

# Anorexia Nervosa: Resisting Gender And Sexual Politics In Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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## Abstract

Despite the fact that the word anorexia is never used in the novel *The Vegetarian*, the writer, Han Kang analyzes the disease and its implications with a level of complexity. Anorexia is defined as acceptance to the rebellion against culturally manufactured norms of femininity, which Han Kang shows as dynamic throughout the book. Han Kang's textual anorexia, her attempt to "write the body," reveals that the problems of essentialism, idealism and biologism that beset theoretical Ecriture feminine are not invariably produced in fictional practice. In the present paper, the researcher intends to explore how anorexia is used to explore problems of gender, language, sexual politics, and social dislocation. The present paper will also explore how anorexia nervosa is used to examine women's techniques for establishing alternate languages, weighing not only the benefits but also the risks. The protagonist, Yeong-hye's attempt to escape repressive commercial society and patriarchal hegemony are evident in her refusal to eat meat and eventually any food at all. She strongly expresses her assertion and defiance against the ingrained social systems through her unwillingness to eat, dislike of girdles, and projected metamorphosis into a plant.

**Keywords:** Korean Literature, Sexual Politics, *The Vegetarian*, anorexia, patriarchy, non-conformity.

## Introduction

The Ancient Korea was highly influenced by Ancient Chinese culture. In 1948, South Korea was split on its own path away from North Korea. The effects of industrialization, urbanisation, and westernisation on the Korean people's lives affected their lives. Seafood, beef, and rice were the staples of the cuisine. Koreans enjoyed meat dishes such as asulgogi and kalbi. Despite the fact that there were no dietary taboos in Korea, vegetarianism was always discouraged due to the fact that the majority of the population was carnivorous. Meat played an important role in Korean food and culture. In her twenties, the author was a vegetarian who faced the same anxiety and intimidation from society. Everyone pushed her to eat meat; she eventually switched to a meat-based diet for health reasons, despite her strong dislike and remorse. She could relate to many individuals who used to consume meat and felt guilty regarding taking away other beings' lives to save their own. She explores the same problems of human brutality and shame in *The Vegetarian*. The narrative also addresses the issues of patriarchal domination and resistance against it through anorexia followed by the anguish and

desire for the transformation into a plant, a nonviolent organism.

Kang's portrayal of anorexia is similar to what French feminists refer to as "feminine ecriture." She demonstrates how anorexia is both culturally critical and complicit. It's a reflection of a woman's perspective of herself as a consumer and a victim, as well as a way to fight both roles. Margaret Atwood also uses anorexia to address the issues of gender, language, sexual politics and social dislocation in her novel *The Edible Woman* in which she critically examines how anorexia is culturally critical as well as complicit. The woman's perception of herself as a consumer and a victim through anorexia has been beautifully represented in this novel. After accepting the marriage proposal of Peter, Marian stops eating. Her body parallels the crisis of patriarchal domination and cultural hegemony. She feels threatened by the patriarchal attempt to devalue her which further leads to losing her ability to sustain herself. Atwood uses madness as a poetic device in her fiction and in this novel this madness is represented as eating disorder, 'anorexia nervosa'. *The Edible Woman* is divided into three parts representing the three main phases of this psychosomatic disease. The background causes of this problem is presented in part one. In part –II,

the onset of the diet restriction takes place followed by the third part discussing the resolution of the crisis which caused the disorder. All the main characteristics of an anorexic are exhibited by Marian McAlpin- "enmeshment" with a parental figure, feeling of ineffectiveness, fear of fat, and above all the longing for autonomy. Anorexia nervosa provides her a platform to resist against the consumerist approach of patriarchal society against a female body. The useful recent medical literature available on anorexia provides a relevant key to interpret such issues broadly. After comprehending the symptoms of this disorder, a proper interpretation of this disorder in relation to sexual politics and the dynamics of relationships of the characters portrayed in the novel can be done. Simultaneously one can always appreciate the brilliance of the writer who has unified this broad problem of the society with appropriate mordant wit.

## Discussion

*The Vegetarian* takes place in Seoul, Korea, where the typical cuisine consists of fish, eggs, and chicken, among other things. However, the protagonist makes a firm decision to become a vegetarian. The novel does not encourage vegetarianism; rather, it represents the issues of resistance and protest against the consumerist approach of the society. Losing complete appetite is a reflection of resistance against the patriarchal hegemony and social conformity where a female body is just considered a commodity. The narrative is told by three narrators, the first by an oppressive husband who believes that his wife is an ordinary woman with no special skills or talents, who would unquestioningly cook for him his favourite meals and would also gratify him sexually.

