

Consuming Signs: A Feminist-Semiotic Analysis of Food and Gender in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract

The Vegetarian by Han Kang is a novel that explores the story of a woman who decides to adopt vegetarianism after consuming meat for years. The paper studies the function of food as a semiotic system to analyse the intersections of femininity, societal expectations and cultural norms in South Korean patriarchal society. This paper also argues that the protagonist Yeong-hye's decision to completely stop consuming meat is not a simple dietary choice but a semiotic act that subverts the signifying system linking food, the female body and prescribed femininity. Through her radical decision to embrace vegetarianism, she disrupts the conventional food signs of meat as patriarchal authority, cooking as feminine duty and simultaneously challenges the performative roles that define femininity. Analysing her transformation through a combined semiotic and feminist lens reveals how Yeong-hye's body becomes a site of resistance. This paper aims to deconstruct how food function as a primary signifier of societal expectations.

Keywords: South Korean Literature, Semiotics, Feminist Theory, Food Studies, Patriarchy

Introduction

The Vegetarian (2007) by Han Kang, translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2015, is a novel of a woman's psychological conflict and trauma of its protagonist, Yeong-hye. Divided into three sections, "The Vegetarian", "Mongolian Mark" and "Flaming Trees", it follows the story of the protagonist whose decision to simply stop eating meat after an unsettling dream of a "pool of blood in a barn" (Han 19) that kept recurring ends up provoking deep familial and societal tensions. To understand the larger significance and implications of her choice, this paper applies semiotics, the study of signs, symbols and their use in creating meaning. Analysing the novel through a semiotic framework enables us to look at how food functions as a cultural signifier that shapes and reflects social values within the culture of a society. The paper also attempts to look at the consequences of resistance through her story, a housewife who by adopting vegetarianism ends up challenging the patriarchal norms and societal expectations that surrounds her. Yeong-hye's seemingly

simple decision to abstain from meat sets off a ripple effect, redefining her relationship with her family and her identity.

In South Korean society, dining traditions can also double as an enforcement for conformity, familial unity and respect for authority and hierarchy. These meals also extend beyond individual preferences but it is a performance of an individual's social role, especially for women. With her resolve to become a vegetarian, she challenges the very frameworks that define womanhood, autonomy and sanity. In a conventional patriarchal society, it is assumed by default to be a woman's role to prepare food and serve it to the male members of the family. And by refusing the food prepared in a family gathering is to reject the family itself. Yeong-hye's decision, is therefore a direct confrontation towards gender expectations and also towards a broader cultural system in which eating meat is connected to communal harmony, strength and prosperity. Her actions thus is seen as an intentional and visible violation of societal norms, making her a figure of subversion within the established social order. In this context, her decision to adopt vegetarianism is a destabilisation of the semiotic system.

The Semiotics of Food and Patriarchal Norms

Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian was something that was near to impossible to comprehend by her husband. He perceived it as something that was abnormal. In order to fully understand the subversiveness of Yeong-hye's vegetarianism, the cultural significance of meat in South Korean society has to be considered. Their cuisine leans heavily on non-vegetarian dishes. Even seemingly vegetarian dishes like kimchi or vegetable stews often contain fish sauce, shrimp paste or anchovy broth. There is a strong cultural preference for diets that are centred around meat. Shared common meals are valued by Koreans, so in a group dining experience where meat is central, being a vegetarian can become an issue of inconvenience. It also makes vegetarianism a social transgression and not just a personal choice.

In the opening section of the novel, as narrated by Mr. Cheong, "Every morning she got up at six a.m. to prepare rice and soup, and usually a bit of fish" (Han 4). Yeong-hye's early role centers on caregiving and nourishment, an act signifying her position as a dutiful wife. Her domestic labour, maintaining the household and fulfilling kitchen duties reinforces the cultural association between women's work in the kitchen and marital obligation. Food operates as a marker of socially prescribed femininity. Yeong-hye's rejection of meat is interpreted as a rejection of her roles as a daughter, wife and woman. Her husband, Mr. Cheong, views her decision as irrational. His reaction highlights how women's bodies are controlled not just for conforming to the gender roles but to maintain male dignity. The inability to put a control over his wife's dietary choice threatens his male authority, revealing how patriarchal systems rely heavily on women's obedience and docility.

Yeong-Hye, through her action, challenges the cultural codes that link food, femininity and patriarchal control. In the opening lines of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, the husband, Mr. Cheong declares, "Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way" (Han 3). This statement establishes the central thesis of the novel that a woman's worth in a society is dependent upon her conformity to set coded behaviours, of which dietary practice is a fundamental element. Yeong-hye's transformation from an "unremarkable" wife to a site of crisis is brought about by a single,

seemingly harmless act, the refusal to consume meat. This refusal, however, is far from simple, it is a semiotic disturbance.

