



WHEN CARES BECOMES COERCION: A BIOPOLITICAL STUDY OF HANG KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN*

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Abstract

*This paper aims to examine Hang Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007) through the theoretical framework of biopolitics, as articulated by Michel Foucault to analyse the regulation of the female body within modern disciplinary societies. The paper argues Yeong-hye's refusal to consume meat and her gradual withdrawal from human life which constitutes a radical challenge to biopolitical power that seeks to normalise discipline and medicalise nonconforming bodies. Rather than interpreting Yeong-hye's action solely as a symptom of mental illness, this study reads her bodily resistance as a response to sustain patriarchal and institutional violence enacted through family authority, marital expectations and psychiatric intervention. Through close textual analysis of scenes involving surveillance forced feeding and medical confinement, the paper demonstrates how the novel exposes the violence embodied in practices presented as care and normalcy. By foregrounding the body as a sight of struggle *The Vegetarian* exposes of contemporary systems of authority which assert control over life, revealing how biopolitical control collapses the boundary between protection and coercion. This study can be further extended by applying the same theoretical framework to a comparative analysis of works by other female authors.*

Key Words: Coercion, biopolitics, body and power, patriarchy

1. Introduction

Han Kang's novella *The Vegetarian* first published in Korean in 2007 and then translated into English by Deborah Smith holds a prominent position in modern global literature due to its disturbing examination of the human body, silence and act of defiance. Instead of offering a typical narrative of psychological collapse or social transgression, the text interrogates the subtle and pervasive forms of power that control physical existence in contemporary society. Han Kang, an eminent South Korean writer and recipient of Nobel Prize and the Man Booker International prize, is known for addressing themes of violence, memory and corporeality, and trauma in her works. Her literary works - including *Human Acts*, *Greek Lessons*, and *The White Book* – shows a sustained interest with how physique is shaped by the history, ideology and power.

The Vegetarian narrates the gradual withdrawal of Yeong-hye, a seemingly ordinary woman, from social life following her decision to stop eating meat. This refusal however should not be read merely as personal or ethical choice. Rather than, it marks the starting of an intense bodily resistance that weakens family control, patriarchal norms, and medical institutions. The novella is written in three interconnected parts and employing shifting narrative perspectives, the novella exposes how social systems react when a body refuses to conform.



This paper examines *The Vegetarian* primarily by the theoretical framework of biopolitics as interlocked by Michel Foucault. Michel Foucault's framework of biopolitics is relevant to this study as the protagonist's body in the selected novella is shown as a primary site of power which subverts the biopolitical order of coercive social institutions.

2. Literature Review

Since its 2007 publication, Hang Kang's novella *The Vegetarian* has drawn out a lot of critical attention from academics who have analyzed it from a variety of theoretical perspectives, including modernist, narrative theory, psychoanalysis, trauma studies, feminism and ecofeminism. The majority of literature now concentrates on Yeong-hye's vegetarianism as a symbolic act of defiance against gendered norms and patriarchal oppression. Yeong-hye's retreat has been interpreted as a rejection of male power and domestic enslavement, highlighting the depiction of regulated, aestheticized female body within marriage and family systems.

Ecofeminist readings are a prominent strain of critique, criticizing the exploitation of both women and nature. Scholars believe Yeong-hye's ambition to become plant like expresses a rejection of human brutality, consumption and anthropocentric hierarchy. Yeong-hye's vegetal imagery is frequently interpreted as a critique of masculine rationalism and ecological degradation, situating the novella within a larger conversation about environmental ethics and gendered oppression. These studies effectively highlight the symbolic relationship between female body and nature ,yet they frequently remain at the level of metaphor and ethical critique.

Another significant corpus of research uses trauma based, psychoanalytical framework to analyze *The Vegetarian*. Yeong-hye's Vegetarianism serves as a psychological protection strategy against past aggression, according to critics who have connected her nightmares, quiet and physical reluctance to repressed trauma. Although these reading shed light on the internal aspect of her pain, they frequently personalize her resistance while ignoring the structural forces at work in her body. Noting how Yeong-hye's resistance is treated as mental-illness, some reviewers have discussed the portrayal of medical institutions and psychiatric authority. However these discussions are fragmented. This gap indicates the needs for systematic biopolitical reading that accounts for how family, medicine regulates life and define normalcy.

