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## The Female Body as a Site of Resistance: A Radical Feminist Study of Violence and Control in The Vegetarian

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper delves deep into the analysis of Female body as site/agency of resistance in The Vegetarian by Han Kang by employing the critical lens of radical Feminist theory. The novel portrays the dystopian plot of a Protagonist Yeong-Hye who stands in opposition of stipulated social and cultural norms by relinquishing the meat eating and turns vegetarian. An ordinary woman, Yeong-Hye, decides unconventionally which signifies the unilateral freedom of body as the meat consumption was not only a social tradition but also a familial norm. The outright shift from meat to vegetables storms the family and challenges the social norms. The decision sparked a conflict leading to the repudiation of sexuality and human identity. The decision was normal in the perspective of Yeong-Hye but response was unwanted and conflictual. The conflict manifests the urge of feminine freedom to choice and the way social control system resists woman from personal choices and bodily autonomy. The research paper draws on the feminist critical framework of Kate Millet and Andrea to interpret and analyze the dystopian experiences of Yeong-Hye as a female body in the Vegetarian. To understand the deeper layers of underlying meanings and concepts, the crucial patriarchal elements are discussed which tend to cover, restrict, regulate, discipline and appropriate the female body. Millet on the one hand underscored the subjugation of women via ideological tenets and physical enforcement. Meanwhile, Andrea situates that women suffer at the hands of patriarchal chains by the means of objectification of violence and the violation of human body. Besides, the paper seeks to relate the Michel Foucault's concept of Disciplinary power in order to view at the novel plot as the body of Yeong-Hye undergoes strict surveillance, normalization and punishment. The paper treats the novel beyond its literal underpinnings. The meat in the novel is not looked at as a food choice but a symbolic element of rejection and non-compliance and non-conformity. Yeong-Hye in the novel transforms into plantlike creature and flee from the sexual interactions which entails her deep desire to escape the socially stipulated chains as both consumption and control complicate her life. The refusal or physical resistance carries many symbols, from getting rid of unseen prison, fomenting her identity as a female and the way to destroy her identity too. Consequently, the article brings about the minute details, contradictions, concepts and stipulations with reference to the radical feminist ideas. The female body turns out to be a medium of denial against the social control. The story of Yeong-Hye proves that both liberation and destruction can flick out of resistance and most probably the destruction. The novel is replete with the underpinnings which offers a solid ground for patriarchal critique.*

**Keywords:** Female Body, Resistance, Radical Feminist, Study of Violence, The Vegetarian, Feminist Ideas.

### Introduction

The female body has surfaced as a field of critical study and site in the realm of the incumbent Feminist discourse which studies the intersection and contention of power, control on female body. The patriarchal setup not only treat women as biological entity but socially constructed identity to maintain the gender divisions and hierarchy. The learned writers of feminism and women studies have deeply investigated the existence of women in the society, finding female body as both a site of domination and harbinger of revolt. The vegetarian in this context depicts the profoundly disturbing yet logically rich discovery of politics played on female body. This is showcased with the prism of Yeong-Hye's life when she renounces the normative practice of meat consumption. At literate level, the novel pictures a novel which unexpectedly props up unwanted consequences followed when main character Yeong gives up eating meat. This singular and individual act of giving up shakes the roots of cultural and social order of patriarchy. This shows how singular preferences disturb the patriarchal bondage. In fact, this was not a refusal of single person but a overt challenge to the family order and male domination order. As a result, her body becomes an excising pad where disciplinary power is exercised. Yeong's husband tends to convince her for conformity and her father turns violent in enforcing her to retreat to meat. Given the strict reactions from her husband and father, Yeong's body remains subject to constant surveillance, inquiry and coercion. This phenomenon relates with Michael faucalt's concept of Docile body which is trained, shaped and designed to obey the system, pressurizing the individuals to comply with the established power structures.

The control and surveillance in the novels are technically reflected through the mechanism of narration. Yeong is even the protagonist of the novel, ironically herself or personal narration is diluted which raises the concern that the control is dynamic. The narration of her story is carried out by her brother, sister and brother-in-law, singling out the textual voice of Yeong-Hye. The exclusion is not natural but orchestra to minimize or dim the voice of women. This coincides with Kate Millet's identification of Patriarchal mechanism which denies the female subjectivity and projects as objects and subservient of men in male-dominated society. Narrated from the perspectives of others, the identity of Yeong-Hye remains fragmented signifying the fragile role of women in social order.