This paper looks at how food in the novel functions as a potent signifier within the patriarchal system, a system that relies on consumption and control of female bodies. To analyse this, this paper employs semiotics, the study of signs and their meaning. Ferdinand de Saussure established the sign as composed of a signifier and a signified, the connection between them shaped entirely by social convention. Food, in this book, functions as a signifier which is encoded with expectations of women as nurturers and objects of consumption. In South Korean society's socio-cultural norms, "meat" is not just a signifier for animal flesh. It signifies patriarchal authority, the normalisation of violence, social integration and the expectation of docile femininity. Everyday staples such as Kimchi and various banchan (side dishes) embody values of maternal care signifying women's role of sustaining the family with acts of nourishment. This symbolic division intensifies the burden of domestic labour on women. Roland Barthes's concept of myth becomes particularly crucial in this regard. According to him, "myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form" (Barthes 107). He also adds that "myth has the task of giving an historical intention to a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal" (Barthes 142). He defines myth as a kind of speech that distorts and transforms historical and cultural constructions into naturalised truths. The myth here is that a Korean wife would ideally and naturally cook for the family and consume meat, thereby affirming her constructed role within both the family and the society. This process of naturalisation is most effectively maintained through rituals that are communal in nature. Taking an example of the Korean barbecue, it functions as more than just a simple meal, it operates as a social ritual that is gendered. Typically dominated by men, where men grill the meat and serve it to other, thereby symbolizing authority and performing the role of a provider and master of the feast. The meat sizzling on the grill, the shared drinks and the collective wrapping of slices of cooked meat in lettuce form a sensory semiotic system that reaffirms social bonds under patriarchal authority. Yeong-hye's refusal to participate in such a ritual makes her a "spoiler", a presence that unsettles communal harmony. Mary Douglas, an anthropologist, in her work *Purity and Danger* (1966), argues that a breach in a cultural category, such as rejecting an expected food practice, is often perceived as a form of threat or pollution to the entire social structure itself (Douglas 50). Thus, Yeong-hye becomes marked as "polluted" or "dangerous" not because she is physically impure, but because her abstention from the ritual silently exposes and critiques the compliance of others in such normalised structures of domination.

This semiotic system is inherently gendered by its structure. Feminist theories enable us to unpack this gendering through its critical framework. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" in *The Second Sex* (1949), it resonates deeply in this context (Beauvoir 283). Womanhood is an identity that is constructed and is socially produced, shaped through norms that are dictated under patriarchal control. In a similar way, Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble* (1999), posits that gender is social and not innate but rather, it is a product of repeated performance and behaviour that is dictated by the set of norms that are constructed socially. She further explains that, "there is no identity behind the express of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be of its results" (Butler 33). The act of preparing and consuming food makes up the most primary part of these performative acts through which gender identities are constructed.

Yeong-hye deciding to become a vegetarian is a refusal to conform, a deliberate rebellion expressed through her body against societal norms. By rejecting meat which is the signifier, she is also rejecting the symbolic order that ties food to patriarchal authority and her own identity. Her body becomes the center for her protest as she transforms from her passive body to an active body of refusal.

Meat, Power and the performance of Femininity

The social setting of *The Vegetarian* initially appears as a stiflingly normal society, a world where signs and meanings are not questioned and accepted for what it is. This normality is a product of patriarchal constructs, with food serving as an effective tool for enforcing these norms. In the first section of the novel which is narrated by Yeong-hye's husband, Mr. Cheong, the connection between meat consumption and patriarchal order is starkly illustrated. His worldview is that of convenience and control. He chooses Yeong-hye as a wife not for her individuality but for her "unremarkable" disposition, her lack of expressing her desires and strong opinions. His sense of identity relies on the passivity of his wife. In this context, meat becomes a signifier of this power dynamic. When he insists on being served pork ribs, his demand is not simply just for his hunger to be satiated, he is enacting his role as the male head of the household, expecting obedience from his wife without question. The acts of preparing and serving meat becomes a ritual of subservience.

Roland Barthes' analysis on food in *Mythologies* provides a useful parallel. He writes that food operates as a signifier of "situation and value" (Barthes 99). In mid-century France, steak signified masculinity and national vigor. Similarly, in the context of the novel, meat, particularly the grilled beef and pork ribs that feature prominently signifies participation in South-Korea's patriarchal system. It represents economic prosperity, social cohesion (especially among men) and an unquestioned vitality. To abstain from meat is not viewed or considered as a private and personal choice but as a rejection of this entire moral and social framework. This is evident in the reaction of Yeong-hye's family, they respond to her refusal as though it were rebellion. Her father's attempt of force feeding her a piece of meat during a family dinner is the novel's most powerful depiction of this patriarchal enforcement. He screams, "Don't you understand what your father's telling you? If he tells you to eat, you eat!" (Han 38). His reaction reveals how Yeong-hye's acting out of her own mind and autonomy is viewed as a threat to the patriarchal structure that their family is built upon. Meat also becomes the tangible symbol of this collective control over the individual and most particularly, over the female body.

In most cultures all over the world, the kitchen is coded as a space that is gendered. It is the place where a woman performs her role as a nourisher and caregiver. Yeong-hye's refusal to cook meat for her husband functions as a refusal to participate in the performance of the gendered responsibilities. Her body which was a source of nurture for her husband transforms to a site of denial and withholding. Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of woman's immanence versus man's transcendence is especially relevant here. Women are often confined to the repetitive, life sustaining labor of immanence which is cooking cleaning and childbearing that enables men to pursue projects and transcend into the public sphere. Yeong-hye's refusal to cook meat is a refusal of her immanent role. She withdraws the supportive ground for Mr.Cheong's claim to transcendence. In doing so, she destabilises the structural basis of their marriage.

