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"MADNESS AS RESISTANCE: SUBVERTING PATRIARCHAL CONTROL IN HAN KANG'S THE VEGETARIAN"

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of madness as a form of resistance in Han Kang's novel The Vegetarian, which deeply depicts a woman's psychological and bodily rebellion against the shackles of a patriarchal and conformist Korean society. The main character, Yeong-hye, exhibits behavior labeled as "madness" after she decides to stop eating meat—a decision that later develops into a rejection of language, social expectations, and even her own body. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of madness as a social construction and R.D. Laing's anti-psychiatry perspective, this study argues that Yeong-hye's descent into what is considered madness is not simply a mental disorder, but a conscious form of resistance embodied through the body. Her rejection of familial and societal norms represents an attempt to reclaim agency in a world that often oppresses women's subjectivity. Through a close reading of the narrative, this article reveals how The Vegetarian critiques mechanisms of control, discipline, and normalization within domestic and institutional structures. Ultimately, Yeong-hye's madness emerges as a counter-narrative that shakes the rational order and challenges dominant ideologies about gender, conformity, and sanity.

Keywords: ***Madness, Resistance, Han Kang, The Vegetarian, Patriarchy, Michel Foucault, Feminism, Body Politics, Korean Literature, Social Control.***

Introduction

In the growing body of literary criticism on gender and mental health, madness is increasingly viewed not merely as a clinical diagnosis but as a site of resistance, negotiation, and meaning-making. In postmodern and poststructuralist discourse, madness is reinterpreted as a response to the socio-political and cultural pressures exerted upon the individual, especially women in patriarchal societies. Han Kang's The Vegetarian (2007), which won the Man Booker International Prize in 2016, is a seminal literary work that challenges normative understandings of sanity and resistance through the story of Yeong-hye, a woman whose rejection of meat consumption spirals into a radical detachment from language, sexuality, and social conformity. Recent scholarship underscores the importance of examining madness in literature through an intersectional and socio-political lens. According to Chu (2020), female madness in contemporary Korean fiction frequently emerges as "an articulation of refusal—a way of saying 'no' when language itself is insufficient or dangerous" (p. 145). Similarly, Kim and Song (2022) argue that Korean women writers increasingly use psychological disorder as a metaphor for political and gendered trauma, especially in societies that suppress dissent and individual agency. These perspectives are crucial in understanding how The Vegetarian positions Yeong-hye's so-called mental breakdown not as an illness, but as an embodied critique of cultural and familial control. This study builds upon Michel Foucault's (1961/2019) theory of madness as a discursive construct shaped by institutional and societal norms, and aligns with RD Laing's (1967/2018) anti-psychiatric view that madness can be a rational reaction to an irrational world. In The Vegetarian, Yeong-hye's transformation is not described as a loss of sanity, but as a deliberate retreat from a violent social order that equates obedience with wellness. Her silence, anorexia, and nudity are symbolic acts that resist both the control of her body by her husband and family, and the broader mechanisms of normalization that dictate feminine behavior in

Korean society. The novel's portrayal of the body as both a battleground and a site of autonomy resonates with recent feminist scholarship. Lee (2019) highlights that in East Asian literature, the female body is often the primary terrain upon which resistance to patriarchal authority is staged. Moreover, in the context of South Korea's Confucian-influenced cultural landscape, the subversion of roles such as wife and daughter is often met with psychiatric labeling and institutional discipline (Jung & Park, 2021). These dynamics are further complicated by Korea's rapid modernization, which has intensified psychological pressures while maintaining rigid gender hierarchies and collective social values (Seo & Yoon, 2020). Yeong-hye's descent into madness thus becomes a rupture—a disruption of the expected trajectory of womanhood defined by marriage, obedience, and domesticity. Her refusal to participate in these roles is met not with dialogue but with coercion, medicalization, and eventual institutionalization. As Seo and Yoon (2020) note, the psychiatric system in South Korea has historically been used as a tool to reinforce normative social behavior, often pathologizing nonconformity rather than addressing the root causes of psychological distress. Furthermore, the novel engages with broader global concerns about mental health and gender-based violence. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) reports that women are disproportionately affected by depression, anxiety, and other forms of psychological trauma, often linked to socio-economic stressors, intimate partner violence, and gender discrimination. Literature such as The Vegetarian becomes a crucial space to explore these intersections—where the personal becomes political, and madness becomes a coded language of suffering and resistance.