Moreover, the novel provides a good example of various types of violence related to the preservation of patriarchal authority. This physical violence is shown in its most primitive level, in one of the most infamous scenes when Yeong-hye is force-fed meat by her father through violence. This scene represents the face of patriarchy, which is reacting to any infraction by taking violent actions against the victim. Along with physical violence, the author shows the use of psychological violence towards Yeong-hye who is continually called irrational, mentally sick and abnormal. The argument by Andrea Dworkin is that the patriarchal society is justified to employ coercive measures and control through the use of psychological violence. In this way, the main character is another victim of the oppressed woman.

In addition, sexual violence and objectivation of women are the key elements of the story. An example is when Yeong-hye has a brother-in-law who is obsessed with her and paints her body with flowers before filming her. Instead, Yeong-hye is an object of pure beauty, and the character shows this as he is greatly preoccupied with her purity as a woman later on. The actions of the character can be interpreted in terms of radical feminism that denounces the commercialization of women bodies. Because of this, the main character becomes unable to be.

The argument presented in this paper is that using a body, *The Vegetarian* offers an example of the body as a paradoxical place of resistance and at the same time a self-destructive location. In this paper, *The Vegetarian* will be put in the context of radical feminism and demonstrate how, in terms of her own bodily rebellion, Yeong-hye exposes the violence inherent in patriarchy but,

at the same time, sacrifices so much in the name of resistance to this order. It is not just a psychological process, but rather a political process as well because she rebels against the oppressive systems that dictate life in a patriarchal society. In this paper, we will seek to know how this body act of rebellion that will be discussed in the context of the concepts of Millett, Dworkin and Foucault eventually brings her down to her own destruction.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does the patriarchy work as a form of domination of the female body in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*?
2. What are the ways that Yeong-hye's body is used as a means of defiance of the patriarchal violence and disciplinary power?
3. What is the role of the activities of being a vegetarian, abstinence of sex and silence in developing body resistance?
4. In which ways are Yeong-hye being empowered, self-negating or her subjectivity is failing?
5. How does the novel complicate the line between resistance and mental breakdown from a feminist perspective and Foucauldian discipline?

### **Research Objectives**

To analyze the shapes of violence and oppression executed by patriarchal structures in the family, sex life and institutions in the case of *The Vegetarian*, based on the works of Kate Millett (1970) and Andrea Dworkin (1974).

In order to explore the idea of female body as a key element of resistance in the story through analysis of Yeong-hye's refusal from meat and sexuality.

In order to use the theory proposed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) to understand the functioning of disciplinary power and normalization practices in the novel.

To talk about the metaphorical change of Yeong-hye to the state of being like a plant as a complete denial of humanity.

To speak about the issue of feminist resistance and to think about what implications are caused by the act of resistance by the body.

In order to analyze the idea of female madness through the perspective of Elaine Showalter (*The Female Malady*, 1985).

### **Literature Review**

Since it was translated into English in 2015, *The Vegetarian* (2007) by Han Kang has become the subject of significant academic attention as a result of the portrayal of violence, bodily transformation, and subversion in a patriarchal system. The mysterious plot of *The Vegetarian* has been discussed by academics of several various theoretical approaches such as feminism, psychoanalysis, postmodernism, and trauma theory, and the fascinating role of Yeong-hye. Nevertheless, an examination of *The Vegetarian* in terms of radical feminism appears to be quite uncharted, although it is informative.

Several works of criticism have analyzed the novel in terms of violence and consumption by using meat as a symbol of oppression. The line "I had a dream" is the beginning of Yeong-hye's resistance against the practice of eating meat, which symbolizes an act of rejection of her ordinary life. Criticism on the role of meat consumption in the novel suggests that this practice is linked with the dominance in the culture of violence within the society, wherein violence becomes internalized and accepted. It corresponds with what ecofeminists like in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990) suggest regarding the connection between woman abuse and animal abuse. Nevertheless, despite its relevance to the issue at hand, this approach may be limited in addressing the specific challenge to patriarchal oppression.

