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## MASTER Dissertation

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# Romanticizing the Objectification of the Female Body in Hang Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007)

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of Master Degree  
in Literature

**Submitted by:**

Miss TOUTI Safia Nour

**Supervised by:**

Dr. Abdelnacer BENABDERREZAK

### Board of Examiners:

Dr.	BENADELRREZAK Abdelnacer	<b>MCA.</b>	University of Biskra	Supervisor
Dr.	BOUMAARAF Hanane	<b>MCB.</b>	University of Biskra	Examiner
Mr.	SMATTI SAID	<b>MCB.</b>	University of Biskra	Chair

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## DEDICATIONS

*I am forever grateful to Allah for giving me the strength and guiding me towards the completion of this dissertation.*

*I dedicate this work to my parents, my mother, whose constant support was the fuel that kept me going towards the end, and my father whose presence, kind words and trust gave me strength whenever I doubted myself.*

*To my sisters and my cousin whose unwavering support made this journey possible. I also extend my heartfelt gratitude to my friends who listened to all my complaints, supported me throughout, and believed in my potential.*

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims at examining the romanticization of the objectification of female body in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007). The novel is lauded for its exploration of trauma and resistance, and it paradoxically aestheticizes the protagonist Yeong-hye's progressive detachment from her corporeal self. Drawing upon Julia Kristeva's assumptions of abjection, this research work explores the ways Yeong-hye's rejection of social norms manifests as a disruption of the symbolic order. Furthermore, Lacanian concepts of the gaze and the object *petit a* illuminate the male characters' desire to possess and control Yeong-hye's body as an idealized unattainable object. Integrating feminist perspectives on patriarchal power structures, this study also examines how the novel both reflects and subverts the cultural forces that contribute to the objectification of female body. It argues that Kang's narrative, despite its apparent feminist intentions, inadvertently romanticizes Yeong-hye's suffering by transforming her body into a canvas for artistic expression and a site of voyeuristic contemplation. The analysis demonstrates that the romanticization of the female body is manifested through vivid imagery, symbolic vegetal motifs and the male characters' artistic obsessions. Future research could explore further the implications of aestheticizing and romanticizing the pervasive nature of objectification, particularly within narratives of resistance.

**Keywords:** aestheticization; female body; Han Kang; objectification; *The Vegetarian*

## DECLARATION

I declare that the work presented in this Master's dissertation, "Romanticizing the Objectification of the Female Body in Hang Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007)" is the result of my own independent research and scholarly effort. All sources of information, including published and unpublished materials, have been duly acknowledged and cited in accordance with accepted academic conventions. I confirm that this dissertation has not been previously submitted, in whole or in part, for assessment towards any other academic qualification. I have taken full responsibility for ensuring the accuracy and originality of the content within this dissertation and have adhered to the highest standards of academic integrity.

**TOUTI Safia Nour**

**Signature**

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Tanti", is written over a faint, circular official stamp.

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# **General Introduction**



## General Introduction

Literature serves as a potent medium for representing the lived experiences of its creators. It functions as a conduit for conveying unspoken realities and transforms abstract emotions into tangible expressions. While historically male-centered, literature has increasingly incorporated the voices of women writers, who have utilized the form to articulate their traumatic encounters with patriarchal structures and their aspirations for liberation. For centuries, women have endured silencing and objectification often denied women fundamental human rights; literature provides a space to challenge these injustices and expose the power dynamics that perpetuate them.

Korean society, deeply rooted in tradition and hierarchical norms, has historically placed significant pressure on women to conform to prescribed social roles. Within this patriarchal framework, women are often relegated to the roles of 'good mothers' and 'good wives'. They are judged by their adherence to restrictive expectations regarding behavior, appearance, and social conduct. These impositions extend beyond mere role performance to shape social expectations concerning body image, etiquette, and overall conformity.

The discrimination and subordination of women have spurred various forms of resistance with literature emerging as a crucial tool for portraying the harsh realities of patriarchal oppression. Feminism, as a multifaceted political, social, and literary movement, seeks to dismantle male dominance and challenge female subjugation. Han Kang is a celebrated Korean woman author, and she is the winner of the 2015 Man Booker International Prize for *The Vegetarian*. The novel, translated by Deborah Smith, recounts Yeong-hye's transformation and defiant embrace of vegetarianism which is a seemingly rebellious act against the grain of Korean social expectations.

This dissertation tackles the central problem of how *The Vegetarian*, despite its apparent critique of patriarchal objectification, ultimately romanticizes it. This dissertation aims to contribute to the understanding of the complex relationship between female agency, artistic representation and the pervasive influence of objectification in contemporary Korean literature.

### **Rationale of the Study**

This study examines the romanticization of objectification in a specific novel. It aims at addressing gaps in scholarship regarding female representation, trauma, and ethical artistic expression. It connects to feminist and Korean literary debates by analyzing how the novel portrays women issues. The research seeks to foster an understanding of the novel's impact and promote responsible literary analysis. It contributes to broader discussions on gender and cultural representation.

The topic of this dissertation arose from the researcher's personal interest in the cultural and sociological structures that shape Korean society with particular attention to women experiences. As a woman, the researcher has developed a strong awareness of the challenges women face in patriarchal systems, which led to a critical examination of these issues through literature. This personal and academic perspective on gender, identity, and social norms serves as the foundation of the study and its drawn approach.

### **Literature Review**

Caitlin E. Stobie's analysis of *The Vegetarian* highlights the relationship between diet, trauma, and power in a postcolonial context. Stobie argues that Yeong-hye's choice to adopt veganism stems from an unhealed trauma and serves as a form of rebellion rather than a symptom of mental illness. The study explores the use of animal, bodily, and sexual imagery to reimagine ethical relationships and challenge social norms. Stobie also discusses the

concept of "sibling species". It emphasizes how Yeong-hye's actions blur the boundaries between humans and non-humans.

On the other hand, Emily Jane Cluett's study focuses on "vegetal affect". This work examines how Yeong-hye's behavior and emotions disrupt gender-based power dynamics. Cluett argues that Yeong-hye's unconventional reactions challenge patriarchal expectations of how women should act. The study examines how Yeong-hye imitates plants, both emotionally and physically, and challenges the idea that identity is only human-centered. Cluett argues that her transformation offers a different way to resist society's rules and presents Yeong-hye as a figure who redefines personal agency through non-human traits.

Raimy George and Sunitha V examine *The Vegetarian* through an eco-psychological lens, exploring the connection between Yeong-hye's mind and the natural world. Their study investigates how Yeong-hye's dreams and her decision to give up meat influence her relationships and reflect her inner psychological state. The analysis links Yeong-hye's transformation to a deeper connection with nature that shows how the novel integrates human emotions with broader ecological themes.

Shilpa Bright's ecofeminist reading of *The Vegetarian* examines the parallels between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. Bright argues that Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is not just a refusal to harm but also a way to mark her freedom in a patriarchal society. The analysis connects the novel to ecofeminist theory in which it shows how Yeong-hye's resistance challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the interconnected domination of women and nature.

Macsiniuc's study, *Normalising the Anorexic Body. Violence and Madness in The Vegetarian by Han Kang*, explores how food choices and eating habits shape gender roles and power dynamics within the family. The protagonist first becomes a vegetarian and later develops anorexia. She uses these actions as a way to escape the strict expectations of a

patriarchal society. Her silent refusal to eat is an attempt to assert personal independence, but others suppress it through both physical and literal violence. The main settings, the family home and psychiatric institutions, become places where her resistant body faces control and discipline.

The paper entitled *Defying Norms and Redefining Identity: Yeong-hye's Journey in Han Kang's The Vegetarian* examines how food acts as a central tool in her narrative, which is her understanding of desire, pleasure, sexuality, and selfhood. It employs an Ecofeminist framework. The study investigates interconnected forms of ecological, sexual and physical violence within society. The paper portrays vegetarianism as the protagonist's self-liberation. The analysis describes Yeong-hye's psychological existential crisis. Ultimately, the novel's exploration of resistance and transformation offers insight into the interconnectedness between societal oppression, body autonomy, and the struggle for individual's freedom.

These scholarly works interpret Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* through feminist, ecological and psychological perspectives. They mainly focused on how the writer intends to portray the resistance of the protagonist, her connection with nature, and her rebellion against patriarchal norms. However, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the author's use of poetic and beautified language to romanticize the objectification of the female protagonist. This dissertation seeks to address this unexplored aspect through the examination of the images of objectification and its portrayal.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This dissertation tackles the central problem of how *The Vegetarian*. Despite its apparent critique of patriarchal objectification, it romanticizes it. It has thus presented complex ethical and representational questions. The study emphasizes the paradoxical tension between the novel's seeming feminist intentions and its romanticized portrayal of Yeong-hye's

objectification, and it probes the implications of this contradiction for understanding female representation.

### **Research Questions**

- How does Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* both critique and perpetuate the objectification of the female body through its narrative choices?

### **Sub-Questions**

- How does the novel's use of imagery and symbolism contribute to the aestheticization of Yeong-hye's body?
- In what ways do the male characters' perspectives and artistic desires reinforce the objectification of Yeong-hye, despite their apparent concern for her well-being?
- What are the ethical and representational implications of romanticizing female objectification within a feminist narrative?

### **Research Methodology**

This dissertation employs a multifaceted theoretical framework to dissect the complex layers of objectification in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. Primarily, feminist theory serves as a foundational lens; it enables an examination of patriarchal structures embedded in the narrative. Psychoanalytic assumption, specifically Julia Kristeva's theory of “Abjection” and Jacques Lacan's notions of the “Gaze” and the “Object Petit a” are used to illuminate Yeong-hye's rejection of social norms as an act of disrupting the symbolic order and to elucidate the male characters' desires to possess and control Yeong-hye's body.

The textual analysis involves a meticulous examination of specific passages, recurring motifs, character interactions, and narrative structure to critically evaluate the novel's representation of female objectification. To determine the extent to which objectification is romanticized, the study scrutinizes the use of imagery, symbolism, and narrative perspective and assesses whether these elements aestheticize Yeong-hye's suffering. This critical approach

considers the ethical and representational implications of such aestheticization within the context of contemporary Korean literature and feminist discourse.

This study follows the MLA 8th edition citation style for all bibliographic references, including in-text citations, as it is the standard citation format used in literary and cultural studies.

## Hypothesis

This dissertation hypothesizes that:

- While *The Vegetarian* critiques patriarchal norms and the objectification of women, its narrative strategies and aesthetic choices romanticize Yeong-hye's objectification, thereby undermining its feminist potential.

