

Unveiling Carnism: Patriarchy, Resistance, and the Female Body in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007; trans. 2015) unfolds as a haunting meditation on resistance, embodiment, and ideological violence through the life of Yeong-hye, a South Korean woman who abruptly rejects meat consumption after a series of disturbing dreams. Her choice, dismissed by her family as madness, destabilizes patriarchal and cultural structures that naturalize dominance both over animals and women. This paper reads *The Vegetarian* through the theoretical lens of carnism, a concept articulated by Melanie Joy to describe the invisible belief system that normalizes meat consumption as natural, normal, and necessary. By situating Yeong-hye's vegetarianism as an act of defiance against carnism and patriarchy, the study examines how the female body becomes the battleground for ideological control. Drawing also on Carol J. Adams's *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, the analysis reveals how food, gender, and power intertwine in cultural narratives of consumption. Ultimately, Yeong-hye's withdrawal into silence and vegetal being represents a radical redefinition of agency, one that challenges both anthropocentric and patriarchal forms of violence.

Keywords: Carnism, Patriarchy, Feminism, Female Body, Ideology, Resistance.

Introduction

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is a visceral exploration of what it means to reject the violence embedded in everyday life. The novel opens with Yeong-hye, a quiet South Korean housewife, who one day decides to stop eating meat after recurring dreams of slaughter and blood. What begins as a seemingly private choice spirals into a profound act of rebellion that fractures her marriage, alienates her family, and isolates her from society. Structured in three parts, told through the voices of her husband, brother-in-law, and sister, the narrative withholds Yeong-hye's direct voice, amplifying her silence as both defiance and erasure.

Yeong-hye's decision to turn vegetarian is not merely about food; it is a refusal to participate in systems of domination. Within the novel's domestic and cultural framework, this rejection functions as resistance to carnism, an ideology that, as Melanie Joy defines, conditions people to eat certain animals while excluding others from moral consideration. Carnism operates invisibly, presenting meat consumption as a biological or cultural necessity rather than an

*Corresponding Author Email: handiquerengani@gmail.com

Published: 6 January 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i1.45470>

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ideological choice (Joy 23). Yeong-hye's abstention thus threatens the "natural order" of both food and gender, exposing how power sustains itself through normalized violence.

At the same time, Han Kang's portrayal of bodily rebellion invites feminist interpretation. Yeong-hye's refusal disrupts the patriarchal structures that demand female compliance, domesticity, and silence. Her act echoes what Carol J. Adams calls the "sexual politics of meat," where women's bodies and animal bodies are similarly objectified and consumed within patriarchal culture (Adams 43). By refusing meat, Yeong-hye refuses her assigned role as both provider and product of male control.

This paper argues that *The Vegetarian* exposes the interlocking systems of carnism and patriarchy as ideologies of domination that depend on invisibility and normalization. Yeong-hye's bodily withdrawal her refusal to eat, speak, or conform emerges as a radical form of resistance and a quest for autonomy through self-erasure. Through this lens, Han Kang transforms the act of eating, or not eating, into a profound political and existential gesture.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework:

Since its English translation in 2015, *The Vegetarian* has been the subject of diverse critical interpretations. Scholars such as Hye-Jin Park and Kyung-Hye Lee have explored the novel through feminist and psychoanalytic lenses, analyzing Yeong-hye's transformation as both trauma and transcendence. Park situates Yeong-hye's defiance within the broader context of patriarchal family structures, arguing that her vegetarianism embodies a refusal of domestic servitude and gendered obedience (Park 214). Similarly, Lee reads Yeong-hye's bodily transformation as a "silence of the body," through which Han Kang dramatizes the limits of speech and reason under systemic oppression (Lee 91).

While feminist readings abound, few studies explicitly engage the novel through the theoretical framework of carnism. Melanie Joy's *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows* articulates carnism as an invisible ideology that sustains meat consumption through three mechanisms: invisibility, justification, and denial. It legitimizes violence against animals by framing it as natural, normal, and necessary (Joy 25). This triad mirrors the ideological operations of patriarchy, which similarly naturalizes gender hierarchies.

To extend this analysis, Carol J. Adams's *The Sexual Politics of Meat* provides a foundational feminist-vegetarian perspective, arguing that both animals and women are rendered "absent referents" in patriarchal discourse, their suffering erased to sustain systems of consumption (Adams 46). When women and animals are simultaneously objectified, eating meat becomes an act of both domination and denial. Through this theoretical synthesis, Yeong-hye's refusal emerges as a conscious disruption of two interdependent ideologies: carnism's anthropocentrism and patriarchy's gender hierarchy.

Analysis:

Yeong-hye's decision to give up meat shatters the invisible boundaries of carnism. Her husband, Mr. Cheong, perceives her refusal as irrational, an inconvenience to his social and domestic routine. His narration reveals how carnism presents itself as common sense: "Before my wife became vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every

way” (Han 3). The shock in his tone suggests that deviation from normalized consumption is perceived as moral and social deviance.

Carnism, as Joy emphasizes, relies on the suppression of empathy and the concealment of violence. In the novel, Yeong-hye’s nightmares of animal slaughter rupture this ideological concealment, making visible what carnism demands remain unseen. Her vegetarianism, therefore, is not simply dietary it is epistemological. By rejecting meat, she rejects an entire worldview structured on denial and domination.