This paper deviates from different research papers, by putting biopolitical theory at the center of analysis and mainly reinforcing Michel Foucault. This research argues that biopolitics provide more thorough framework of comprehending how Yeong-hye's bodily refusal becomes a matter of governance, surveillance and coercion. This research add to current discussions on the politics of body, resistance and institutional power in contemporary literature by interpreting *The Vegetarian* as contemporary regimes that assert control over life itself.

3. Research Methodology

The present research article adopts a qualitative and interpretive research method based on textual analysis. Secondary sources, includes existing articles on *The Vegetarian* to contextualize the analysis and support theoretical interpretations. However, the focus remains on the primary text to ensure that conclusions emerge from close analysis of the novella rather than from external generalizations. The primary sources of research are Hang Kang's novella *The Vegetarian* (2007) and Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics presented in his book *The history of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (1976). Michel Foucault conceptualizes biopolitics as a form of power that emerged in modern societies concerned

primarily with the administration of life rather than the exercise of death. Despite sovereign power, which works through punishment and outlook, biopolitical power works through control, normalization and discipline. It creates what Foucault refers as “docile bodies”—bodies that are trained, optimized and made valuable within social systems. According to Foucault institutions such as family, marriage, medicine and psychiatry play a crucial role in maintaining biopolitical control. These groups define what is acceptable or abnormal, healthy or ill, normal, or pathological. Essentially, biopolitics does not constantly appear aggressive it often present itself as care, protection or concern for well-being. However, when individuals reject to participate in these regimes of normalization, power becomes more coercive. Michel Foucault’s concept of biopolitics emphasizes how modern power governs life not through over punishment but through every day practices that regulate bodies, habits and desires. Biopolitics give a rich lens to survey how power operates not through over brutality unescorted, but through daily controlling of bodies, habits and aspirations. While feminist, Ecofeminist and trauma-based readings of the novella are critically relevant, they will be used here only to support and contextualize the central biopolitical argument. The focus remains on how Yeong-hye’s body becomes a contested site where power, resistance and subjectivity collide (Foucault, 1995).

This research methodology is in accordance with the aim of the research as it enables to uncover how Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* subverts the contemporary systems of patriarchy while questioning the boundary between protection and coercion.

3.1 Research Questions

The present research article aims to address the following research questions:

1. How does Han Kang in her novella *The Vegetarian* represent the female body as a site of biopolitical control and resistance?
2. In what ways does the protagonist Yeong-hye’s denial to eat meat subvert patriarchal dominance?
3. How does Han Kang unmask the violence embedded in practices of familial, marital and medical institutions framed as care, treatment and normalcy?

3.2 Research Objectives

The main objectives of the present study are:

1. To examine Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* through Michel Foucault’s lens of biopolitics in order to understand how power operates on and through the body.
2. To analyze how patriarchy sustains its biopolitical power over the female body through coercion in the novella.

3.3 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its examination of Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* within a broader literary discourse on biopolitics, violence, trauma and the politicization of the body in contemporary society. By adopting a biopolitical framework, this study moves beyond dominant interpretations that read the protagonist’s refusal to consume meat primarily as a manifestation of psychological disorder. Instead, through the application of Michel Foucault’s theory of biopolitics, the research foregrounds the female body as a critical site where power, discipline and resistance intersect within modern social and institutional structures.

3. Analysis

In *Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's body becomes a biopolitical issue precisely because she ceases to cooperate. Her refusal to consume meat, to act femininity and ultimately to eat at all upsets the mechanism that govern social life. The increasing efforts to control her body—from familial pressure to medical procedures—reveal the violence which underlie in biopolitical governance.

In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's body becomes a site where such governance is exercised not through seemingly ordinary acts—eating, dressing and behaving appropriately within social norms. Her husband's narrations reveal how deeply normalized this control is when he evaluates her body primarily in terms of social acceptability rather than personal comfort. His anxiety over her refusal to wear a bra underscores even intimate bodily choices are governed by social expectations: “*Even in the summer... she'd have it unhooked barely a minute after leaving the house.*” (Han, 2015, p.5) The concern is not Yeong-hye's pain but the visibility of non-conformity, indicating how biopolitical power operates through shame and surveillance.

