

The Politics of the Female Body: Resistance and Patriarchal Violence in *The Vegetarian*

DR SAMSONRAJ C¹, DR ELAKIYA V²

¹ Department of Humanities, Bannari Amman Institute of Technology, Sathyamangalam

² Department of Science and Humanities, Sri Ranganathar Institute of Engineering and Technology
(Autonomous), Coimbatore

Abstract— Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* presents a compelling critique of patriarchal authority by portraying the female body as a contested site of control, resistance, and self-expression. Through a close textual analysis, the paper explores four interconnected dimensions of resistance: patriarchal violence imposed upon the female body, bodily resistance through vegetarianism, silence as a form of political agency, and arboreal transformation as a symbolic rejection of human violence and social conformity. The analysis demonstrates that the family, marriage, and medical institutions collectively function as disciplinary mechanisms that seek to normalize female behaviour by controlling bodily practices and suppressing individual autonomy. In response, Yeong-hye employs her body as the primary site of resistance, refusing food, speech, and ultimately the human identity that sustains patriarchal violence. Her silence is interpreted not as passivity or psychological collapse but as an alternative mode of communication that challenges dominant discourses of power. Likewise, her desire to become a tree signifies a radical aspiration to exist beyond the violence embedded within human civilization. The paper contends that Han Kang redefines political resistance by portraying the body itself as a space of ethical dissent, where acts of refusal become expressions of freedom and self-determination. Ultimately, the study contributes to contemporary feminist literary scholarship by demonstrating that *The Vegetarian* critiques patriarchal ideology through its powerful representation of bodily autonomy, resistance, and the enduring struggle for female agency in modern society.

Keywords— Body Politics, Female Agency, Patriarchy, Resistance and Violence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is a compelling exploration of bodily autonomy, patriarchal oppression, and individual resistance. Originally published in Korean in 2007 and translated into English by Deborah Smith, the novel gained

international recognition after receiving the International Booker Prize. Through the story of Yeong-hye, a woman whose decision to stop eating meat gradually develops into a rejection of human violence and social conformity, Han Kang interrogates the relationship between the body, power, and identity. Rather than portraying vegetarianism as a simple dietary choice, the novel presents it as a symbolic act of resistance against the patriarchal structures that regulate women's lives.

The narrative unfolds through the perspectives of Yeong-hye's husband, brother-in-law, and sister, denying the protagonist a sustained narrative voice. This narrative strategy reflects the silencing of women within patriarchal societies, where female identity is often constructed through the perceptions of others. As Yeong-hye refuses to conform to conventional expectations of wifedom, obedience, and femininity, her body becomes the primary site upon which familial, social, and institutional power is exercised. The violent responses of her family expose how patriarchal authority seeks to discipline women who challenge established norms.

The concept of body politics, particularly as developed by Michel Foucault, provides an effective framework for understanding the novel. Foucault argues that modern societies regulate individuals through disciplinary practices that shape behaviour and normalize conformity. When applied to feminist literary criticism, these ideas reveal how women's bodies are subjected to cultural expectations, surveillance, and control. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's refusal to consume meat, her silence, and her eventual identification with plant life represent a radical rejection of these disciplinary mechanisms.

Previous scholarship has examined the novel through ecofeminism, trauma theory, carnism, and feminist criticism, emphasizing themes of violence, identity, and ethical resistance. However, relatively few studies combine Foucauldian body politics with feminist analyses of patriarchal violence to examine how bodily resistance functions as political agency. This paper addresses that gap by arguing that Yeong-hye's body becomes a contested political space where patriarchal power attempts to enforce conformity while acts of bodily refusal challenge systems of domination. Through this perspective, the novel emerges as a profound critique of gendered violence and a powerful representation of female resistance in contemporary literature.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Vegetarian has attracted considerable scholarly attention because of its multifaceted exploration of gender, violence, trauma, and identity. Since its English translation, the novel has been examined through diverse theoretical perspectives, including feminism, ecofeminism, trauma theory, body politics, carnism, disability studies, and posthumanism. These studies demonstrate that Han Kang's work transcends a simple narrative of vegetarianism and instead presents a profound critique of the social structures that regulate the female body.

