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Manuscript Title: [Re]visioning Plant Consciousness and Eco-Subaltern Positionality: An Ecofeminist Critique of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract

Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* offers a radical rejection of meat consumption and challenges anthropocentric views of human identity, intelligence, and agency. This destabilizes the hierarchy and creates space to rethink and redefine the relationships between women, non-human beings, and the ecology. This article uses Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality to situate the novel at the intersection of Ecofeminism, Spivak's idea of Subalternity, and Michael Marder's Plant Philosophy. It critically examines plant consciousness and the shared eco-subaltern position of women and nature depicted in the text. The study follows Yeong-hye, the protagonist, as she transitions from a linguistic being to a non-linguistic one, blurring the boundary between human and non-human life and highlighting their dual marginalization as female and vegetal entities. It interprets her withdrawal from speech as a reflection of women's misrepresentation and denied agency, while also presenting

a narrative of resistance through silence, which addresses Spivak's key question, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Drawing on an ecofeminist perspective, the article analyses the bodily metamorphosis, critiquing how women's bodies, like nature, are controlled and violated within patriarchal structures. The interconnected forms of domination and exploitation of women and non-human nature through Yeong-hye's body become a site for resistance, societal control, and personal clash of agency, echoed in the repeated phrase 'I am not an animal anymore'. The study adopts a qualitative approach using close reading to critique key sections of the text in alignment with interdisciplinary theories and to re-vision the novel *The Vegetarian* as a critical space for rethinking coexistence and agency beyond the paradigms of anthropocentrism.

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, Plant philosophy, Eco-subalternity, Resistance, Dualisms*.

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Introduction

> *"I am not an animal anymore sister. I don't need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight*." (Kang 154)

Yeong-hye's movement from human exceptionalism towards a vegetal being challenges the preconceived notions of consciousness and agency associated with humans. It also unsettles the boundaries that hierarchically distinguish human, non-human animals, and vegetal lives. Thus, her vegetal insistence highlights the conceptual and material space through which the relation between gender, power, and species can be reimagined.

Kang's narrative, when read in context with the paradigm of dualism— Human/Non-human, Man/Woman, Culture/Nature, Reason/Emotion, Self/Other— historically and culturally functioned as a set of systems that have maintained and empowered one term of these dualistic binaries while the other remains subordinated. These differential binaries sustain and reinforce power and oppression. As Val Plumwood asserts:

> The process of domination forms culture and constructs identity, the inferiorised group must internalise this inferiorisation in its identity and collude in this low valuation, honouring the values of the centre, which form the dominant social values. (Plumwood 47)

Plumwood's formulation thus provides a theoretical framework for Yeong-hye's transformation, disrupting the anthropocentric logic that privileges masculine rationality over feminine embodiment. In this context, the intersectionality of theoretical lenses used in the present paper emerges as significant. These intersectional perspectives create space to reimagine and destabilize the ontological boundaries between human and non-human existence, while critically examining how agency and subjectivity are differently distributed across species within the power structure.

This also raises critical questions about anthropocentric conceptions of intelligence and consciousness, as well as the conceptual boundaries that define the human and non-human worlds. It simultaneously challenges the historically constructed division between culture and nature. For centuries, the Western philosophical framework has conceptualized nature not as a living entity but as a passive resource for human consumption, domination, and control—reducing it to an object whose value derives from its usefulness. Plumwood identifies this as a broader structure of Western dualism. She observes:

> The natural world and the biosphere have been treated as a dump, as forming the unconsidered, instrumentalised and unimportant background to 'civilised' human life; they are merely the setting or stage on which what is really important, the drama of human life and culture, is played out. (Plumwood 69)

Therefore, the Eurocentric philosophies and their privileges of rational consciousness produce a hierarchical conception of subjectivity in which humans are established as the normative centre of existence. This is rooted in the Cartesian philosophical dictum—*cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) that marginalizes other living entities that do not conform to the defined model of cognitive existence expressed through rationality, speech, and autonomy, i.e., nature and non-human animals. This marginalization, therefore, contributes to their eco-subaltern position within the defined structure.

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The hierarchy becomes problematic in contemporary critical discourses, as consciousness itself is treated as an exclusively human capacity and the legitimacy of subjectship depends upon the ability to articulate oneself through dominant structures of reason and language. Within this conceptual framework, the study develops the notion of eco-subaltern positionality, which brings together Spivak's theory of subalternity, Michael Marder's plant philosophy, and ecofeminist critique.