Food functions as another key mechanism of governance. Eating meat is regarded as a normalizing social value, and Yeong-hye's rejection challenges the biopolitical logic that links nourishment with obedience.

At the beginning of the novella Yeong-hye being introduced through voice of her husband, a choice that immediately highlights the patriarchal authority. His description of himself as “*completely unremarkable in every way*”, that establishes invisibility and compliance as ideal female characteristics. Her value is defined not by uniqueness or agency but by her ability to blend with social expectations.

Marriage, within this framework, functions as a biopolitical institution that controls the female body. Yeong-hye's husband sees her body as an extension of his own social identity. This is evident in his discomfort with her refusal to adhere to traditional standards of appearance. He admits:

I would have preferred her to go around wearing one that was thickly padded. So that I could save face in front of my acquaintances...Even in the summer, when I managed to persuade her to wear one for a while, she'd have it unhooked barely a minute after leaving the house. The undone hook would be clearly visible under her thin, light-colored top, but she wasn't remotely concerned. I tried reproaching her, lecturing her to prayer up with a vest instead of brain in the sultry heat. She couldn't stand wearing a bra because of the way it squeezed her breasts, and that I'd never worn one myself so I couldn't understand how constructing it felt. Nevertheless, considering I knew for a fact that there were plenty of other women who, unlike her, didn't have anything particularly against bras, I began to have doubt about this hypersensitivity of hers (Han, 2015, p.5).

The bra becomes a symbol of disciplinary control. It is an object that enforces norms of femininity under the guise of decency. Yeong-hye's physical pain is ignored. Her lively bodily experience is invalidated in favor of social conformity. This moment shows how biopolitical power operates at the closest level, synchronizing not only overt exploits but private agitation.

The domestic space in *The Vegetarian* operates as primary biopolitical institutions where regulation is enforced through intimacy rather than law. Marriage becomes a mechanism that disciplines the female body by aligning it with patriarchal expectations of obedience,



visibility, and functionality. Yeong-hye's husband introduces her as a "completely unremarkable in every way". (Han, 2015, p. 8), demonstrating that domestic order values compliance and invisibility. Her value is determined by her capacity to conform silently, which perpetuates the idea that the home is a place where surveillance is a common place.

The family's response to Yeong-hye's vegetarianism reveals how domestic care turns into coercion. The most violent expression of this control occurs during the family gathering, where her father physically assaults her to enforce obedience: "Her father raised his hand and struck her across the face" (Han, 2015, p.51). This act shows how violence is justified by patriarchal power under the pretext of correction and tradition. Control over the domestic realm is rationalized as necessary for maintaining order. And it is the reflection of the wider biopolitical state.

Yeong-hye's resistance does not employ using logical reasoning or political jargon. Instead, it manifest as silence, disengagement and minimal speech. Her silence irritates those around her because it takes away their ability to control her. According to Foucault, silence interferes with the discursive process that power uses to classify and rectify deviance. She engages in seemingly meaningless actions, such as "picking up the dried leaves.....crumbling them into a fine powder" (Han, 2015, p.51). These gestures reject productivity and purpose, aligning her body with non-human temporality. Silence, in this context becomes an embodied refusal to participate in normative social life. When confronted by her family and pressured to consume meat, Yeong-hye finally speaks "I won't eat it" (Han, 2015, p.51). The simplicity and firmness of this statement destabilize familial authority. It is perceived not as a choice but as an act of rebellion. The violent reaction it provokes exposes how deeply biopolitical power depends on bodily compliance.

