analysis; violence

## 1. Introduction

The 2024 Nobel Prize for Literature has been awarded to Han Kang, a South Korean author, for her "intense poetic prose that confronts historical traumas and exposes the fragility of human life" (The Korean Times). Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, one of the most internationally known Korean novels, is a relentless investigation of the violence and nature of suffering in our world. As the novel's protagonist, Yeong-hye, is battered, restrained, force-fed, sexually assaulted, and institutionalized against her will—primarily in the name of familial accord—what begins as a refusal to eat or cook meat intensifies into a wholesale renunciation of

the company of human beings in an earnest, but ill-fated attempt to grow roots, sustain herself, and thrive as a tree (Finck 4).

However, scholars hold widely divergent views on Yeong-hye's militant vegetarianism. For instance, Won-Chung Kim argues that the suffering caused by Yeong-hye's refusal to conform to the accepted norms of the meat-eating, patriarchal society disrupts the integrity of her personhood as both a woman and a vegetarian. By metamorphosing her into the haunting "given" face of a suffering victim, Yeong-hye provocatively challenges us to reframe the current violent structures underpinning our eating habits (1). Finck, in contrast, asserts that the mimicry of, or engagement with nonhuman forms of life are both passive strategies for resisting human acts of violence and exploitation and alternative models of sociability and care (1). I partly agree with Kim's (2) perspective that *The Vegetarian* depicts a victim of a meat-based sexist culture and a social system that requires harmony and conformity for its own integrity. Yeong-hye, the protagonist, threatens not only her own safety but also the very integrity of the society of which she is a part. This idea can be more effectively comprehended within the purview of metaphor. As Lakoff and Johnson demonstrate,

We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action (4). Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature (Dail and Peng 4).

Laura Wright considers that, "Yeong-hye's transition from woman to plant begins as a metaphor, when In-hye's husband paints flowers all over Yeong-hye's body and dreams of her with pale green skin" (131), as 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 96).

The imagery within the narrative functions as a vital gateway for our comprehension. From my perspective, Han's work, by delineating Yeong-hye's vegetarianism through the elaborate world of images she has constructed, lucidly explicates the author's stance. This stance suggests that when we witness the mercilessness and cruelty of the patriarchal, meat-eating society against which Yeong-hye is fighting, we are able to reflect on ourselves, and thereby the metaphor can work "as the very bond of human subjectivity, even to the point of being raised to a supreme ethical principle" (Buddeberg, Eva 159).

## 2. Refusing the Order: Meat

"The spirit wants its will, the one lost to the world now wins its own world." (Nietzsche 17). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche expounds on the three metamorphoses of the spirit: the camel, which initially assumes the heaviest of loads; the lion, which battles valiantly to attain freedom; and finally, the spirit of the child.

In Kang's imaginative realm, Yeong-hye's spiritual evolution takes the form of becoming a vegetarian as a means of defying the stereotypes and biases afflicting women in the metaphorical construct of a carnivorous society. Regrettably, Yeong-hye's spiritual journey halts at Nietzsche's first stage—the camel, shouldering the burden, and failing to progress further.

To fathom the vicissitudes and intricacies within Yeong-hye, it is imperative that we explore the diverse array of imagery and metaphors meticulously crafted by Kang. According to Lakoff and Johnsen, "Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities" (157). In *The Vegetarian*, Kang metaphorically illustrates the oppressive dynamics between women and the entrenched patriarchal society as akin to the relationship between knife and meat, particularly in the context of the character of Yeong-hye. Although initially traditionally submissive, Yeong-hye undergoes a profound transformation when she finds herself unable to continue performing the routine task of cutting meat, a task that previously earned her husband's condescension. Schopenhauer says that, "Of course like everyone else, I can never escape the mistakes and weaknesses inherent in my nature, but I will not increase them with unworthy accommodations" (15). Evidently, Yeong-hye has elected to acquiesce, perpetually ensnaring himself in the frailty of her essence and the myopia of his worldly perspective. In doing so, she constructs a self-imposed penitentiary within which he has condemned himself to a life sentence of self-judgment. As stated by Wright, "The violence inflicted on her body by the men in her life is clear evidence of the danger that her veganism poses to the patriarchal established order of both her family and her culture more broadly" (130-131).