Han Kang constructs these ruptures through imagery that collapses the distinction between human and animal. Yeong-hye dreams of “blood filling her mouth,” of “cows being slaughtered” (Han 14), and awakens trembling, already alienated from her own flesh. The violence of her dreams mirrors the repressed violence of carnism the everyday horror of killing sanitized by culture. Her refusal to eat becomes a moral confrontation with what the rest of society chooses to ignore.

Yeong-hye’s body becomes the site of patriarchal and ideological enforcement. The most brutal instance occurs during the family gathering when her father physically assaults her for refusing to eat meat: “Father seized a piece of pork and thrust it into her mouth. Blood trickled from her lips as she spat it out” (Han 78). This moment encapsulates the intersection of patriarchy and carnism, both seeking to discipline the body through violence. Her father’s act of force-feeding represents patriarchal authority’s intolerance of female dissent. The body that refuses becomes a body to be punished.

Carol Adams’s theory clarifies this dynamic: patriarchy demands consumption and control, while female resistance threatens the illusion of order. Yeong-hye’s vomiting afterward becomes a symbolic purging of the internalized violence imposed on her, an expulsion of both meat and patriarchy. Her frail body, once the site of domestic servitude, now becomes a stage for rebellion.

The scene also parallels ecofeminist readings of the female body as aligned with nature. In refusing meat, Yeong-hye aligns herself with the non-human world, a solidarity often devalued in patriarchal and anthropocentric thought. Her body becomes porous to the natural realm a metaphorical bridge between the human and vegetal. This connection reframes her “madness” as a form of posthuman empathy. Yeong-hye’s metamorphosis thus recalls the ecofeminist assertion that “to heal the split between human and nature, the feminine must reclaim her affinity with the non-human” (Gaard 72).

Yeong-hye’s gradual withdrawal from speech has often been misread as passivity or psychosis. However, her silence is a strategic rejection of discourse itself. By refusing to justify her choices, she refuses to participate in the ideological language of carnism and patriarchy. As Kyung-Hye Lee argues, “Her silence exposes the body’s capacity to signify beyond patriarchal language” (Lee 104). Han Kang’s narrative structure reinforces this erasure: Yeong-hye never narrates her own story; she exists only through others’ interpretations. This displacement mirrors how women’s voices are mediated or erased in patriarchal culture. Yet within that silence lies a new language—the language of the body. Her refusal to speak reclaims the body as a site of expression, independent of masculine control.

Her silence also evokes Judith Butler's idea of performativity and refusal: in rejecting the expected performances of gender and consumption, Yeong-hye dismantles the very framework that defines her identity. Her stillness, her plant-like existence, is not lifelessness but an alternative mode of being an existence beyond speech, beyond violence, beyond ideology.

The novel's later sections depict Yeong-hye's institutionalization, where her vegetarianism is pathologized as illness. Doctors and family members alike attempt to restore her to "normalcy," reflecting how ideology polices boundaries of sanity and deviance. "They said she was refusing food again," her sister In-hye laments, "that she was trying to become a tree" (Han 142). This medicalization of dissent echoes Joy's observation that ideological systems label opposition as irrational to preserve their authority. Yeong-hye's desire to photosynthesize—"I don't need to eat anymore. I can feel sunlight filling me" (Han 149)—transcends the human-centered logic of consumption. Her metamorphosis into vegetal being is not madness but the ultimate rejection of violence, a yearning to exist beyond the economy of domination.

Han Kang's prose blurs the line between death and transcendence. As Yeong-hye grows weaker, her spiritual strength intensifies. In-hye's narration reveals both pity and awe, sensing that her sister has reached a realm "where words no longer matter" (Han 161). Yeong-hye's transformation thus becomes both tragedy and liberation—a spiritual revolt against systems that define worth through productivity and conformity.

Yeong-hye's transformation into a tree-like figure can be read as both death and liberation. While patriarchal and carnist ideologies demand her restoration to "normal," she instead embraces a posthuman identity. Her final act of withdrawal marks a refusal to be complicit in violence toward animals, toward herself, and toward the world. In this sense, *The Vegetarian* enacts what Adams calls "the politics of refusal," where nonparticipation becomes the only ethical stance in a corrupt system (Adams 102). Yeong-hye's resistance is not loud, dramatic protest but quiet negation. Her body, reduced to fragility, paradoxically becomes a site of immense moral power.

Through Yeong-hye, Han Kang reimagines the female body not as passive matter but as ethical consciousness. Her metamorphosis invites a revaluation of what it means to live ethically in a violent world. Her journey is less about destruction than purification—a return to the organic, the elemental, and the non-violent.

Conclusion:

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* unveils the entanglement of carnism and patriarchy as interlocking ideologies of domination. Through Yeong-hye's rejection of meat and her gradual transformation, the novel exposes the violence hidden within the ordinary—within eating, gender roles, and language itself. Yeong-hye's rebellion lies not in speech or protest but in withdrawal: the refusal to consume, to perform, or to obey. By reading the novel through Melanie Joy's theory of carnism, Carol Adams's feminist-vegetarian framework, and ecofeminist thought, this paper demonstrates how Yeong-hye's act transcends individual defiance, becoming an allegory of systemic resistance. Her silence and transformation illuminate refusal as a radical form of agency—an act that reclaims the body from ideological control. In revealing the brutality concealed within cultural "normalcy," *The Vegetarian* asks

readers to confront their own complicity in structures of domination and to imagine liberation not through power, but through the courage to refuse.

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