By recontextualizing madness as a form of political resistance rather than mere psychological deterioration, this paper seeks to offer a nuanced interpretation of The Vegetarian. It argues that Yeong-hye's descent into silence and self-erasure functions as a form of agency—a last resort to reclaim ownership over her body and identity. This interpretation is informed by the intersection of feminist literary criticism, Foucauldian theory, and cultural studies on mental health and resistance. Thus, The Vegetarian is not simply a narrative about mental illness or dietary eccentricity; it is a powerful allegory about the costs of nonconformity in a society where female subjectivity is policed and silenced. Through a close reading of the novel, this paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on madness, power, and resistance in global women's writing. It also invites a broader reflection on the implications of labeling and controlling those who choose to live outside the parameters of the socially acceptable, particularly in the context of a rapidly modernizing but deeply traditional society such as South Korea.

Research Methodology

This study applies a qualitative-descriptive method within the framework of literary analysis, aiming to explore how madness is constructed and represented as a form of resistance in The Vegetarian by Han Kang. The qualitative approach enables the researcher to interpret and unpack symbolic meanings, character behavior, and narrative structure by employing critical and theoretical tools that draw from feminist theory, discourse analysis, and poststructuralist perspectives.

2.1 Research Approach and Design

The research is framed by a textual and interpretative analysis, which emphasizes close reading and the deconstruction of narrative elements. This approach is particularly suitable for uncovering how the novel represents social power, gender dynamics, and mental health discourse through literary techniques and character development. The study is underpinned by Foucauldian discourse theory, anti-psychiatric perspectives (RD Laing), and feminist literary criticism, which together facilitate a multi-layered analysis of the protagonist's descent into "madness" as a symbolic and political gesture. The analysis also pays attention to narrative structure, point of view, symbolism, and figurative language that contribute to the novel's thematic construction.

2.2 Data Source

The primary data for this study is the novel The Vegetarian by Han Kang, specifically the English edition translated by Deborah Smith (2015). The novel is divided into three interrelated parts—The Vegetarian, Mongolian Mark, and Flaming Trees—each narrated from a different perspective, which offers multiple interpretative dimensions regarding the protagonist's psychological and social transformation. **Secondary data** includes journal articles, scholarly books, and relevant theoretical works published within the last ten years that discuss madness, gender, resistance, and the intersection of literature and mental health. These include recent studies on Korean literature, feminist criticism, and psychiatric cultural discourse.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process involves selective and thematic close reading, focusing on passages where the character Yeong-hye exhibits behaviors labeled as deviant, irrational, or subversive. The researcher identifies and categorizes key textual elements, such as:

- Physical and psychological transformations of the protagonist
- Reactions of other characters (husband, family, medical professionals)
- Symbolism of body, silence, and food
- Institutional and familial discourses of control and normalization

The analytical process follows a three-stage interpretive framework:

1. **Textual Analysis**: Identifying and annotating significant literary and rhetorical elements.
2. **Theoretical Interpretation**: Interpreting the data using concepts from Foucault (madness and discourse), Laing (anti-psychiatry), and feminist theory (gender, agency, resistance).
3. **Contextualization**: Relating the textual analysis to broader social, cultural, and ideological contexts, especially in South Korean society.

2.4 Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure validity, the study triangulates textual evidence with contemporary scholarly debates and theoretical insights. The researcher critically engages with multiple perspectives to avoid single-narrative interpretation and integrates various critical viewpoints to strengthen analytical objectivity. **Trustworthiness**is enhanced by maintaining analytical rigor in the interpretation process, providing transparent justification for textual selections, and ensuring consistency between theory and data analysis. The methodology follows ethical scholarly standards, and all sources are properly cited.

Findings and Discussions

1. Madness as a Form of Resistance to Patriarchal Control

Finding 1: "I had a dream. A dream about becoming a plant." (p.13)

This seemingly surreal dream becomes a profound metaphor for Yeong-hye's internal desire to escape the human world dictated by patriarchal oppression. Her longing to transform into a plant represents a passive, non-confrontational act of resistance. In Elaine Showalter's framework of female madness, this dream signifies a refusal to conform to traditional roles assigned to women, such as docility, sexual availability, and obedience. The imagery of becoming a plant echoes the desire to detach from a society that polices the female body.