Han Kang vividly illustrates this defiance in *The Vegetarian*, "She kept on putting the parcels of meat into the rubbish bags, seemingly no more aware of my existence than she had been last night. Beef and pork, pieces of chicken, at least 200,000-won worth of saltwater eel" (Kang 10). This act of refusal not only signifies Yeong-hye's rebellion against the roles assigned to her by a patriarchal order but also triggers a series of nightmares in which she is confronted with gruesome imagery of a forest filled with bloodied flesh. As demonstrated by Deleuze:

The line of flight is like a tangent to the circles of signification and the center of the signifier; it is under a curse. The goat's anus stands opposite the face of the despot or god. Anything that threatens to put the system to flight will be killed, or flight itself will be killed. Anything that exceeds the excess of the signifier or passes beneath it will be marked with a negative value. Your only choice will be between a goat's ass and the face of the god, between sorcerers and priests (135).

"As soon as the strength in Yeong-hye's arms was visibly exhausted, my wife growled and spat out the meat. An animal cry of distress burst from her lips. '... get away.'" (Kang 40). This visceral reaction constitutes both a corporeal manifestation of Yeong-hye's profound inner turmoil and a momentous symbolic rupture from the fetters that had hitherto constrained her. In that singular, pregnant moment,

Yeong-hye was not simply spurning the morsel of meat but the entire edifice of the patriarchal system that had been relentlessly imposing its values and expectations upon her. As Nietzsche states:

You should be the kind of men whose eyes always seek an enemy-your enemy. And with some of you there is a hate at first sight. You should seek your enemy, wage your war and for your thoughts! And when your thought is defeated, then your honesty should cry out in triumph even for that! (33)

Yeong-hye's cry was a primal, visceral ululation for emancipation, a poignant plea to be extricated from the asphyxiating clasp of a society that regarded her as naught but a conduit for its normative strictures. It was as though she had attained a precipitous breaking point where the sole recourse remaining was to abscond, both tangibly and metaphorically, from the violence and oppression that had transmuted into the quotidian fabric of her existence. "Jaw clenched, her intent stare facing each one of us down in turn, my wife brandished the knife" (Kang 40).

This act of defiance, albeit ostensibly trifling within the broader panorama, was a potent enunciation that Yeong-hye was no longer amenable to being a passive pawn in her own subjugation. It instigated a concatenation of events that would compel those in her orbit to grapple with the discomfiting verity of their comportments and the society they had jointly engendered.

### 3. Tracing the Trauma: Dream

Albert Camus believed that, "But nonetheless the boundaries exist, and we know it. In our wildest aberrations we dream of an equilibrium we have left behind and which we naively expect to find at the end of our error"(168). Yeong-hye finds herself trapped within the suffocating confines of a patriarchal society, enshrouded by insidious and obfuscating veils of meat-eating metaphors, where her every attempt to eke out an existence is a herculean struggle against the inexorable forces that seek to subjugate her.

Regrettably, her dreams, which one might naively assume could offer a modicum of respite, prove to be an equally inhospitable terrain far from the sanctuary she so fervently craves. Rather than serving as a refuge, her dreams function as a perversely distorted looking glass that magnifies and lays bare, with unsparing brutality, the latent violence lurking beneath the ostensibly placid surface of reality. They unfurl before her a tableau awash with sanguinary images of the ravages of devastation, where she is condemned to bear witness, in mute and impotent agony, to her own cries of despair that rend the very fabric of her being until her throat is raw and her voice hoarse.

And yet, in this nightmarish realm, her anguish remains unacknowledged, and her pleas unheeded, as she languishes like a forsaken island, adrift in a vast and indifferent ocean of interminable solitude and unmitigated despair. Kang writes:

That shuddering, sordid, gruesome, brutal feeling. Nothing else remains. Murderer

or murdered, experience too vivid to not be real. Determined, disillusioned. Lukewarm, like slightly cooled blood (28)... Sleeping in five-minute snatches. Slipping out of fuzzy consciousness, it's back-the dream. Can't even call it that now. Animal eyes gleaming wild, presence of blood, unearthed skull, again those eyes. Rising up from the pit of my stomach. Shuddering awake, my hands ... need to see my hands. Breathe. My fingernails still soft, my teeth still gentle" (33).

