



**NARRATING THE SILENT BODY: NARRATIVE APPROPRIATION AND
FEMALE VOICE IN HAN KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN***

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Abstract

*This paper examines the narrative structure of *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang in order to explore how female autonomy is mediated and appropriated through external narrative voices. Although Yeong-hye is the central figure of the novel, she never narrates her own story. Instead, the narrative unfolds through three different voices- her husband, her brother-in-law, and her sister In-hye. This narrative strategy creates a striking paradox in which the protagonist remains present throughout the story yet is denied narrative authority over her own experiences. The paper argues that this structural absence exposes the mechanisms through which patriarchal discourse constructs, interprets, and disciplines the female body. The first section, narrated by Yeong-hye's husband, frames her decision to stop eating meat as a disruption of domestic normality. The second section shifts to the narration of the brother-in-law, an artist who becomes fascinated by Yeong-hye's body and transforms her into an aesthetic object. Through this perspective, the novel illustrates the operation of the male gaze as theorized by Laura Mulvey. And in the final section, the narration of In-hye who empathises with her sister and reflects psychologically. By analysing these shifting narrative viewpoints, this paper argues that *The Vegetarian* demonstrates the limits of narrative authority itself. Yeong-hye's silence therefore emerges not simply as absence but as a form of resistance that disrupts interpretive control. The novel reveals how female subjectivity often remains beyond the reach of dominant narrative frameworks, exposing the power structures embedded within storytelling.*

Keywords

Narrative Authority, Narrative Appropriation, Female Body, Patriarchy, Male Gaze, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The *Vegetarian* is a widely acclaimed, Nobel and Man Booker Prize winning novel by Han Kang, initially published in Korean language in 2007, and later translated into English by Deborah Smith. The novel welcomes us into the life of a seemingly unremarkable, but an extraordinary woman - Yeong-hye. Her sudden decision to stop eating meat destabilizes the social and familial structures around her. What began as a simple dietary refusal gradually develops into a radical withdrawal from human society. As Yeong-hye increasingly rejects meat, eventually food, social interaction and even her own human identity, the novel delves into an exploration of patriarchy, violence and the limits of human autonomy. The novel has been studied through various aspects such as bodily autonomy, ecofeminism, trauma, Korean patriarchal control etc. However, one of the less discussed but striking aspects of the novel lies in its narrative strategy.

Despite being the central figure of the narrative, Yeong-hye never narrates her own story. The novel is divided into three sections, each narrated by a different character; her husband, her brother-in-law, and her sister- In-hye. Through each of their narration we get a different version of Yeong-hye, built purely from their thoughts, attitudes, aspirations and expectations about her. The



husband views her as a disruption to his normal life; brother-in-law views her with erotic fascination and eventually transform her to his desires; while her sister tries to sit with her and understand her on a rational and emotional level. Throughout these narrations, the voice of the protagonist is nearly absent.

This narrative design brings in a striking paradox, as Yeong-hye despite being a central presence throughout the story, around whom the story revolves, never gained narrative authority over her own story. As a result, the novel not only depicts a woman who rejects social norms, but also reveals how female autonomy is often constructed through external interpretations. So in a way she becomes victim not only to patriarchal authority but also narrative appropriation.

This paper tries to explain that the narrative structure of *The Vegetarian* exposes the mechanisms through which patriarchal discourses control and interpret female body and female autonomy. Yet none of the interpretations could fully capture the essence of her choices, thereby revealing the limitations of narrative authority.

Patriarchy and the Construction of Domestic Normality:

The first section of the novel is narrated by Yeong-hye's husband – Mr. Cheong. He introduces us to Yeong-hye, her existence, and her 'strange' decision to abstain from meat. Right from the beginning, he emphasizes his ordinariness. He is an ordinary man, with an ordinary office job, leading a mundane and predictable life. This ordinariness and predictability is his comfort and ideal life. Hence, anything that deviates from the path is strange. Even his choice of partner was not an act out of love or admiration, but because marriage is the norm of the society, and he found a woman who seemingly fit into this normalcy. This emphasis on the mundane and normalcy is crucial to understand his narration. "Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way" (Kang, 3).

According to him, marriage is a social institution, and an ideal married life is where the wife fulfills the needs and requirements of the husband with no complaints, and thereby brings in domestic stability. Any disruption in this stability brings in domestic and social chaos. This patriarchal man thus could never bring himself to understand the idea of personal choice. Hence, when Yeong-hye declares her decision to not eat meat, he views it not as her personal choice, but as a disruption to his social life and public reverence. Thus he repeatedly describes her choice as strange, embarrassing and incomprehensible. Rather than trying to understand her choices or reasons, he focuses on the inconvenience caused by her actions.

The narrative voice in this section shows how patriarchal authority intervenes even in ordinary expectations. His narration frames Yeong-hye's refusal as a deviance from the societal norm, thereby placing her as the problem that requires correction. Thus the narration itself is fashioned to discipline her thoughts and choices that fits into patriarchal satisfaction.

The violent episode of family dinner where Yeong-hye's father forces her to eat meat by even resorting to physical aggression is a prime example of this disciplining and correction, thereby enforcing the social norm and saving the family's pride. Yet her husband's narration continues to view it as an act of restoring social order and not a violation of personal choice and physical boundaries. He even tries to establish his authority by forcing himself into her.

As the reader begins reading the novel, the personal choice of Yeong-hye is built and treated as a form of woman's irrational stubbornness, such that the readers themselves might begin questioning the choice of the protagonist. Through this narrative voice, the novel demonstrates how authority over storytelling can shape the meaning of events. The husband's narration appropriates Yeong-hye's experience as a case of domestic disruption and social defiance.