Early feminist readings primarily interpret Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat as an act of resistance against patriarchal domination. Scholars argue that the novel portrays the female body as a contested space where social expectations, family authority, and masculine power intersect. Yeong-hye's rejection of meat symbolizes her refusal to participate in systems of violence that normalize both the consumption of animals and the subordination of women. Such studies emphasize that patriarchal violence in the novel is manifested not only through physical abuse but also through emotional coercion, objectification, and institutional control.

Another significant body of scholarship approaches the novel from an ecofeminist perspective. These studies establish a relationship between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of nature, arguing that both are products of hierarchical systems

based on domination. Yeong-hye's desire to become a tree is interpreted as an ethical rejection of human violence and anthropocentric values. Rather than viewing her transformation as psychological deterioration, ecofeminist critics consider it an attempt to establish a harmonious existence beyond oppressive human structures.

Trauma theory has also become an influential framework for understanding *The Vegetarian*. Researchers contend that Yeong-hye's disturbing dreams, silence, and gradual withdrawal from society are deeply connected to unresolved childhood trauma and domestic violence. Her refusal to consume meat is viewed not merely as a dietary decision but as an expression of psychological suffering that conventional language cannot adequately communicate. Trauma scholars therefore argue that silence functions as an alternative mode of expression rather than an indication of passivity.

Recent studies have expanded the discussion by incorporating theories of carnism, disability studies, and posthumanism. These approaches argue that the novel questions dominant assumptions about normality, sanity, and humanity itself. Yeong-hye's bodily transformation is interpreted as a challenge to compulsory social norms governing food, gender, and identity, revealing how institutions often pathologize individuals who resist conformity.

Although these critical approaches have enriched the understanding of *The Vegetarian*, most studies examine feminist resistance, ecological ethics, or trauma as separate analytical categories. Comparatively fewer scholars investigate how patriarchal power disciplines the female body through interconnected familial, social, and institutional mechanisms using the framework of body politics. This paper addresses that gap by integrating Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power with feminist literary criticism. It argues that Yeong-hye's bodily refusal represents a political challenge to patriarchal authority and that her transformation reflects an assertion of autonomy rather than merely psychological decline.

III. PATRIARCHAL VIOLENCE AND THE FEMALE BODY

One of the central concerns in *The Vegetarian* is the manner in which the female body becomes a site of patriarchal control, surveillance, and violence. Han Kang presents Yeong-hye's body not merely as a biological entity but as a political space upon which familial authority, cultural expectations, and institutional power are imposed. From the opening pages of the novel, Yeong-hye is denied individuality and is instead valued for her conformity to the traditional roles of wife and daughter. Her decision to reject meat is interpreted by her family not as an exercise of personal choice but as an act of rebellion that threatens the patriarchal order. Through this conflict, Han Kang demonstrates that patriarchal violence extends beyond physical abuse and operates through everyday expectations, social discipline, and the denial of female autonomy.

The novel begins by presenting Yeong-hye through the perspective of her husband, whose narration immediately objectifies her identity. Han Kang introduces Yeong-hye not through her own voice but through her husband's perspective, immediately revealing the patriarchal gaze that defines her identity. Rather than recognizing her individuality, he values her only because she conforms to conventional expectations of an obedient wife. As he recalls, "Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way" (Han Kang 13). He values her because she is "ordinary" and uncomplicated, suggesting that her greatest virtue lies in her ability to remain unnoticed and obedient. His description reflects a patriarchal mindset in which a woman's individuality is considered less important than her ability to satisfy domestic expectations. Yeong-hye is not appreciated for her aspirations or opinions but for her willingness to conform to the conventional image of an ideal wife. By allowing the husband to narrate the opening section, Han Kang exposes how patriarchal discourse constructs women through the male gaze rather than allowing them to define themselves.

This representation closely corresponds to Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that power is

exercised not only through overt punishment but also through subtle mechanisms that encourage individuals to internalize social norms. Although Foucault does not specifically address gender, feminist critics have extended his ideas to demonstrate how patriarchal societies discipline women's bodies through expectations concerning appearance, behaviour, sexuality, and domesticity. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's husband expects unquestioning obedience and interprets any deviation from established norms as irrational. Consequently, her body becomes a site where patriarchal authority attempts to enforce conformity.