It also hypothesizes that:

- The novel's pervasive use of floral and vegetative imagery, while seemingly symbolic of Yeong-hye's transformation, contributes to the aestheticization of her body.
- Despite expressions of concern, the male characters' perspectives and artistic desires, particularly through acts of observation and attempts at capturing Yeong-hye's image, reinforce her objectification by prioritizing their subjective interpretations and artistic fulfillment over her agency and well-being.
- Romanticizing female objectification within a narrative of resistance presents significant ethical and representational implications by undermining feminist discourse on agency and representation; the aestheticization of Yeong-hye's suffering, even if intended to critique social norms, may perpetuate harmful stereotypes and diminish the impact of her resistance.

## Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the novel's use of imagery and symbolism in relation to Yeong-hye's body.
- To examine the male characters' perspectives and their role in perpetuating the objectification of Yeong-hye.
- To evaluate the ethical and representational implications of romanticizing female objectification within the novel.
- To contribute to the understanding of the complex relationship between female agency, artistic representation, and objectification in contemporary Korean literature.

## Chapter Demarcation

This dissertation comprises three chapters, each addressing the central theme of the romanticization of the female body's objectification in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. The first chapter explores the socio-cultural context of contemporary Korea and examines how Korean women's literature confronts patriarchal norms, Confucian values, and social pressures. The second chapter presents the theoretical framework through which the novel will be later analyzed. The concepts of *l'écriture féminine* by Hélène Cixous, the theory of *Abjection* by Julia Kristeva, and the *Gaze* by Jacques Lacan to interpret instances from the novel. The final chapter analyzes the objectification of the protagonist, Yeong-hye, and argues that Han Kang portrays this objectification in a romanticized manner.

*Chapter One:*

*The Female Body as a Site of*

*Control*



## **Chapter One: The Female Body as a Site of Control**

1.1 Introduction

1.2 Family and Domestic Space in Korean Literature

1.3 Woman Body in Korean Women Literature

1.3.1 Social Expectations

1.3.2 Women Individual Desire

1.4 Signs of Repression vs. Liberation

1.4.1 Signs of Repression

1.4.2 Signs of Liberation

1.5 Conclusion

## 1.1 Introduction

Korean literature reflects the nation's socio-cultural values. Literature explores Korean women's realities; it bridges the gaps between social norms and women's aspirations and hopes. They experience different forms of patriarchy within the household borders. During the early 19th century, the evolving gender roles significantly prompts Korean women writers to address emerging social taboos. Their works reveal a desire for individual liberation from traditional constraints, yet the extent and nature of this liberation, and its impact on Korean society, warrant deeper critical exploration. These literary expressions reflect a complex negotiation between personal aspiration and prevailing social norms, which merit further analysis to uncover the complexities of their evolving roles.

Korean women have historically faced multifaceted challenges, ranging from domestic violence rooted in Confucian-influenced patriarchal family structures to objectification during the Japanese occupation, exemplified by the term "comfort women." The emergence of the "New Women" movement marked a critical response; it seeks to liberate women's bodies and minds. These experiences form the bedrock of Korean women's literature. Korean women's literature increasingly confronts previously unaddressed themes. It delves deeper into women's perspectives, critically examining their roles and experiences within a rapidly changing society, as it challenges traditions and social expectations. Further, such endeavours contribute to ongoing dialogues about gender equality and social justice in Korea.

## 1.2 Family and Domestic Space in Korean Literature

Literature is used as a tool to portray the social and cultural structures. Asia is one of the oldest societies in world history that encompasses various society structures. Korea is a culturally vivid region that was built upon the teachings of Confucianism. Confucianism,

through its emphasis on familialism—a philosophy prioritizing the family unit—has significantly shaped Korean social structures (Park and Cho 118; Park and Schepp 112). Korean literature mirrors these social structures and aids at shedding light on the dark sides of the Korean family. The Korean family is known for being well-structured and built on respect. However, this ideal image hides its patriarchal nature. The latter enforces strict gender roles and causes women to suffer.

In her work entitled *Women and Korean Literature*, Koh portrays the principles of Confucianism regarding domestic duties. It draws a bold line between the public and private spheres. Each of the sexes had distinct roles to be performed at the domestic level. Women did not have the right to proper education (Koh 35). Traditionally, women are primarily encouraged to cultivate female virtues; however, the 19th-century industrialization and subsequent modernization efforts instigated shifts in women's social positioning. While these changes ostensibly offered new opportunities, a critical examination is needed to assess the extent to which these opportunities translated into genuine empowerment, and whether traditional expectations of women are truly subverted and adapted to fit the evolving socio-economic sphere in Korea. They start to gain education and to participate in outdoor activities. They mark their presence in different fields (McGoldrick et al 349). Literature is primarily produced by men for men. However, in modern Korean literature, women seek to discuss their experiences as mothers, wives as well as daughters.

Kim Myongsun's *Suspicious Girl* (1917) stands as a seminal work in modern Korean literature. It is an exploration of domestic violence through the eyes of a young woman. The short story depicts a teenage girl who flees her home following her mother's suicide. The girl is driven to desperation by the oppression she faced from her husband (Koh 38). Koh argues that the narrative is deeply informed by Kim Myongsun's own lived experiences. As such,

this piece of Korean literature serves as a powerful reflection of women's struggles within the domestic sphere.

Influenced with Confucianism teachings, women are not part of the outdoor social activities (Kim 104). As a result, Korean women suffer from physical as well as psychological abuse. Violence against women does not solely take the shape of a husband-wife relationship. However, in the traditional Korean family power is also exercised by fathers against their children. Fathers are often regarded as the wise and authoritative figures within the family; a role sometimes creates a sense of distance. This perception often positions them as the primary decision-makers, as they are responsible for guiding the family's direction and future. Sons are typically raised with a strong emphasis on the duty to serve and care for their parents. They are not encouraged to be fully autonomous, as they are expected to prioritize the well-being and needs of their parents. The responsibility of caring for aging parents often falls on the sons. Their role as caregivers perpetuates the cycle of familial interdependence.

Traditional Korean fathers do not tolerate deviations from established social norms. They often exert physical violence to maintain discipline in such cases (Soh 61). This is an outcome of embracing confucianism “filial piety”<sup>1</sup> principle which reinforces the relationship between the father and his children. It highlights the idea that their success is the family's success. Moreover, their faults are considered the whole family's responsibility (Park 112). Korean children are raised with these principles. Their present and future are dedicated to their elders. They do not have an autonomous life as they are permanently dependent on their family members.

Father-children relationship is a recurrent theme in Korean literature. When a number of literary works portray the good father-children relationship, others depict the patriarchal

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<sup>1</sup>It refers to the relationship value between father and children in Asian society. It reinforces not solely the children's respect to their parents but also the support they provide for them.

practices behind the household borders. In her novel *I Went to See My Father* (2021) Kyung-Sook Shin tells the story of the protagonist who returns to her childhood home after years to thank her father for his sacrifices. On the other hand, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* recounts the story of the female protagonist who shifts to vegetarianism. Her actions result in her strict father's reaction that would later punish her physically.

### **1.3 Woman Body in Korean Women Literature**

Social expectations surrounding gender and attractiveness exert considerable influence on individual self-perception. Women are often held to multifaceted beauty standards, while men are frequently expected to embody strength and power. The specific criteria that define these ideals of attractiveness vary across cultures and time periods. These standards profoundly shape how individuals perceive their own worth. They potentially lead to both positive self-enhancement and negative self-objectification. In South Korea, which values social conformity, women face strict social norms to achieve specific beauty standards (Abrams et al 352). Body and face shapes define the value of a woman. These beauty ideals are not aesthetic preferences. However, they operate as mechanisms that reinforce gendered power dynamics.

Contemporary Korean literature openly explores taboo related to women's bodies. As a result, self-determination marks a remarkable shift in women's behaviours. Women moved from being passive, in-door and marginalized individuals to active members in Korean society. With industrialization and the western influence, they seek to free themselves from social constraints. Korean women have to perceive social pressures to conform to social expectations. They behave in accordance with the claustrophobic cultural norms and beauty standards. These constraints accumulate to add an additional layer of complexity that blocks their journey towards personal autonomy and self-determination.

### 1.3.1 Social Expectations

In Korea, a woman's self-image is guided by the social and cultural norms of her environment (Gelézeau 5). Women are expected to conform to these socially agreed criteria to satisfy their husbands' expectations. Standards for their bodies and face shapes have existed since early times. However, they change over time with the westernization of Korean society. With the evolution of the media, women start to be influenced by Western beauty standards (Kwak 2). As a result, traditional beauty standards shift from being social to becoming global. In her novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (2016) the writer Cho Nam-Joo portrays the story of an ordinary Korean woman throughout her life stages. It draws attention to the experiences the protagonist has with the Korean social norms. From childhood to motherhood, Jiyoung is constrained by first her family and then her in-laws. The author highlights the importance of having a child in the traditional Korean society. Also, she points at the clash between the family's standards and the protagonist's decision to not have a child.

### 1.3.2 Women Individual Desire

Due to the firm social restrictions, the New Women Movement emerged in Korea. Its main tenets are drawn around the liberation of women physically as well as mentally. Women's journey to gain their rights, which were stolen because of the Confucian values, is fueled by successive historical events. These events take their anger to its peak. Confucianism, and then the 19th century Japanese colonization and its consequences led to the foundation of this movement (Hur 183). According to Hur, Korean women who were working as prostitutes criticized this movement. They argue that The New Women Movement victimized them. They sought to legalize their work and invited the movement's theorists to normalize their job (193).

This rebellion against the traditional gender roles marks the shift to a new era. Women are now introduced to areas which were once considered taboos. They start to go against society's conformity roles to express their inner desires. Their personal autonomy clashes with the social constraints. This rebellion takes different shapes and literature is one. Literature is a “form of human expression” (Rexroth) which is enchained with certain criteria. Themes discussed back in the days revolved around family, virtues, and ethical values. However, modern Korean literature intends to dig deeper to analyze topics which were not openly discussed before.

The same example discussed above introduces the shift in Korean women's behaviour. It tackles an angle that showcases the autonomy of the female protagonist to choose what to do with her own body. The protagonist, Jiyoung, decides not to have a child with the approval of her husband. However, this decision makes her in-laws disappointed. Instead of accepting her choices, they accuse her of being sick and physically incapable of bearing a child. This work demonstrates the consequences women face once they try to break conformity norms. Another example is Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2016) in which it highlights the reaction of male characters to the protagonist's firm decision to shift to vegetarianism.