This concept does not suggest an equivalence between women and nature; rather, it identifies the intersecting structures through which both women and the non-human world have been instrumentalized, silenced, and excluded from the dominant definition of agency and subjectivity. Thus, Spivak's famous question "Can the subaltern speak?" occupies a primal space in the study as it extends beyond the conventional anthropocentric subject to question who owns rationality and discursive agency. This legitimacy of voice and agency also raises the question; what forms of life are excluded from the dominant, fixed definition of anthropocentric rationality?

Marder's plant thinking challenges these presumed notions through his philosophical reflection on vegetal lives as a form of living existence that complicates conventional distinctions between human and non-human. This reimagines consciousness beyond the Cartesian concept of rationality. The subalternity of nature, therefore, is about the conditions produced by dominant systems that deprive non-human lives of their own assertiveness. An ecofeminist perspective further highlights that dualisms, ontological boundaries, and other differences are constructed and are not politically neutral.

The historical interconnection of women with nature, emotion, and passivity has contributed to the devaluation of feminine and non-human forms of existence simultaneously. The intersections of these theoretical lenses therefore expose the shared logic of domination through which patriarchal and anthropocentric systems determine whose existence is valued, whose agency is acknowledged, and whose voice can be heard. Thus, eco-subaltern positionality becomes crucial for examining the marginalized position of subjects whose forms of existence blur the anthropocentric categories.

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* occupies this critical space, revealing that an individual's actions, knowledge, and modes of self-expression are shaped by historically constructed systems of social conventions and normative understanding. These structures also influence our habits, behaviours, and decisions. These influences are evident in the novel's narrative

technique, through which an unsettling account of the protagonist, Yeong-hye, unfolds. Her experiences are presented through three distinct perspectives: her unnamed husband, her brother-in-law, and her sister In-hye, but not through the protagonist herself.

This narrative displacement foregrounds how the subaltern subject Yeong-hye is interpreted and represented. Her refusal of language, the rejection of meat consumption, and the gradual transformation towards a vegetative being trace her personal alienation as an act of resistance against the constructed, normalized understandings of embodiment and accepted behaviour in society. Through her transformation, she blurs the dualistic boundaries between Human/Non-human, Rational/Irrational, Self/Other, and Subject/Object. This critical perspective on the intersections of patriarchal authority and cultural norms consequently exposes how dominant structures enforce themselves upon individuals.

They also define boundaries of acceptable existence, while delegitimizing forms of resistance outside of the normative structure by rendering them unintelligible or pathological. By subjecting Yeong-hye to these intersecting confrontations, the narrative exposes the patriarchal violence embedded within these normalized systems of acceptable living. Consequently, her body becomes a contested site where suppression and resistance both intersect. The resistance thus extends beyond an individual rejection to the dominant structure that rejects ethical consideration and reinforces the treatment of nature as consumable.

Her resistance further highlights that attempts to unsettle the normative structures are frequently put up for surveillance and control. The article therefore examines Yeong-hye's journey as both a subaltern and a vegetal being, interrogating how her movement from human towards a non-human life illuminates the complexities of marginalization within the anthropocentric structure.

The study thus attempts to [re]vision plant consciousness through Yeong-hye's transformative journey and to interrogate her as an eco-subaltern subject. Consequently, the article interprets her incomprehensible condition not merely as an escape from violence and bodily subjugation, but also as an ontological shift that questions established understanding of consciousness, agency, and resistance**.** Thereby, the study examines how the marginalization of women and subordination of non-humans emerge through interconnected power structures.

Theoretical Framework & Methodology

This study positions Han Kang's seminal work *The Vegetarian* at the intersection of ecofeminism, subaltern studies, and the emerging critical dimension on plant consciousness.

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The article adopts the anti-essentialist ecofeminist perspective, examining the parallels between patriarchal domination and anthropocentric supremacy. This demonstrates how the shared logic of domination is legitimized through hierarchical binaries be it privileging men over women, human over non-human, and culture over nature. This framework examines the interconnectedness of gender and refusal of normative practices, exposing boundaries that govern the lives of human, animal, and vegetal life. It provides a critical understanding of the structural dichotomy that reinforces the subordination of the "other".