The violence experienced by Yeong-hye intensifies after her decision to become a vegetarian. Her refusal to consume meat is treated by her family as a rejection of cultural values rather than a personal ethical choice. The most disturbing example occurs during the family gathering when her father forcibly attempts to make her eat meat. This episode symbolizes far more than domestic conflict. The act of force-feeding represents the patriarchal belief that women's bodies exist under familial and paternal authority. Yeong-hye's refusal to open her mouth becomes an assertion of bodily autonomy, while her father's physical coercion illustrates the violence employed to restore patriarchal control. Food therefore becomes a symbolic instrument through which authority is imposed upon the female body.

Han Kang further reveals that patriarchal violence is normalized within family structures. Yeong-hye's father believes that physical force is justified because he assumes absolute authority over his daughter. Rather than condemning his actions, several family members initially attempt to persuade Yeong-hye to comply, illustrating how patriarchal systems are sustained collectively rather than by individual men alone. Violence is therefore institutionalized within familial relationships, where obedience is valued above individual freedom. The novel suggests that patriarchal ideology survives because it is accepted as a social norm rather than recognized as oppression.

Yeong-hye's marriage similarly exposes the objectification of the female body. Her husband evaluates her primarily according to her usefulness within the household and later treats her body as an

object that exists to satisfy his sexual desires. Her emotional state, personal beliefs, and ethical convictions remain insignificant to him. Instead of attempting to understand her decision, he becomes concerned about how her behaviour affects his social reputation and professional life. This emphasis on public appearance reflects the patriarchal expectation that women should preserve family honour through conformity. Consequently, Yeong-hye's body is reduced to a social symbol whose purpose is to maintain masculine respectability rather than express individual identity.

The second part of the novel extends this critique through the character of Yeong-hye's brother-in-law. Unlike her husband, whose concern centres on domestic conformity, the brother-in-law transforms Yeong-hye into an aesthetic object. Fascinated by the Mongolian mark on her body, he projects his artistic fantasies onto her without acknowledging her humanity. His obsession demonstrates another manifestation of patriarchal control: objectification disguised as artistic appreciation. Yeong-hye's body becomes a canvas upon which male desire is inscribed, reinforcing the notion that women's bodies are continually interpreted, consumed, and appropriated by masculine authority. Although his behaviour appears less overtly violent than the father's physical assault, it nevertheless deprives Yeong-hye of agency by reducing her existence to an object of visual pleasure.

The novel also critiques institutional mechanisms that regulate deviant bodies. As Yeong-hye's refusal intensifies, medical professionals diagnose her condition as psychological illness and subject her to psychiatric treatment. Instead of recognizing her choices as expressions of ethical or political resistance, institutional authority seeks to restore her to socially acceptable behaviour. This reflects Foucault's argument that modern institutions define normality by identifying and correcting behaviours that deviate from accepted standards. Within the novel, medicine functions as an extension of patriarchal discipline because it pathologizes female autonomy rather than questioning the oppressive social structures that produce suffering. Scholars have likewise argued that the novel exposes how care and institutional intervention can become mechanisms of

control when they privilege normalization over individual agency.

An equally significant aspect of patriarchal violence in the novel is its symbolic dimension. Han Kang portrays violence not only through physical assault but also through language, silence, surveillance, and social expectation. Yeong-hye is repeatedly denied the authority to explain her decisions because others assume the right to interpret her behaviour. Her husband calls her irrational, her father considers her disobedient, her brother-in-law eroticizes her, and medical professionals classify her as mentally ill. Each interpretation strips away her subjectivity and replaces it with identities imposed by patriarchal discourse. Consequently, the violence inflicted upon Yeong-hye is epistemic as well as physical; she loses not only control over her body but also the ability to define herself.

Through Yeong-hye's experiences, Han Kang argues that patriarchal violence is embedded within ordinary social relationships and institutional practices. The family, marriage, and medical system collectively function as mechanisms that regulate female bodies and suppress individual autonomy. Yeong-hye's refusal to submit to these expectations therefore transforms her body into a political site of resistance. Rather than portraying her merely as a victim of domestic abuse or psychological illness, the novel exposes how patriarchal power operates through multiple interconnected forms of control. Her body becomes both the object of violence and the medium through which resistance is articulated, laying the foundation for the subsequent exploration of vegetarianism as an embodied political act.