Finding 2: "You're not the only one who's suffered... I've been so lonely. I feel like I'm going crazy." (p.45) Yeong-hye's response to her sister reflects a fragmented psyche, but also hints at the shared yet silenced suffering of women. Her articulation of madness becomes a way to vocalize pain that is otherwise marginalized. Drawing on Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's theory in The Madwoman in the Attic, this moment reinforces how madness provides a language for women to articulate their discontent in a male-centered world.

Finding 3: "She's gone crazy, right? Completely lost it." (p.52) Yeong-hye's act of defiance is immediately labeled as "madness" by others, especially men, to delegitimize her autonomy. Michel Foucault's theory in Madness and Civilization helps to understand this reaction: society marginalizes individuals who reject the norms, branding them mad to regain control. Her nonconformity—especially in rejecting food, clothing, and sexuality—is seen as dangerous, thus requiring psychiatric intervention.

Finding 4: "Her husband dragged her out by the arm, still naked." (p.30)Yeong-hye's bodily autonomy is denied when her husband physically forces her to conform. The violence against her body reflects patriarchal control, and her non-response—her silence and nakedness—becomes symbolic resistance. As theorized by Julia Kristeva, the abject female body becomes a site of cultural anxiety, and Yeong-hye embodies that anxiety through her refusal to be disciplined.

Finding 5: "I can't live like this anymore. I don't want to eat meat. I don't want to eat anything." (p.18)Yeong-hye's refusal to consume meat—and later, food altogether—symbolizes a rejection of patriarchal consumption of the female body. Carol J. Adams' The Sexual Politics of Meat interprets vegetarianism in feminist terms as resistance against the objectification and commodification of bodies. By not eating, Yeong-hye reclaims control over her body and subverts the normative structures of nutrition and femininity.

2. The Body as a Site of Control and Subversion

Finding 6: "Her body looked thin, angular, almost as if the flesh had been scraped away." (p.63)This depiction of Yeong-hye's emaciated body reflects the extent of her resistance. The act of erasing her flesh becomes symbolic of erasing the identity imposed by patriarchal systems. As Susan Bordo argues in Unbearable Weight, the female body is the primary site upon which societal control is exercised. By wasting her body, Yeong-hye transforms it into a canvas of rebellion.

Finding 7: "She looked at me with those calm, blank eyes... like she was already somewhere else." (p.65) This vacant gaze can be interpreted as a psychological withdrawal and a tactic to deny her oppressors emotional access. The disembodiment aligns with Hélène Cixous' idea of écriture feminine, where the female body becomes a language that communicates without conforming to patriarchal logic.

Finding 8: "She stripped off her clothes and walked into the woods." (p.77)Nudity and nature converge in this moment as Yeong-hye seeks to transcend her human, gendered identity. The forest becomes a space of liberation and defiance, reminiscent of ecofeminist ideals where nature and femininity unite against male domination. Her nakedness is no longer erotic; it is defiant, raw, and emancipatory.

Finding 9: "Her body was marked with bruises, yet she never complained." (p.49)Physical abuse, coupled with silence, reveals the normalization of violence against women. However, Yeong-hye's refusal to vocalize pain subverts expectations. Her silence is not submission but resistance, a rejection of patriarchal discourse that demands her to justify or explain herself.

Finding 10: "She kept her mouth shut and her head down when her father slapped her." (p.23)The slap from her father represents patriarchal sanctioned violence within the family. Her stoic response again reinforces resistance through refusal to conform to the role of the obedient daughter. Her rebellion lies in action—she refuses to respond in the expected emotional register.

3. The Politics of Food, Nature, and Female Autonomy

Finding 11: "I don't want to eat meat anymore. Ever." (p.17)Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is a symbolic break from cultural norms. In a Korean context where meat often symbolizes prosperity and filial duty, her rejection becomes radical. It also aligns with ecofeminist ideas that link the subjugation of nature and women. This refusal marks the beginning of her journey toward autonomy.

