

## Eating and Suffering in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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**Abstract:** In his article "Eating and Suffering in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*" Won-Chung Kim examines how Han investigates suffering through the topic of food and eating. Kim shows that *The Vegetarian* is a work that thoroughly investigates both what constitutes suffering and what role carno-phallogocentric thinking can play in such suffering: suffering becomes in the novel a psychological, physical, and spiritual effect of dietary resistance to male-dominated Korean society. After offering a working definition of sufferings, Kim argues how the suffering caused by Yeong-hye's refusal to follow the reigning norms of the meat eating, patriarchal society disintegrates the intactness of her personhood as a woman and a vegetarian. By metamorphosing her into a "given" face of a suffering victim that haunts us, Yeong-hye provocatively challenges us to reframe the current violent structure of our eating.

## Won-Chung KIM

### Eating and Suffering in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

Han Kang's<sup>1</sup> *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 the what constitutes suffering in humanity's life and its characteristics. Numerous critics and theorists have attempted to define suffering. These definitions help us to understand the representation of suffering in Han's novel. *The Vegetarian* is a novel that thoroughly interrogates both what constitutes suffering and what role carno-phallogocentric thinking can play in such suffering: suffering becomes in this novel a psychological, physical, and spiritual effect of dietary resistance to male-dominated Korean society. Central to these definitions is the concept of corporeal and psychological /spiritual disintegration. Han's novel portrays precisely such disintegration. A victim of a meat-based sexist culture and a social system that requires harmony and conformity for its own integrity, the protagonist Yeong-hye threatens not only her own safety but also the very integrity of the society of which she is a part. Jacques Derrida describes the complex theoretical interplay between meat and sexuality in the concept of carno-phallogocentrism, which he defines partially as an "interiorization of the phallus and the necessity of its passage through the mouth" (113). While it is not necessary here to get into all of the complexities of the philosophy Derrida is discussing, the link between an aggressive and violent (phallus-centered) heterosexuality, on the one hand, and meat, on the other, is pertinent here. This is a novel that challenges binaries. Two of these (assailant/victim, woman/vegetarian) characterize Yeong-hye's suffering. The close intersection of Yeong-hye's suffering as a vegetarian woman with the pain of animals in the meat-eating patriarchal society in the novel poses questions about our culture and its reiteration of violence to other beings. In *The Vegetarian*, suffering becomes a psychological, physical, and spiritual effect of dietary resistance to male-dominated Korean society.

Though suffering has been an inescapable part of human life, surprisingly little academic research has been done on it until recently. So far, one of the most commonly accepted definitions of suffering is the one proposed by Eric Cassell that it involves a sense of impending personal disintegration. In "The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine," Cassell distinguishes suffering from pain and distress and argues that suffering has three distinctive characteristics. The first one is that "suffering is experienced by persons" (131). Suffering is something that is experienced by a whole of a person, not by a mind or body separately: "bodies do not suffer, persons suffer." Behind his emphasis of this personhood of a suffering human lies Cassell's attempt to reject the historical dualism of mind and body: "We are of a piece; virtually nothing happens to one part that does not affect the others" (Cassell, *The Nature* vii). The second proposition is that "suffering occurs when an impending destruction of the person is perceived" (131). Suffering is more than the physical pain or threat, being "the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of the person" (131). The third suggestion he makes is that "suffering can occur in relation to any aspect of the person" (131). Suffering influences all the aspects of one's personal, social, and even spiritual life. In sum, suffering is, in Cassell's view, is something that occurs to a person which menaces one's integrity and damages one's life in all areas of one's life. Yeong-hye, the female protagonist of *The Vegetarian*, undergoes precisely the severe 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.