Gayatri Spivak's theorization of the subaltern provides a further conceptual grounding for examining Yeong-hye's marginalization or 'othering'. This illuminates the structural conditions that render the voice of marginalized subjects unintelligible within dominant structures of representation. This provides an analytical framework for understanding Yeong-hye's refusal to submit to socio-cultural expectations, thereby becoming unintelligible. Her resistance eventually turns into withdrawal from speech, food, and human life form. Consequently, her gradual desirelessness is interpreted through medicalized language rather than understood as an act of dissent.

This study, therefore, extends the question of subalternity to ecological representations through the concept of eco-subaltern positionality. This describes the space in which both marginalized human subjects and non-human lives are positioned outside of the dominant discursive frameworks of recognition and agency. The study also engages with the perspective of plant humanities to question the privileging of human consciousness as the accepted measure of intelligence, agency, and existence.

Within this framework, Yeong-hye's vegetal transformation disrupts the conventional human/non-human binary. This finds its discourse in Michael Marder's philosophical perspectives on vegetal being, in which he dismantles the Aristotelian system of hierarchy by suggesting that plants are conscious beings that exhibit intelligence, memory, and communication. Therefore, Yeong-hye's identification with vegetal beings destabilizes this conventional understanding and demands consideration of consciousness beyond the anthropocentric categories. Consequently, this intersects a shared world of vegetal life, ethics, and ecological thought and offers a distinctive approach to examining Yeong-hye's identification with plant life.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative interpretive close reading that is combined with theoretical applications to Kang's narrative. Particular attention is given to

symbolism, recurring imagery of violence and meat, Yeong-hye's repetitive assertions and desire for bodily transformation, and narrative structure. These metaphors trace the non-essentialist interconnectedness of structures of domination, while highlighting the unstable and ambiguous space of Yeong-hye and her metamorphosis that continues to survive in the unresolved negotiations of resistance and agency.

Literature Review

Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* (2007) has generated extensive theoretical attention and diverse criticism of gender, violence, embodiment, vegetarianism, madness, and bodily transformation. Existing scholarship has approached Yeong-hye's vegetarianism and her complex transformation through multiple theoretical lenses, such as feminism, posthumanism, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies. The scholarship examined in this article unsettles conventional boundaries of human/nonhuman, sanity/madness, and analyses the relationship of the body and the environment.

At the same time, these approaches reveal a critical space to examine the mutual connectedness between gender and species-based hierarchies and how Yeong-hye's vegetal transformation exposes the conditions through which agency and subjectivity are constructed and legitimized. Thus, this forms an interdisciplinary space for [re]reading the novel that goes beyond singular literary analysis. Joori Joyce Lee's article "Touching Surfaces: Gestures of Love toward the Wounded Sister in Han Kang's The Vegetarian" attends to bodily surfaces, sensory experience, touch, smell, taste, and dreams as other materialisms through which Yeong-hye's refusal is articulated.

Her approach offers an important intervention because it does not reduce Yeong-hye to a symbolic representation of patriarchal oppression; instead, it recognizes the body as a material site through which knowledge, resistance, and desire become perceptible. Her analysis complicates the representational understanding of vegetal imagery as symbols of resistance, and interprets sunlight and Yeong-hye's vegetal contact as a relation outside of the coercive human contact(s) that structure her life. Her discussion also places dreams within a broader history of feminist reading, which she rejects, redirecting her attention from what dreams supposedly mean to how Yeong-hye's dreams in the novel expose the violence that eventually becomes materially and sensorially experienced through her body.

The Foucauldian reading of Kang's *The Vegetarian* in "Power, Patriarchy and the Post-Human Subject: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*" examines

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the regulation of Yeong-hye's body through the interconnected oppression of sovereign and disciplinary powers. The article analyses and establishes the relationship between power, patriarchy, and bodily autonomy and discusses Yeong-hye's transformation into a vegetal being through a post-human perspective. The study further emphasizes the mechanism of discipline and resistance by drawing upon Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, *The History of Sexuality,* and *Psychiatric Power*. The authors Munir and Liaqat conceptualize family as both a social institution and a psychiatric facility, highlighting how it projects Yeong-hye as a subject that needs medical correction.