#### **1.4 Signs of Repression Vs Liberation**

Repression plays a central role in shaping Korean women's identity and experiences. In Korea, the beliefs of Confucianism enforce rigid gender roles that limit women's autonomy and put them in subordinate positions. However, over time Korean women started to resist these norms using different means. Korean woman literature is now used to express these repressed emotions and challenge traditional roles. Women seek to liberate themselves through embracing their unique experiences.

### 1.4.1 Signs of Repression

Repression manifests in diverse forms. It encompasses both internal psychological processes and external social mechanisms. Internal repression refers to the unconscious psychological strategies employed to keep disturbing thoughts, feelings, or desires out of awareness. External repression, on the other hand, involves social structures, norms, and practices that suppress certain groups or ideas that limit their expression or agency (Garssen 471).

Repression refers to the status where the oppressed feel enchained and unable to find their true selves. Repression conceals a significant part of an individual's identity beneath the social and religious veils. It drives them to restrain their desires in order to fit in society. Repression is generationally imposed by the dominant groups over the marginalized. Women constitute the social group most impacted by these norms and have to bear the weight of their repression.

Influenced by Confucianism teachings, Korean women's behaviour is limited to a number of assigned roles which are remarkably different from those assigned to men. They suffer from physical as well as psychological segregation. They are not part of the outdoor social activities. However, they are confined in their homes to uniquely serve men (Kim 104). These gendered social roles exist since ages and are socially agreed on. They became the norms that should not be debated.

In traditional Korean society, marriages are often arranged by elders to secure familial well-being and the continuation of the husband's lineage. The husband assumes the roles of provider, protector, authority figure, and leader within the family structure. Conversely, the wife's primary responsibilities center on childbearing and the management of household affairs. Expressions of love are rare in Korean households. A remarkable feature of the traditional Korean extended family is that elders fix conflicts between a husband and his



wife, as they believe that issues should be resolved domestically when divorce is uncommon. The authority of the husband often takes precedence over the wife (Lee 274). Korean women have no right to make any decision and the latter involves even personal matters like marriage.

The oppression of Korean women has historically intensified. It is culminated in periods of heightened subjugation. Their resistance started to emerge from the social constraints. Signs of repression are manifested in different forms. They are articulated through direct resistance as well as implicit one. Korean literature is one of the means women utilize to express their anger towards patriarchal oppression. Various literary writing techniques are used to portray the common anger women share across time and space. These techniques aim at helping the writer to draw their thoughts and experiences on papers. Also, they aid at conveying messages to a wider audience.

MiseliJeon in her research entitled *Violent emotions: Modern Japanese and Korean Women's Writing* states that there are two different concepts used in women's literature. These concepts present the feelings of resentment and revenge (Han (恨), in Korea and Urami in Japan). They are originally Chinese words which refer to feminine sentiments. These culturally rooted terms refer to deep emotions as sorrow, resentment and anger. The latter are used to describe women's emotions towards society's oppression. She states that these are individual feelings of violent deeply repressed emotions women have because of the neo-confucian ethics. She argues that though these emotions are individual, women who share the same experience would consider them universal. Jeon demonstrates that Urami is a more violent expression than Han (39-40).

#### **1.4.2 Signs of Liberation**

After centuries of generational oppression and enforced silence, women in Korea start to reclaim the possibility of change. They begin to craft a version of themselves beyond the

identities imposed by the patriarchal society. Bobbie Harro argues that through lived experiences of oppression, individuals eventually reach a point of critical awareness where the pursuit of change becomes an essential step toward liberation (52). They reach this point when they get to define “oppression” and understand its nature. Harro also argues that in order to have a profound change, a systematic plan is undertaken. This is also referred to as “The Cycle of Liberation”. This model reinforces the idea that identifying the issue of oppression as a socially structured phenomenon aids at finding accurate solutions.

Bobbie Harro’s Cycle of Liberation model points at different steps the oppressed take through their journey towards change. The first step is “waking up” where individuals do not feel comfortable in their usual statuses and start to look for change (54). Harro argues that this stage occurs as a result of a significant event the person goes through which shifts their worldview. This illustrates the shift women in general and Korean women in particular have made as an attempt to break free from social restrictions. This shift is manifested in different forms such as behavioral habits, lifestyles and shifts in perspectives. Korean literature is considered a common tool Korean women utilize to discuss the atrocities of patriarchy.

Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*, as example, exemplifies the modern Korean woman mind. It discusses topics related to the female body, sexual desires and a critique of patriarchy. The novel has multiple dimensions and invites the readers to widen their scope of interpretations. From one hand, it sheds light on the different shapes of violence against women. From the other hand, it describes the objectification of the female body and its descendance to a mere object of desire by male characters. Han Kang’s *The vegetarian* explores themes of oppression as well as liberation. The Vegetarian’s protagonist Yeong-Hye is a good example who embodies Harro’s “Wake up” stage. Yeong-Hye is a female character who decides to make a firm decision to stop eating meat as opposed to what is agreed on by the society.

This shift comes from a dream she had. The latter, as Harro refers to, is the “critical incident” the protagonist experienced.

Liberation is a journey the silenced women undertake in order to redefine their identities. Women are an example because they are the most affected by patriarchal norms. As Simone De Beauvoir states in her influential book *The Second Sex* (1953), “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other” (16). The latter illustrates the idea that women are not referred to as individuals. They are defined as opposite to men. Simone also argues that women are perceived as the “Other”. Othering women means to marginalize them and place them in a lower position where their significance is unremarkable. Due to the influence of the western world, Korean women started to look for their identities as separate from what is socially accepted.

Oppression, repression, and liberation form an interconnected web. Each shapes and reinforces the other in a dynamic cycle of influence. In order to highlight the connection between “Repression” and “Liberation”, it is important to first define “Oppression” which is the reason behind the emergence of these concepts. Oppression carries the connotation of domination and tyranny that is exercised by the ruling groups. It is thus a structural rather than an individual choice. Oppression is molded to take the form of social norms, traditions and systems of domination within the fabric of everyday life. It is manifested through exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness and violence (Adams et al 35-36).

Repression is the result of the continuous oppression of the privileged over the marginalized. It is a coping mechanism where individuals unconsciously repress their emotions, desires and thoughts to avoid being harmed. Repression is generated due to social constraints and limitations. The word itself refers to both the social shackles and the psychological imprisonment of the marginalized. Women, in Korea, endure these feelings of

repression which are the result of the patriarchal society, the Confucian teachings and the gendered social norms.

Accumulation intensifies pressure which turns liberation into both a desire and an inevitable path towards change. Korean women encountered successive events which date back to the adoption of Confucian teachings, the Japanese colonization and the division of Korea into northern and southern spheres. The decision to change is fueled by their anger as well as their desire to readjust the norms. As a result of this accumulation, the new women's identity appeared in 1898 with the creation of an organization that declared women's rights. However, the New Korean women faced many challenges dealing with the notion of the "wise mother and good wife". The modern, westernized ideologies of gender equality clashed with the traditional norms that perceive women as caring mothers and good wives (Ochiai and Aoyama 94-95).

### 1.5 Conclusion

Korean literature has served as both a reflection and an influencer for the nation's socio-cultural evolution. It particularly exposes the layered oppressions faced by women. Korean women's lives are long confined to rigid roles defined by obedience and self-sacrifice. The latter is rooted in Confucian principles that glorify male dominance within familial and social structures. However, Korean women writers reached freedom of expression after years of silence. In her novel *The Vegetarian*, the 2024 Nobel prize in Literature winner Han Kang introduces themes of body liberation, resistance against social constraints and the break of conformity rules all under the umbrella of freedom and change.

Han Kang, in *The Vegetarian*, portrays the realms of patriarchy, social norms and the protagonist's rebellion. It sheds light on the objectification of the female body and its descent to a mere canvas where male's art finds space. The book leads the readers to embrace different interpretations of the nature of this objectification. Whether it is a site of

control or is simply an individual's preference and choice. While the first chapter intends to pave the way for the readers to understand the social and cultural circumstances of the Korean society, the second chapter builds the theoretical playground to analytically understand Han kang's 2015 Man International Booker Prize winner *The Vegetarian*. The last chapter reads between the novel's lines to extract the objectification of the female body and its romanticization.

## *Chapter Two:*

# *The Semiotic of Vegetarianism and Its Impact on the Female Body*

## ***Chapter Two:***

### 2.1 Introduction

### 2.2 Vegetarianism as a Form of Rebellion and Resistance

#### 2.2.1 Feminism Reading of the Act

#### 2.2.2 Confronting the Limits of the Body

### 2.3 The Objectified Body as a Spectacle

#### 2.3.1 The Concept of Objectification

#### 2.3.2 Jacques Lacan's Concept of The Gaze

### 2.4 Conclusion

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the theoretical framework through which Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is examined in the following chapter. It brings together feminist and psychoanalytic concepts that illuminate the processes by which the female body is objectified, romanticized and positioned within systems of patriarchal control. This chapter constructs the foundation to understand the philosophical and ideological frameworks.

This chapter explores the concept of vegetarianism as a symbolic act of rebellion and resistance, particularly in relation to women's refusal of patriarchal consumption. It delves into Hélène Cixous' theory of *L'écriture féminine* from *The Laugh of the Medusa* to highlight the potential of the female body as a site of resistance through writing and self-expression. Julia Kristeva's theory of *Abjection*, as articulated in *Powers of Horror*, is introduced to highlight the destabilization of the self in relation to the other. Lastly, the chapter examines Lacan's theory of *The Gaze* to address the mechanisms of objectification and the fragmentation of female identity. The chapter seeks to equip the reader with the critical tools necessary to interrogate how the female body in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is rendered visible, consumed, and yet radically subversive. These concepts serve as the analytical lens through which the protagonist's transformation is read in the subsequent chapter.

## 2.2 Vegetarianism as a Form of Rebellion and Resistance

The term "Vegetarianism" refers to the act of shifting to eating vegetables instead of meat. It is perceived as an act of rebellion against violent norms. Vegetarians believe that the consumption of meat is considered a violation against non-human species (Adams 41). Their choice to stop eating meat stems from their desire to rebuild their identities. It is considered



a step towards freedom of choice. Women particularly tend to find ways to redefine themselves as separate from what is expected from the patriarch.