Silence in *The Vegetarian* functions as a powerful yet precarious form of resistance. Yeong-hye's refusal to articulate her motivation frustrates those around her because biopolitical power depends on discourse to classify and deviance. Her silence is medicalized and disciplined, culminating enforced institutional violence: "They forced the tube between her lips.... blood and vomit mixed together" (Han, 2015, p. 147). This represents how ecofeminist resistance turns biopolitics i.e. the state and family asserts control over her biological existence itself. Silence makes Yeong-hye susceptible to misunderstanding and medicalization even as it resists discursive capture. Without language she is unable to defend her autonomy within institutional structure that acknowledges verbal compliance or pathology. Therefore, under biopolitical regimes, silence reveals the potential for resistance as well as its limitation.

In the novella, food plays a major role as a symbol of social belonging and control. Eating meat is not just a dietary habit but a culturally accepted norm connected to family customs, masculinity and national identity. These symbolic systems are upset by Yeong-hye's vegetarianism.

From biopolitical perspectives, food regulates body by sustaining productivity and social cohesion. Refusing food, therefore threatens the very logic of life management. As Yeong-hye gradually limits her intake, her figure becomes more and more unrecognizable to social institutions. What begins as vegetarianism turns into starvation, intensifying the need with which power to step in become more pressing.

The second section of the novella introduces a different mode of bodily control: aestheticization. Yeong-hye's brother-in-law paint flowers on her naked body. It is her brother-in-law that projects her on that vegetal image since when they first met, when he saw

her *‘like a tree that grows in the wilderness demanded and solitary’* (Han, 2015, p.64). Then he actively displays his psyche on her body:

Half opened buds, red and orange bloomed splendidly on her shoulders and back, and slender stems twined down her side. When he reached the hump of her right buttock he painted an orange flower in bloom, with a thick vivid yellow pistil protruding from its center. He left the buttock one with the Mongolian mark, undecorated. Instead, he just uses a large green, fainter than the mark itself, so that the latter stood out like the pale shadow of a flower (Han, 2015, p.84).

Although this act appears reverent, it strips Yeong-hye of agency. She is transformed into an object of visual pleasure rather than recognized as a subject. He perceives her something beyond humanity. *‘Whether human, animal or plant, she could not be called a ‘person’* (Han, 2015,). This perception resonates with Giorgio Agamben’s concept of bare life, where an individual exists biologically but is excluded from political and social recognition. While Agamben’s theory is not the primary framework of this paper, it helps illuminate how Yeong-hye’s body is admired, preserved and controlled without being acknowledged as a person. She possesses the qualities of both plant and human and she denies her identity as a woman.

Her calm acceptance of all these things made her seem to him something sacred. Whether human, animal, or plant she could not be called a person but then she wasn’t exactly some feral creature either-more like a mysterious being with qualities of both (Han, 2015, p.88).

The final stage of Yeong-hye’s bodily regulations culminate within the medical facility, where biopolitical power manifest in its most overt and violent form. Psychiatry and medicine, which claim to protect and preserve life, become instruments of coercion when confronted with a body that refuse normalization. Yeong-hye’s refusal to eat is no longer treated as personal choice but as a pathological condition requiring correction.

In the novella at the end of the first part, *The Vegetarian* after attempting to commit suicide Yeong-hye sent to the mental hospital where she is touched a wounded bird. The second section *Mongolian Mark* relays the consequences of Yeong-hye’s defiance through another bodily symbol: a birth mark on her buttocks. She is hospitalized after attempting to commit suicide with the fruit knife and subsequently lives with her sister. The following incident is an evident for this:

She would occupy herself in picking up the dried leaves that had fallen from the flower pots and crumbling them into a fine powder or in stretching out the palm of her hand to cast shadows over to the floor ((Han, 2015, p. 69).

Michal Foucault argues that modern medicines functions as a disciplinary institution that classifies, diagnosis, and manages deviant bodies. In *The Vegetarian* Yeong-hye’s body is subjected to surveillance, restraint and force-feeding under the guise of treatment. The hospital setting transforms her into a passive object of care, stripped of agency and voice. The image of

Her skin was pale and green. Her body prone in front of him, like a leaf that had just fallen from the branch, only barely begun to wither, the Mongolian mark was gone; instead, her whole body was cover with that pale wash of green (Han, 2015, p.96).