While Cassell examines the phenomena that a suffering person shows from the medical point of view, Emmanuel Levinas investigates philosophically the inner landscape of the man in suffering. In his influential essay on suffering, "Useless Suffering," he argues that suffering is something that is "given" in this world, that is, something that is "an excess," a "too much" and always there beyond our power. His argument that "suffering is at once what disturbs order and this disturbance itself. It is not only the consciousness of rejection or a symptom of rejection, but this rejection itself; a backwards consciousness, 'operating' not as 'grasp' but as 'revulsion'" (156) explicitly shows why it is hard to accept and endure suffering. The second characteristics of suffering Levinas points out is its passivity. The person in suffering cannot act out his or her will positively but is forced into submission, as we can infer from Levinas' words that "It [suffering] is no longer the performance of an act of consciousness, but, in its adversity, a submission; and even a submission to the submitting, since the content of which the

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<sup>1</sup> The family name comes first in Asian countries, including Korea. Therefore, Kang is the given name and Han is the family name.

aching consciousness is conscious is precisely this very adversity of suffering, its hurt" (157). Young Ahn Kang, a specialist of Levinas, elaborates on this aspect of suffering: "In suffering we lose all our prerogatives. In suffering there is no plan for future, no project, no activity" (491). It is a total passivity, because it is "more profoundly passive than the receptivity of our senses" (Levinas 157). The third aspect of suffering for Levinas is that it is a pure "undergoing." Suffering just occurs and "rends the humanity of the suffering person, overwhelms his humanity" (157). It is something that engulfs a person, forcing him to submit to it. Levinas' insight of suffering as a "given" in the world, its passivity, and its pure undergoing is aptly applicable to Yeong-hye's suffering. But her suffering has one more important characteristic: it is a method of resistance she adapted very self-consciously.

In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's experiences match the definition of suffering Levinas expounds: disturbing the order and being rejected. 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. She knows too well that she is destined to undergo "suffering that arises through the burden of impossible decision or the destruction of deeply-held commitments and ideals (Malpas and Lickiss 5). As Levinas persuasively argues, suffering not only disturbs the prevailing order but also makes the suffering person a "repulsion." The same reason of "feeling stuffed" penetrates both of her refusals. As the bra is a symbol of patriarchal and androcentric oppression of the female body, meat in the novel is a symbol of male power and authority. The bra is a mechanism of patriarchal society to control the female body, having fetishized women's breasts—a source of life that feeds babies—into an object of sexual desire and thereby turned them into something that should be hidden from the eyes of others. Normalizing the practice of eating meat is likewise a mechanism used to control a woman's body in a patriarchal society. 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 more serious provocation that eventually results in her imprisonment in a mental hospital.

Yeong-hye's suffering is similar to that of tortured prisoners, on which Elaine Scarry expounds in her seminal book, *The Body in Pain*. Though Scarry's main focus falls on the war between nations and the dynamics of torturers and prisoners, she offers important insight that can help us to understand Yeong-hye's unyielding pursuit of a harmless life and consequent suffering. Yeong-hye wages a war, to use Scarry's metaphor, single-handedly without any supporters against 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. This social ostracism is itself a potent kind of psychological suffering that Levinas would call "rejection." In this sense, what and how one eats determines how and how much a person such as Yeong-hye suffers. The social and cultural norms and systematic violence against those who make eating choices against such norms are under deep scrutiny in this novel. 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. By her refusal, she questions the validity of meat eating and patriarchal values behind it. In Scarry's terms, it is a dispute between the people who try to maintain their meat-eating ideology as a "cultural reality" and Yeong-hye who tries to unveil the ideology as "cultural fiction." From the very beginning, it is a war in which she is destined to fail and meet ruin and to suffer. What matters most for her in this war is not to defeat others, but to demonstrate that their carninormative ideology is not a given but an invented one. Her strategy in this difficult task of "derealization" of meat-eating ideology is to show how excruciating and painful her life has been under this ideology. To use Joseph Amato's words, Yeong-hye uses suffering as a kind of weapon because "It is a kind of moral entitlement; it is a demand for the attention, sympathy, and aid of ours. Suffering calls out to the world, seeking compassion, forgiveness, and mercy" (17).

One of the most prominent characteristics of suffering is the disruption of all relationships of the person involved. Yeong-hye is a victim in the carno-phallogocentric society where "masculinity and carnivorism work together to support the virility, power, and authority" (Malatino 131) of men. Yeong-hye's transgression against the ruling norms and consequent social disdain and contempt are explicitly revealed at a party hosted by her husband's company president, where her two refusals occur simultaneously. The response of guests to Yeong-hye's failure to wear a bra in such a public setting is best summarized in the "curiosity, astonishment, and contempt" (29) that the executive director's wife shows. Here, the words, "astonishment" and "contempt" deserve special attention: her action is so shocking as to make others dumbstruck and deserves contempt because it degrades a woman's dignity. Having transgressed the "permissible" boundary, she becomes what Julia Kristeva calls Abject, a repulsive being one should not be around.