Vegetarianism helps individuals to shape their views of themselves and how others view them. The consumption of vegetables rather than meat is not solely linked to diet but it has a close connection to people's personal choices and philosophy (Nezlek and Forestell 46). The latter aids individuals to choose what shapes their personal identity. This lifestyle often reflects deeper values such as compassion, environmental concern, and a rejection of social norms. For many, abstaining from meat becomes a symbolic act of autonomy and self-definition. It challenges traditional expectations, especially in cultures where meat consumption is tied to strength and status. Vegetarianism has, thus, become both a personal and political statement about one's identity and place in the world.

Vegetarianism is seen as a way to resist the rules and expectations in Korean society. It goes against traditional roles related to family, gender, and social class. In Korea, eating meat is often linked to power, masculinity, and high social status, while avoiding meat is sometimes seen as weak or connected to lower-class people. These beliefs create unfair ideas about who should eat meat, especially giving men more value than women. By choosing to be vegetarian, a person challenges these old beliefs and shows their desire for independence. This choice creates a conflict between the person's wish to live freely and the pressure to follow what society expects (Devi and B 1573).

### **2.2.1 Feminist Reading of the Act**

Hélène Cixous shares with her intellectual partner, Jacques Derrida, similar experiences of exile and marginalization. The latter shapes their perspectives on language and subversion. Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism <sup>2</sup> parallels Cixous's critique of

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<sup>2</sup>The term comes from the Greek word *logos*, which means "word" and is often linked to divine or authoritative speech, like the word of God. Logocentrism is the idea that there must be some ultimate source or authority that gives language its meaning.

patriarchal thinking which undermines phallic authority through feminine expression. Their shared concern with challenging authority and domination is reflected in the term "phallogocentrism". They highlight the intersection of feminism and poststructuralism in their works. Cixous and Derrida's personal backgrounds as Jewish exiles from Algeria likely influenced their distinct yet complementary views on the power of language and the potential for marginalized elements to subvert dominant structures. Cixous' exploration of *écriture féminine* and Derrida's Deconstruction offered innovative approaches to understand cultural and sexual difference (Seller). Their intellectual exchange fostered a powerful critique of traditional power structures which resonates within both feminist and poststructuralist thought.

One of Helene Cixous' prominent works is *The Laugh of The Medusa*. The Medusa refers to a mythological character. The myth recounts the tale of a beautiful woman cursed to become a Gorgon, her hair transformed into poisonous snakes, and her gaze became capable of turning living beings into stones. Traditionally, Medusa has been allegorized to represent a range of concepts. They vary from ideal feminine beauty to rebellion, divine punishment, and the frightening aspects of female sexuality (Kaiser 149).

Hélène Cixous, in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, challenges this negative portrayal, particularly the Freudian idea of the Medusa that represents the frightening female sexuality. Cixous reimagines *Medusa* as a figure of female empowerment. It encourages women to embrace their bodies and voices through writing. Cixous overthrows patriarchal narratives through the depiction of Medusa as laughing. It restores the image of the myth as a symbol of female strength and resistance against male dominance. This reinterpretation encourages women to defy social constraints and express their true selves through the transformation of Medusa from a monster into a symbol of female liberation (Kaiser 149).

Hélène Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa* champions women's writing as a revolutionary act of self-reclamation and resistance against patriarchal oppression. She advocates for women to inscribe themselves into the text. Cixous's call to action recognizes the power of writing as a means for women to articulate their experiences, challenge dominant narratives, and construct their own identities. Cixous emphasizes the importance of a woman writing herself. She highlights the need for women to embrace their agency in a world that has historically denied them (Cixous et al. 875-876).

Cixous also acknowledges the complexities of female identity. She argues against the essentialization of women into a single monolithic category. While she speaks of a universal woman, she recognizes the diversity of female experiences and the importance to avoid generalizations. Cixous celebrates the boundless creativity and imagination of women and emphasizes the uniqueness of each individual's sexuality and unconsciousness. Through rejection of the notion of a uniform female sexuality, Cixous challenges the phallogentric structures that seek to define and control women's bodies and desires. She advocates for a more fluid and a wider understanding of female identity (Cixous et al. 875-876).

Women have a crucial role in sustaining life, juxtaposing this with their systematic deprivation in both life and language. Cixous's theorization of feminine writing is a means to liberate women from phallogentric language. Cixous's personal encounter with misogyny in Paris, coupled with her multicultural background, led her to recognize the need for an alternative way of thinking that challenges all forms of oppression, particularly the repression of women by the Phallogentric structures of western society. This experience fuels her exploration of the relationship between gender and writing. The latter led to the development of *écriture féminine* as a means to subvert patriarchal language and empower women (Chakraborty 2896).

Hélène Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa* gained international recognition with its English translation. It becomes a central text to establish French feminism in the United States. Unlike American feminism, which focused on civil rights, social inequality, and issues like education and reproductive rights, French feminism delves into the linguistic and psychosexual aspects that uphold the patriarchal social order. More theoretical and philosophical than its American counterpart, French feminism explores how patriarchal conventions deeply influence the production of meaning, desire, and subjectivity. It seeks to envision a feminine identity defined outside of patriarchal norms. It challenges the symbolic structures that perpetuate gender inequality (Kaiser 153).

Hélène Cixous' *Écriture féminine* (women writing) represents the feminine body as a means that challenges the male-centric discourse. It reclaims the female voice within male-centric language. In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous interprets Medusa's decapitation as a metaphor for patriarchal silencing which marginalizes feminine expression. Cixous advocates for a fluid, embodied writing style that resists patriarchal constraints and restores agency to the female subject by reclaiming Medusa's laughter (Chakraborty 2897- 2898).

Freud, in *Medusa's Head*, sees Medusa's decapitation as a symbol of the castration complex, where a boy who fears castration identifies with his father and distances himself from his mother. Lacan argues that to enter the "Symbolic Order" which is a structured male-dominated system, a child must reject the mother's world. Boys fully adopt this order, while girls remain connected to the mother retain an intuitive pre-linguistic expression that is dismissed in male discourse. Medusa's beheading, then, represents the silencing of women's voices, highlighting the broader suppression of female expression in a patriarchal society (Chakraborty 2898).

### 2.2.2 Confronting the Limits of the Body

Influenced by Bakhtin and psychoanalysis, she explored themes of abjection, alienation, and femininity. She continues to publish on gender, nationalism, and emotional states; she integrates psychoanalysis with cultural critique. Her critique of motherhood and feminist politics remains controversial, yet her work influences feminist theory, film studies, and critical social analysis.

“It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” ( Rudge 506)

Rudge interprets this quote saying that Kristeva’s theory of Abjection explores the emotional defense mechanisms triggered by feelings of horror and repulsion. Its illustration stems from a personal reaction to the film that forms on milk coffee, which evokes a deep sense of disgust. This response highlights the significance of boundaries between inside and outside, self and other in shaping human emotions. Abjection serves as both a reaction to and a defense against such unsettling experiences (507-506). The abject is not merely repulsive; it also carries a disruptive potential and challenges social norms and sacred values by exposing what must be repressed in order to be maintained.

Kristeva’s discussion of abjection in relation to the film on milk coffee highlights how disgust is not merely a physical reaction but a deeper psychological and social response to boundary violations. The abject is disturbing precisely because it exposes the instability of the categories individuals rely on to define ourselves and the world around them. The thin layer of film on the coffee is neither solid nor liquid, neither part of the drink nor entirely separate from it. It exists in an unsettling in-between state. This ambiguity triggers a rejection and mirrors the ways society reacts to behaviours that blur conventional boundaries.

Kristeva builds on Freud's and Lacan's theories of child development regarding psychosexual stages and language acquisition. However, she departs from them by emphasizing the rejection of the mother as a key factor in identity formation. While Freud and Lacan focus on the paternal law as the structuring force of subjectivity, Kristeva argues that a child's separation from the mother is both a necessary and ambivalent process occurred at the limits of language and identity. This separation, driven by emotional and unconscious forces, leads the child to seek identification with the paternal ideal rather than merely submitting to paternal authority. (Rudge 507) Kristeva's concept of "Abjection" arises in this space of transition. It exists outside established structures like the ego and superego. The maternal body becomes abject; something the child must reject to establish a distinct self. However, this rejection does not entirely erase the influence of the maternal; it lingers as an unsettling presence that challenges stable identity.

She also draws on Mary Douglas's work on pollution, distinguishing between external substances that threaten social order and internal bodily processes that disrupt personal identity. While Douglas sees all bodily matter as potentially polluting, Kristeva categorizes these defiling substances based on whether they endanger the social system or the self's integrity. Through this lens, abjection reflects both an individual and collective struggle to maintain boundaries and order (Rudge 508).

### **2.3 The Objectified Body as a Spectacle**

The objectified body, particularly the female body, has long been positioned merely as passive and also as an active site of spectacle. Through this visual representation the body is framed, consumed and evaluated. This spectacle is exposed to visual representation and encompasses the cultural processes through which bodies are rendered mere objects. These dynamics transform the body into a surface upon which social expectations are projected.

### 2.3.1 The Concept of Objectification

Objectification, a central concept in feminist thought, involves the reduction of a person, typically a woman, to a mere object or instrument for the gratification of others. This process often occurs within power dynamics where the dominant group, historically men, views the subordinate group as lacking autonomy and intrinsic value. As Sandra Bartky explains, objectification denies individuals their subjectivity and full humanity, relegating them to the status of bodies to be used or consumed. Such objectification perpetuates inequality by reinforcing male dominance and limiting women's agency (Bartky 129).

Feminist scholars have developed and expanded the concept of sexual objectification, offering a perspective distinct from Kant's view that objectification is an inherent aspect of sexual desire. Instead, they argue that the issue arises from the way societies shape and reinforce gendered norms. Across cultures, socialization processes establish hierarchical gender roles characterized by dominance and submission. As a result, some men are conditioned to associate sexual desire with power and control that lead them to perceive women as objects for consumption. Women, exposed to the same social influences, internalize these dynamics and may come to eroticize subjugation and external judgment. Feminist theory emphasizes that sexual objectification is not a neutral process but one deeply rooted in power imbalances, wherein women are disproportionately reduced to objects rather than recognized as autonomous individuals (Vaes 189-190)

Sexual objectification was introduced to social psychology by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), who grounded their analysis in the work of feminist scholars. They defined sexual objectification as a phenomenon that primarily affects women with an emphasis on how social structures and gendered socialization contribute to this process. Drawing on feminist theory, they argue that women, in particular, are subjected to sexual objectification due to the prevailing power imbalances and hierarchical gender roles, which reduce them to objects

of desire rather than recognizing their full humanity. Fredrickson and Roberts primarily provide descriptive evidence when discussing sexual objectification. They begin by focusing on the sexualized gaze which often fixates on specific body parts and carries a significant potential for objectification. This objectifying gaze tends to be directed at women more frequently than at men (Vaes 189-190)

The distinction between sexes is traditionally based on the body; however, discussions on psychological gender differences have often emphasized biological determinants such as anatomy, genetics, and hormonal influences. Feminist scholars and other critics have challenged these deterministic perspectives that lead to a greater focus on sociocultural explanations. These approaches argue that gender differences are largely shaped by socialization processes, as well as the unequal distribution of power and status between men and women, rather than being solely dictated by biological factors.

