

Systemic Violence and Quiet Rebellions: Trauma and the Struggle for Self in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

Dr Phiona Elizabeth Joshy

Associate Professor, Department of English
Bishop Chulaparambil Memorial College, Kottayam
phionaej@bcmcollege.ac.in

Abstract

This paper examines Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* through the lens of contemporary trauma theory. It analyzes how the protagonist Yeong-hye's psychological and emotional breakdown which is manifested through intense vegetarianism, nightmares, and a surreal transformation into a tree and serves as a rebellion against patriarchal violence and societal conformity. Employing the theories of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, the study argues that the novel portrays trauma as a belated and unspeakable response that resists narrative coherence. The novel ultimately indicts a social system that pathologizes female resistance, and claims "madness" as a testament to oppressive structures rather than individual response.

Keywords: female agency, patriarchy, resistance, trauma, vegetarianism

Trauma is seen as the consequence of distressing events that have a psychological, emotional and physical impact on a human being. Literature has been a medium which explores human experiences and psychological scars caused by trauma. Initially it referred only to physical wounds later it expanded to include the profound psychic injury, as exemplified by the "shell shock" suffered by soldiers and people in the World Wars and the Holocaust. Trauma theory, which emerged in the 1990s with notable scholars like Cathy Caruth, studies how overwhelming, catastrophic events resist immediate processing and instead return later through nightmares and flashbacks. Thinkers like Roger Luckhurst and Sigmund Freud, describe trauma as a mental intruder that evokes havoc and chaos in the mind and soul of the survivor, inflicting lasting psychological disorientation even after the physical wounds appear to have healed.

These disorientations remain fragmented and suppressed in the minds of the victim and literature can be employed to articulate these stifling experiences. Trauma theory helps to analyse these chaotic experiences within a cultural and sociological context. Trauma takes the survivor through a near death experience building a crisis where both the event and the reality of survival feel doubtful.

This makes articulation difficult. However, literature provides a vital space for this "double telling," rendering voice to what is mostly silenced, particularly in patriarchal societies, as noted by Judith Herman. Literature offers a medium to articulate the disintegration and reconstruction of identity in the aftermath of trauma. It provides a space to explore the engagement between the narrative and the unvoiced experience.

The Vegetarian is a novel by Nobel prize recipient Han Kang and is a psychological novel. It consists of three parts connected through the misogynistic treatment of society towards women. They are titled *The Vegetarian*, *Mongolian Mark*, and *Flaming Trees* and was originally published as separate stories in South Korea. Even though the novel embraces a bizarre form of resistance, the novella has garnered international acclaim and has been received positively by literary critics. Yeong-hye, the central character, induces interest in the reader through her decision to stop eating meat as a form of resistance and draws attention to the dysfunction within her family and the society at large. This act of resistance disrupts her life and creates a profound impact on her life and in the reader. The three parts have the perspectives of three characters connected to Yeong-hye. The first part is narrated from the perspective of her husband, Mr. Cheong, and gives us insights into the hostile reactions of her family, including her father attempting to force-feed her meat. Yeong-hye slits her wrist in an act of defiance that causes her mental and physical decline.

The second part, "Mongolian Mark," presents the viewpoint of Yeong-hye's brother-in-law, who is an artist. He becomes obsessed with her body and imagines her as a muse. He convinces her to help in an art project where he paints floral patterns on her naked body. This project translates into a sexual encounter and consequentially brings him disgrace and Yeong-hye's institutionalisation. The final section, "Flaming Trees," is narrated by Yeong-hye's sister, In-hye. She reflects on their lives as she watches Yeong-hye sink to deeper despair in a psychiatric hospital, transforming into a tree after deciding to abstain from all forms of food. In-hye's examines her own suppressed desires and the burden of societal expectations thrust on women as a race.

The Vegetarian explores the trauma-laden life of Yeong-hye, and her sibling and examines the attempt that humans make to rise above the brutality of physical existence within a conformist society. The novel establishes that this enforced conformity is the fundamental source of trauma as is evident in Yeong-hye's attempt at transformation and autonomy. In-hye emerges as the only character who understands beyond her visible "madness," which requires her to endure traumatic insights within her life too. Yeong-hye's chooses to find relief from the patriarchal tyranny within her life by an arboreal transformation. Her pursuit of

the healing instils in her desire to discard all that was human and assuming the soothing and calming existence of a plant. Her trauma and her journey to transcend the pain is revealed through fragmented storytelling. She is raised in a deeply patriarchal household and her identity was continually smothered and subjugated violently by a father. She wakes up to the realization that she is not alone. She begins to see her own suffering reflected in her sister, mother, and in the animals killed for food. She recognises in them the same helplessness and despair she experiences.