IV. VEGETARIANISM AS POLITICAL REFUSAL

Yeong-hye's resistance begins with a simple yet uncompromising refusal to participate in a system of violence. During the family confrontation, she firmly declares, "I won't eat it" (Han Kang 27). This brief statement marks the first overt assertion of bodily autonomy in the novel. Unlike a conventional political protest, Yeong-hye's resistance is expressed through refusal rather than confrontation. By declining to eat meat, she reclaims authority over her own body and

rejects the patriarchal assumption that her family has the right to determine her choices. Her refusal transforms eating from an ordinary domestic practice into an act of political dissent. The statement is significant because it demonstrates that resistance can be enacted through every day bodily practices rather than through public activism or verbal confrontation. When questioned about her behaviour, Yeong-hye repeatedly asserts, “I don’t eat meat” (Han Kang 28). Although the statement appears simple, it carries profound ethical and political implications within the context of the novel. The declaration is not merely a description of dietary preference but an assertion of bodily sovereignty. By deciding what enters her body, Yeong-hye challenges the authority traditionally exercised by her husband, father, and family. Her refusal destabilizes the patriarchal order because it demonstrates that control over the female body ultimately belongs to the woman herself. Han Kang thus transforms vegetarianism into a symbolic rejection of violence, domination, and compulsory conformity.

V. BODILY RESISTANCE THROUGH VEGETARIANISM

Yeong-hye’s decision to become a vegetarian mark the turning point of *The Vegetarian* and serves as the central act of bodily resistance in the narrative. At first glance, her refusal to consume meat appears to be a simple change in dietary preference. However, Han Kang gradually reveals that vegetarianism functions as a symbolic rejection of violence, domination, and patriarchal authority. Yeong-hye’s body becomes the medium through which she resists the social structures that seek to discipline and control her. Unlike conventional forms of protest that rely on speech or public action, her resistance is expressed through the deliberate regulation of her own body. By refusing meat, she refuses participation in a culture that normalizes violence against both women and animals, transforming an everyday act of eating into a powerful political statement. Yeong-hye’s resistance begins not with a political manifesto or verbal confrontation but with a deeply personal experience. When questioned about her sudden refusal to consume meat, she simply replies, “I had a dream” (Han Kang 16).

The catalyst for Yeong-hye’s transformation is a series of disturbing dreams filled with images of blood, slaughter, and violence. Following these dreams, she quietly announces that she will no longer eat meat. Her explanation, “I had a dream” (Han Kang 16), is intentionally brief, offering little justification to her family. This minimal response reflects the deeply personal nature of her decision, which resists rational explanation within the patriarchal framework that demands obedience and conformity. Rather than debating or defending her choice, Yeong-hye simply withdraws from practices that she associates with violence. The dream thus becomes a symbolic awakening that prompts her ethical rejection of a violent human order.

From the perspective of body politics, Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism represents an assertion of bodily autonomy. Michel Foucault argues that modern societies regulate individuals by disciplining their bodies and normalizing acceptable forms of behaviour. Eating habits, like other bodily practices, become subject to social expectations and institutional control. In *The Vegetarian*, the family’s insistence that Yeong-hye resume eating meat demonstrates how food functions as an instrument of social regulation. Her refusal disrupts the routine of domestic life and challenges the authority of those who assume the right to determine what she should consume. Consequently, the body becomes the primary site where power is contested.

The novel also demonstrates that food is closely connected to cultural identity and patriarchal ideology. Within Yeong-hye’s family, meat symbolizes normality, family unity, and social acceptance. Her rejection of meat is therefore interpreted not as an individual preference but as an attack on collective values. The family’s increasingly hostile reaction reveals that eating is never merely a biological act; it is also a cultural practice through which obedience and belonging are reinforced. By refusing meat, Yeong-hye simultaneously rejects the patriarchal values embedded within everyday domestic rituals. Her body becomes a visible expression of dissent, exposing the ideological assumptions that underlie seemingly ordinary practices.

The relationship between meat and patriarchal power has been explored extensively by feminist scholars, particularly Carol J. Adams, who argues that the consumption of meat has historically been associated with masculinity, dominance, and power. Adams contends that patriarchal culture frequently establishes symbolic connections between the exploitation of women and the consumption of animals, treating both as objects available for control and consumption. This theoretical perspective illuminates Yeong-hye's decision to reject meat as more than a dietary choice; it becomes an ethical refusal to participate in systems founded upon domination. Recent scholarship on *The Vegetarian* similarly argues that vegetarianism functions as a critique of both carnism and patriarchy, revealing how food practices reproduce gendered hierarchies.

