



Ethics of Witnessing: Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract— *The paper examines Han Kang's The Vegetarian as a critique of militarized masculinities, extractivism, and systemic violence. The Vegetarian exposes the limitations of conventional liberalism by problematizing the concept of the 'human'. It argues that The Vegetarian reveals how South Korea's militarized history and capitalist culture and economy are entangled with patriarchy and extractivism. The paper shows how the novel interrogates anthropocentric and gendered epistemologies and different forms of violence. It also suggests that it is perhaps through empathetic witnessing and ethical engagement that the novel opens up the possibility of hope.*



Keywords— *Militarized masculinities, patriarchy, metamorphosis, humanness, sexualized bodies.*

In a significant departure from its historically Eurocentric and predominantly White Male tradition, Han Kang was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2024. As the world remains a helpless witness to the now more than a year-long and continuing genocide in Gaza—with consistent military support and rhetorical vindication of Israel's "right to self-defence" by the most powerful Western democratic nations—dehumanizing statements like Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant's remark, "We are fighting against animals," have intensified the erosion of the already fragile concept of humanity. The calculated annihilation of Palestinian civilians, predominantly women and children, through bombings, starvation, and displacement, has only deepened the global crisis of moral corrosion.

After winning the Nobel, Han refused to celebrate the award reportedly because of the two raging wars in Ukraine and Gaza. A year which was marked by unremitting violence and brutal attempts to silence resistance, Han Kang's Nobel award, is a recognition of her excavation and scathing critique of violence and her insistent exploration of the concept, contours and complexity of the idea of the "human". In a conversation with Krys Lee on "Violence and Being Human", Han recalls her childhood in Gwangju made infamous by Gwangju Massacre, the May 18 Democratic Uprising, when many citizens, including Jeonnam University students, were beaten and killed by government

troops in the protest against the Chun Doo Hwan regime in 1980. The historical memories of this uprising and its traumatic aftermath inform Han's preoccupation with patriarchal military violence and the examination of the nature of human violence. In the interview she says, "Violence is part of being human, and how can I accept that I am one of those human beings? That kind of suffering always haunts me. Yes. I also think my preoccupation extends to the violence that prevails in daily life" (Lee 61). In her gutting novel *Human Acts*, Han writes about the aftermath of the massacre through the perspective of six different narrators, connected to the murder of a middle school student, reminiscent of the killings of hundreds of students by the military junta.

Adhy Kim in her essay, "Han Kang's Speculative Natural Histories Beyond Human Rights" examines how the act of recollecting human rights violations in the Cold-War is connected to old colonialisms. For postcolonial nations like South Korea, post-World War II development involved aligning with the Global North. Kim avers that the paradigm of human rights as constitutive of universal justice obviates the accountability of global capitalism and its role in producing new forms of violence. The language of human rights does not sufficiently attend to the issue of distributive justice, extractivism, the exploitation of labour, and its failure to critique the relationship between capitalism, militarism and gendered violence. Kim reads

Han Kang's works as pushing the limits of rights-based thought and discourse (435). *The Vegetarian* and *Human Acts* expose the limitations of conventional liberalism by problematizing the concept of the 'human'. While the *Human Acts* evokes a violent historical moment in post-War South Korea, *The Vegetarian* alludes to historical violence more obliquely, it reveals how South Korea's militarized history and capitalist culture and economy are entangled with patriarchy and extractivism. Memories of war and dehumanization are embedded in social and cultural relations, dietary practices, and filial and conjugal relationships.

The Vegetarian is centred around Yeong-hye who one day stops eating meat. Her decision provokes abusive treatment from her husband, father, and brother in law. The novel is written from the perspective of three narrators—Cheong, Yeong-hye's husband, her brother-in-law who is an artist, and her sister In-hye. The multiple narrators in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* capture the evolving interpretations of Yeong-hye's transformation, as she gradually metamorphoses into what she perceives as a plant-like state—or, as others see it, a descend into madness.

Though the first section is narrated from her husband's perspective, it offers glimpses into Yeong-hye's inner world, particularly through the vivid dream sequences that haunt her. As a narrative technique, this first-person account from Mr. Cheong's viewpoint introduces readers to the established social conventions and gendered power dynamics that define marital relationships in contemporary South Korean society. The structural division between first-person and third-person narration in this opening section forces a disjunction between established social norms and Yeong-hye's silent yet powerful resistance against them.