As stated by Lakoff and Johnsen, "so we seek out personal metaphors to highlight and make coherent our own pasts, our present activities, and our dreams, hopes, and goals as well" (234). Lakoff and Johnson emphasize the role of personal metaphors in shaping our self-understanding, which is particularly evident in Yeong-hye's journey towards self-awareness. Her vivid dreams not only reflect her internal struggles but also act as a catalyst for a profound transformation, revealing the deep-seated trauma associated with eating meat. This realization marks a turning point in Yeong-hye's life, as she begins to question the societal norms she once blindly followed, underscoring the power of metaphorical thought in driving personal change and growth.

The vivid dreams are a catalyst for Yeong-hye's awakening, leading her to a chilling realization. Until the trauma of eating meat is revealed in the form of a dream, Yeong-hye also enjoyed meat as a proper member of a meat-eating society. She cooked meat dishes for her husband and did not hesitate even to hack a chicken into pieces with a butcher's cleaver. Her behavior clearly demonstrates that she had no other choice but to adjust to and accept that mechanism of violence and oppression in order to survive in a meat-eating society. The important conceptual point for Freud's argument that dreams are wish-fulfillments is that a "wish" is necessary for mental activity because it provides the motive force for it. All mental activity is motivated, and dreams—as another expression of thought—are also motivated (Colace and Boag 109). Yeong-hye, a victim of a meat-eating sexist culture and a social system that requires harmony and conformity for its own integrity, threatens both her own safety and the very integrity of the society of which she is a part (Kim 2). She becomes indistinguishable from the meat she once prepared, both being mere objects destined for consumption within a system.

#### 4. Claiming the Body: Breasts

Lakoff and Johnsen suggest that, "A given metaphor may be the only way to highlight and coherently organize exactly those aspects of our experience" (157). As eating meat is used to control the inside of a woman's body, the bra is used to control the outside of it. Kim suggests:

The bra is a mechanism of patriarchal society to control the female body, having fetishized women's breasts—a source of life that feeds babies—into an object of sexual desire and thereby turned them into something that should be hidden from the eyes of others (3).

Normalizing the practice of eating meat is likewise a mechanism used to control a woman's body in a patriarchal society. Yeong-hye's refusal to wear a bra leads her to expose her breasts in public places, a serious provocation that eventually results in her imprisonment in a mental hospital. Her husband states:

She tried to justify herself by saying that she couldn't stand wearing a bra because of the way it squeezed her breasts, and that I'd never worn one myself so I couldn't understand how constricting it felt(Kang 6)...She had now lost so much weight that her breasts were little more than a pair of small bumps beneath her sharply protruding collarbones"(Kang 89).

From Yeong-hye's husband's descriptions, whose narration frames the tale, the suffering caused by wearing a bra, equates to eating meat. This highlights Yeong-hye's unbearable psychological and spiritual distress underlying her refusal. The novel reveals the patriarchal man's control and expectation of the female body through its imagery of the breasts, and how this control permeates every aspect of everyday life.

She was wearing a slightly clinging black blouse, and to my utter mortification, I saw that the outline of her nipples was clearly visible through the fabric. Without a doubt, she'd come out without a bra. When the other guests surreptitiously craned their necks, no doubt wanting to be sure that they really were seeing what they thought they were, the eyes of the executive director's wife met mine" (Kang 21-22).

The wife's breasts and corset become the symbol of the husband's power, and her dress choice becomes the stage for his power. This control over women's bodies and the suppression of women's freedom severely constrains women in patriarchal cultures.