One of her key memory involves her father punishing her pet dog, Whitey, for biting her: "The dog vomits blackish-red blood... I remember the two eyes that had watched me... on the surface of the soup. But I don't care. I really didn't care" (Kang 30). This incident intertwines the dog's suffering with her own emotional wounds. Yeong-hye's identity has never truly belonged to her. Her identity is shaped by the cruel misogynist conditioning and she has been complicit in many of the patriarchal norms. This complicity when juxtaposed with her own victimhood with that of the animals she has consumed, feeling both victim and aggressor triggers deep seated guilt in her. As she reflects in the hospital: "The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there... Nobody can help me. Nobody can save me. Nobody can make me breathe" (Kang 35). The unexpressed guilt transforms into physical trauma for Yeong-hye. Han Kang critically examines human centred oppression that marginalizes the "other," drawing parallels between the suffering of animals and Yeong-hye's own trauma.

The narrative of oppression continues into Yeong-hye's marriage, where Mr. Cheong, views her solely as a means to fulfill his own ego. He narrates the first section, explaining he married her precisely for her "passive personality," noting, that "There was no need to affect intellectual leanings in order to win her over... I could rest assured that I wouldn't have to fret about such things on her account" (Kang 2). He views her act of turning a vegetarian as annoying and socially embarrassing. He is peeved at her refusal to cook him meats and resents the her act of throwing away expensive cuts of meats. He rallies the rest of her family behind him in his campaign to torture and coerce Yeong-hye back into eating meat and acting socially respectable. By the end of the first titular part of the novella we see her bruised, raped forcefully fed meat and blood by her parents and institutionalized when she attempts suicide.

Yeong-hye's profound psychological transformation is prompted by the recurrent and violent nightmares she experiences. She dreams of being trapped in a nightmarish space: "Dark woods... A red barn-like building... A long bamboo stick strung with great, blood-red gashes of meat... Blood in my mouth, blood-

soaked clothes sucked onto my skin" (Kang 8). These dreams reflect her internal turmoil and suffocating guilt and is reflective of her oppressive childhood.

Her violent dream sequences serve as deep manifestations, revealing the mind's attempt to process and escape overwhelming violence. She states, "I had a dream... Blood, everywhere. I was drenched in it. I couldn't eat meat after that" (Kang 65). The blood imagery in her dreams and her stoic decision to adopt of vegetarianism expresses Cathy Caruth's idea that trauma is a belated, intrusive painful memory. Bessel van der Kolk's emphasizes how trauma is stored in the body. The narration establishes that violence that does not heal projects as bodily rebellion, exemplified through Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat.

Judith Herman notes that traumatic memories often resurface through symbolic bodily communications rather than direct recollection. Caruth observes that trauma narratives frequently employ "figurative language to bear witness to what cannot be directly remembered" (Caruth 11). Yeong-Hye's brother-in-law observes "The Mongolian mark on her buttock was still faintly visible, blue-green, like a bruise. A stain that wouldn't wash out." (Kang 72). By comparing the birthmark to a bruise there is the suggestion of both unprocessed pain and the permanent trauma that has caused it, strengthens Bessel van der Kolk's idea that trauma leaves "an indelible imprint" on both body and psyche (van der Kolk 21). The brother-in-law's artistic fascination with the mark transforms Yeong-hye's body into what Caruth describes as "a text to be deciphered" rather than a subject with agency (Caruth 10). The brevity and visual focus of his description contrast sharply with Yeong-hye's own inarticulate trauma expressions. This highlights the communication gap between survivor and observer and is suggestive of how trauma leaves lasting marks across generations.

Yeong-hye's decision to accept a more natural and uncorrupted way of life is signified by her transformation into a plant like being. Her wish for change invites cruelty from the people closest to her, resulting in increased isolation and suffering. "She smeared feces on the walls of her room and all over her body, laughing the whole time, so we had no choice but to move her to the padded cell." (Kang 150). This reveals severe psychological regression which is a hallmark of unresolved trauma.

According to Bessel van der Kolk's extreme trauma can cause a return to expressions that are preverbal and manifested through bodily actions when cognitive processing becomes unbearable. The feces which are a primal bodily substance symbolize her attempt to externalize internal suffering, mirroring how childhood trauma survivors often reenact violations through bodily waste. Yeong-hye's most animalistic behaviour emerges from her most intense human suffering.

The nurse's horrified reaction mirrors societal tendencies to interpret trauma symptoms as madness rather than communication. Yeong-hye's decision to abstain from eating meat and her gradual shift into a plant-like existence serve as coping mechanisms. These actions represent her attempts to regain control over her life and to flee from the traumatic experiences she has endured. The hopeful clinging to a dream-like reality turns out to be harsh, deepening her psychological disintegration and exacerbating her trauma.

In Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, while Yeong-hye's visceral rebellion against patriarchal violence dominates the narrative; her sister In-hye endures a quieter but equally devastating form of trauma. Unlike Yeong-hye, whose suffering is marked by dramatic acts of refusal, In-hye's pain manifests through repressed guilt, emotional exhaustion, and the cumulative weight of societal expectations. Her trauma begins in childhood, shaped by the same abusive household that shattered Yeong-hye, but where Yeong-hye resists, In-hye survives by conforming. She becomes the responsible sister, the one who upholds the facade of normalcy. Her compliance comes at a cost of a growing sense of guilt for failing to protect Yeong-hye from their father's brutality. This survivor's guilt lingers into adulthood, poisoning her relationships and distorting her idea of agency.