In contrast, her sister In-hye, represents the successful performance of traditional gendered role. Throughout the novel, In-hye is the competent, responsible figure who manages the family's cosmetics shop and takes on the responsibility of caring for others. She is the one who attempts to mediate between Yeong-hye and their infuriated family. In-hye tries to re-integrate her sister into the symbolic order which she herself upholds. Her character acts as a foil, highlighting the extremity of her sister's nature of defiance. She performs the semiotics of compliant femininity and womanhood even at personal cost. Yeong-hye's refusal and non-compliance makes her unintelligible within the existing order, marking her as an alien and even mentally unstable.

The Female Body as a Site of Resistance and Re-signification

In the patriarchal semiotic system, the female body itself is a signifier, an object to be consumed under the male gaze. Mr. Cheong's attraction to Yeong-hye is grounded in her object-like quality. He describes her body in terms of its passivity and accessibility and lack of self-assertion. Her decision to become a vegetarian directly disrupts this arrangement. By stepping outside the cycle of meat consumption, she also withdraws her body from the broader economy of male consumption and appropriation. As her body changes, she loses weight, her breasts shrink, her smell changes and she becomes less appealing and less desirable to her husband, a fact he notes with disapproval (Han 15). Her body is no longer a palatable object instead it becomes a sign of resistance, a body-text that no longer yields to his interpretation or control. This moment anticipates the second section's more explicit and aestheticised artistic consumption of her body by her brother-in-law but here, the consumption in the marriage is mundane and domestic. Her dietary choice of becoming a vegetarian is the first step in reclaiming her body from being a sign for others and attempting to make it a sign for herself, however imperfect that self may be.

Yeong-hye's only explanation for her change remains cryptic and repetitive: "I had a dream" (Han 10). The dream, disturbing, full of blood and saturated with violence is the beginning of her refusal. It surfaces as a repressed memory and trauma that fractures the calm facade of her life. Her vegetarianism becomes the bodily translation of this psychic disturbance, a deliberate and systematic undoing of her the signifying structures that have long constrained her.

In *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses* (1993), Jacques Lacan presents the idea of the Symbolic Order, "the order of language, of signifiers, and of the law" (Evans 202). It refers to the intersection of cultural social norms and symbols that make up the experience of humans and also influences the way we see reality. Language and signifiers plays an important role in shaping this Symbolic Order. Within this order, meat is a signifier of participation and belonging. By refusing it, she is not only attempting to disengage from a food habit but from the entire system of meaning that the diet supports. She stands firm in her conviction. Her protest is a result of bodily intuition and not ideology.

Judith butler's theory of gender performativity enables us to analyse the implications of Yeong-hye's actions. If gender is constructed repeated acts, behaviours and expressions, then her refusal to eat meat becomes a refusal to perform gender roles that are expected of her. She stops being wife and daughter in the manner that is prescribed to her through culture and habit. She becomes a testimony of how such constructed roles depend upon compliance. Her body becomes a symbol of what Butler terms as "insubordination". Her body stops to signify

what it is supposed to and it becomes a physical sign that no longer falls in line with the conventional ideas of femininity.

Yeong-hye's silence becomes symbolic in a society where women are systematically silenced. And consequently, it becomes her loudest statement. Her body becomes a site of resistance. Unlike the male characters, who seek to define her, she erases herself from their narratives entirely. Her rejection of food and societal norms mirrors the idea of the abject, as described by Julia Kristeva as that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4). By refusing to eat meat and food altogether, Yeong-hye becomes an abject, disrupting the societal norms and expectations that rely on her compliance and submissiveness. As she withdraws into silence and becomes thin, her body no longer represents desire or femininity, so it becomes unreadable and threatening. Her presence is no longer recognisable to those around her, so she is diagnosed and institutionalised to control the disruption she causes.

Conclusion

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is an exploration and examination of the politics that surrounds the female body. While the novel is rooted in South Korean culture, its themes resonate globally. Yeong-hye's choice to embrace vegetarianism functions as a profound act of resistance against the patriarchal system that uses food as a signifier to enforce and regulate traditional notions of femininity and exert control. By abstaining from meat, she challenges the signification that tie her to the roles of a compliant wife, caregiver, nourisher and an object of consumption. She contests the very meaning of power and questions the traditional view of women's act of cooking as submission.

Ultimately, the novel is more than just a woman's decision to opt for vegetarianism. It sheds a light on the oppressive expectations that societal norms imposes on the female body. Reading the text from both semiotic and feminist lenses, the novel exposes how food reinforces gender norms. It compels readers to reconsider the way they look at the political dimensions of food and gender. The novel positions food as a critical medium through which specific social roles are reinforced or questioned, turning the simple act of eating or not eating into acts that are imbued with broader social meanings and potentials for resistance.

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