### Anorexia- A Form of Resistance

Han Kang demonstrates that the body is significantly connected to psychosocial situations. Furthermore, Kang's fictitious example expands on Bordo's idea that anorexia may be seen as a form of anti-consumeristic resistance. The human body, which is made up of five elements: fire, earth, water, air, and space, is utilised as a metaphor in the novel to portray its affinity and enhanced relationship with cosmic and infinite nature due to her aversion to the social and patriarchal oppression. Yeong-hye digs further into her dreams to reclaim her affinity and belongingness with nature. Every cultural bond appears hazy and obsolete to her. "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." She confesses to her sister, "Endlessly, endlessly...yes, I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch, I spread them wide..." (*The Vegetarian* 127)

### Resistance against Consumer Culture

Yeong-hye is a woman with a strong sense of self. She feels boundless and free by not "wearing a bra" (*The Vegetarian* 5), which her husband perceives as an unnatural activity. He tries his level best to make her wear one beneath her thin shirt but "she tried to justify herself by saying that she couldn't stand wearing a bra because of the way it squeezed her breasts" (*The Vegetarian* 6). According to Won-Chung Kim, "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." ("Eating and Suffering in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* 4). Similar to the resistance of Yeong-hye, Atwood's heroine, Marian in *The Edible Woman* expresses fear of her mature body is that of the girdle. Apart from food, girdles are the consumer items represented in the novel as symbols of feminine practice of self-restraint. A girdle advertisement and Marian's newly purchased girdle situate the novel within its historical context.

### Social Oppression and Oneness with 'Self'

Yeong-hye does not wish to conform to societal norms, rules, or regulations. Despite society's constant attempts to limit her, she manages to live in her own manner because of her strong belief in her "self" and unwavering determination to be a "vegetarian." Even in public, she expresses her desires and wants fiercely. She makes it very apparent to her husband's working colleagues that she has not become a vegetarian for religious or ethical reasons, as most people do. She manages to eat only "salad and kimchi and a tiny bit of squash porridge" amid a large gathering when everyone is enjoying a meaty feast (*The Vegetarian* 25). Her subversive act of refusing to eat meat symbolises her wish to reclaim control of her body, which has been violated multiple times since she became a vegetarian. In one of the instances, her husband assaulted her sexually and in one episode her father forced meat into her mouth. Yeong-hye's victimization by the

patriarchal society -first, by her husband, who raped her and forced her into a loveless marriage, then by her father, who forcibly shoved a piece of mashed pork into her mouth while also physically abusing her, then by her brother-in-law, who contrived to seduce her in the name of her artistic profession, and also by her sister, who held her captive in the hospital. As a result, she eventually stopped eating and talking in attempt to resist this oppression.

The novel explores the power of societal norms and regulations as enormous but no doubt, the power of 'self' is also represented vast and gigantic. The self is always ignored and avoided in the society and one has to undergo a difficult phase in order to have oneness with his/her "self." Sometimes, one has to be a non-conformist in order to be a true "self." In her undergraduate years, Han Kang was motivated by a line from a poem by Lee Sang which was written in the Korean script *hangul*, "I believe that humans should be plants." which prompted her to present a new perspective regarding humans transforming into plants after being compelled to live in a harsh and violent world of human cruelty and destruction. Han Kang penned a story called "The Fruit of My Woman", in which a woman transforms into a plant and her husband places her in a vase and waters her. *The Vegetarian* is a continuation of this narrative in which she wants to know how terrible humankind may become. She seems to be debating whether or not human purity is attainable, and how one might live a blameless life. She also raises the subject of how a person may live a life without harming others. How can one promise not to harm anyone? Human violence, she discovers, is not a geographic or temporal concern, but rather a universal one.

### **Ecriture Feminine and Anorexia**

Helen Cixous refers to *écriture féminine* in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," a uniquely feminine style of writing marked by disruptions, gaps, silence, puns, new images, and other elements that appear eccentric, incomprehensible, and inconstant due to centuries of suppression of the female voice, which is now ready to speak in a borrowed language. This voice emerges as a pre-linguistic, pre-natal, and unconscious potentiality that manifests itself in literary works, more free, eliminating all repressions, undermining all significations, the logic, and the closure of the phallogocentric language—opens itself into a joyous free play of meanings. *écriture féminine* undermines the symbolic and threatens to unleash

chaos where there is order, whereas masculine language symbolises the symbolic-linear, authoritative, and realistic. Cixous refuses to define and encode *écriture féminine* because doing so would restrict and trap it inside Western phallogocentric rationalism's logic. In contrast, she claims that *écriture féminine* is derived from the female body, which is not exclusive to women. Men, too, can write from this vantage point. *Écriture féminine*, she claims, serves as a deconstructive and a disruptive force that shakes the Symbolic order's security and stability, allowing for more play—in gender, sexuality, and other subjects. Han Kang uses meat and vegetarianism as symbols to express women's resistance to social conformity. The concept of *écriture féminine* allows women to express their own passions, writing about their bodies. In a society where meat is consumed by the majority of the population, the picture of a vegetarian woman seems strange, incomprehensible and unfathomable. She shows a woman's complete independence via anorexia, which defies society's normative value system. Yeong- Hye's boundless ability to merge with nature defies traditional notions of femininity.