emphasizes her erasure as an individual and her reduction to a medical subject. This compelled involvement exposes the dichotomy inherent in biopolitics: authority purports to safeguard life, yet it frequently does so by infringing upon bodily autonomy. Yeong-hye’s



body is kept alive not for her own purpose but to preserve the social order that her refusal threatens. Her resistance is thus recorded as illness demonstrating how dissenting bodies are neutralized through medical discourse. Psychiatry in *The Vegetarian* represents the most explicit manifestation of biopolitical power. Once Yeong-hye's refusal escalates into starvation, medical institutions intervene to classify her resistance as mental illness. The hospital sees her like a patient whose life must be saved against her will, as symbolized by "the pale patient uniform, soaked through" (Han, 2015, p. 127). Instead being a subject with agency, her body becomes an object of treatment.

The most disturbing moment occurs during force-feeding, where medical care becomes indistinguishable from violence "they forced the tube between her lips ...blood and vomit mixed together". This scene exposes the ethical contradiction of biopolitics- life is preserved through bodily violation. Patriarchy justifies force, which results in madness, by reframing disagreement as sickness. Yeong-hye's rejection to recover exposes the demeaning logic of medical normalcy and undermines the notion that survival on one's own equates to well-being.

From a biopolitical perspective, trauma intensifies Yeong-hye's refusal to participate in regulated life. Her silence is not emptiness but a refusal to translate bodily pain into socially intelligible language. Foucault emphasizes that power depends on discourse to function effectively; Yeong-hye's silence disrupts the dependence. By refusing explanation, she resists classification and control. Her dream sequence makes this transformation explicit:

I was standing on my head.... Leaves were growing from my body, and roots were sprouting from my head.... So, I dug down into the earth. On and on... I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch so I spread my leg (Han, 2015).

This imagery signifies a desire to exit the human order altogether. Becoming vegetal is not an escape but an ethical rejection of violence, consumption and domination. Yeong-hye becoming destabilizes the very foundation of biopolitical governance, which relies on productive, consuming and speaking bodies.

Unlike many narratives of female resistance, *The Vegetarian* refuses the redemption or reconciliation. Yeong-hye's transformation does not result in empowerment or recovery but culminates in her complete withdrawal from human identity. Her declaration, "I am not the animal anymore" (Han, 2015, p. 148), signifies a rejection of all hierarchical forms of life governed by consumption and domination. Her wish to become plant-like shows an ethical rejection of violence rather than a quest for emancipation within human society.

Yeong-hye's resistance remains unresolved, as evident by the final description of her as "an inchoate mass of darkness and water" (127). There is no return to normalcy, only the haunting aftermath of a body that refused governance.

Sexuality in the novella operates another site of biopolitical control. Yeong-hye's sexual availability is expected within marriage, yet her withdrawal from normative femininity renders her body both threatening and desirable. Her brother-in-law's fascination with her body reveals how biopolitical power eroticizes deviation while simultaneously seeking to control it. The act of painting flowers on her body aestheticizes her refusal, transforming residence into spectacle: "Half-opened birds, red and orange, bloomed splendidly on her shoulder and back" (Han, 2015). While he perceives this act as an artistic and relevant, it replicates the logic of domination. Yeong-hye is admired not as a person but as a surface, a canvas. He acknowledges her liminal status. This moment demonstrates how biopolitical desires operate- preserving the body as an object while denying subjectivity. Yeong-hye's sexuality is neither autonomous nor recognized; it is appropriated and aestheticized.



Yeong-hyes's desire to photosynthesize-that is-to live without eating meat- represent a fundamental rethinking of life outside dominance. Even though they are ultimately unsustainable within human civilization, her body becomes a space where ultimate ethics of existence are imagined.

Conclusion

In the end, Yeong-hye body defies normalization, despite of great efforts of her family and medical facilities. The boundary of biopolitical power is shown by her refusal to consume meat. Power can force feed, sedate and constrain but it cannot restore meaning or consent. The eerie aftermath of biopolitical violence is shown in the picture of Yeong-hye standing like a ghost "an inchoate mass of darkness and water." She is not a one acceptable by society, yet she does exist. Her survival is deprived of dignity, exposing the unethical shortcoming of the system that value control over individuality.

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