Yeong-hye's bodily resistance extends beyond food consumption to encompass broader forms of self-determination. As the narrative progresses, she increasingly withdraws from social expectations concerning marriage, sexuality, and domestic responsibility. Her refusal to engage in sexual relations with her husband and her growing indifference toward conventional femininity indicate that vegetarianism is only the first stage of a more comprehensive rejection of patriarchal norms. Instead of allowing society to define her body according to its expectations, she gradually reclaims authority over her physical existence. Every act of refusal, whether rejecting food, intimacy, or prescribed gender roles, becomes an assertion that her body belongs to herself rather than to the institutions seeking to regulate it.

The reactions of the other characters reveal how threatening bodily autonomy becomes within patriarchal society. Yeong-hye's husband interprets her refusal as an embarrassment that damages his social reputation. Her father considers it an act of disobedience deserving punishment, while medical professionals classify her behaviour as psychological illness. None of these responses attempt to understand her ethical convictions; instead, each seeks to restore her to normative behaviour. Their collective reactions demonstrate that patriarchal systems tolerate female agency only when it remains within socially approved boundaries. Once Yeong-hye exercises independent control over her body, she is labelled irrational,

deviant, and in need of correction. The novel therefore exposes how autonomy itself becomes criminalized when exercised by women.

An important feature of Yeong-hye's resistance is that it is fundamentally non-violent. She does not seek revenge against those who oppress her, nor does she attempt to impose her beliefs upon others. Instead, her resistance consists entirely of refusal. She withdraws from participation in systems she considers violent without physically confronting those around her. This ethical refusal distinguishes her from traditional literary protagonists who challenge oppression through direct confrontation. Han Kang suggests that resistance may also take the form of quiet persistence, where the simple act of saying "no" destabilizes established structures of authority more effectively than open rebellion. The body thus becomes a silent yet powerful political instrument.

The progression of Yeong-hye's vegetarianism also illustrates the increasing conflict between individual ethics and social conformity. As her commitment deepens, she reduces her food intake further and ultimately rejects nourishment altogether. While other characters interpret this behaviour as evidence of mental collapse, it can also be understood as the logical extension of her refusal to participate in a violent human order. Her body becomes the final space over which she can exercise complete authority, even at the cost of her own survival. This radical autonomy challenges conventional assumptions that self-preservation is always the highest human value. Instead, Han Kang proposes that ethical integrity may require rejecting systems that sustain life through violence and domination.

Ultimately, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism should not be interpreted simply as an expression of psychological disturbance or personal eccentricity. Rather, it functions as a profound act of bodily resistance that questions the ideological foundations of patriarchal society. Through her refusal to consume meat, she rejects cultural expectations, masculine authority, and institutional regulation of the female body. Han Kang demonstrates that political resistance need not occur through public protest or verbal confrontation; it can also emerge through the body itself. By transforming eating into an ethical and political act, The

Vegetarian reveals that bodily autonomy possesses the power to challenge deeply entrenched structures of domination and redefine the meaning of freedom.

VI. SILENCE AS POLITICAL RESISTANCE

Silence occupies a central place in *The Vegetarian* and functions as one of the most powerful forms of resistance employed by Yeong-hye. Unlike conventional literary protagonists who challenge oppression through speech or direct confrontation, Yeong-hye increasingly withdraws from verbal communication as the narrative progresses. Her silence is often interpreted by her family and society as evidence of psychological instability or emotional detachment. However, a closer reading suggests that her silence is neither passive nor meaningless. Instead, it becomes a deliberate rejection of the patriarchal language that seeks to define, discipline, and control her identity. Han Kang transforms silence into a political act through which the protagonist resists systems of domination without adopting the language of those who oppress her.