Jesook Song, Michelle Cho, and Eunjung Kim's chapter "Against Confinement: Degeneration, Mental Disability, and the Conditions of Nonviolence in *The Vegetarian*" extends this discussion through the inclusion of mental disability, institutionalization, heteronormativity, and biopolitical regulation. He relocates Yeong-hye's vegetarianism within the structures of sexuality, productivity, and national development. The article emphasizes how Yeong-hye's refusal of meat develops alongside a rejection of sexual desire, marriage, and conventional forms of human sociality. Her "non-normative desire and desirelessness" (Kim 159) becomes unintelligible in the social order, which connects to the state's emphasis on population growth and suicide prevention. Thus, this demonstrates how human life cannot be separated from biopolitical structures.

Kim further examines Yeong-hye's institutionalization and force-feeding as a site upon which "ableist juridico-medical" (Kim 158) power attempts to restore the normative boundaries. Instead, her vegetal existence acts as a form of non-violent existential refusal against patriarchal and anthropocentric violence. This study also complicates the distinction between human and nonhuman suffering as it questions the connections between "the culled bodies of animals and people who died in institutions" (Kim 158). This extends the ecofeminist approach as, apart from highlighting an interconnection between women and animals, it investigates the institutional mechanisms through which lives are subjected to different forms of violence.

Laura Wright's discussion of *The Vegetarian*in "The Planned Cow and No End to Meat: Veganism and Disordered Eating" enages with feminist food studies as she situates the cultural tendency to interpret women's dietary refusal as having eating disorders. The discussion complicates vegetarianism through a binary- an act of ethical consideration versus an act of psychological pathology- highlighting how social and cultural institutions define 'normal'. She offers a comparative argument of *The Edible Woman*, *Life & Time of Michael K*, and *Nervous*

Conditions, highlighting how food practices connect gender, cultural identity, colonialism, politics, and body regulation. Wright therefore demonstrates that choosing veganism and eventually Yeong-hye's food refusal occupies an unstable position between agency and autonomy, resistance and coercion.

Together, these approaches reveal the diverse theoretical scholarship on *The Vegetarian,* emphasized through feminist resistance, gendered violence, vegetarianism, posthumanism, disability, biopolitical regulations and institutionalization, and ethical consideration. Synthesising these critical perspectives has enriched the understanding of Yeong-hye's refusal and resistance, yet a significant gap remains. The limitation of the existing scholarship is not the absence of a single theoretical perspective; rather, it is the integration of the multiple dimensions that already exist. The existing scholarship understands Yeong-hye's transformation in two ways- either as an escape from anthropocentric violence, or as pathological anorexic withdrawal.

However, these critical readings pay less attention to her vegetal transformation which moves beyond a medicalized symptom or symbol of liberation and considers it, instead, as a space that unsettles normative modes of existence and exposes the boundaries through which agency is recognized. Within this oscillating positioning, the present study uses eco-subaltern positionality as a critical intervention. This concept does not essentialize the connection of women and nature; rather, it highlights the structurally produced position occupied by subjects whose choices and expressions of agency or resistance are rendered unintelligible by the dominant discursive structures.

Reading *The Vegetarian*: Refusal, Violence and Transformation

The novel's opening statement, narrated by Yeong-hye's husband, establishes the normative position that Yeong-hye occupies within the patriarchal structure: "Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way" (Kang 3). This description is significant, as her "unremarkableness" exposes her conformity to the societal expectations of an obedient wife and the transformative power of her dream. Her inclination towards vegetarianism now becomes her first and major act of defiance against the patriarchal expectation of an obedient wife; thus, a private dietary choice consequently becomes a refusal of the relational and cultural expectation imposed upon her.

This leads to unsympathetic changes in their relationship. When Yeong-hye does not perform ordinary domestic routines, they turn out to be disobedience and against the culture,

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where her husband almost complains: "In the five years we'd have been married this was the first time I'd had to go to work without her handling me my things and seeing me off" (Kang 11). Within this context, non-vegetarian food symbolically represents familial norms and expectations within the novel. Yeong-hye's decision to throw away the meat therefore functions not merely as a rejection of food, but is also a representational act of rejecting the entire system imposed upon her.

The response of her husband was not of concern, but rather of confusion and anger, similar to the response of society and the relationships evolving around her. His understanding of a "reasonable" change reveals the narrow boundaries within which Yeong-hye's agency is recognized. He explains:

> As far as I was concerned, the only reasonable grounds for altering one's eating habits were the desire to lose weight, an attempt to alleviate certain physical ailments, being possessed by an evil spirit, or having your sleep disturbed by indigestion. In any other case, it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as mine had done. (Kang 14)

Thus, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism can be understood as an early expression of the eco-subaltern positionality, where her resistance emerges through the refusal of the dominant structures that regulate both her body and her relationship with the non-human world. This movement from refusal to transformation therefore becomes crucial to understanding Yeong-hye's trajectory. The external violence of slaughter and meat consumption represented in the novel internalizes into dreams, memories, and bodily consciousness of Yeong-hye, consequently turning her body into a site through which refusal and ethical consideration are articulated.