Nevertheless, through the prioritization of sociocultural influences, some theoretical frameworks have overlooked the body's significance beyond its biological functions. The body is not merely a biological entity but is also constructed and given meaning through cultural practices and discourses. Scholars across various disciplines have begun to explore the ways in which bodies convey social meanings, shaping gendered identities and experiences within specific historical and cultural contexts.

Heterosexuality is deeply embedded in cultural norms, as reflected in the longstanding social expectation that men have the implicit right to sexualize women, regardless of age or status. This sexualization manifests in various forms from overt acts of sexual violence to more subtle yet pervasive practices such as sexualized evaluation. One of the most insidious and widespread forms of this evaluation is the act of gazing (visually inspecting women's bodies) often in a way that objectifies and reinforces gendered power dynamics. (Fredrickson and Roberts 175).



Sexual objectification occurs when a woman's body, specific body parts, or sexual attributes are isolated from her identity and reduced to instruments for external use or interpretation. In this process, women are perceived primarily through their physicality, often disregarding their agency, intellect, and individuality. This reductionist view reinforces the notion that women's bodies exist primarily for the pleasure or consumption of others rather than as integral aspects of their personhood (Fredrickson and Roberts 175).

In Western society, women are frequently preoccupied not with enhancing their physical capabilities or responding to their own bodily needs, but rather with shaping their bodies as objects of observation and social interpretation. Instead of embracing their bodies as sources of personal strength and expression, they often engage in a continuous struggle to conform to social ideals. This tension positions women in opposition to their own bodies, as they attempt to reconcile personal physical realities with externally imposed expectations. Eventually, their bodies become sites of negotiation, where cultural pressures dictate appearance and self-worth, rather than spaces of autonomy and self-expression (Kaschak).

Scholars have proposed various interpretations regarding the symbolic significance of eating disorders within cultural contexts. They offer insightful analyses of women's experiences. These disorders have been understood as manifestations of deeply internalized negative perceptions of women and their bodies, as well as fears related to sexuality and the transition into womanhood. Additionally, some perspectives link eating disorders to the complexities of mother-daughter relationships. Ultimately, these struggles reflect broader conflicts surrounding women's desires, bodily autonomy, and social expectations, with eating disorders serving as both a poignant and distressing expression of these tensions (Kaschak).

### 2.3.2 Jacques Lacan's Concept of The Gaze

In Lacan's theory, vision and perception are crucial elements in understanding human subjectivity. Lacan builds on this idea by introducing the concept of the gaze. In contrast to Maurice Merleau-Ponty who emphasizes that seeing involves being seen. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception is not just about passively watching the world. Instead people are influenced by the world and how others see them. Lacan's theory also emphasizes the idea of being "seen". He suggests that external forces shape how people are seen even before they are aware of their perceptions. In other words, people are looked at before they even start looking at the world themselves (75).

Lacan builds on the idea of being seen by introducing the concept of the "pre-existence of the gaze" (72). He argues that when people perceive the world, it is not just based on their own observations. Instead, their perception is shaped by outside forces like society, language and what others expect of them. For example, a child is born into a world where others have already labeled and categorized them even before the child can understand the world on their own. This is not just about being seen by others in the moment. It is about the underlying conditions that have shaped how people experience the world. Lacan's idea of the gaze is not just about seeing or being seen. It is a strong force that shows how society and unconscious desires constantly watch, judge, and influence people. People do not control the gaze; it exists before they are even aware of it and shapes who they are. The gaze, as a symbolic force, relates to "castration anxiety." According to Lacan, this anxiety comes from realizing that people are always influenced by forces stronger than themselves. Knowing that people are being watched and cannot fully control this observation leads to feelings of vulnerability. These feelings are important in Lacan's theory of the subject (73).

Lacan distinguishes between the "eye" and the "gaze." The eye is the physical organ used to see the world. The gaze refers to the ways people are seen and being seen shape their experience. Lacan argues that vision is not neutral or simply about observing the world objectively. Instead, vision is shaped by the gaze, which exists before people actively see and defines the way they perceive the world (73). The gaze, in Lacanian terms, represents an external, often symbolic, perspective through which individuals are observed and judged by society. This external viewpoint pre-exists and influences individuals perceive themselves and their place within the social order. Therefore, the gaze is not merely a passive observation but an active force that shapes identity and experience.

Lacan's analysis of mimicry in nature, especially through Roger Caillois' work, clarifies this point. In nature, animals might develop eye-like patterns to avoid predators. Lacan argues that mimicry is more than just a survival tactic. He believes it reveals a deeper truth about vision: the power of the gaze lies in how certain visual cues, like eye-like patterns, affect people's perception. The "stain," (a visual mark that attracts attention but lacks clear meaning) shows how the gaze works before people fully understand it (Lacan 73). Lacan also argues that when people think they are "seeing themselves seeing," they are mistaken. They believe they control their own vision, but the gaze is always beyond their complete understanding. There is always a gap in self-awareness. This illusion of control over perception is central to Lacan's argument that the gaze can never be fully controlled.

Lacan connects the gaze to the psychoanalytic idea of desire, specifically through his theory of the "objet petit a," or the unattainable object of desire. In this sense, the gaze reflects a basic lack within a person. According to Lacan, this lack relates to castration anxiety and is fundamental to the structure of desire. People's perception of the world is always incomplete because it is shaped by the gaze, which they can never fully possess or understand. Lacan's theory of the scopic drive (the drive to see and be seen) supports this

idea. It suggests that vision is not just a passive act but is deeply connected to unconscious forces and people's desires (Lacan 74).

## 2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has established the theoretical groundwork for a critical reading of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. It focuses on three intersecting domains: bodily autonomy, feminist expression, and visual Objectification. Cixous' *écriture féminine*, Kristeva's abjection, and Lacan's Gaze outline the key conceptual tools necessary to understand the novel's engagement with the romanticization of the objectification of the female body. Each theoretical framework contributes to a deeper understanding of the tensions between patriarchy and women. Together, they form a multidimensional lens through which the protagonist's bodily choices, her detachment from social norms, and her transformation into a symbolic figure can later be interpreted.

The next chapter built on the theoretical part will lead to a close analysis of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. It demonstrates how these concepts manifest within the narrative. The next stage of this dissertation aims to uncover how the novel romanticizes the objectification of the female body while it simultaneously reveals its potential as a site of resistance and redefinition within patriarchal structures.

## *Chapter Three:*

### *The Intersection of Desire, Power, and Objectification*

### *Chapter Three:*

3.1 Introduction

3.2 The Depiction of the Female Body

3.3 The Consumption of the Female Body

3.4 Desire and its Role in the Objectification

3.5 The Romanticization of Female Body Objectification

3.6 Conclusion

### 3.1 Introduction

The last chapter is dedicated to the analytical part of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. It aims at applying the social context of Korea all along with the theories chosen by the researcher to critically analyze its manifestations. Hélène Cixous' *L'écriture Féminine* which is introduced in her influential essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* invites women to use their own bodies and unique female experiences to talk about what has long been buried by the patriarchal language. The theory is used to analyze parts of the novel and to highlight the author's discussion of certain social taboos to break the conventional constraints of the Korean patriarchal society. Later in this chapter, Julia Kristeva's theory of *Abjection* that is introduced in her essay *Powers of Horror* is employed to critically interpret the reactions of the novel's characters to the protagonist's, Yeong-Hye, shift to vegetarianism. The transformation her body goes through is perceived as abject and unpleasant to the human eye. Jacques Lacan and his concept of *The Gaze* is also used to analytically intercept the turning of the female protagonist's body to a mere object of desire through the gaze. When some of the characters perceive Yeong-Hye's transformation as something unpleasant, other characters get attracted to it. Lacan's concept of the Gaze concept digs deeper into the psychological aspects of the characters to uncover the objectification of women's bodies.

### 3.2 The Depiction of the Female Body

Korean women have long been expected to meet social beauty standards which are made by the patriarch. Their bodies have to look in a certain way to please the male's gaze. Talking about women's experiences and bodies is considered taboo in conservative societies like Korea. However, contemporary movements emerged to call for women to use their voices and to speak loudly about women's experiences. Feminist theorists appeared to invite women to write about the different hidden realities women encounter since early times.

In her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Hélène discusses how the westernized stereotypical representation of women affects their identities. She urges women to write about their bodies and women's unique experiences and to reject the phallogocentric language. Han Kang is a Korean female writer who opts to use women's unique bodies to reveal the unseen experiences.

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is a short novel which recounts its events in three alternating chapters; *The Vegetarian*, *Mongolian Mark* and *Flaming Trees*. Each chapter is told from a different perspective, all revolving around the protagonist, Yeong-Hye, who is a woman living in Seoul, South Korea. The first chapter is told from the husband, Mr. Cheong, perspective. In the very first pages of the book, he describes his wife and her unpleasant looks that do not meet with the social beauty standards. He notes her passivity and quietness as unattractive. Later in the chapter, the husband reveals his embarrassment at being seen with her in the presence of important people. In the first chapter, Yeong-Hye makes a decision on own her to become vegetarian.

The second chapter entitled *Mongolian Mark* is recounted in the third person from the brother in laws' (her sister's husband) perspective. He is an unnamed character referred to as In-Hye's husband. He is an artist and filmmaker who start fantasizing about the protagonist's body. The brother in law was attracted by the Mongolian mark on the back of the protagonist which generated ideas for his next art project. In this part of the novel, he invites her to paint on her body while recording the whole process. He even fantasizes having intercourse with her with their bodies painted with flowers.