An extensive amount of criticism regarding the novel has been published in relation to the themes of violence and consumption, with critics considering meat to be a metaphorical representation of the violence within the system. The scene when Yeong-hye says, I had a dream, she is saying something against the eating of meat, a symbolic breaking of the society norms. We may assume that the meat eating in the novel is a sign of the culture of glorifying violence and internalizing it. This type of analysis has been supported by ecofeminist approaches to literature, as seen in the work *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990). Though such a method provides considerable understanding of the character of the choice Yeong-hye makes, it does not take into account the meaning of this choice in terms of patriarchy and female sexuality.

The notion of sexual objectification has also been given much consideration considering the scenario of *The Vegetarian* as applied by radical feminists. The main source of reference that the scholars have in this respect is the book titled *Woman hating* published by Andrea Dworkin in which she expounds on the concept of objectifying women by describing them as objects of male lust. This theme is particularly eminent in the second part of the story, where the art project by the brother-in-law entails making the body of the protagonist a source of beauty by painting her naked body with flowers and recording the procedure. Such phenomenon is explainable by the idea of Dworkin of eroticizing female subjugation.

The theories of psychoanalysis have been an excellent source of material in the analysis of the novel as well. The dream analysis of Yeong-hye as well as the analysis of her psychological transitions is conducted on the background of her trauma portrayal, her awareness, and rebellion against the social conventions. It is noteworthy that rebelling of Yeong-hye is not regarded by the feminists as her psychiatric issue. Using a term of insanity to identify women in this scenario is one of the ways of maintaining patriarchal hegemony within the society. This statement corresponds with the thoughts that are presented in the book "*The Female Malady*" by Elaine Showalter.

Besides being knowledgeable about the aspects of surveillance and normalization as applied to the work, the use of the concept of power suggested by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* can also be used to get an insight into what is happening. The notion of docile bodies, introduced by Foucault, can be applied to the example of the constant monitoring of Yeong-hye, correcting and eventually incarcerating his actions. She does not fit in, breaking the conventions established in her community and this causes increasingly extreme actions to be taken.

Despite all these different critical perspectives, however, a clear lacuna emerges in terms of a holistic radical feminist critique that considers issues of violence, subjugation, and rebellion. Even though criticism has analyzed different elements of Yeong-hye's transformation process, not much has been done to understand how her body serves both as a means for patriarchal subjugation and defiance.

A critical analysis of the Punjab Women Protection Bill (2015): Are Women's Rights being enforced, or are they simply being erased? Rabia Aamir's "A Feminist Insight" is an analysis of the Punjab Women Protection Bill (2015) from the Postcolonialism and Islamic feminism point of view. The author argues, referring to feminist theories of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Sara Suleri and Asma Barlas, that the bill is rife with anti-feminist messages in its text and implementation, and is actually meant to protect the rights of men and promote their equality. According to the author, the legislative initiative threatens to place women in the position of victims and subalterns, instead of granting them social and intellectual empowerment. The other critical aspect is that it brings out the risks involved in adopting Western models of feminism without taking into account the indigenous cultures and Islam. It is evident from the application of Spivak's notion of subaltern and critique of post-colonial feminism by Suleri that it is necessary

to have a feministic discourse which is sensitive towards the culture and context of Pakistan. The author said that only by educating and reinterpretation of Islam, women empowerment will occur indeed

Although such a combination would help bridge the existing knowledge gap, it is the purpose of this study to combine the theories developed by the radical feminist scholars such as Millett (1970) and Dworkin (1974) and Foucault's notion of power in terms of disciplinary control as discussed in his work of 1975. In trying to demonstrate that Yeong-hye's body, in its refusal to eat meat, be sexual, and live like a person, is in itself an act of resistance against patriarchy, a form of resistance with little chance of success.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of the study is a radical feminist theory, but with post-structuralism and feminist literary approach, as a way of analyzing the simultaneous presence of the feminine body in *The Vegetarian* as a site of patriarchal violence and resistance to the oppression. In the analysis, there is the assumption of Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* (1970), whereby patriarchy is viewed as a political system that is supported by ideology and kinship; in this case, it is assumed that the family is the most significant mechanism that is used by patriarchy to control the female bodies. The patriarchal control is evident in the case of Yeong-hye where her husband wants her to conform and where her father is violent towards her body as a means of discipline.

