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Research Article

Beyond The Platter: Unpacking Trauma, Resistance, and Healing in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract

This research paper analyzes the themes of trauma, resistance, and healing in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, examining their representation within the socio-cultural and psychological context of contemporary Seoul. The study focuses on the protagonist, Yeong-hye, whose traumatic experiences are shaped by both personal and societal pressures, resulting in deep psychological scars. Her decision to adopt vegetarianism and her subsequent silence are interpreted as acts of resistance against patriarchal and societal expectations. The paper explores how the novel addresses the complexities of healing, highlighting the psychological and societal constraints that impede recovery. Through the use of literary techniques such as symbolism, narrative structure, and character development, Han Kang deepens the thematic exploration of these issues. The findings underscore the significant impact of societal pressures on personal identity and autonomy, offering a critical examination of the socio-cultural dynamics that shape the lives of women in Seoul. This research contributes to the broader understanding of how literature can reflect and challenge societal norms, particularly in relation to psychological trauma and women's mental health, calling attention to the need for greater awareness and support in addressing these themes.

Keywords: (Trauma, Resistance, Healing, *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang, Women's Mental Health, Identity, Autonomy, Psychological Constraints, Societal Norms.)

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INTRODUCTION

Han Kang, born in South Korea in 1970, is a renowned author known for *The Vegetarian*, first published 2007, later Translated By Deborah Smith in 2015 in English, won the International Booker Prize in 2016. She has also written *Human Acts*, *The White Book*, *Greek Lessons*, and *We Do Not Part*. In 2024, she received The Nobel Prize in Literature for *The Vegetarian* that's a reflection of her deeply poetic writing that addresses historical traumas and highlights the delicate nature of human life. *The Vegetarian* is a novel about a woman's decision to stop eating meat, which disrupts her family life and leads to unexpected consequences. It is divided into three parts, each narrated from a different perspective. The novel explores themes of individuality, mental health, societal expectations, and the human body. Exploring how trauma, resistance, and healing are manifested in the narrative and through the protagonist of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, and examining what these themes reveal about the broader socio-cultural and psychological experiences of women living in contemporary Seoul, the setting of the novel.

Aims and Objectives:

1. To critically analyze the protagonist, Yeong-hye, and her progression through trauma, resistance, and healing.
2. To investigate the portrayal of trauma, resistance, and healing in *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang.
3. To contribute to a deeper understanding of how literary works reflect and critique socio-cultural and psychological issues.
4. To identify and examine the literary techniques employed by Han Kang to depict trauma and resistance.
5. To explore the socio-cultural and psychological ramifications of the character's responses to trauma and healing within the narrative.

Hypotheses:

1. Despite the pervasive trauma and resistance portrayed in *The Vegetarian*, the narrative suggests that true healing is often unattainable. The story emphasizes the persistent psychological scars and societal constraints that hinder complete recovery.
2. *The Vegetarian* demonstrates that resistance to oppressive societal norms may not always occur through traditional means. Instead, it can emerge through unconventional actions, revealing the profound psychological consequences of such resistance on individuals.
3. In *The Vegetarian*, the protagonist's transformation represents a rebellion against patriarchal and societal expectations, shedding light on how personal identity and autonomy are suppressed and reshaped by prevailing cultural norms.

METHODOLOGY

For this research, a comprehensive literature review and textual analysis methodology are employed to delve deeply into Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. The approach is multi-layered, designed to capture the nuances of trauma, resistance, and healing within the novel. Next, a

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literature review is conducted by examining existing academic research, scholarly articles, and critical essays on *The Vegetarian*. Information that provides insights into the socio-cultural and psychological context of the novel, the portrayal of trauma and resistance, and the literary techniques used by Han Kang is sourced. Throughout this process, a critical and analytical lens is adopted, focusing on how the themes of trauma, resistance, and healing are intertwined in the narrative. By comparing *The Vegetarian* to other contemporary South Korean literature, common struggles and societal expectations faced by women in this cultural context are highlighted.

Literature Review:

Ravikesh CKS examines Yeong-hye's psychological journey, focusing on the trauma caused by societal and patriarchal pressures. **P. Deborah Ann and Stephen Foster Davis** offer an eco-critical perspective, analyzing Yeong-hye's transformation from non-vegetarianism to vegetarianism as a rejection of human violence and a move toward reconciliation with nature. **Shilpa Bright** applies an ecofeminist lens, linking the oppression of women and nature under patriarchal dominance. Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is portrayed as resistance to patriarchal control and a symbol of freedom. **Jane Kim** discusses postmodern existentialism, emphasizing Yeong-hye's quest for identity and autonomy, critiquing societal constraints and the search for personal meaning. **Dr. Min Joo Lee** offers a psychological analysis of Yeong-hye's trauma, exploring how societal pressures exacerbate her mental decline, positioning the novel as a commentary on mental health. **Dr. Hyun Jung Park** situates the novel within contemporary South Korean literature, highlighting vegetarianism as cultural resistance against societal norms. **Dr. Seong Sook Kim** investigates the deconstruction of gender norms, focusing on Yeong-hye's challenge to traditional gender roles. **Dr. Jong Min Ho** explores the novel's narrative fragmentation and symbolism, enhancing its thematic depth. This research seeks to address the gap by analyzing *The Vegetarian's* socio-cultural critique, focusing on trauma, resistance, and healing in contemporary South Korean society.