The third chapter of the novel is also told in the third person from the sister, In-Hye's perspective. In this last part of the novel, the author recounts the journey of Yeong-Hye and her sister after being taken to an asylum. The events shift from chaos to peaceful



and helplessly end when the protagonist's body loses hope to survive and becomes decayed. This is a result of her strict decision to not eat anything anymore.

As discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, Korean women have historically been subjected to rigid social expectations that have significantly constrained their autonomy. Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* offers an illustration of these patriarchal constraints through the protagonist's decision to stop consuming meat and its eventual consequences. While such a choice might be interpreted as a personal act, within Korean society, particularly for a woman, it becomes a form of rebellion. The act challenges deeply rooted norms and disrupts generational expectations imposed upon women. In this context, the female body is no longer perceived as belonging to the individual but is instead regulated by the desires, expectations, and judgments.

Cixous believes that language has long been controlled by male-centered thinking (known as phallogocentrism) and sees writing as a powerful way to challenge this dominance. She introduces *écriture féminine*, a form of writing that breaks traditional rules and embraces emotion, the body and imagination. This type of writing resists the male-dominated symbolic order and gives voice to what has been silenced. Cixous describes it using powerful metaphors such as "explosive," "revolutionary," and "shattering," emphasizing that it is not just creative expression but an act of resistance against a system that has historically excluded women's voices (Cline 55).

In *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang's decision to limit the voice of the protagonist Yeong-hye is a powerful narrative strategy that functions as a form of resistance against patriarchal structures and the language. Yeong-hye's silence becomes a potent tool of subversion in a society that seeks to define and control her. Kang challenges the phallogocentric nature of language, where Yeong-hye's silence becomes a refusal to participate in a linguistic system that oppresses her. This silence also acts as a form of rebellion against social constraints

placed on women. In a patriarchal society, women are often expected to be docile and communicative. Yeong-hye defies these expectations to assert her autonomy. As the narrator notes, "...I was surprised by her complete lack of reaction" (Kang 7), she highlights how her silence surprises those around her, disrupts their expectations and challenges conventional norms.

Kang's narrative choices impact how readers perceive Yeong-hye's psychological being. The quote "She was a woman of few words" (Kang 4) emphasizes the external perception of her silence rather than her internal motivations. This narrative structure serves as a critique of how society misunderstands female resistance. When Yeong-hye speaks, it is often to express feeling misunderstood and eventually labeled mentally ill. In a scene where the protagonist tries to explain to her husband a frightening dream she has, which is one of the reasons for her refusal to consume meat again she says: "... I had a dream" (Kang 8). Her husband responds with: "A dream ?What the hell are you talking about? Do you know what time it is ?" (Kang 8). This response shows how society tends to invalidate female experiences that deviate from the norm. Also, it reflects the devaluation of women's emotions. In a dismissive tone, her husband disregards Yeong-hye's rare and vulnerable attempt to express her feelings.

Helene Cixous rejects the male dominated symbolic order and advocates for an innovative way of writing that does not follow traditional conventions. She critiques the traditional male dominated structures of writing. She advocates for unconventional techniques like the use of dreams, humour, puns, metaphors, repetition and autobiographies. These methods challenge the rigid structure of traditional language and bring forward the repressed femininity. The latter gives voice to what has been silenced in patriarchal discourse (Cline 56).

The nature of Han Kang's novel is ambiguous and is recounted in an intense and surreal spiral. In an interview with Kim Chang-wan, Han kang states that the novel is a question

instead of an answer. She invites readers to look at the novel as a questioning tool rather than a piece of literature that ends with a moral (Kim Chang-wan). This aligns with the unconventional structures of narrative championed by Helene Cixous in her concept of *écriture féminine* as they both challenge traditional forms of storytelling and moralistic structures. Instead, Han Kang's work is a thought provoking fragmented narrative that invites readers to engage actively with the text.

Another form of unconventionality is the portrayal of the protagonist's dreams. Part of the novel contains descriptions of Young-Hye's dreams which pushed her to neglect the consumption of meat. These dreams create a sense of deviations from the central plot to dive into the depth of the protagonist's psyche. These dreams are used as a technique to break free from the traditional phallogocentric narrative methods and to switch to what is uniquely experienced by other individuals. By doing so, Han Kang subverts the traditional phallogocentric narrative structures, using instead the fluid, nonlinear logic often associated with *écriture féminine*.

Dark woods. No people. The sharp-pointed leaves on the trees, my torn feet. This place, almost remembered, but I'm lost now. Frightened. Cold. Across the frozen ravine, a red barn-like building. Straw matting flapping limp across the door. Roll it up and I'm inside, it's inside. A long bamboo stick strung with great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down. Try to push past but the meat, there's no end to the meat, and no exit. Blood in my mouth, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin. Somehow a way out. Running, running through the valley, then suddenly the woods open out. Trees thick with leaves, springtime's green light. Families picnicking, little children running about, and that smell, that delicious smell. Almost painfully vivid. The babbling stream, people spreading out rush mats to sit on, snacking on kimbab. Barbecuing meat, the sounds of singing and happy laughter. But the fear. My clothes still wet with blood. Hide, hide behind the trees. Crouch down, don't let anybody see. My bloody hands. My bloody mouth. In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of

my mouth, slick with crimson blood. Chewing on something that felt so real, but couldn't have been, it couldn't. My face, the look in my eyes...my face, undoubtedly, but never seen before. Or no, not mine, but so familiar...nothing makes sense. Familiar and yet not...that vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling. (Kang 12)

This quote is taken from the novel and it refers to a dream sequence which reveals Yeong-Hye intense disturbance and repulsion towards violence and meat consumption. It also alludes to her repulsion and rebellion against social norms that subject the powerless, in this case women and animals, to violence under patriarchal dominance. The imagery of blood, raw flesh, and confusion reflects deep seated guilt. The protagonist's transformation is fueled by fear, shame, and alienation from both her and the society. It symbolizes her struggle to reject violence and reclaim bodily autonomy in a world that constantly violates it.

In the opening lines of this quote "Dark woods. No people. The sharp-pointed leaves on the trees. My torn feet. This place, almost remembered, but I'm lost now. Frightened. Cold." (Kang 12) Han Kang uses a fragmented style and a heavy amount of punctuation to disrupt the traditional narrative flow. This mirrors what Cixous describes as "Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide. Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contour" (Cixous 889), each sentence functions like a wave, isolated yet flowing into the next. The latter explains the sea-like nature of women's writing; unbounded and non-linear which is connected to their feminine sexuality (Notenboom 16).

Helene Cixous argues that for women to develop a truly authentic and liberated form of writing. Women must establish a deeper awareness of their bodies. This body consciousness would naturally lead to a writing style marked by openness, fragmentation and nonlinearity. The latter disrupts the structures of rational patterns of discourse. For her, reclaiming the body from its historical misuse under male rhetoric is essential, as only through embodied experience can women produce a form of writing that challenges and ultimately subverts phallogocentric traditions (Nath 139).

In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-Hye does not speak much, her voice is limited, but her body becomes her primary form of communication. Her refusal to eat meat, to engage sexually, and to conform, becomes a radical assertion of agency, a bodily text that speaks beyond words. Yeong-Hye's body becomes the canvas onto which others project their fantasies and desires, particularly her husband and brother-in-law. Yeong-Hye exercises autonomy over her body and makes choices independent of social expectations. Her decision to allow a man to use her body as a canvas reflects not submission, but a personal desire to detach from human violent qualities and move closer to nature. This idea is illustrated when Yeong-Hye refuses to engage in sexual activity with her brother in law, yet consents to an encounter with his friend whose body, like hers, is painted with flowers and petals. Her willingness to engage in this act appears to stem not from the desire for the individual, but from a deeper response to the interest in the flowers. It shows that she is guided by the desires of her own body rather than by conventional human attraction.

“Why shouldn't we? Because I'm your brother-in-law?”

“No, it's nothing to do with that.”

“... Did you fancy that kid?”

“It wasn't him, it was the flowers...” (Kang 106)

Yeong-Hye refusal to even have any sexual intercourse with her husband is interpreted as an autonomous decision to reclaim ownership over her body and to act in accordance with her inner impulses rather social expectations. This behaviour signifies a rupture from the phallogocentric structure of marriage. The latter reduces the female body to an object of male desire. This shift in her behavior is narrated by her husband, who reveals his growing discomfort with her refusal to perform the expected role of an obedient wife in the following quote:

But what troubled me more was that she now seemed to be actively avoiding sex. In the past, she'd generally been willing to comply with my physical demands, and there'd even been the occasional time when she'd been the one to make the first move. But now, although she didn't make a fuss about it, if my hand so much as brushed her shoulder she would calmly move away. One day I chose to confront her about it. (Kang 16)

Han Kang in this scene uses Yeong-Hye's husband to narrate his wife's refusal to reveal how she begins to reclaim control over her body not through speech but through embodied rejection. Cixous argues that women's writing and expression must emerge from the body rather than from the restrictive, linear and rational language of the patriarch. Through this resistance, Han Kang's character embodies what Hélène Cixous terms *l'écriture féminine* which is a bodily form of expression that resists domination and articulates a new language of female subjectivity through silence, distance, and disobedience.

Hélène Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa* challenges the western stereotypical image of the mythical female character Medusa as a terrifying, monstrous female. Instead, she claims "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing." (Cixous 885) This reclaims the Medusa as a symbol of female power and sexuality not something to fear, but something to embrace. Cixous uses this as a metaphor for the way women's bodies and voices have been historically silenced.

In Han Kang's novel, Yeong-Hye's transformation aligns with Cixous's reimagining of the Medusa. When she refuses food, speech and sex, Yeong-Hye reclaims her body from patriarchal control. Her physical transformation is perceived as grotesque by some and sublime by others. The latter emphasizes the double bind of female embodiment under the male gaze. Like the laughing Medusa, Han Kang highlights the binary logic of beauty/monstrosity and submission/rebellion.

The demonstration of how the protagonist's body is initially framed through a lens of disinterest and objectification, her husband's first impression reveals a stereotypical and superficial evaluation of her appearance;

Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way. To be frank, the first time I met her I wasn't even attracted to her. Middling height; bobbed hair neither long nor short; jaundiced, sickly-looking skin; somewhat prominent cheekbones; her timid, sallow aspect told me all I needed to know (Kang 3).