According to Magdalene Zolkos, "Yeong-hye's veganism is a radical project of self-exile from humanity, as well as a powerful anti-patriarchal gesture" (Zolkos 105). In her reading, the novel illustrates how humans are continuous with plants (and animals). Mr Cheong finds Yeong-hye's unwavering refusal to eat meat incomprehensible initially and explains it by connecting it to contemporary 'dietary fads' such as veganism. As her resistance becomes unyielding, he begins to read her behaviour as violating cultural and patriarchal norms. Her extraordinary will breaks the passivity and ordinariness of his marital life which was his consolation. He says, "I'd always thought her as completely unremarkable in every way" (Kang 3). His patriarchal entitlements in the marriage preclude him from noticing and lead him to misread the signs of Yeong-hye's exceptionalism. Yeong hye's preoccupation with reading, her refusal to wear a bra, and her apathy towards social niceties are misconstrued by her husband. Her obdurate

passivity is interpreted as her pliancy, and her refusal to sexualize her body is seen as a gesture of seduction by her husband. Unable to pierce through her unresponsiveness, Mr Cheong reacts by raping her which she resists with animal strength. Her husband justifies his brutality by evoking male conjugal entitlements and alludes to 'comfort women' who were dragged against their will by Japanese soldiers. Comfort Women were Korean women who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military during the Japanese occupation of Korea during the Second World War. Cheong's casual self-comparison to an imperial Japanese soldier and Yeong-hye to a 'comfort woman', exposes the structural violence embedded in gender relations and the continuing influence of South Korea's militarized past in the contemporary. Cheong's assertion of his masculinity aligns him with Yeong-hye's father, a Vietnam War veteran who recounts his violent history with nationalist pride. Though the novel is not directly about the Vietnam war, it is the context of South Korea's militarized modernity. According to Ady Kim, "*The Vegetarian* makes an oblique connection from an earlier post-Korean War generation raised on militaristic anti-communist ideologies to a post- democratization generation that thoughtlessly reproduces ongoing violence against women" (Kim 441).

In this context, Yeong -hye's troubling dream of murder and gruesome death is a subconscious acknowledgment of the violence in human society. While the male characters celebrate their masculinity and trace their masculinist genealogy from a militarized history, Yeong-hye's dream confronts that darkness. In her dream, she says, "Perhaps I am only now coming face to face with the thing that has always been here. Its dark" (Kang 28). In her dream, she sees herself strangling a pigeon, brutally hacking it off and sinking her finger into its slippery eyeball (32). She says, "I become a different person, a different person rises up inside me, devours me..." (33). In her dream, she is confronted by her culpability as a human in participating in violence against animals, her meat eating. This terrifying nightmare drives her towards veganism and she gradually dissociates herself from her 'humanness'. Her radical transformation to a plant-form is girded by her inherent rejection of a patriarchal and misogynistic framing of human societal structures. Her ontological metamorphosis to arboreality is enacted through her active, unyielding passivity. As Rose Casey suggests, "She is not figured as a domineering human subject, "who works upon the world" but as a radically pacific being who inclines towards tree-life" (Casey 7). The beingness of vegetal life is politically contrasted with the masculinist colonial and neo-colonial ideology that privileges domination, control, and extractivism.

The first section explicitly critiques the militarist masculinities and its overt acts of violence. It also exposes the structural violence embedded in social customs, family, modern systems of economy and development. In the second section titled 'Mongolian Mark', Yeong-hye's further transformation towards vegetal-life is examined through her artist brother-in-law's objectification of her body. Yeong-hye's brother-in-law experiences a surge of creativity impelled by his sexual desire for her. He persuades Yeong-hye to allow him to paint flowers and vines on her naked body. He is aroused by his complete artistic control over Yeong-hye's body and gets flowers painted on his body too, by a friend. Following this, he records his sexual act with Yeong-hye. The masculinist artistic impulse to control Yeong-hye is in essence not fundamentally different from her father's and her husband's violence and entitled desire to force her into submission. Her father, Mr Kim's sudden rage and attack on Yeong-hye is not an isolated incident. It indicates both his militaristic masculinity and a more routinized patriarchal violence in the everyday. Mr Kim orders that Yeong-hye be physically restrained and be force-fed meat. This overt act of violent control is followed by Yeong-hye's brother-in-law's wish to claim Yeong-hye's body through artistic objectification and sexual domination. In this section, "the novel examines the erotic fantasies of Yeong-hye's artist brother-in-law, as he imagines painting her denuded body with floral imagery." (Stobie 795). It is interesting that along with the floral imagery, he paints a faceless man with his arms around her neck appearing to throttle her. While in the first section, the novel exposes the nature and normalisation of patriarchal violence in social and filial structures, this section reveals the relationship between aesthetics and masculinist violence. The perverse attempt of the artist combining vegetal imagery with the sexual act, is an act of fetishizing Yeong-hye's body and mind. This is contrasted with Yeong-hye's imagination and actual physical transformation into a vegetal form, seeking a material seamlessness between the human and the vegetal. The novel itself consciously subverts the patriarchal aesthetic frameworks through feminist critique. The novel by identifying the ideological project inherent in aesthetic practices exposes the fallacy of the liberal humanist claims about the autonomy of art and its radicalism. By decentring the human in the novel, Han leads us to think about aesthetics not only in terms of the anthropocentric but in planetary terms.