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. In this sense, Korean society is a carnistic society that regards meat consumption as "normal, natural, and necessary" (Joy 96). Melanie Joy, who coined the term "carnism," elaborates that we see carnism "as a given, the 'natural' thing to do, the way things have always been and the way things always will be. We eat animals without thinking about what we are doing and why, because the belief system that underlies this behavior is invisible" (9). Until her trauma involving eating meat is uncovered in the form of a dream, Yeong-hye had also enjoyed meat as a proper member of meat eating society. She cooked meat dishes for her husband and did not even hesitate to hack a chicken into pieces with a rectangular butcher's cleaver (26). Her behaviors clearly demonstrate that she had no other choice but to adjust to and accept that mechanism of violence and oppression in order to survive in a meat-eating society. Yeong-hye is what Judith Butler's calls "the subject of feminism, [who] is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought" (*Gender* 4). Her identity as a woman is produced and restrained by the value of the patriarchal, meat eating culture against which she now struggles to free herself. As Okhee Lim, a Korean literature specialist notes, "because a woman's experience is already contaminated by the patriarchal symbolic order, the image of woman created by it cannot be pure" (37). In this sense, the fact that Yeong-hye enjoyed eating and cooking meat dishes for her husband indicates that she has gone through what Butler calls subjection, "a process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming the subject" (*Psychic* 2). Butler regards subjectivity as an effect of discourses instituted by power and knowledge, which are accepted as natural and inevitable and, therefore, subjects<sup>2</sup> must conform. In this sense, subjectification, like gender, is a never-ending process that depends on the correct repetition of socially approved behavior (Doncu 334). Therefore, not following the ruling ideology, political power, and language puts one at risk of being declared abnormal, isolated, and ostracized by society. This is exactly what Yeong-hye faces when she, as a result of the visions she saw in her dream, announced her decision not to eat meat any longer.

Dreams play crucial roles in this novel, because they have triggered Yeong-hye's annihilating suffering by repeatedly bringing her oppressed trauma. They reveal her inner mind without any social censorship governing her consciousness and work as a mirror reflecting her mind. Dreams work as a channel through which her repressed trauma is revealed. Cathy Caruth in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* argues that "trauma is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (3). The relationship between trauma and suffering has been well discussed. Stephen K. Levine criticizes in *Trauma, Tragedy, Therapy: The Arts and Human Suffering* the prevailing conceptions of trauma in psychology and the social sciences for being inappropriate for understanding the human suffering trauma evokes (17) and asks for "more than cognitive manner" in approaching it. Deirdre Barrett's *Trauma and Dreams* persuasively expounds the relationship between trauma and suffering and how trauma shapes dreaming and what the dreaming mind might reveal about trauma. 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 to all her dreams: "*Dawn of the next day. The pool of blood in the barn . . . I first saw the face reflected there*" (27). In the novel, "the barn" is a metaphor for a slaughterhouse and a butcher's shop, while "the pool of blood" is associated with life, death, and slaughter. Therefore, "the pool of blood in the barn" represents both the place of butchery and meat-eating society. Yeong-hye is, finally, able to look into herself 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. No one can deny that Yeong-hye is a representative of the victim of meat-eating culture, but she, in deep analysis, proves to be an assailant and accomplice, too. Only when we consider these double roles she plays in the novel, can we understand fully her dire suffering. This doubleness and, indeed, the notion of binaries is interrogated in in this novel.

The bewildering dialectics of the assailant and the victim can be traced back to the defining moment of her life regarding her pet Whitey. Many literary critics, including Chan-Kyu Lee and Eun-Ji Kee, have argued that 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

<sup>2</sup> For convenience, I use the terms "subject" and "person" (and their cognates) interchangeably.

is a perfect example of what Christopher A. Monteiro et al. call "carnistic domination," that "justif[ies] the domination, subjugation, and killing animals for food" (52). They explain carnistic domination is a more hostile, hierarchy-enhancing category of carnistic beliefs than the carnistic defense which provides justification for meat consumption. In "From Carnivore to Carnist," Joy argues that "meat-eating rests on the speciesist assumption that humans are superior to other animals and that therefore, sacrificing nonhumans for the human palate is ethical and legitimate" (126). 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" (56) emphatically summarize the basic mentality of meat-eating culture.