Themes and Structure:

Part 1: The Vegetarian - Narrated by Mr. Cheong, this part introduces Yeong-hye's decision to stop eating meat after a horrifying dream about blood and violence. Her refusal to conform to societal norms angers her husband and family. A disturbing family dinner ends with Yeong-hye being physically forced to eat meat, leading to a mental breakdown.

Part 2: Mongolian Mark - Told from the perspective of Yeong-hye's brother-in-law, an artist. He becomes fascinated by a birthmark on Yeong-hye's body and starts a project where he paints her body with flowers. Their relationship becomes increasingly obsessive, culminating in a scandal that further isolates Yeong-hye.

Part 3: Flaming Trees - Narrated by In-hye, this part focuses on Yeong-hye's descent into madness. She becomes convinced she can survive by living like a tree, refusing food and water. In-hye reflects on her own struggles and the societal pressures they both face. The novel ends ambiguously, leaving readers to interpret Yeong-hye's fate.

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Themes of The Vegetarian - In The Vegetarian, Han Kang explores deep themes of Trauma, Resistance, and Healing, Primarily. Yeong-hye's choice to stop eating meat becomes a powerful act of defiance against societal and patriarchal pressures. The novel delves into the psychological scars caused by these pressures, highlighting how challenging it is to achieve true healing in such an environment. It also examines personal identity and autonomy, showing the struggle to maintain individuality in the face of cultural expectations, all while using rich symbolism and multiple perspectives to tell the story.

Trauma from the Patriarchal Society: Yeong-hye's trauma stems largely from the oppressive patriarchal society she lives in. The novel marks several instances where Yeong-hye's autonomy is undermined by those around her. Her decision to become a Vegetarian is met with disbelief and anger, particularly from her husband, Mr. Cheong, and her father. *"Why, aren't you going to eat it?"* (Kang, Page 14) captures their immediate reaction laden with patriarchal control. *"It was as though I was seeing someone I'd never seen before. Not only because of her nakedness, but also because of the way she was so completely absorbed in her own world,"* (Kang, Page 24).

Childhood Trauma: Yeong-hye's dreams often flashback to her childhood, filled with cruel memories and acts of violence. *"When I was a child, my father pulled up my skirt to hit me while a neighbor watched,"* (Kang, Page 81). This illustrates how deep-rooted her trauma is, originating from her own family. *"Ever since primary school, I'd believed my father regarded me with a mix of love and hatred,"* (Kang, Page 74). Yeong-hye's statement underscores her conflicting emotions stemming from childhood trauma.

Psychological Breakdown: Yeong-hye's trauma manifests in a gradual mental breakdown, symbolically portrayed through her hallucinations and belief in transforming into a tree. *"In dreams, I'm going to become a tree,"* (Kang, Page 99) reflects her disintegration. *"I'm scared. I'm scared of my father. Even now, he looks at me with that same hate,"* (Kang, Page 81). This quote highlights the ongoing psychological breakdown that stems from her traumatic past.

Vegetarianism as Rebellion: Yeong-hye's renunciation of meat is a significant form of resistance against societal expectations. Her vegetarianism can be seen as an assertion of autonomy against control. *"My wish to reject all meat-based foods was a kind of self-purification,"* (Kang, Page 22). *"My body rejecting every last bit of meat. One bite and it would all come up. All that blood."* (Kang Page 18). Yeong-hye's rejection of meat symbolizes a broader rebellion against societal control.

Resistance through Silence: Yeong-hye often resorts to silence, which is her form of nonviolent resistance. Her refusal to conform is met with violence, and yet she remains silent. *"In the end, she didn't say a word. She just kept her mouth shut,"* (Kang, Page 32). *"He yelled at her savagely, rattling the windowpane, yet she said nothing."* (Kang, Page 32).

Artistic Expression as Resistance: Another character, In-hye's husband, a video artist, uses Yeong-hye's body in his art projects as a form of resistance against his personal and professional frustrations. *"He captured her bare body in complete darkness, only lit by a single*

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beam,” (Kang, Page 77). *“In her body, I found the perfect canvas for my art. Her rebellion was embodied in the way she refused to conform to societal norms,”* (Kang, Page 77).

Failed Healing: While some characters seek healing in different ways, the novel suggests that true healing remains elusive for Yeong-hye. Her family members drag her to psychiatrists hoping for recovery. *“They tried to persuade her to go to a hospital, but she just ignored them,”* (Kang, Page 35). *“Her thin wrists still bore the marks of the restraints that had bound her,”* (Kang, Page 127), emphasizing the failure of true healing.