Yeong-hye's Attempt to Transcend Violence through Dreams

The dream imagery in the novel serves as a gateway to transcend the system of violence surrounding Yeong-hye while also revealing the agency that she holds in a patriarchal society and its expectations. They reveal the normalized violence against non-human beings and articulate her growing rejection of meat consumption and act as an expression of her internal consciousness. Therefore, what appears to be a psychological disturbance is the struggle to comprehend and resist the normalized violence. This entangled oppression experienced by

Yeong-hye and animals blurs the boundaries of exploitation and establishes a connection between the two.

The sequence of horrible dreams is filled with images of human brutality towards animals and their slaughter, and the experiences that Yeong-hye has witnessed throughout her life. These experiences become internalized within her, resurfacing through dreams that connect the unconscious memories and brutal impressions with the conscious human actions of bloodshed and horror embedded in the meat-eating culture. Thus, the psychological impact of these dreams highlights the violence she has encountered and its relationality to her present consciousness, which continues to occupy her body and mind. This inseparability is represented in the vivid imagery of the dream:

> Long bamboo sticks 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. (Kang 12)

This vivid imagery of blood, flesh, and "blood-soaked clothes" creates an expression of entrapment, as there is "no exit"; reflecting Yeong-hye's inability to distance herself from the psychological distress and the violence that has embedded in her consciousness through ethical awakening. The horrifying dream of violence, bloodshed, and butchery, described as "dreams of murder", "a palimpsest of horror", and "violent acts" (Kang 28), therefore represents the trauma in Yeong-hye's body that resurfaces through non-verbal means.

The connection between psychological and physical embodiment becomes explicit when Yeong-hye attempts to explain her refusal of meat consumption to her husband: "I had a dream… and that's why I don't eat meat anymore" (Kang 16). Although her statement directly explains her change in dietary choices, it doesn't align with her husband's normative view. This isolates Yeong-hye, as her husband's inability to understand and interpret her concludes her behaviour as evidence of becoming mentally ill.

Her dream also connects human violence with animal slaughter, exposing the boundaries of institutionalized violence. Her act of refusal is an indication of refusing to participate in a system that normalizes anthropocentric violence towards non-human animals. This recognizes a system of interconnectedness between Yeong-hye and the non-human animals. Their shared exposure to violence transcends physical connections, challenging the anthropocentric hierarchy that chooses to position humans as separate from other species.

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Yeong-hye's connection with the animal suffering, therefore, finds its expression within her body and consciousness. She herself mentions:

> The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there. Blood and flesh, all those butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny, and though the physical remnants were excreted, their lives stick stubbornly to my insides. (Kang 49).

These nightmares affect her both externally and internally, suggesting the awareness of her own participation in the system of violence through her previous acceptance of a carnivorous diet. Those violent dreams also subtly parallel the violent history of Korea through Yeong-hye's father, who is a war veteran with his rigid and old rules, disciplinary habits, and set of ideologies. He metaphorically represents the previous generation who are living with a mark of violence, war, and military experiences, devoid of gentle sentiments. This becomes explicit at the dinner table incident: "My father-in-law stooped slightly as he thrust the pork at my wife's face, a lifetime's rigid discipline unable to disguise his advanced age." (Kang 44)

His forceful act of making Yeong-hye consume meat becomes a microcosm of the society and the filial ways of submitting to the structure of patriarchy under authoritarian control. Yeong-hye's nightmares, therefore, present both collective and personal memories of experiences and actions, exposing the cultural pattern and societal structure. This connects personal violence with a broader culture of discipline and coercion. Thus, in this context, Yeong-hye's dream becomes a psychological and ethical space of resistance. Her movement from witnessing violence, to internalizing it, and finally refusing participation pushes towards her attempt to transcend conventional human existence towards a vegetal mode of being.