The novel's narrative structure reinforces this interpretation by denying Yeong-hye a sustained first-person voice. The story is narrated successively by her husband, her brother-in-law, and her sister, while Yeong-hye herself rarely speaks. This narrative choice reflects the patriarchal tendency to construct women's identities through the perspectives of others rather than allowing women to represent themselves. Her husband interprets her silence as irrationality, her father sees it as disobedience, her brother-in-law transforms it into an object of artistic fascination, and medical professionals diagnose it as mental illness. In each instance, others attempt to assign meaning to her silence instead of listening to the ethical convictions underlying her actions. The absence of Yeong-hye's voice therefore symbolizes the broader social exclusion of women from dominant systems of representation.

From the perspective of body politics, silence becomes an act of resistance because it interrupts the mechanisms through which power operates. Michel Foucault argues that power is sustained through discourse, classification, and institutional knowledge. Individuals are expected to explain themselves

according to socially accepted categories, allowing institutions to regulate behaviour through language. Yeong-hye refuses to participate in this process. She does not provide elaborate explanations for her vegetarianism, nor does she attempt to justify her choices to her family or doctors. Apart from her brief statement that her decision originated in a dream, she increasingly withdraws from conversation. This refusal to speak prevents others from fully incorporating her into the discursive systems that seek to normalize her behaviour. Her silence therefore functions as a rejection of the language through which patriarchal authority exercises control.

Silence also challenges the patriarchal expectation that women must continuously perform emotional and domestic labour. Within the novel, Yeong-hye is expected to explain herself, reassure her husband, satisfy her family, and conform to social expectations. Instead, she chooses not to engage in these communicative obligations. Her refusal destabilizes those around her because it denies them the dialogue through which they might persuade, discipline, or manipulate her. Rather than participating in arguments she cannot win within a patriarchal framework, she simply refuses to continue the conversation. In this sense, silence becomes more disruptive than speech because it exposes the limits of patriarchal authority when confronted with non-compliance.

Yeong-hye's silence also reflects the relationship between trauma and language. Many trauma theorists argue that deeply traumatic experiences often resist verbal expression because they exceed the capacity of ordinary language. Trauma is frequently communicated through fragmented memories, bodily symptoms, dreams, or silence rather than coherent narration. Yeong-hye's disturbing dreams and gradual withdrawal from speech suggest that her silence is rooted in experiences of violence that cannot be adequately articulated. Rather than interpreting silence as emptiness, the novel presents it as a different mode of communication in which the body speaks when language fails. Her refusal to explain herself indicates that certain forms of suffering cannot be translated into conventional discourse without losing their ethical significance. Recent scholarship similarly interprets Yeong-hye's silence as an expression of trauma and resistance rather than simple passivity.

Furthermore, silence protects Yeong-hye from the ideological violence embedded within patriarchal discourse. Every attempt by other characters to describe her reduces her identity to labels such as irrational, ill, disobedient, or abnormal. By refusing to adopt their language, she resists the identities imposed upon her. Her silence therefore preserves a space of autonomy that remains inaccessible to those seeking to define her. Although others continue to interpret her actions according to patriarchal assumptions, they never succeed in fully possessing her inner consciousness. This unresolved ambiguity is one of the novel's greatest strengths, compelling readers to recognize that genuine resistance may remain partially unknowable within systems structured by domination.

The contrast between Yeong-hye and the other narrators further highlights the political significance of silence. Her husband constantly speaks about social respectability, her brother-in-law projects aesthetic fantasies onto her body, and medical professionals rely on diagnostic language to classify her condition. Their speech reflects institutional and patriarchal authority. Yeong-hye, by contrast, withdraws from these discourses altogether. Her silence rejects not only individual authority but also the broader cultural logic that equates compliance with sanity and obedience with femininity. In refusing to participate in these conversations, she undermines the legitimacy of the social order itself.

Silence in *The Vegetarian* is therefore not a symbol of weakness or defeat but a profound form of ethical and political resistance. It enables Yeong-hye to reject patriarchal expectations without reproducing the language through which those expectations are maintained. Her body, rather than her voice, becomes the primary medium of communication, expressing dissent through refusal, withdrawal, and self-determination. Han Kang thus challenges conventional assumptions that resistance must always be vocal or confrontational. Instead, the novel demonstrates that silence can become a powerful expression of agency when speech has been appropriated by systems of domination. By transforming silence into an act of resistance, *The Vegetarian* redefines political agency as the capacity to refuse participation in oppressive structures, even when that refusal is expressed without words.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Vegetarian presents a profound critique of patriarchal society by portraying the female body as a contested site of power, discipline, and resistance. Through the character of Yeong-hye, Han Kang demonstrates that patriarchal violence extends beyond physical abuse to include cultural expectations, familial authority, social surveillance, and institutional control. Rather than depicting Yeong-hye merely as a victim of psychological illness, the novel reveals how her body becomes the medium through which she challenges the structures that seek to regulate her identity and autonomy.