This concept is also elaborated in *Woman Hating* (1974) when Andrea Dworkin talks about the structural system of objectification, sexual exploitation of the bodies of women in the patriarchy. In the novel, her brother-in-law transforms the body of Yeong-hye into a work of art by painting her naked body with flowers to demonstrate how female bodies are aestheticized, consumed and controlled by art and eroticism. To reinforce such feminist readings, in his book, *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Michel Foucault presents the notion of disciplinary power and the so-called docile body to demonstrate how modern organizations control people through monitoring, normalization, and medical power.

In addition, the idea of female madness as a social construct and imposition on the women who do not conform to the traditional gender norms through the book written by Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* (1985) provides another way of looking at this issue and perceiving the state of insanity that Yeong-hye finds herself in as a means of symbolic resistance instead of merely her mental breakdown. By integrating all these theories, it is possible to refer to the female body as an intersection space of violence, objectification, disciplining and social stigma within the framework of patriarchal ideology under the theoretical frame. Concerning this literary work, one can trace the opposition of Yeong-hye to the patriarchal order in her refusal to eat meat, engage in sex, and transform into a Plant.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

There will be an effort to give a critical overview of *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang in the section and this will be focused on four interrelated views of this work: patriarchy, violence, control, resistance through transformation and self-erasure, and resistance through collapse. According to radical feminist literature, namely *Sexual Politics* (1970) by Kate Millett, *Woman Hating* (1974) by Andrea Dworkin, *Discipline and Punish* (1975) by Michel Foucault and *The Female Malady* (1985) by Elaine Showalter, one might argue that in the case of the body of Yeong-hye, there is a dialectic

### **Patriarchal Violence and Control: The Body as a Disciplined Object**

When you look at the story in *The Vegetarian*, what the story starts with is what seems to be the commonplace in the sense that the protagonist in the story lives a life of being a good wife.

Nevertheless, this action becomes self-destructive with a methodical exposure of patriarchal violence when the protagonist chooses to become a vegetarian. Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1970) describes patriarchy as a structuring process of male domination in social institutions such as family, culture and ideology. The subservience requirement imposes its dominance on the body of Yeong-hye in her relationship as she is dominated by the male in her life.

The act of physical force is made clearer during the family dinner in which Yeong-hye's father makes sure that she eats the meat served before her. At this juncture, food assumes the role of a means of dominating the woman, which also occurs in the patriarchy, as introduced by Dworkin in *Woman Hating* (1974). As per her theory, patriarchal culture makes the normalization of violence against women common as well as camouflages such abuse as part of morality or discipline. Further, it is Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) which offers a very important theoretical lens with regard to the development of such violence towards institutional power. The shift of Yeong-hye defiance into insanity is a symptom of her medicalization, and thus, a depiction of the Foucault concept of a docile body, where non-conformity is subjected to control through surveillance and normalization. The last phase of such control, then, is the institution of the psychiatric asylum where the body of Yeong-hye is literally in a restraint.

Patriarchal violence in the novel has three dimensions, that is, domestic tyranny embodied in the husband, family tyranny embodied in the father and institutional tyranny embodied in psychiatry.

#### **The Female Body as Resistance: Vegetarianism and Refusal**

In this case, the body of Yeong-hye is the only way of resistance by which she can fight against the system of oppression. Vegetarianism is the first stage towards renouncing any violence in the society. Considering the radical feminist interpretation of Yeong-hye in 1974 by Dworkin, the rejection of meat by Yeong-hye is a protest against the logic of consumption of the patriarchy that excludes it among women as subject and object. Therefore, it is not only her biological or dietary opposition to patriarchy but also her ideological opposition.

Her resistance is further strengthened by refusing sex. Millett (1970) argues that as a woman in the institution of marriage, a sexual contract is involved in which her body forms a subject of exchange in exchange of legitimacy in the system. The resistance to her marital duties by Yeong-hye is used as a way of resisting this agreement and ideologies that accompany it.

It is also worth noting that Yeong-hye expresses no language to express the resistance to the oppressive regime and this fact is in agreement with feminist reading that lays emphasis on bodily activities in instances where language cannot communicate in situations of oppression.

#### **Transformation and Self-Erasure: Becoming Non-Human**

The resistance Yeong-hye forms continues to its ultimate manifestation as she learns to view herself as a plant, refuses to eat at all, and aims to eliminate her human nature. This radical change will be one more step towards the comprehension of the complicated concept of resistance as an action that entails far more than social disobedience.