Later in the novel, however, the portrayal of her body takes on a very different tone. While still observed through an external gaze, it is no longer eroticized but becomes almost ethereal, beautiful yet detached from conventional desire;

This was the body of a beautiful young woman, conventionally an object of desire, and yet it was a body from which all desire had been eliminated. But this was nothing so crass as carnal desire, not for her—rather, or so it seemed, what she had renounced was the very life that her body represented (Kang 85).

This shift marks a radical transformation in how the female body is viewed; from a passive object to a site of resistance stripping itself of imposed meaning and reclaiming agency through refusal and quiet rebellion.

### **3.3 The Consumption of the Female Body**

In *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang explores the disintegration of the female body as a site of control, conformity, and desire. As Yeong-Hye withdraws from social norms, through her withdrawal from speech, sexuality and refusal to eat meat, her body becomes unreadable and disturbing to those around her. This shift is read through Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, which addresses how societies reject what threatens their sense of order and purity. Kristeva's notion of the abject is useful for understanding how Han Kang's character Yeong-

Hye and her transformation are perceived not only as loss of humanity, but also as a threat to patriarchal norms.

Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject is defined as "the violence of mourning for an "object" that has always already been lost. The abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments." (Kristeva 15). It highlights how the abject represents something both familiar and estranged that once was part of us and now is rejected. This process of rejection is never complete. However, the abject continues to haunt the subject. It disrupts boundaries that separate the clean from the unclean and the self from the other. In this way, the abject forces a confrontation with what society seeks to repress.

In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-Hye's bodily transformation after rejecting meat mirrors her body as unnatural, disturbing, and challenges the norms imposed upon women's physicality and behaviour. As such she becomes abject in the eyes of those around her, neither fully human nor fully object; "Her calm acceptance of all these things made her seem to him something sacred. Whether human, animal or plant, she could not be called a "person" but then she wasn't exactly some feral creature either—more like a mysterious being with qualities of both." (Kang 88). Yeong-Hye no longer fits into normal ideas of being human. She becomes something in between, which makes others uncomfortable. Yeong-Hye's body and behaviour make her hard to understand, and this is the reason why people around her begin to reject her transformation.

The narrator, her husband, observes "She grew thinner by the day, so much so that her cheekbones had really become indecently prominent. Without makeup, her complexion resembled that of a hospital patient." (Kang 15). This description portrays her as fragile and sickly. It shows that her body no longer aligns with accepted ideas of female beauty. In another quote "At first she'd slimmed down to the clean, sharp lines of a dancer's physique, and I'd hoped things might stop there, but by now her body resembled nothing so much as



the skeletal frame of an invalid” (Kang 18). Yeong-Hye’s body shifts from a normal acceptable object of observation to become an “abject” that places her in a space between life and death. The latter makes her body difficult for others to accept or understand. This discomfort reflects society’s fear of what does not conform the norms.

The depiction of Yeong-Hye as “standing there so unnaturally still it was almost as if she were some kind of ghost, silently standing its ground.” (Kang 7) evokes a sense of otherness that aligns with Kristeva’s concept of the abject. Her ghost-like appearance disturbs those around her as she no longer conforms to expected human behaviour. Yeong-Hye’s stillness makes her presence uncanny and difficult to understand and categorize. She becomes a haunting reminder of death and decay of the human body, which is something humans reject yet know its ever-present.

Han Kang’s characters develop confusion around the nature of Yeong-Hye “Whether human, animal or plant, she could not be called a “person” but then she wasn’t exactly some feral creature either—more like a mysterious being with qualities of both.” (Kang 88). They describe her as existing beyond conventional standards of identity. They find it hard to define her and understand her person. The ambiguity she creates reflects Kristeva’s notion of the abject as that which resists clear categorization, and the protagonist’s lack of definable identity disturbs the established order.

In an excerpt from the novel, Mr, Cheong (Yeong-Hye’s husband) reflects on her presence as follows: “I would once again have to live with this strange, frightening woman, the two of us in the same house. It was a prospect I found difficult to contemplate.” (Kang 44) The latter reveals how she is no longer recognized as the familiar wife, but she has become a source of fear and discomfort. The abject, which is her body, provokes horror because it is foreign and close. What was once close and part of the self (his wife) becomes disturbing and unfamiliar.

The quote “Just look at your face!” (Kang 36) is told by Yeong-Hye’s father. It portrays the family’s horror and rejection of their daughter’s new body which looks closer to a corpse. The image of the corpse generates feelings of fear and rejection as it resembles the unwanted death humans run from. Yeong-Hye’s unrecognizable appearance contradicts with her father’s expectations of femininity and obedience. His reaction stems from his patriarchal nature and the disturbance his daughter’s transformation causes in the system of social conformity.

Despite all this negative reaction to the abject body of Yeong-Hye, Han Kang uses third person to talk about the perspective of the protagonist’s brother in law. It uses a tone that shows that this abjection is captivating; it is described as “Her skin was a pale green. 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 writer here likens her to a “delicate, withering leaf” which is a metaphor that emphasizes her fragility while romanticizing her transformation. It describes her decayed body in an image that shows it as strangely beautiful. Her brother in law perceives this abject body as something artistic.

### **3.4 Desire and its Role in the Objectification**

Jacques Lacan’s concept of the Gaze that is introduced in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* revolves around the idea of identity formation of individuals. According to him; “What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside.” (Lacan 106) which alludes to the idea that a person’s identity is constructed by the look of other people. It is the gaze of other external perspectives; society, other people, the symbolic order which shapes one’s identity. Once a person is aware of being looked at, he or she is no longer a subject but becomes an object to be observed.

In Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-Hye's body becomes a spectacle for others to project on. Her body transformation attracts the attention to it and it eventually becomes an object rather than one's personal belonging. Han Kang does not give voice to the protagonist to define herself, however, she is defined and described by external perspectives. This description of her body turns it to a mere object of desire.

The scene in which Yeong-Hye's brother-in-law films her body "He took the camera off the tripod and began to film her close up...Once he'd finally captured her whole body on the tape, he switched off the camcorder." (Kang 84) is a good embodiment of Lacan's concept of the Gaze; which is not merely about looking, but it focuses more on how the subject becomes objectified and fragmented. It is fragmented in the sense that the camera zooms in on parts rather than the whole body. In this scene the camera becomes an extension of the gaze through its use to capture the body of Yeong-Hye and turns it into a collage.

In another quote from the novel, the protagonist's identity shifts from being personal to become defined by external forces through the eyes of the others; "In order to judge whether she might possibly have been trying to tell me something, I spent a minute or two looking at her through new eyes, studying her attitude." (Kang 5) In the previously mentioned quote, Yeong-Hye's husband, instead of asking her about her intentions from choosing not to wear a bra in public places (as it is the norm), he tries to analyze her actions through his own perspective and observations.

Han Kang proceeds to say: "When he eventually set the brush down, he looked down at her body, at the flowers blooming on it, with all thoughts of filming gone out of his head" (Kang 88) to further show how the protagonist's body becomes a spectacle of the other field of observation. This is an excerpt from the second chapter of the novel where the brother-in-law starts to fantasize about Yeong-Hye's body and later uses it as a canvas for his art project.

### 3.5 The Romanticization of Female Body Objectification

Objectification or sexual objectification is the use of the female body as an object of sexual desire. Sexual objectification occurs through the male gaze where the female body becomes an object of men's drives (Sanchez 4). It has a negative connotation as it suppresses female agency. The concept of romanticization on the other hand refers to the process of rendering what has been proven wrong something aesthetized. In *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang proceeds to romanticize the objectification of Yeong-Hye's body.

In the second chapter of the novel entitled *The Mongolian Mark*, the author uses third person narration to recount the description of Yeong-Hye's naked body through the eyes of her brother-in-law. She writes:

She was coming out of the bathroom. The real shock, though, was that she was naked. She stood there blankly for a moment, as though she, too, were somewhat startled, and without the slightest trace of moisture visible on her naked body. But then she began to pick up the scattered clothes one by one and slip them on. She did this quite calmly, not in the least flustered or embarrassed, as though getting dressed were merely something demanded by the situation, rather than something she herself felt to be necessary. (Kang 73)

The calmness of Yeong-Hye, despite the intensity of the scene where she stands naked in front of her brother-in-law, draws the readers into a deeper reflection. Her reaction as noted in the previous quote demonstrates the casualness of the moment as though being naked and gazed at by a man is entirely acceptable. Yet, her calm response reveals that the author's portrayal carries a sense of romanticization and simplification of a situation that would be perceived as intense and objectifying. Yeong-Hye carries on saying "It's okay." Now, too, she spoke as though answering like this was the expected, necessary thing. "It's just that I enjoy being like this when I'm on my own." (Kang 74). This response further illustrates the idea that her nudity is not meant to provoke or attract attention. It, however, represents her

personal sense of freedom that is detached from social norms. The objectifying gaze of the brother-in-law is not challenged but instead embedded within a scene that is marked by tranquility. The narrative has, thus, framed this objectification as beautiful and calm.

Throughout the pages in which Yeong-Hye's body is used as a canvas for her brother-in-law to paint his art, her body is beautifully described delving deep into the observation of the body through the male gaze. Han Kang writes

Only then did he realize what it was that had shocked him when he'd first seen her lying prone on the sheet. This was the body of a beautiful young woman, conventionally an object of desire, and yet it was a body from which all desire had been eliminated. (Kang 85)

In these lines, the brother-in-law detaches all conventional desires from the female body and transforms Yeong-Hye's body into a site of beauty rather than sexual drive. The body is no longer perceived as a sexual object; rather it is "a body from which all desire had been eliminated". This notion is echoed earlier in the novel "Rather than provoking lust, it was a body that made one want to rest one's gaze quietly upon it." (Kang 74). The stillness and serenity of Yeong-Hye's body softens the violence of the gaze and turns it into an artistic admiration.

Han Kang highlights the tension between objectification and romanticization through the male gaze in the observation of Yeong-Hye's body:

"Her skinny collarbones; her breasts that, because she was lying on her back, were slender and elongated like those of a young girl; her visible ribcage; her parted thighs, their position incongruously unsexual; her face, still and swept clean, open eyes which could well have been asleep. It was a body from which all superfluity had gradually been whittled away. Never before had he set eyes on such a body, a body that said so much and yet was no more than itself." (Kang 87)

This passage offers a description of Yeong-Hye's body from the brother-in-law's perspective. Despite the transformation of her body that is marked by "skinny collarbones", "visible ribcage" and "parted thighs" which aligns with what Julia Kristeva defines as the abject, her physical fragility does not evoke horror or rejection. The abject confronts the viewer with the boundaries of life and death. Rather than being cast out, the abject is turned into an object of the male gaze and this objectification is rendered romanticized and viewed as something uniquely captivating.

