

Eating and Suffering¹ in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, one of the most internationally known Korean novels, is a relentless investigation of the violence and the nature of suffering in our world. Unlike what the title of the novel may suggest, it is not a story about a vegetarian per se; rather, it is a work that investigates what constitutes suffering. Suffering has been an inescapable part of human life, something that is experienced by a whole of a person, not by a mind or body separately. Suffering influences all the aspects of one's personal, social, and even spiritual life. In sum, suffering is something which menaces one's integrity and damages one's life in all areas. In *The Vegetarian*, suffering becomes a psychological, physical, and spiritual effect of dietary resistance to male-dominated Korean society. Yeong-hye undergoes the disintegration of her personhood both as a woman and a vegetarian; her refusal to eat meat jeopardizes her whole life and brings her not only a physical pain but also almost unbearable psychological and spiritual distress.

Yeong-hye's suffering originates from her rejection and challenge of the reigning norms of the society through her two refusals—not to wear a bra and not to eat meat. It is a method of resistance she adapted very self-consciously. As the bra is a symbol of oppression of the female body, meat in the novel is a symbol of male power and authority. As the bra is used to control the outside of a woman's body, (eating) meat is used to control the inside of it. Yeong-hye's refusal to wear a bra leads her to expose her breasts in public places, a serious provocation that eventually results in her imprisonment in a mental hospital. In Korean society, where social conformity is regarded as one of the most important social virtues, such a deviation is hardly acceptable. This is why Yeong-hye's decision not to eat meat is not accepted as a personal dietary choice, but backfires into a devastating conflict. Yeong-hye wages a war, single-handedly and without any supporters, against an almost indomitable enemy: the reigning norms of the patriarchal Korean society of which she is also a member. When she determines to quit eating meat, all of society, including her own husband and family members, turn their backs against her and become her enemy.

Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat results in her being isolated from society, because eating meat is a measure used to judge the normal and the abnormal in Korean society. Uneasiness toward vegetarianism stems from the Korean belief that meat eating is a basic human instinct. We eat animals without thinking about what we are doing and why. Until her trauma involving eating meat is uncovered in the form of a dream, Yeong-hye had also enjoyed meat. She cooked meat dishes for her husband and did not even hesitate to hack a chicken into pieces with a rectangular butcher's cleaver. Dreams play crucial roles in this novel, because they have triggered Yeong-hye's suffering by repeatedly bringing her oppressed trauma. They reveal her inner mind without

¹ This is an edited version of Mr Kim's original essay. To read the whole piece please visit:
<https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3390&context=clweb>

any social censorship governing her consciousness and work as a mirror reflecting her mind. Yeong-hye dreams six times in the novel, and they are all italicized in the text. All these series of dreams have some relationship with meat eating and allow us to infer the real motive of her determination not to eat meat. The last line of her second dream gives a clue: *“Dawn of the next day. The pool of blood in the barn . . . I first saw the face reflected there”*. In the novel, ‘the pool of blood in the barn’ represents meat-eating society. Yeong-hye is, finally, able to look through this mirror of meat-eating culture and to find, quite surprisingly, that the face reflected on the pool of blood is none other than her own.

Yeong-hye is a victim of meat-eating culture and her refusal to eat meat is caused by her trauma of being forced by adults to eat dog meat when she was a child. Her father’s reaction to their family dog Whitey, when it bit nine-year-old Yeong-hye, goes far beyond a disciplinary action or appropriate revenge. Killing the dog by chaining it up to his motorcycle and circling the village seven laps until it falls dead in order to make its meat softer is a horrible spectacle of animal abuse. His action is a perfect example of the domination, subjugation, and killing animals for food. The animal abuse by Yeong-hye’s father is not much different than what somebody is doing somewhere without our knowledge for our meat eating, though there may be some differences in the degree of abuse. Her mother’s comment that *“When we stop eating meat, the world will devour you whole”* emphatically summarizes the basic mentality of meat-eating culture. This pathetic scene culminates in the village feast of eating dog meat soup. Yeong-hye also participated in this feast, at first perhaps reluctantly at the urging of adults, but later positively relishing the meat, as we can infer from her emptying *“an entire bowl.”* This atrocious cruelty done to the family dog in front of a nine year old girl was too gruesome for her to bear without mental shock. Killing animals to make food is an ultimate form of animal abuse, and to kill one’s own beloved pet and to eat it is far worse. In this sense, Yeong-hye suffers a kind of shock, expressed in her words, *“But I didn’t care”* and *“I really didn’t care.”* The repetition betrays the sincerity of her words, and the shock is deeply engraved in her deep consciousness as her archetypal trauma.

Therefore, Yeong-hye also suffers severe confusion about her identity, because she has realized that the face of the meat-lover is her own. Her paradoxical statement that the face is strange and familiar at the same time shows her confusion about her own identity and difficulty to accept herself as a meat eater: *“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”*. Here the slaughterhouse is a metaphor for the meat-eating world; her inability to find an exit on the opposite side shows how difficult it is to get out of this meat-eating culture. Because the “I” who shudders in fear with blood in her clothes, hands, and mouth is the portrait of Yeong-hye imprisoned within the meat-eating society, she cannot help but feel *“a horribly uncanny feeling.”* She is excluded from society and alienated from herself.