Under the Foucauldian lens, when the disciplinary systems of power become stronger, resistance may be manifested in the form of denying any categories that form in these systems. The fact that Yeong-hye considers herself to be a tree implies that she tries to avoid the human condition that she considers to be violent and sexualized in its nature.

However, this change is also a sign of self-destruction as Yeong-hye no longer recognizes the borders between the human and non-human bodies and, therefore, does not fall into the category where people can exercise their power over the system to free themselves.

Thus, at this point of time Showalter and her work *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1985) gains importance because it brings to light the phenomenon of

female madness brought about by the deviation of women. The case of Yeong-hye can be viewed as a manifestation of female insanity and radical feminism that rejects the imposed identities.

### **Resistance or Collapse: The Paradox of Bodily Rebellion**

Lastly, we can discuss the resistance of Yeong-hye in regards to whether it is a resistance or a certain inevitable crumbling. On the one hand, her acts refusing to eat meat, rejecting sexual intercourse, and becoming a plant person can be considered as radical resistance, exposing the violence within the patriarchal structures. Her flesh is a revolve weapon, which cannot be assimilated.

Her resistance however results in increased isolation, institutionalization and ultimately her own mental breakdown. Thus, it may imply that resistance in such oppressive structures does not bring about freedom but destruction and disappearance of the resisting person. Through this way, it is possible to show that the Vegetarian illustrates a variant of limit case of feminist resistance, where resistance and politicization of the body is destructive and does not fit into the social reality.

According to Millet, it represents the fact that patriarchy is omnipresent and there is very little room left for dissent. For Dworkin, it demonstrates the way in which violence is immanent to any structure of social interaction. Foucault elaborates on this idea by talking about the power, which has no outside it means that there is no place from which to resist power.

So, there can be quite a tragic irony here: the more radical Yeong-hye becomes resistant, the less significant is her place within social context.

### **Conclusion**

This critically analyzed novel by Han Kang under the critical approach of radical feminism is *The Vegetarian*. In this way, we get to know that female identity is the place of patriarchal violence, the place of radical opposition, and, ultimately, disappearance of self. The works of Kate Millet (*Sexual Politics*, 1970), Andrea Dworkin (*Woman Hating*, 1974), Michel Foucault (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975) and Elaine Showalter (*The Female Malady*, 1985) are included in the research, which demonstrates the necessity to prove that the narrative of the bodily experience of Yeong-hye. To begin with, the significant discovery of the current research lies in the fact that the patriarchal violence represented in the novel is very institutionalized and that the violence is carried out with the help of domestic, family and medical institutionalized power. As the analysis above shows, Yeong-hye refuses to eat meat, which leads to the increasing number of acts of violence against her, which confirms Millett (1970) as right when she asserts that family is one of the most important disciplinary structures of patriarchy. The violence that follows in its turn demonstrates the fact that Dworkin (1974) is right when she claims that patriarchy hides under the veil of care and morality the coercive character of its mechanisms.

The second result is that the body of Yeong-hye turns into the place of resistance because of the absence of language-based and institutional agency. Both Yeong-hye being vegetarian, sexually abstinent, and mute are embodied as resistance to domination. The novel demonstrates that in patriarchal cultures when the voice of a woman is actively suppressed, women have no other option other than to speak out through their bodies. Meanwhile, this type of protest is rather unclear as it affects both empowering and self-destructing.

Another valuable discovery is that the fact that Yeong-hye transforms into a state akin to that of a plant can be considered ontological resistance. But this ontological resistance is accompanied by loss of identity as well, proving it to be contradictory. In this way, even though the denial of humanity enables the eventual denial of the patriarchal oppression, it leads to the loss of oneself. It validates the Foucault (1975) concept of the all-powerful nature of power and the unavoidability of its reproduction in the protest movement process.

The fourth finding as the Yeong-hye case is being analyzed is that the novel puts a spin on the traditional definition of mental illness. In this respect, applying the methods of Showalter (1985), it can be concluded that the fact that Yeong-hye is admitted to hospital unveils the attempts of the culture of patriarchy to suppress female consciousness that is subversive. That is, the madness of Yeong-hye must be viewed as the other form of symbolic opposition.

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