Yeong-hye's own response to this bizarre scene shows she has also internalized this ruling ideology. Standing inside the gate, she watches their "*Whitey, eyes rolling and gasping for breath, gradually exhaust himself*" (49). She shows no sympathy to the dying dog, her cherished pet, and is, instead, cruel: "*Every time his gleaming eyes meet my own I glare even more fiercely*" (49). 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 "meat paradox," that is "the moral conflict meat eaters may experience when they care about animals, but also want to eat them" (Monteiro et al. 52). The enormity of the shock is paradoxically 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.

Disorientation and confusion about one's own identity are the most noticeable symptoms of a person in suffering (Cassell, "The Nature" 134). 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*" (20). 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 the gradual isolation from her world, the conspicuous 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 Yeong-hye'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" (46) are no less than her declaration of independence as an autonomous human being. But "in an instant, his strong palm cleaved the empty space" (46), because Yeong-hye's words are an outrageous and unacceptable challenge to her father, a paragon of the patriarchal and androcentric man. Even after he hits her so hard that "the blood showed through the skin of her cheek" (46), 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. This indeed resembles a kind of rape, a kind of forced fellatio. 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. Over the issue of meat eating, the moral laws of family and the minimal care and regard for fellow human beings vanish like a bubble.

Yeong-hye suffers in the sense that Levinas understands suffering—namely as extreme distress that a helpless being undergoes passively. In the novel, 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" (74). Like the tortured prisoner Scarry mentions, 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. Her eyes, gazing at her own family members, tremble unsteadily like those of a cornered animal. These terrified eyes of Yeong-hye overlap with those of dying Whitey, chained and dragged to death by her father's motorcycle. Her father's force-feeding of meat into her mouth strikingly resembles feeding various things like sawdust, plastic, paper, antibiotics, and hormones to cattle in animal factory farms, as graphically portrayed in Ruth Ozeki's *My Years of Meat*. Animal suffering is closely related with women's suffering in androcentric society. The work of Carol Adams, one of the pioneers linking meat with misogyny bears importantly on Yeong-hye's resistance to meat eating culture and the androcentric culture that oppresses women by setting patriarchal values as a gold standard.

Adams insists in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* that "patriarchy is a system of sexual discrimination inherent in the relation between humankind and animal" (20) and that "meat is a symbol of patriarchy" (74). 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. In the novel, woman and animal become interchangeable and the oppression of animal and woman goes hand-in-hand. Investigating meat eating and vegetarianism from the perspective of feminism, she also highlights "the relation between woman and animal" and in particular "the mutually overlapped oppression" (25, 80). Under this thought system, women are lumps of meat, and "meat" becomes a term to express woman's oppression (95); through this process, the body of animals and women both become the object of consumption and exploitation. As pornography and prostitution objectify and commodify a woman's body, so too does meat eating objectify and commodify the body of an animal.

While Adams investigates the issue of meat from the point of sexual politics, Jeremy Rifkin explores the issue of meat eating from a historical and ecological point of view in *Beyond Beef*. He emphasizes how meat-eating has been one of the most powerful means of preserving patriarchal society when he says that "beef-eating myths and dietary practices have been used throughout history to maintain male dominance and establish gender and class hierarchies" (4). Examining the psychology of eating beef, he notes the close relationship between eating red meat and men's sexual desire: "for a long time in the myth and tradition people have thought the blood flowing through the red meat confers [on them] strength, aggression, passion, and sexuality, all virtues coveted among beef-eating people" (239). Therefore refusing to eat meat is no less than denying masculinity, the very foundation of patriarchy: "believing that they are being denied their maleness by being denied their meat, husbands often lash out at their spouses" (Rifkin 244). This is why Yeong-hye's father apologizes to his son-in-law, complaining that his wife is not serving meat, by saying "I am the one who's ashamed" (36). In the novel, violence is, unfortunately, a universal characteristic of patriarchal men. Yeong-hye has been exposed to her father's violence from childhood and got lashed on her calves until she was eighteen years old; it has culminated in his slapping her cheek in the aforementioned family party. As her sister tells us, all this violence toward Yeong-hye is caused by her inability to curry her father's favor, being meek and naïve. The only choice open to a woman in patriarchal society is to please her father, that is, to follow her father's values or suffer under his violence.