The three parts of the novel construct a trajectory of Yeong-hye's gradual transformation in stages. Han interrogates anthropocentric and gendered epistemologies and the different forms of violence they produce through Yeong-hye's transformation. The third part of the novel,

"Blazing Trees", is a departure from the first two. This section is narrated from the perspective of Yeong-hye's sister In-hye. In contrast to Yeong-hye, In-hye is firmly entrenched in the convention; she is married, dutiful, and runs a cosmetic store. As mentioned earlier, Yeong-hye's nonconformity is evident even before she begins her journey of wilful metamorphosis. In-hye's conventionality is situated in the context of childhood trauma of growing up with an abusive father. Though not strictly conventional, but her marriage to an artistic man reveals the more subtle forms of oppression women experience in ostensibly progressive partnerships. Like Yeong-hye, the novel traces In-hye's journey towards self-awareness. Initially, she remains gender-compliant but gradually she grows increasingly uncomfortable at witnessing the blatant violence unleashed on Yeong-hye. While Yeong-hye's rejection of societal norms and her abnegation of her humanness is radical, In-hye's evolves towards a heightened awareness of systemic violence. By the end of the novel, In-hye becomes conscious of the structural violence and misogyny that both she and her sister are militating against, though their responses are different in intensity and form.

In-hye is the only one in the family who is moved by her sister's condition and responds to her with care and gentle protectiveness. On learning about her husband's betrayal, she initially reacts with disgust and jealousy but over time she transitions to understanding her intense defiance of convention. According to Caitlin E Stobie (2024), In-hye "comes to adopt a humanist philosophy which is also postcolonial; it rails against exploitative and possessive individualism" (Stobie 797). As Yeong-hye discards, though never fully, her distinctive humanness, and In-hye watches her sister's disintegration, she says "I have dreams too...I could myself dissolve... let them take over...but surely dream isn't all there is? We have to wake up at some point..." (Kang 182). Preceding this, In-hye becomes intensely aware of the natural world as she notices summer woods, dense foliage, with rain falling on leaves blazing like green fire. Yeong-hye's transformation is juxtaposed with In-hye's growing sensitivity to trees and nature. Yeong-hye endures multiple forms of violence, but it is her irrepressible urge for complete autonomy and separation from the human world that lies beyond the conceptual framework of extractivist, capitalist anthropocentric discourse. The extraordinary brutality inflicted upon her is produced by this fundamental cognitive and epistemological disconnect. Yu-Chen Tai argues that it is from the liminality of the dream-space that Yeong-hye accesses the repressed trauma of violence and her participation in it as a human agent. In and through her dream she bears witness to collective historical violence.

You-Chen Tai goes on to suggest that Yeong-hye remembers the violence both as a victim and as an accomplice to the structures of violence (Tai 632). Yeong-hye's embodied resistance remains opaque to all the characters in the novel except In-hye in the end. Driven by the ethics of care rather than full comprehension, In-hye attempts to protect her sister from being force-fed in the hospital. It is through this act of witnessing that In-hye examines her own past, how she has suffered the normalized oppressions of patriarchy. Yeong-hye's radical challenge to heteronormativity and sexual oppression allows In-hye to assess her own complicity and entrapment within structures of expectations produced by patriarchy.

In the final section of the novel, it is perhaps through her empathetic witnessing and ethical engagement that In-hye opens up the possibility of hope. Yeong-hye's resistance is acknowledged even if it is not fully understood by In-hye. Yeong-hye's radical and embodied act of resistance to established interpretative frameworks is affirmed by In-hye when she chooses to respect and protect Yeong-hye's right over her body and her refusal to participate in the human world. According to Zofia Zaliwska and Megan Boler, "Witnessing requires a space of thick co-presence, in which she who bears witness and she to whom witness is borne are collectively co-producing, making-with each other a space of listening inextricably bound up with history's collectively embodied memories" (Zaliwska and Boler 80).

It is through In-hye's act of witnessing of Yeong-hye's dissolution into vegetal form that the novel suggests the possibility of non-hierarchical, participatory solidarity can be created through ethics of care.

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