Delving again in the first chapter of the novel, the perception of the protagonist's body is still a focal point. The unnamed brother-in-law's depiction of Yeong-Hye vegetarian body extends to explore deeper emotions;

"Now, the fact that she didn't eat meat, only vegetables and cereal grains, seemed to fit with the image of that blue petal-like mark, so much so that the one could not be disentangled from the other, and the fact that the blood that had gushed out of her artery had soaked his white shirt, drying into the dark, matte burgundy of red bean soup, felt like a shocking, indecipherable premonition of his own eventual fate." (Kang 71-72)

This excerpt embodies Julia Kristeva's idea of the abject as Yeong-Hye's bleeding body is something that disturbs the human eye. But instead of being rejected, it is incorporated into beauty and meaning. Han Kang elevates her suffering into something lyrical. The blood that "had soaked his white shirt" is not just a disturbing bodily fluid, but it becomes "burgundy of red bean soup" which is something familiar and comforting. The latter masks the horror of the image of the decayed body and renders it a surreal omen. Additionally, the reaction of the narrator is not of shock in a traditional sense but of fascination and reflection.

Han Kang continues to provide an insightful portrayal of the smallest details of Yeong-Hye's body. The Mongolian mark which is the first thing that attracted her brother-in-law turns into a surreal birthmark;

How could such a thing still be there after all these years? It didn't make any sense. Its pale blue-green resembled that of a faint bruise, but it was clearly a Mongolian mark. It called to mind something ancient, something pre-evolutionary, or else perhaps a mark of photosynthesis, and he realized to his surprise that there was nothing at all sexual about it; it was more vegetal than sexual. (Kang 83)

This part of the novel sheds light on the fixation of Yeong-Hye's brother-in-law on her Mongolian mark. These process of observing and describing turns the female body into an object of the male gaze. This abject body is turned into a site of fascination and attraction in ways "there was nothing at all sexual about it" but pure admiration of the complexities of the female body.

This attraction to the body generates ideas for the brother-in-law. As an artist he states to fantasize about using her body as a canvas to accentuate its beauty. In the passage that follows, a vivid description is given to the process of painting;

First he swept up the hair that was falling over her shoulders, and then, 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 center. 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 84).

The left buttock, where the Mongolian mark rests, is preserved and not painted over it. The brother-in-law purposely frames it with "a wash of light green" to enhance its visibility "like the pale shadow of a flower". This is not solely an aestheticization of the natural body, but it is an artistic portrayal of the abject mark (Mongolian mark). This birthmark is closely linked to primitivity, ancestry and the pre-symbolic. Instead of confronting the strangeness of the mark, Han Kang turns it into a poetic focal point, a mystery to be admired.

The following excerpt continues the motif of Yeong-Hye's body as canvas. The brother-in-law paints "huge clusters of flowers" across her most intimate body parts. He transforms her into a landscape of symbolic meaning;

"This time he painted huge clusters of flowers in yellow and white, covering the skin from her collarbone to her breasts. If the flowers on her back were the flowers of the night, these were the brilliant flowers of the day. Orange day lilies bloomed on her concave stomach, and golden petals were scattered pell-mell over her thighs" (Kang 87-88)

Through the description of this scene, Han Kang demonstrates that the gaze does not sexualize Yeong-Hye's body; instead, the act of painting emphasizes the beauty of what society deems abject. The female body is transformed into an object of the gaze, rejected as an abject initially then returned to be a site of delicacy and beauty. Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* exposes the complex layers of objectification and how the latter is rendered as a site of attraction that is not sexual.

### 3.6 Conclusion

Taken together, this chapter explores Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* through a multi-theoretical lens. Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine* illuminates the ways in which the novel gives voice to its female characters' experiences and how they confront patriarchal silencing. On the other hand, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection provides insight into the reaction of society to the transformation of Yeong-Hye's body. Later, Jacques Lacan's theory of the gaze further reveals the objectification of the female body. In the end, the chapter concludes by tracing how Han Kang critiques the objectification of the female body; she reveals how such objectification is romanticized not as overtly violent but as hauntingly beautiful.



# **General Conclusion**

## General Conclusion

This dissertation has undertaken a comprehensive exploration of the intricate interplay between female objectification, patriarchal structures, and acts of resistance as depicted in Han Kang's acclaimed novel, *The Vegetarian*. Recognizing literature as a potent medium for conveying silenced voices and repressed experiences, this study has employed feminist theoretical frameworks—specifically, Hélène Cixous's concept of *l'écriture féminine*, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, and Jacques Lacan's understanding of the gaze—to dissect the complex narrative layers of the novel.

The analysis commenced by situating literature within a broader historical and cultural context, emphasizing its evolution from a historically male-dominated domain to an increasingly inclusive space that incorporates the voices and perspectives of women. These women writers have harnessed the power of literature to challenge entrenched patriarchal norms and to articulate their experiences of suffering, oppression, and aspirations for liberation.

Given the deeply rooted traditions and hierarchical norms that characterize Korean society, the dissertation acknowledged the significant pressures placed upon women to conform to prescribed social roles and expectations. Within this patriarchal framework, women are often relegated to the roles of "good mothers" and "good wives," their worth measured by their adherence to restrictive expectations concerning behaviour, appearance, and social conduct.

The heart of this study focused on Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, a novel set against the backdrop of a conservative Korean society. It intimately captures the struggles of its protagonist, Yeong-hye, who adopts vegetarianism as a symbolic act of resistance against

social expectations and patriarchal control. This seemingly simple decision, however, is met with severe social reactions and highlights the rigid constraints placed upon women within this cultural context.

Throughout the narrative, Yeong-hye's body becomes a contested site objectified by those around her while she simultaneously seeks autonomy and self-determination through her radical dietary choice. This dissertation has argued that her transformation from passivity to active resistance is not merely a personal journey but a critique of a society that persistently objectifies women's bodies and silences their desires and voices.

By employing feminist psychoanalysis, the study delves into the ways in which Han Kang's narrative both critiques and perpetuates the objectification of the female body. While the novel overtly challenges patriarchal norms and the systemic oppression of women, this research work reveals a significant tendency to romanticize Yeong-hye's objectification, thereby raising critical questions about the ethical implications of such aestheticization.

In essence, this dissertation has demonstrated that Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* operates as a complex and often contradictory text, simultaneously exposing the brutal realities of patriarchal control and raising critical questions about the nature of female agency, artistic representation, and the ethical responsibilities inherent in literary expression. The study reveals the novel's complex dance between critique and complicity; it challenges readers to grapple with the ways in which literature reinforce social norms.

This research work provides an understanding of the delicate balance between artistic freedom and ethical responsibility. It has thus urged scholars and readers alike to critically examine the representations of women in literature and to consider the other implications of such portrayals for feminist discourse and social justice.

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# Appendices

## Appendices

### Appendix A:

**The author: Han Kang**



Appendix B:

The novel: The Vegetarian

WINNER OF THE 2024 NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE

**HAN KANG**

'An extraordinary experience'  
*Guardian*

'Terrifying and terrific'  
Lauren Groff



**THE  
VEGETARIAN**  
채식주의자

# Glossary

## Glossary

**Abject:** Referring to something that is cast off, rejected, or excluded, causing feelings of disgust, horror, or fear because it threatens identity and boundaries.

**Androcentric:** it refers to the prioritization of men and the marginalization of women. It means that the world centers around men solely. Androcentric means that the experiences of men are the norms.

**Han (恨):** A Korean cultural concept meaning a deep, collective feeling of unresolved resentment, sorrow, grief, and regret, often stemming from historical suffering, oppression, or personal loss.

**Male gaze:** it refers to how women are seen through the eyes of man and rendered a mere object of their perception.

**Misogyny:** it is the dislike, contempt, or hatred toward women. It can manifest in various forms, including discrimination, objectification, belittlement, exclusion, violence, and the systematic oppression of women in social, cultural, legal, and political contexts.

**Patriarchy:** it is a social system in which men hold primary power while women and marginalized are often subordinated. It is characterized by male authority, privilege, and control over decision-making, and social norms.

**Self-objectification:** It is the process by which individuals view themselves primarily as objects to be looked at and evaluated, often based on physical appearance, rather than as active agents with thoughts, emotions, and abilities.

**Self-perception:** it is the individual awareness of one's thoughts, behaviours, feelings and being. It is how people see themselves shaped by the social experiences and interactions.

**Social expectations:** they are the commonly held beliefs and norms in a given society that dictates how people should behave and present themselves. Social expectations refer to the way both genders are expected to perform their assigned roles to meet the social standards.

**Urami:** It refers to feelings of lingering anger or hurt toward someone or something, often tied to a sense of injustice.

## مُلَخَّص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تفسير كيف تُضفي رواية "النباتية" لهان كانغ طابعًا تَمْظْهيريًا على اغترار الجسد الأنثوي. ففي حين تُثني الرواية على تناولها لموضوعي الصدمة النفسية ومقاومة المد الذكوري، إلا أنها تُجَمِّل، و بصورة متناقضة، انفصال البطلة يونغ-هاي التدريجي عن جسدها. و بالاعتماد على افتراضات "الإطراح" لجوليا كريستيفا ، تحاول هذه الدراسة فهم كيف فسر رفض يونغ-هاي للقيم الاجتماعية على أنه انقلاب علما للنظم المتعارف عليها. و بالاعتماد علممفاهيم لاكان عن "النظرة" و "مقارنة الشيء الصغير لـ" تُبين هذه الدراسة أن رغبة الشخصيات الذكورية في امتلاك جسد يونغ-هاي والتحكم به يصبح متجليا عندما تفقد المرأة إرادتها و قبولها لجسدها ككيان خاص بها، و يدمج الرؤى النسوية حول دور السلطة الأبوية في اذكاء هذه الحالة، تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تقويض الرواية للقوى الثقافية التي تسهم في اغترار الجسد الأنثوي. وتوضح الدراسة أيضا أن سرد هان كانغ، رغم ميولاتها الواضحة الى النسوية، يضيف طابعًا تَمْظْهيريًا على فقدان يونغ-هاي لجسدها وتحويله إلى لوحة فنية وموضع للتأمل يعكس هواجس و غرائز الشخصيات الذكورية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التَمْظْهير، الجسد الأنثوي، هان كانغ، الاغترار، النباتية.