She had removed her hospital gown and placed it on her knees, leaving her gaunt collarbones, emaciated breasts and brown nipples completely exposed. The bandage had been unwound from her left wrist, and the blood that was leaking out seemed to be slowly licking at the sutured area. Sunbeams bathed her face and naked body. (51)

Within this cultural milieu, the wife's repudiation of the corset surpasses mere personal liberation; it epitomizes a deep-seated insurrection against the pervasive patriarchy. Her actions challenge the patriarchal hegemony over women's bodies and deconstruct the societal edicts governing women's fashion. Although this dissent may provoke strife and disquiet, it simultaneously highlights women's quest for self-realization and sovereignty, demanding a rigorous inspection of the patriarchal paradigm. Wright argues that:

women whose dietary choices are based on ethical convictions that politically and socially subvert acceptable social norms and gender-based expectations in ways that leave them trapped between empowered vegan identity and pathologized anorexia, in spaces of uncertainty with regard to their abilities to self-determine (122).

Wright's insights into women's dietary choices as a form of political and social subversion echo the broader struggle of women against patriarchal norms. This resistance is not limited to food but extends to all aspects of identity, including dress. The wife's rejection of the corset is a tangible act of defiance, akin to the dietary choices that challenge societal expectations and assert autonomy over one's body and life. Both acts are expressions of a deeper quest for self-determination within a patriarchal society that seeks to control and define women's roles and appearance.

## 5. Transcending the Self: Knife

As Lakoff and Johnsen observe, "There is no 'single image' that completely fits both metaphors" (95). Indeed, the surface of meat and the surface of the breast share common topological properties, qualifying them as surfaces. However, our mental image of a ground surface is strikingly different from our images of various kinds of container surfaces. The abstract topological concept of a surface that constitutes the overlap between these two metaphors is simply not concrete enough to give rise to a vivid image.

In general, when metaphors are coherent yet not entirely consistent, it is reasonable to expect that they will not form uniformly consistent images. (Lakoff and Johnsen 95). Thus, the third significant image in *The Vegetarian* assists us in constructing the world of violence as perceived by Kang. The knife is yet another crucial image in *The Vegetarian*, serving as a symbol of pain, and shedding light on Yeong-hye's predicament of being unable to rescue herself. Belling argues that, "While most of us have not cut ourselves open with a knife, we probably remember some intense pain, perhaps dental, that seems to fill the head with noise, drowning out clear thought" (307). In *The Vegetarian*, Kang writes:

The hand holding the knife was working so quickly, I felt heat prick the back of my neck. My hand, the chopping board, the meat, and then the knife, slicing cold into my Finger (19)... At first, she drew up her shoulders and seemed about to flee in the direction of the front door, but then she turned back and picked up the fruit knife that had been lying on the dining table (40).

In patriarchal families, women are often depicted as sober and painfully subdued, and while their existence may seem dull, they are characterized by relentless hard work. Thus, when Yeong-hye's seemingly simple act of picking up a fruit knife is examined, it is not an act of suicide, but rather a profound gesture of liberation, signifying her ultimate freedom to become the person she truly is. It can be inferred that for Yeong-hye, the knife is a matter of choice. She takes hold of the blade, plunges it into herself, and embarks on a journey towards what seems like an end. However, one might question whether physical death truly ushers in liberation. In Shakespeare's works, madness is allied to death and murder, and in Cervantes, images are controlled by the presumption and complacency of the imaginary (Foucault 31).



Yeong-hye's initial state of madness is characterized by her inability to recognize the inevitability of death. Her madness blinds her to the terminal nature of life, and it is through the stark reminder of death that she is brought back to a semblance of reason. However, the situation has now reversed; where once madness was a deviation from the norm, it has become the norm itself. This shift in perception is in stark contrast to the hope for a decisive historical revolution that Nietzsche had envisioned. Nietzsche says:

He himself becomes deathly ill in contemplating this cyclical picture; not surprisingly since it seems to deny a possibility he himself had hoped for at the outset a decisive historical revolution, a time after which all would be different from the time before (10).

Nietzsche anticipated a transformative moment in history where everything would be fundamentally altered, a time when the cycle of madness and death would be broken. However, Yeong-hye's situation seems to suggest that such a revolution is not only unattainable but also that the cycle of madness and death has become so entrenched that it is now indistinguishable from life itself.

## 6. Conclusion

It is terrible to be alone with the judge and avenger of one's own law. Thus does a star get thrown out into desolate space and into the icy breath of solitary being. Today you suffer still from the many, you lonely one: for today you still have your courage and your hopes intact (Nietzsche 46).