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. That Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat is followed by her refusal to have sex with her husband shows the close relationship between eating meat and sex. Leon Rappoport also insists on the tie between food and sex, saying "there is at least an implicit if not explicit link between food and sex" (163). She explains to her husband that she cannot sleep with him because of "The meat smell. Your body smells of meat" (24). Her answer to his protest that no smell can come from him because he has just taken a shower tells us that the smell she is talking about is not just a smell of meat. To her, this smell is the smell of meat-eating and of her patriarchal father, as well. Her refusal to sleep with her husband results in a spousal rape, thereby making her a rape victim. In spite of Yeong-hye's strong resistance, he inserts himself, spitting out vulgar curses and succeeds in raping her once in three attempts. Whenever he does this, she endures

this with "a blank face as though she were a comfort woman"<sup>3</sup> (38). 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 in order to keep androcentric values is handed down from father to son-in-law. Through this sexual violence, Yeong-hye's position degrades from that of a wife to a comfort woman. 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 cannot eat meat because the faces she sees in her dream are not only the faces of killed animals but also her own face, and to be more specific, her face inside her stomach. This face is very similar to what Amato mentions as "given face" of victims that "look back at us" (xx), claiming our attention and compassion. Because the faces are ingrained within her own stomach, she cannot get away from them until she empties out her stomach and belly. It means that nobody, once born into the meat-eating culture, can be free from this fundamental structure of violence. Her dilemma is similar to what Butler calls "a larger cultural and political predicament" in the formation of subject, "namely, how to take an oppositional relation to power that is, admittedly, implicated in the very power one opposes" (*Psychic* 17). Her refusal to eat is, in a deep sense, a repudiation of our eating culture and its intrinsic violence of killing other living beings. In this sense, Yeong-hye is reminiscent of a sacrificial lamb, suffering to bear the karma of humanity's violent eating.

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" (20). Openly announcing that one is practicing vegetarianism is very uncommon in Korea, and a very bold gesture.<sup>4</sup> 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. At this intersection, the connection between vegetarianism and feminism becomes evident. As Soo-jeong Shin argues, at the bottom of this novel lies the author's rethinking of "the relationship between human violence and animal violence, between child abuse and animal abuse, between the battering of women and animal maltreatment" (197).

Yeong-hye's progress from vegetarian to anorexic plainly witnesses the severity of her suffering under our ontological condition of eating other's lives to keep us alive. In spite of many revolutionary characteristics, vegetarianism is also, in a strict standard, taking the lives of other beings, unless we deny that plants are alive too, even if the level of violence involved cannot be compared with meat eating. Yeong-hye still cannot stop inflicting harm on living things, though she chews and swallows only "fruits, rice cake or tofu sushi" that her sister brings to her when she is in a mental hospital. She loathes the paradoxical predicament that she is eating and thereby taking the lives of vegetables, while she longs to become a plant. In this sense, it is natural choice for her to practice anorexia—to go beyond a vegetarian diet and simply not eat. Her anorexia is quite different from the refusal of other people to eat. Anorexia is the desire to have complete control over the body. It is mostly women who suffer from this. Yeong-hye is fighting against androcentric "sexism" and the loss of her autonomous self, two main motives of anorexia. Rappaport notes that "the movement to anorexia occurs when eating anything at all brings about a high level of anxiety and becomes a direct threat to self-esteem" (90). Maggie Helwig, a Canadian novelist and social justice activist, also explains that anorexia nervosa is an act of protest, and behind it lies our equation of food with "sin" (227). Refusing food and becoming horribly thin, "like a child in a devastated area," is "a strong statement" that "what I have been given is not sufficient, not real, not true, not acceptable" (Helwig 227). Her argument sheds light on understanding Yeong-hye's anorexia. The meat that was given to her (part of the body of an animal) represents patriarchal violence. The meat is not real food, and, therefore, she cannot accept it. For Yeong-hye, eating non-food

<sup>3</sup> The word is a translation of the Japanese *ianfu* (慰安婦), a euphemism for prostitutes, who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese army during World War II.