Emotional Detachment as a Barrier to Healing: Yeong-hye’s emotional detachment makes it difficult for her to heal. *“Even now, nothing is clear to me. I am still detached,”* (Kang, Page 44). *“She looked at me with eyes that seemed to look through me, not at me,”* (Kang, Page 119).

Incomplete Healing Process: The incomplete healing process is depicted through her continued detachment and withdrawal from reality. *“She seemed to be in a place far away from all of us,”* (Kang, Page 51). *“Her body was there, but her spirit seemed to have left, wandering in a place I couldn’t follow,”* (Kang, Page 120).

Literary Techniques Used:

1. Symbolism: Kang uses powerful symbolism to convey trauma and resistance. For example, Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism symbolizes her utter rejection of societal norms. Her visions of turning into a tree symbolize her desire to escape and find peace. *“The white petals unfurl like wings”* (Kang, Page 89). This symbolic imagery reflects Yeong-hye’s transformation and desire to escape her reality.

2. Narrative Structure: The divided narrative, seen through the perspectives of Mr. Cheong, Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law, and her sister In-hye, provides a multifaceted view. It underscores the novel’s central themes from diverse angles. *“Seeing her through their eyes, you sense her slipping away,”* (Kang, narrative style). The multi-perspective narrative provides an in-depth understanding of each character’s experience. *“The alternating voices helped to paint a complete picture of the story”* (Kang, narrative style).

3. Character Development: Kang meticulously crafts Yeong-hye’s transformation, highlighting her psychological struggle. *“Early in the story... she is portrayed as meek and compliant,”* (Kang, Page 6) whereas later on, she is defiant and detached. *“She became a different person, someone none of them could recognize,”* (Kang, Page 98). *“Her defiance grew with each passing day.”* (Kang, Page 47). The gradual change in Yeong-hye’s character development underscores the novel’s central themes.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Trauma: It is depicted through Yeong-hye’s experiences of violence and abuse, both in her childhood and adult life. Her psychological breakdown highlights the deep-seated impact of these traumatic experiences. The novel underscores the prevalence and impact of trauma caused by strict societal norms and patriarchal control.

Resistance: Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism and silence serve as powerful acts of resistance against societal expectations and patriarchal oppression. Resistance manifests in various forms,

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including artistic expression, and this resistance reveals the profound psychological toll such defiance exacts on individuals.

Healing: True healing remains elusive for Yeong-hye, despite efforts from her family and medical interventions. This illustrates the lasting psychological scars and societal limitations that hinder complete recovery.

Literary Techniques: Han Kang employs symbolism, such as vegetarianism representing rebellion, and narrative structure, using multiple perspectives to enrich the story. Character development is meticulously crafted to portray Yeong-hye's transformation and the impact of trauma and resistance.

• **Broader Socio-cultural and Psychological Context:** These findings indicate that Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* offers a critical lens on the socio-cultural and psychological state of women in Seoul, South Korea:

1. Societal Pressure: The novel critiques the patriarchal and societal pressures that women face, highlighting how these norms of being a certain way and Eating Meat can lead to severe psychological trauma and resistance.

2. Psychological Impact: The narrative reveals the profound psychological impact of trauma and resistance, emphasizing that societal expectations can significantly hinder personal autonomy and identity.

3. Cultural Norms: The portrayal of incomplete healing and the unconventional forms of resistance underscores the difficulty of overcoming deeply entrenched cultural norms and achieving true recovery.

Therefore, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* provides a poignant commentary on the challenges faced by women in Seoul, reflecting broader issues of autonomy, identity, and societal expectations. It underscores the need for a deeper understanding and addressing of these socio-cultural and psychological pressures to support women's mental health and well-being.

• **Evaluation of Hypotheses:**

Hypothesis 1 ~ On Healing - Proved True: The narrative consistently shows that true healing is difficult to achieve due to deep psychological trauma and societal constraints. Yeong-hye's journey is marked by unresolved trauma and incomplete healing, supporting this hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2 ~ Resistance Through Unconventional Means - Proved True: Yeong-hye's forms of resistance, particularly her vegetarianism and silence, are unconventional. These acts of defiance highlight the psychological impact of resisting societal norms, confirming this hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3 ~ Rebellion Against Patriarchal and Societal Expectations - Proved True: Yeong-hye's transformation indeed signifies a rebellion against patriarchal control and societal expectations. Her journey reflects the suppression and reshaping of personal identity and autonomy by cultural norms, validating this hypothesis.

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Conclusion

Therefore, In Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, it is shown how trauma, resistance, and healing impact individuals in South Korea, particularly women. The story reveals how societal and patriarchal pressures create deep psychological wounds. Yeong-hye's choice to become a vegetarian is seen as an act of defiance against these norms, and her silence serves as another form of resistance. Despite many efforts, true recovery remains elusive to Yeong-hye, highlighting the difficulty of overcoming societal constraints. Han Kang's use of symbolism and multiple perspectives adds depth to the story. This analysis confirms that societal pressures profoundly impact personal identity and autonomy. The novel provides a powerful critique of these issues and resonates as an important piece of contemporary literature.

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