Yeong-hye was virtually excluded from the society for her unyielding refusals at the party held by her husband's boss. She was ostracized even by her own family members after the terrible event at her sister's house-warming party—a sure sign of a person who is suffering. Her father's physical violence toward Yeong-hye at the family gathering clearly shows that eating meat is to accept patriarchal values and to refuse it is to repudiate male power. When she declares that she is not eating meat any longer, all the family members urge her to eat meat by employing all possible means: they cajole, persuade, threaten, and scold her. The scene of Yeonghye's adamant refusal to yield to their petitions, which are seasoned with familial love, look pathetic and truly pitiful. Her words, *"Father, I don't eat meat"* are no less than her declaration of independence as an autonomous human being. But *"in an instant, his strong palm cleaved the empty space"*, because Yeong-hye's words are an outrageous and unacceptable challenge to her father. Even after he hits her so hard that *"the blood showed through the skin of her cheek"*, he was not satisfied yet, and orders the other male family members to hold her tight and pushes a piece of sweet and sour pork into her mouth by force. Suffering is enduring this kind of extreme violence in a state of total passivity through which Yeong-hye's own intactness as a person has irrevocably collapsed. The only resistance Yeong-hye can exert against this indiscriminate violence is to moan and to harm herself.

Yeong-hye's suffering does not stop at being smacked on her face and forced to eat meat; rather, her most precious relationship with other family members breaks apart irrevocably. The issue of meat-eating undoes the father/daughter relationship and challenges the very integrity human relations have. The father turns into an animal chasing his prey and she into a cornered animal in a battlefield of survival. To borrow her brother-in-law's words, *"Every single one of them—her parents who had force-fed her meat, her husband and siblings who had stood by and let it happen—were total strangers or enemies"*. Yeong-hye, stunned by this relentless violence and consequent pain, loses her words. Her words cease to take form in a human language and are, instead, substituted with the cry of an animal. Only gnarling, moaning sounds come out of her mouth. As we can see in the above incident, Yeong-hye is mercilessly victimized and degraded into the status of an animal, losing the status of an autonomous human being.

The disintegration of Yeong-hye's integrity and reduction of her world culminates in her husband's sexual abuse, adding the unbearable suffering of being raped by her own spouse. Like her father, who opened her mouth and inserted meat into it by force, her husband opens her body by force and inserts his desire. The violence toward women is handed down from father to son-in-law. Through this sexual violence, Yeong-hye's position degrades. This terrible experience brings about, in turn, self-abasement and self-abomination that the victimized woman has to endure. Her *"blank face"* is an exact copy of young Yeong-hye's face as she *"accepted her father's violence to the bone without any resistance"* when she was a child.

Yeong-hye's dietary choice of vegetarianism is, above all things, an attempt to escape from the fundamental suffering inherent in our eating condition. She struggles to remove the animality

within her own body and to embody the characteristics of plant in her body. The process proceeds in the order of no longer eating meat, adopting a vegetarian diet, becoming an anorexic, and finally, becoming like a plant. To remove animality, she first stops eating meat and then endeavors to erase the trace of meat eating stacked within her body. She becomes “*a stark mad woman*” who throws away all meat food items in the refrigerator and eats “*lettuce and soybean paste, plain seaweed soup without the usual beef or clams, and kimchi*”. In 2007 when the novel was published, openly announcing that one is practicing vegetarianism was very uncommon in Korea, and a very bold gesture². Her public announcement, in spite of the apparent danger that she will be regarded as an insane woman, stems from her conviction that vegetarianism is the only way she can free herself not only from the oppression of animals but also from the male oppression of women.

In the midst of almost unbearable suffering, Yeong-hye finally loses her language. The fact that she does not speak except in quotations by other speakers in the novel, and that she speaks only through the titled italicized language of dream shows that patriarchal society deprives her the status of speaking subject and forces her into silence. Yeong-hye is unable to secure her own position in the society. That is the reason why she speaks only in quotations, and her language is formulated in the forms of screams nobody can understand. Her moans and screams resemble the sound of animals, and this is a clear indication that she is receding gradually from the world

Yeong-hye’s loss of language is tragic indeed, but this loss is not the end of her journey. She ardently wishes to become a plant because a plant, she thinks, consumes only air and water and is free from the intrinsic violent structure of our eating. A plant doing photosynthesis is what she really wants to be after departing from the body of animal; working towards this goal, she endures every day, “*like some kind of mutant animal*”. Her longing to become a tree is, above all things, a desire to transform her from a being eating other beings to a being that provides food for them.

The list of Yeong-hye’s kinds of suffering caused by her endeavor to keep her identity as a woman and a vegetarian is long. It includes isolation from the society, social disdain and contempt, being ostracized by her own family members, spousal rape, divorce, imprisonment in the mental hospital, loss of identity, anorexia, schizophrenia, and even self-annihilation. In spite of the dire suffering she passively endures, she does not renounce her ardent desire to become a plant. Her doctor in the mental hospital explains that “*It isn’t that she’s not unconscious, exactly—rather, it is as if her conscious mind is so completely concentrated on something*”. This “*something*” is the desire to keep fighting against the reigning norms of the patriarchal, meat-eating society and to expose fundamental violence inherent in our eating.

² Since the novel’s publication, vegetarianism in Korea has seen a rise in popularity. While officially the number of people declaring vegetarianism stands at around 4%, some estimates place the number of people who practice ‘flexitarianism’ (adapting one’s diet to partially exclude meat) at 10 million, which would be almost 20% of Korea’s population.