Eco-Subaltern Positionality: Yeong-hye and Plants

The application of Spivak's conceptualization of "subaltern" (i.e. those who exist outside the hegemonic power structure and whose voice cannot be heard within the dominant discourse) to the present study of *The Vegetarian* reveals Yeong-hye's transformation into a plant as significant to her subaltern position. At the beginning of the novel, she is identified as a character who is valued only for her utility and her non-complaining attitude. This led Mr. Cheong to describe her as "completely unremarkable in every way" (Kang 3).

Her identity is constructed as that of a passive, unassertive person whose individual autonomy and agency are erased; this passivity becomes an ideal feminine trait within her social culture. These perceptions mark her position and worth within the structure of gender

and its expectations. She is accepted only when she conforms to these patriarchal expectations. However, these relationships around her change with her decision to adopt vegetarianism. The obedient wife soon becomes a burden, and her body serves as a site of ecological and structural resistance.

> But any minute now this long Sunday would no longer have to look at this woman. I expected that In-hye would take my place, and that the day after tomorrow my wife would be discharged. Discharged- in other words, 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 50)

Yeong-hye's experiences of burden and marginalization gradually reinforce her position as a subaltern. The inadequacy of the linguistic structure becomes significant, as her own speech fails to find recognition for her throughout the novel, which gradually contributes to her subaltern position. As the narrator observes: "There is nothing wrong with keeping quiet; after all, hadn't women traditionally been expected to be demure and re-strained?" (Kang 21) This rhetorical question complements the narrative structure of the novel, in which the sections are narrated through the perspectives of three different family members while Yeong-hye herself is never granted an autonomous narrative voice.

Therefore, her perspective is mediated through perceptions and judgments of others. This structural choice reinforces the condition of subalternity— her experience remains largely unarticulated within the dominant discursive structure. Her attempt to explain the rejection of meat through the simple response, "I had a dream," and her refusal to eat meat at the table are considered incomprehensible in the dominant discourse. Her decision is consequently dismissed as irrational and inappropriate by the relationships, cultural expectations, and social structures surrounding her. The silence then soon turns to voice through her body expression as she rejects the meat consumption forced upon her by her father, displaying resistance of a subaltern identity through her bodily and dietary choice rather than conventional speech.

The resistance becomes more pronounced through her vegetarianism and bodily metamorphosis. Her self-harm, in which she cuts her wrist open with a fruit knife, and her selective choice of not explaining herself to anyone, signify the structure of control and domination where the speech of the subaltern is misrepresented as madness, insanity, or voicelessness. "The only thing that was especially unusual about her was that she didn't eat

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meat. [H]er husband had decided that her vegetarianism was proof that she would never be 'normal' again." (Kang 69-70)

Within this converging space, Yeong-hye's position can be viewed through the perspective of eco-subalternity. In this study, eco- subalternity refers to the space occupied by the marginalized subject be it humans or non-humans; who are being positioned outside of the dominant structures of recognition. This is because their bodies, speech, agency, or forms of existence do not conform to the anthropocentric and patriarchal norms. This concept, therefore, intersects gender marginalization and the hierarchies that privilege androcentric and anthropocentric forms of knowledge and existence. Yeong-hye's desire for the transformation into a vegetal being allows these two intersecting dimensions to converge.

Plants occupy a similar parallel position to that of subalterns in the novel. Within the Eurocentric philosophical tradition of the Great Chain of Beings, plants are positioned at the lowest level of the ontological hierarchy. They are assigned value primarily in terms of their utility to humans rather than being recognized as independent beings. This hierarchical ordering is further reinforced by the anthropocentric framework that denies or marginalizes plant consciousness. Even when forms of vegetal agency are acknowledged, they remain outside of the dominant structure of recognition asthe Other.

> The plant's absolute silence puts it in the position of the subaltern. The absence of voice in plants does not preclude their spatial, material self-expression, though it does pose additional hurdles to the ethical treatment of vegetal life. Our incapacity to communicate with plants the way we do with other human beings (and even with certain animals) by means of a vocal interaction runs the risk of objectifying them or, at best, speaking for them, in their defense, if not in their place. (Marder 178)

Both Yeong-hye and plants in the novel are, therefore, interconnected by their silence—Yeong-hye remains incomprehensible, and plants cannot communicate through human language, leaving them both outside the system of dominant discourse. Their forms of consciousness and communication remain largely illegible throughout the novel. Similar to plants, Yeong-hye communicates and resists not through words but through her bodily transformation as a vegetal being, increasingly demanding sunlight and water for her existence.