### **Establishing New Signifiers**

In the case of Yeong-hye, she wants to be as natural and boundless as a tree, this state can be obtained only after she dies biologically. The Lacanian idea of "second death" helps to explain her death (The Second Death and the Advent of an Ethical Subject in Seminar VII). This idea of beyond pleasure was dubbed "the death drive" by Sigmund Freud, who proposed that the fundamental aim of existence is to discover the right way to die. Lacan distinguishes between two types of deaths: biological and symbolic. The latter happens when a subject follows its desire while breaching the symbolic law, i.e. taboo. As a result, second death is the only way for the subject to seek the self rather than the other. The struggle of Yeong-hye to become a tree can never be expressed in terms of the symbolic: the Real. Yeong- hye's pursuit of perfect freedom, albeit painful, will unlock the metaphorical, which strives for fullness and wholeness all the time. As a result, her transformation into a tree and biological death should be interpreted as a fresh opportunity to broaden the symbolic, aiming for fullness and wholeness, and establishing new signifiers.

Yeong-hye is against consumer culture and social structures, in fact , she no longer wants to be a human. She wants to grow up to be a plant. She is

strongly opposed to human aggression and patriarchal social institutions. She surrenders herself totally to a dream, to nature, to vegetation, in order to avoid current social norms and to be as natural as a plant or tree in nature. "What is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,- that is genius.", Emerson adds, elucidating the concept of total commitment to 'self' and a deeper sense of individuality. (Self-Reliance) Thoreau, Emerson's pupil who resided with him for a period, was also influenced by his views, particularly those relating to the individual and society. He also felt that in society, an individual's heart and strength are dragged out and neglected, making individuals fearful of their own thoughts and views. They are also afraid to speak the truth. "Unjust laws exist; shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavour to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?" asks Thoreau.

### Transformation of Self

The novel follows the protagonist's path from "being to becoming," a notion proposed by French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, in which existence comes before essence. Existentialism is a philosophical ideology based on the concept that humans have complete freedom of choice and that the cosmos is absurd. Han Kang delves into the unresolvable struggle that exists between Yeong-hye's two personalities, one of which is primal and the other of which defies societal conventions. According to Sartre's philosophy, a human person exists first, then forms his essence, value system, and essence via individual decisions. Yeong-hye sheds her existence in the novel *The Vegetarian* by refusing to eat anything and emotionally isolating herself by rejecting societal standards. She wants to express herself completely, freely by disregarding social conventions and norms and by a desire of growing like a plant to feed her primordial nature. She breaks free from the confines of this constricted society which prohibits her from doing things she doesn't need to do. She strives to expand her 'being' in nature since it is huge, free, comprehensive, vast and everlasting. Her innate and inherent desire to be one with nature against the oppressive consumer culture reflects her kinship with the nature.

### Conclusion

#### Major Findings

To conclude, Yeong-hye's unwillingness to eat meat and eventually food at all demonstrates her

efforts to flee from oppressive consumer culture and patriarchal hegemony. Her refusal to eat, aversion to girdles and her imagined transformation into a plant vehemently represents her assertion and resistance against the established structures in the society. She has realised her oneness with nature, since only nature can educate one to be harmless. She can no longer exist in a violent and patriarchal culture. Nature embodied in plants, trees and forests is her only sanctuary and refuge.

Anorexia is a hazard for Yeong-hye, yet it is an experience through which she acquires a more effective voice. In *The Edible Woman*, Marian's inability to eat is represented as a symptomatic anorexia nervosa, a disease which was becoming more common and gaining recognition in 1960s. Marian's starvation is both a protest against repression of herself to fit in a mould of femininity which requires her objectification and it also represents her protest against powerlessness. Marian, quite literally, suffers from a social system that makes her sick. She has not consciously repressed her desire to eat rather her body has taken this decision and stand on its own. She does not manipulate her food; rather, she feels manipulated by it. She feels even more betrayed by her body's rejection of food. Both Yeong-hye and Marian do not suffer from anorexia but an examination of the disease give them a deep insight into their condition. The relationship of a woman with food is considered very crucial in determining her relationship with herself. The use of food is a very crucial and essential metaphor through which women can voice their identity but if the food does not satisfy women's appetite, it means, it has become an enemy of the body while the body has become the mind's enemy.

Hence *The Vegetarian* and *The Edible Woman* promote "writing the body" in its most basic sense: the idea that women may write about their bodies, changing the boundaries of "appropriate" literary material and gaining access to repressed or misrepresented experiences. Furthermore, she demonstrates the validity of a deeper sense of *écriture féminine* as recovering a feminine underside of language that has been obscured by patriarchal laws and grammar, and doing so through forms of expression such as hysteria and anorexia, which have become necessary as a result of women's estrangement from other discourses.

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