<sup>4</sup> The situation regarding vegetarianism in Korea is quite different from 2007 when *The Vegetarian* was first published. According to the Korea Vegetarian Union, about 1-2 % of Korean population is vegetarian and potential vegetarians are up to 15% in 2015. You can easily find vegetarian restaurants in Korea and there are some vegan restaurants too.



evacuates the core of her being. In this sense, Slavoj Žižek's insight that anorexia is not "eating nothing but a positive longing for the ultimate object, nothingness" is also applicable to Yeong-hye (qtd. in Jeong 27).

In the midst of almost unbearable suffering, Yeong-hye finally loses her language. As anorexia is her endeavor to erase the trace of animal in her body, aphasia is then a process of purging the language contaminated with patriarchal ideology. 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. If language is a world of the ruling ideology made with symbols, as a Korean literature critic Mi-yeong Woo suggests (459), 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, according to Gwi-eun Han, a Korean literature specialist, a clear indication that she is receding gradually from the world of logos (294). These murmurings and screams are "the sounds anterior to language that a human being reverts to when overwhelmed by pain" (Scarry 49) and is irrefutable evidence of the severity of Yeong-hye's suffering. As Malpas and Lickiss explain, "to speak in ways that are adequate to suffering is always a challenge—the danger is that one's words, no matter how eloquent, will always seem to fall short of what is undergone, to be incapable of meeting the needs of the one who suffers" (3). It is difficult to articulate one's suffering. In this sense, Yeong-hye's aphasia and silence are meaningful indeed.

The final loss suffering causes to a person is the annihilation of existence. 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" (98). Woo insists that "Yeong-hye's vegetarianism and anorexia are not a mere evading of meat eating but a self-punishment. . . Her anorexia is an extreme case of self-denial for self-extinction" (464). It is true that her anorexia has some elements of self-denial and self-extinction, but the other aspect of it—that she is posing a provocative question to our meat-eating culture—should be noted. 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. And this process involves not only the extinction of her physical self but also her own inner contamination with corrupt patriarchal and androcentric values.

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. Though her suffering shares many characteristics of suffering expounded by scholars such as Cassell and Levinas, Amato, and Malpas and Lickiss, there is one very peculiar difference in her suffering. 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" (178). This "something" is the desire to keep her perseverance of fighting against the reigning norms of the patriarchal, meat-eating society and to expose fundamental violence inherent in our eating. Amato explains that "people use suffering to prove their sincerity. They renounce pleasures, undertake dangerous journeys and pilgrimages, undergo great ordeals to prove their worth, or receive forgiveness" (17). This is an apt summary of Yeong-hye's purpose in her long itinerary of suffering. By unabashedly showing her anorexic skeletal body and how she was cruelly victimized, she becomes the "given face" of a person in suffering that repeatedly haunts our consciousness.

*The Vegetarian* offers resistance to meat-eating as a challenge to patriarchal precepts, at once defining suffering and revealing it to be central to the disintegration of Yeong-hye's previous identity and to her subsequent rebirth as an ethical being. The inextricability of suffering from humanity's life is poignantly visible everywhere, and "we cannot address the question of what it is to be human without also attending to the question of what it is to suffer" (Malpas and Lickiss 1). In this sense, how and why Yeong-hye suffers so severely tells us a lot not only about herself but also about the other members of society. Her experiences also help us understand precisely what constitutes suffering, a topic on which scholars have increasingly theorized. Her experiences are caused by her adamant will not to give up her personhood as a woman and a vegetarian. We witness the mercilessness and cruelty of patriarchal, meat eating society against which Yeong-hye is fighting. Her experiences constitute suffering in the truest sense and by the end of the novel, her skeletal anorexic body exerts "a powerful moral claim upon us" (Amato xx). Watching suffering makes us look back ourselves and thereby can work as "as

the very bond of human subjectivity, even to the point of being raised to a supreme ethical principle" (Levinas 159). Yeong-hye's suffering asks for our attention and provocatively challenges us to lessen suffering of other beings. The implication for meat eating reaches far beyond the novel.

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