Being alone with the judge and avenger of one's own law is terrifying. It suggests that one feels great stress and unease when facing one's own inner judgment and moral code alone. As a symbol of one's own inner self-examination and accountability mechanism, this self-examination can bring harsh judgment and inescapable inner conflict, as if one is placed in a position of isolation, to endure one's own judgment alone.

After enduring an inordinate amount of violence, Yeong-hye inevitably opts for introspection. She compels herself to undergo what appears to be an inconceivable metamorphosis into a tree. During this arduous process, she incessantly engages in self-examination and dredges up her alleged transgressions, an act that is the epitome of cruelty. In the inner sanctum that resembles a tribunal, she is, paradoxically, both innocent, and yet laden with a sense of guilt. She is simultaneously the suspect under scrutiny and the aggrieved victim; she is the august judge as well as the hapless defendant on trial.

The third part of *The Vegetarian*, "Blazing Trees" illuminates the path to mitigation of all the violence Yeong-hye withstands, which is to be transfigured into a tree—a thoroughly thorny one that aligns the trajectory of trauma and recovery with the narrative of crisis and mitigation. She puts this simply to In-hye: "All the trees are brothers and sisters" (Kang 144).



Yeong-hye's transformation into a tree can be seen as a profound act of defiance and a search for an alternative form of existence. In her arboreal state, she is removed from the immediate human world of violence and judgment, yet she remains tethered to it by the very nature of her being. The tree, with its roots firmly planted in the earth and its branches reaching towards the sky, becomes a symbol of both her rootedness in her own truth and her aspiration for something greater—something beyond the confines of the pain and suffering she has endured. Precisely as Lee expounded in *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway, and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do (116).

Just as the mockingbird in Lee's novel is a symbol of innocence unjustly persecuted, Yeong-hye, in her tree-like form, represents a being that has been pushed to the margins, yet still holds within herself a sense of purpose and a yearning for justice. She stands as a testament to the power of the individual spirit to resist and to seek a different path, even when faced with overwhelming odds. Camus says, "To feel one's attachment to a certain region, one's love for a certain group of men, to know that there is always a pot where one's heart will feel at peace - these are many certainties for a single human life" (136).

This sentiment resonates deeply with Yeong-hye's experience. In the silence of the forest that she now inhabits in her imagination, Yeong-hye finds a kind of peace that was absent in her human life. The rustling of the leaves, the gentle swaying of the branches in the wind all become a language that she alone can understand. It is a language of survival, of hope, and of a connection to a world that is larger and more forgiving than the one that judged and condemned her. "In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land" (Camus 13). And perhaps, in this new state, she is able to rewrite the narrative of her life to transform the violence she endured into a force for growth and renewal. Just as a tree can heal itself after being damaged, Yeong-hye, too, begins to heal, one leaf at a time, one branch at a time. She discovers that courage lies not only in facing known terrors but also in embracing the unknown possibilities that lie ahead, in the uncharted territory of her new existence as a tree.

In the culmination of her odyssey, Yeong-hye emerges as a poignant reminder that even within the most abyssal depths of adversity, there exists a faint yet tenacious glimmer of luminosity, a viable path forward that can be unearthed through the arduous process of self-discovery and an unwavering refusal to be circumscribed and defined by the pernicious violence and censorious judgment of others.

In a parallel vein, akin to the indomitable characters enshrined within the pages of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she vividly demonstrates that genuine courage does not

manifest as the absence of trepidation but rather as the resolute capacity to take action despite its presence, to tenaciously grasp one's moral and ethical integrity, and to ceaselessly strive towards a more salutary world, even when that utopian vision appears to be frustratingly and maddeningly remote. Nietzsche says "The figs fall from the trees, they are good and sweet; and as they fall, their red skin ruptures. I am a north wind to ripe figs" (65). Han Kang is the north wind, and Yeong-hye the fig. Yeong-hye's emergence, like nocturnal lightning, pierces the patriarch's haze. Resolute, she shatters secular bonds like a meteor. Each act, a valley bell heralding female awakening. Her tale, a pebble causing social ripples, spurs us to dismantle gender barriers for an egalitarian world.

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