Becoming Plant: A Consciousness Transcending Boundaries

Yeong-hye's attempt to escape the violence of the dominant categories in the structure leads to her transformation into a plant-like being. The rejection of all forms of exploitation compels her to embrace a vegetal identity instead of aligning herself with any other animal. Towards the final section of the novel, she comes to identify herself as one with the vegetal being, mentioning her sister,

> Look, sister, I'm doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands…they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly… yes, I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread them wide. (Kang 127)

Her transformative journey provides a striking parallel to the contemporary theory of plant sentience and its distributed intelligence systems, asserting that Yeong-hye doesn't descend into insanity, rather she evolves towards an alternative form of awareness and consciousness. Her gradual rejection of speech reflects nonverbal communication among plants, in which meaning is conveyed through spatial and chemical signals rather than linguistic structures, challenging the human- centered model of language and highlighting plant agency in the anthropocentric world. As is similar to what Marder observes:

> The language of plants belongs in the hyper-materialist tradition that (in Heidegger's "totality-of-significations" and in Walter Benjamin's "language of things" or "the language as such") is alive to the spatial relations and articulations between beings, animate or inanimate. Plant-thinking, in turn, cannot but rely on material signification that bypasses conscious intentionality and coincides with the very phenomenality—the modes of appearance—of vegetal life. (Marder 80)

Yeong-hye's refusal of food and water, along with her belief that her survival is possible through photosynthesis, and her gradual adoption of a plant-like existence, reflect her growing plant consciousness. This transformation challenges and defies the anthropocentric assumption of human consciousness and the hierarchical ordering of intelligence, all while questioning the Great Chain of Being. She chooses to become the marginalized Other, instead of becoming a

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participant in the hegemonic structure of violence. This act of self-positioning highlights the possibilities of post-human modes of existence.

Her transformation exemplifies Marder's philosophy of plant thinking, which asserts that embodied intelligence is not centralized in a brain but rather distributed throughout an organism. Yeong-hye's transformed consciousness is assumed to be madness and diagnosed as schizophrenia, reflecting that the non-normative experience of knowledge is marginalized and medicalized. In the process of challenging dominant epistemological and social narratives, her opinions are framed in the institutional understandings of control and treatment, thereby reducing her from an autonomous individual to a medical subject that needs to be regulated and disciplined.

> Fifteen to twenty percent of anorexia nervosa patients will starve to death. Even when they're down to nothing but skin and bone, the subject is still convinced that they've put on weight. There can be all manner of psychological factors at play […] but Kim Yeong-hye's is one of those particular cases where the subject refuses to eat while suffering from schizophrenia. (Kang 140)

Yeong-hye's increasing desire to 'become a tree' and her withdrawal from anthropocentric life deconstructs and splits the metaphysical unity of body-soul and mind-body, thus increasing her identification with plant life. Her desire collapses the idea of theory and practice into life itself, where thinking and becoming no longer differ from each other, and 'thinking' itself becomes 'being', thus aligning with the vegetal beings, as:

> Vegetal life practically deconstructs the metaphysical split between the soul and the body, eliminating, in the same gesture, the classical opposition between theory and practice. The material, extended, and organic character of vegetal thought, grounded in a particular mode of being shared by all living creatures, is at one with the activities of nourishment and generation. In this sense, plant thinking is active through and through; it has no practical effects because in and of itself it is a habitus of living. (Marder 173-174)

Therefore, Yeong-hye's transformation signifies the rejection of the hegemonic discourse of medical institutions, patriarchy, anthropocentricism, and speech to identify more

with the plants and trees— destabilizing the human subject of 'I', questioning the Cartesian idea of a centred form of thinking, and diluting more into a subject-less and plant-mode of thinking, undermining the believed traditional anthropocentric notion of the human model of intelligence. As Marder explains:

> The competing vegetal modulations of the brain, transposing either a top–down tree structure or a horizontal grass layout onto neural organization, are in any event beholden to plant-thinking, which induces the non-identity of human thought, prompted to mold itself in the likeness of what it is not, namely the plant and its thinking. At the core of the subject, who proclaims: "I think," lies the subjectless vegetal it thinks, at once shoring up and destabilizing the thinking of this "I." (Marder 163)

This destabilization of the human "I" through vegetal thinking can be traced in Yeong-hye's own attempt to move beyond the boundaries of human existence. Her insistence on maintaining her plant survival, through an explanation to her sister:

> "Do you know how I found out? Well, I was in a dream, and I was standing on my head… leaves were growing from my body, and roots were sprouting out from my hands. So I dug down into earth" (Kang 148).