Finding 12: "She said she had a dream where she killed a dog and ate it raw." (p.15)This disturbing dream inverts the idea of victimhood and predator. The grotesque image disturbs boundaries between the human and the animal, suggesting Yeong-hye's awareness of how her own body is metaphorically consumed by others. It is a protest against the violence of cultural conformity.

Finding 13: "She sat still, not responding, while everyone was eating beef soup." (p.19)The social ritual of eating is disrupted by Yeong-hye's refusal. Food, often used as a symbol of family unity, becomes a battleground. Her silence reclaims agency, unsettling the patriarchal harmony at the dinner table.

Finding 14: "She insisted on only drinking water. No food." (p.28)Refusing nourishment, Yeong-hye asserts her autonomy over her body. In a society where women are expected to be caregivers, her rejection of food serves as a rejection of the roles imposed upon her. This aligns with feminist body theory that critiques the policing of women's appetites—both literal and metaphorical.

Finding 15: "Trees don't hurt anyone... that's why I want to become a tree." (p.92)Her desire to become a tree reinforces the notion of non-violence, detachment, and freedom. Trees are rooted, silent, non-participatory in the human world. Yeong-hye seeks refuge in this identity as a final form of resistance, reflecting Donna Haraway's ideas of becoming-with the nonhuman as a form of survival and rebellion.

Finding 16: "She stopped speaking altogether." (p.98)Complete muteness becomes her ultimate rejection of language—a system constructed and governed by patriarchal logic. Feminist literary critics like Luce Irigaray highlight how silence can serve as a mode of female discourse. Yeong-hye's withdrawal from speech is a refusal to be categorized, diagnosed, or dominated.

Finding 17: "They tried to feed her through a tube. She pulled it out." (p.102)This act of defiance—violently removing medical intervention—underscores her commitment to autonomy, even at the cost of life. Her resistance becomes embodied in her rejection of sustenance and institutional control, paralleling the Foucauldian critique of the medicalization of madness.

Finding 18: "She no longer recognized her sister." (p.103)Losing familial recognition indicates a detachment not only from societal roles but from prescribed relational identities. Yeong-hye dissolves the constructed self imposed by kinship, gender, and duty. This reflects post-structuralist feminist views that identity is fluid, fragmented, and resistive.
Finding 19: "She reached out her arms like branches." (p.104)This bodily transformation—mimicking a tree—visualizes her resistance as transcendence. The body no longer signifies gender, desire, or objectification. It becomes natural, neutral, and free.

Finding 20: "She closed her eyes and whispered, 'I'm finally free.'" (p.105)This final declaration marks liberation not through integration, but through total refusal. In her madness, Yeong-hye finds clarity. In her detachment from societal expectations, she achieves a form of spiritual and existential emancipation.

Conclusion

In The Vegetarian, Han Kang presents madness not merely as a medical or psychological condition, but as a radical form of resistance against a deeply entrenched patriarchal system. Yeong-hye's descent into psychosis and her decision to reject flesh, human interaction, and eventually her physical body itself, are acts that symbolically and literally reject the social expectations imposed on her. Rather than passively accepting her roles as a wife, daughter, and woman in a Confucian-influenced Korean society, Yeong-hye subverts these norms through silence, refusal, and self-erasure. Drawing on feminist and poststructuralist theories, this study demonstrates how Yeong-hye's madness becomes a site of agency and autonomy. Her non-verbal resistance challenges the male-dominated narrative and exposes the oppressive mechanisms embedded within familial, institutional, and societal structures. Her body, previously controlled and disciplined by patriarchal authority, becomes the site of rebellion through non-compliance and transformation. Moreover, this research shows that madness in contemporary literature, especially in Han Kang's work, can no longer be understood outside its sociopolitical context. In The Vegetarian, madness becomes a metaphorical language through which women articulate dissent and reclaim agency. It speaks volumes in a world where the voices of women are often ignored, silenced, or overwritten. Ultimately, The Vegetarian invites readers to reconsider madness not as a form of weakness or illness, but as a radical, embodied discourse of protest—an alternative form of expression for those rendered voiceless in normative society. This study contributes to a broader understanding of how literature can foreground marginalized perspectives and dismantle hegemonic structures through narrative experimentation and psychological subversion.

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