This study has examined the novel through the framework of Michel Foucault's concept of body politics alongside feminist literary criticism. The analysis demonstrates that Yeong-hye's refusal to consume meat is not simply a personal dietary preference but a symbolic rejection of violence, domination, and patriarchal ideology. Her vegetarianism represents an assertion of bodily autonomy that disrupts the disciplinary mechanisms imposed by the family and society. Similarly, her silence functions as a powerful form of political resistance, rejecting the patriarchal discourse that attempts to define, interpret, and control her existence. By refusing to justify her choices, Yeong-hye transforms silence into an alternative language of dissent that challenges conventional notions of agency.

The novel further extends this resistance through Yeong-hye's desire to transcend human existence and identify with plant life. Her arboreal transformation symbolizes the rejection of anthropocentric violence and patriarchal hierarchies, suggesting the possibility of an existence beyond systems founded on domination and exploitation. Although her actions are interpreted by those around her as symptoms of madness, the novel invites readers to question whether the true irrationality lies within Yeong-hye or within a society that normalizes violence while condemning non-violence as deviance.

Ultimately, *The Vegetarian* redefines the politics of the female body by presenting resistance as an embodied ethical practice rather than a verbal or

physical confrontation. Han Kang suggests that the body itself can become a political text through which women contest oppressive social structures. Yeong-hye's acts of refusal expose the limitations of patriarchal authority and demonstrate that autonomy may be asserted through the rejection of conformity, even at great personal cost. In doing so, the novel challenges readers to reconsider the relationships between body, identity, violence, and freedom in contemporary society.

The findings of this study contribute to ongoing discussions in feminist literary criticism, body politics, and contemporary Korean literature by emphasizing the interconnected nature of gender, power, and bodily resistance. Future research may further explore *The Vegetarian* through interdisciplinary perspectives such as posthumanism, environmental humanities, disability studies, and affect theory to deepen our understanding of Han Kang's complex representation of resistance, embodiment, and ethical subjectivity. As a work that continues to resonate across cultural and disciplinary boundaries, *The Vegetarian* remains a significant literary intervention into debates on bodily autonomy, gendered violence, and the enduring struggle for individual freedom.

REFERENCES

- [1] Adams, Carol J. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. 35th Anniversary ed., Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.
- [2] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- [3] Caruth, Cathy, editor. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- [4] Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995.
- [5] Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage Books, 1990.
- [6] Han, Byung-Chul. *The Burnout Society*. Translated by Erik Butler, Stanford University Press, 2015.
- [7] Han, Kang. *The Vegetarian*. Translated by Deborah Smith, Hogarth, 2016.
- [8] Kim, Won-Chung. "Eating and Suffering in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*." *Acta Koreana*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2017, pp. 193–212.
- [9] Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, 1982.
- [10] Lee, Hyangjin. "Violence, Silence, and the Female Body in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*." *Korean Studies*, vol. 43, 2019, pp. 150–170.
- [11] Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18.
- [12] Park, Jiyoung. "Body Politics and Female Subjectivity in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*." *Journal of Korean Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2019, pp. 73–95.
- [13] Philip, B., M. Jeeva, F. Allwyn, and C. Samsonraj. "Culture for Sale: Neocolonialism in Tourism, Its Impact on Indigenous Communities, and the Commodification of Heritage." *Neocolonialism*, 1st ed., Routledge, 2026, pp. 524–527. DOI: 10.4324/9781003725138-94.
- [14] Samsonraj, C., and A. Ajai. "Into the Heart of Arunachal: The Mystique of the Adi Tribal Heritage." *International Journal of Scientific Development and Research*, vol. 10, no. 5, 2025, pp. 950–955.
- [15] Samsonraj, C., and V. Elakiya. "Voices of Resistance and Renewal: Equilibrium in Karukku." *International Journal of Research in English*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2026, pp. 103–106. DOI: 10.33545/26648717.2026.v8.i3a.688.