In-hye's suffering intensifies through betrayal, particularly at the hands of her husband, whose exploitation of Yeong-hye under the pretext of art exposes the unescapable misogyny that defines their world. Though In-hye is not directly sexually abused in the novel she becomes an indirect victim who is forced to accept that her sister's body has been violated by the man she trusted. The dissolution of her marriage leaves her isolated. She is burdened with single motherhood and has to bear the societal stigma attached to divorce in Korea. Her trauma is further compounded by medical abuse when she seeks treatment for vaginal bleeding which is a moment that emphasises the systemic disregard for women's bodily autonomy. The doctor's dismissive attitude, his clinical detachment, and the implied humiliation of the examination mirror the broader culture that silences women's pain, reducing their suffering to mere inconveniences.

As Yeong-hye's mental state deteriorates, In-hye assumes the role of caregiver, a responsibility that pushes her to the brink of collapse. Her monthly visits to the psychiatric hospital become rituals of despair, each one a reminder of her powerlessness to save her sister. Yeong-hye's refusal to eat, her delusional belief in her own transformation into a tree and her eventual physical decline all weigh on In-hye, who is left to question the meaning of her own choices. While Yeong-hye rejects the world entirely, In-hye remains trapped within it by her trauma

leading to her exhaustion. The novel's closing passages is narrated from In-hye's perspective unraveling a quiet crisis of identity. She confronts the hollowness of the roles she has been conditioned to play as that of a dutiful daughter, devoted sister, selfless mother. In-hye's trauma, though less visible than Yeong-hye's, is just as deep. It is the trauma of a woman who upholds the system that destroys her. A system she upholds because she thinks that is the way to survive.

Han Kang uses In hye's character to expose the insidious nature of patriarchal violence, which harms not only those who rebel against it but also those who labor under its weight in muted suffering. In-hye's story is a testament that trauma is not always loud and that the breaking happens in silence. Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* centre on women whose lives are shaped by trauma, but their experiences reflect different cultural and psychological landscapes. Yeong-hye, the protagonist of *The Vegetarian*, rebels violently against the patriarchal norms of South Korean society, her trauma rooted in familial abuse and bodily violation. It is deeply personal and inextricably tied to systemic oppression.

Yeong-hye's trauma in *The Vegetarian* is visceral and rooted in violation. Though never explicitly detailed, the novel implies a history of sexual abuse and patriarchal violence. Her father's authoritarianism, her husband's objectification, and her brother-in-law's exploitative art project all reflect a society that reduces women's bodies to sites of control. Her decision to become vegetarian initially is a rejection of her fater's cruelty which morphs into a broader protest against a world that consumes and commodified her. Meat becomes a metaphor for the violence she has internalized: "I'm doing this because I hate blood. I can't stand the smell of meat cooking" (Kang 71). Her trauma is both a reaction to personal abuse and a rebellion against a culture that silences women's agency.

The Vegetarian critiques the suffocating patriarchy of South Korea. Yeong-hye's husband views her as a docile object, her father forces meat into her mouth to assert dominance, and her brother-in-law exploits her body for his voyeuristic art. Each man represents a facet of systemic misogyny, and their collective violence drives Yeong-hye's psychic collapse. Her institutionalization in the novel's final act underscores the brutality of a system that equates female resistance with insanity. At the hospital she is hospitalized and fed through a tube which further mutes her becomes a literal and metaphorical silencing. Her rebellion, though defiant, ultimately consumes her. Han Kang offers no redemption and leaves the readers with a haunting image of Yeong-hye "smiling faintly, her eyes wide open, fixed on some point in the distance" (Kang 148).

Yeong-hye's trauma is a violent, self-destructive protest against the patriarchal dehumanization of South Korean society rooted in implied sexual abuse and

familial violence. Through Yeong-hye's disintegration, the novel reframes 'sickness' not as a failure of the individual, but as a systemic condition of societies that equate conformity with humanity and deviation with disease, critiquing the violence of normative structures that weaponize labels of madness to silence dissent. Yeong-hye's trajectory from passive wife to institutionalized patient illustrates the brutal cost of defying patriarchal and societal norms, which pathologize her trauma as madness to be controlled rather than a testimony to be understood. The narrative powerfully validates Cathy Caruth's assertion that trauma is experienced belatedly and repetitively.

Ultimately, the novel presents trauma not as an individual failing but as a systemic condition. Yeong-hye's tragic erasure and In-hye's silent suffering are two sides of the same coin, revealing a world where female pain is either spectacularized into madness or invisibly absorbed as duty. Through its unflinching gaze, *The Vegetarian* reframes the question of "sickness," suggesting that the true pathology lies not in the survivor's fractured psyche, but in the oppressive structures like familial, social, and institutional systems, that inflict violence causing wounds and then move on to punish the visible scars. The novel leaves readers with a profound indictment of a society that demands conformity at the expense of humanity, where the quest for autonomy can lead only to disintegration or unbearable endurance.

Works Cited

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian*. Translated by Deborah Smith, Hogarth Press, 2015.

van der Kolk, Bessel A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Viking, 2014.