Her understanding of the plants as the only beings that do not inflict violence on any other life forms justifies her identification with the vegetal beings, thereby radically rejecting the human social order sustaining on violence, hierarchy, and exploitation. Her attempt to associate herself more closely with plants is to breathe freely beyond the confinement of the restricted social order. This rejection of hierarchical and violent systems also opens an ecofeminist perspective to look at Yeong-hye's transformation.

[Re]Visioning through an Ecofeminist Lens

The [re]visioning of *The Vegetarian* vividly illustrates the interconnected forms of domination and exploitation. This highlights the ecofeminist concern i.e. the entanglement of the exploitative identity of women and nature, including non-human animals that are often excluded from the normative discourse. This is revealed through Yeong-hye's body, which becomes a battleground for resistance, societal control, and personal clash of agency. Her husband views her as an object of convenience, appreciating her for being "completely

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unremarkable". He positively considers Yeong-hye's unquestioning performance of domestic responsibilities despite his habitual neglect.

However, when for once she doesn't conform to the normative expected conventional wife role through her acceptance of vegetarianism he abandons her, exposing the conditional nature of acceptance. With Yeong-hye's resistance to consuming meat, her father attempts to force-feed her and then physically assaults her for her refusal, insisting that this discipline would restore her older habitual food consumption. He says "If she eats it once, she'll eat it again." (Kang 39). These incidents expose the patriarchal and anthropocentric domination that seek to discipline Yeong-hye's body, which parallels the domination of the natural world, thus reflecting the ecofeminist lens in the novel. As Greta Gaard explains in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature:*

> Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, eco feminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. (Gaard 1)

Also in the novel, her brother-in-law exploits her vulnerability for his artistic projects by painting floral motifs on her naked body and filming her. This demonstrates how nature, when filtered through the male gaze, can become a site of aesthetics and commodification rather than a genuine ethical engagement. Therefore, this incident highlights a sense of patriarchal control that normalizes both violence and the objectification of women and non-human animals. The attempts of force-feeding imposed upon her in the hospital echo the violence exercised by her father, exposing the interconnected structure of power that operates through the control of resistance and suppression of any dissent.

These repeated events mirror the expected passivity within the system that disciplines agency. Consequently, Yeong-hye is constructed only as a resource whose value is determined by her capacity for convenience and obedience. Her vegetal transformation signifies radical rejection of the hierarchies of both human consciousness and patriarchal domination, thereby embracing an alternative mode of existence that destabilizes the constructed binaries of man/woman, reason/emotion, culture/nature, mind/body, and human/nonhuman- binaries that function as mechanisms of exclusion and domination.

Therefore, her body becomes the battleground against these intersecting systems of existing domination, while her refusal of food, particularly meat, represents a rejection of the interconnected systems of violence, exploitation, and inherited domination that govern women, non-human animals, and the ecology. As Kang writes, "This was the body of a beautiful young woman, conventionally an object of desire, and yet it was a body from which all desires had been eliminated" (Kang 85). Thus, Yeong-hye's transformation from an obedient wife to a post-human figure can be interpreted as a radical act of ecofeminist reclamation. She is positioned as a subaltern subject, whose resistance emerges through her bodily autonomy of a vegetal being over language within a system of coercion and control. This reconceptualizes resistance and agency beyond the humanist approach.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* reimagines plant consciousness and eco-subaltern positionality through a vivid exploration of resistance and the play of agency in the interconnected systems of domination. Through Yeong-hye's transformation from a conventional, ordinary, and obedient wife to a vegetal being, the article studies the fundamental assumptions about consciousness, agency, and the boundaries of the human and the non-human. It also highlights how resistance blurs these rigid boundaries of social exclusion through major incidents that intersect and shape the possibility of reimagining.

By resonating with plant consciousness, Yeong-hye chooses an alternative mode of being that transcends the conventional boundaries of human existence, also rejecting the violence associated with it. The study re-reads the novel through the intersection of plant consciousness and ecofeminism, highlighting the eco-subaltern positionality of both Yeong-hye and non-human animals. This [re]visioning demonstrates how Yeong-hye's journey interconnects various forms of violence against women and nature, suggesting that these oppressions share a common conceptual root that chooses to silence and reject the voice against the dominant structure.

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