Aestheticism and the Male Gaze:



The second section of the novel shifts the narrative perspective to Yeong-hye's brother-in-law. He offers an absolutely different perspective of the situation. While her husband was disturbed by his wife's disruption of domestic normalcy, the brother-in-law becomes fascinated by her. He is a commercially unsuccessful video artist, who leads an almost secluded existence in his own terms, neglecting familial responsibilities. His interest in Yeong-hye begins when he comes to know about a particular Mongolian mark (birthmark) on Yeong-hye's body. He considers this as a remarkable trait about her, and begins to fantasize about it.

He slowly begins to view her as his artistic inspiration- a muse he can use to his will. Unlike the first section of the novel, here we see a domination of male gaze that transforms her body into an aesthetic object, being exploited for selfish fantasies. He becomes obsessed with the idea of painting flowers on her body, highlighting the Mongolian mark, and transforming it into a performance art. He reinterprets Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat to his convenience by stating that her internal transformation aligns her with this natural world, thereby giving a symbolic layer to his creative indulgences.

This aesthetic obsession also reveals another form of narrative appropriation. Although he tries to have a conversation with Yeong-hye about her choices, her refusal to speak did not really affect him as long as she agrees to be his model. He conveniently reinterprets her body as a canvas for his artistic ambitions. Thus in the second part of the novel, the individuality of Yeong-hye is displaced by her brother-in-law's desire and fantasies, slowly reshaping her identity according to his vision.

The brother-in-law's narration therefore shows how the mere act of looking itself can shape and dominate a narrative. His narrative presence transforms Yeong-hye into a visual spectacle. Even with her complete physical presence and participation, her presence is orchestrated through his perspective. The reader never gets direct access to her thoughts or imagination. Instead, her body becomes the prime object around which narrator construct his own story.

As Laura Mulvey has rightly remarked in her seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey, 11). Here Yeong-hye becomes the passive female, who becomes the object of active male gaze, thus positioning women as mute and passive spectators once again in their own narrative. As a result another narrative where female body becomes the site where other people project their interpretation is produced.

Empathy and Reflection:

The final section of the novel introduces Yeong-hye's sister In-hye as the narrator. This section offers the only female perspective in the entire novel. Unlike the previous narrators, we see that In-hye approaches her sister with great compassion and empathy. At this point, everyone has abandoned her, including her husband and parents. In-hye is the sole human being who tries to be there for her sister. In this section, she reflects on their childhood, and the violent environment in which they grew up. In-hye truly desires to understand her sister, and tries to help her, providing medical care. She is the only narrative voice that goes beyond the physical aspects and societal norms to understand her. She slowly begins to question the social structures that caused this dilemma and alienation. She feels that her sister's transformation might perhaps be a reaction to a world defined by violence and control.

Despite this deeper level of reflection, In-hye's narration still illustrates the limitations of narrative interpretation. She tries to give a psychological interpretation for Yeong-hye's choices, by recalling childhood trauma and probable dissatisfaction with adult life. However, these are still speculations, and she cannot completely articulate the meaning of Yeong-hye's choices.



As Yeong-hye's condition deteriorates in the hospital, her silence and alienation becomes even more loud. She refuses food, claiming that she no longer needs nourishment, because she has become a tree. She has decided to live on water and sunlight. In-hye could not understand or explain these decisions, and was caught between compassion and confusion. She now recognizes the brutality of the outside world, but she cannot determine whether Yeong-hye's transformation is madness or resistance. In fact, the novel's conclusion reinforces this uncertainty, as it does not reveal the truth of Yeong-hye or gives her the chance to explain it. The reader is thus left with the same feeling of uncertainty and inability to comprehend the deeper choices made by Yeong-hye.

The Silent Voice of Resistance:

Although the voice of Yeong-hye appears to be physically muted, the novel also suggests that her silence functions as a powerful form of resistance. By refusing to articulate her motivations in conventional terms, Yeong-hye disrupts the interpretive frameworks through which others try to define her. The narrators repeatedly attempt to interpret or reason her in their own terms, all of which ultimately fails to capture the complexity of her transformative choices. It is said that to define is to limit. Her silence protects her from definitions, rendering her limitless with her autonomous decisions.

The only instance where we get a glimpse into the inner world of Yeong-hye is through the fragments of her dreams. However, they still remain ambiguous. The dream is filled with violent and grotesque images of blood, slaughter and childhood trauma. These images suggest that her refusal to eat meat might have originated as a visceral reaction to the brutality of human actions and existence that she suppressed inside her. However, the narrative does not offer a complete explanation. This is the closest interpretation we shall read from the protagonist herself.

By maintaining this ambiguity, the novel challenges the assumption that a narrative always produces understanding. On the contrary, here the multiple perspectives by the narrators reveal the instability of meaning itself. Each narrator attempts to construct an interpretation for Yeong-hye's behavior, but the proliferation of interpretations only highlights the impossibility of definitive knowledge or truth.

Thus, Yeong-hye becomes a narrative resistance with her silence. Thus the silent voice at the centre of the novel, quietly yet fiercely disrupts the voices that attempt to define it.

Conclusion:

The narrative structure of *The Vegetarian* reveals how storytelling can function as a mechanism of power. By presenting Yeong-hye's story through three different voices, the novel demonstrates how female autonomy becomes mediated through external interpretations. The husband defines her as a domestic deviance. To her brother-in-law she is but an aesthetic spectacle, while her sister attempts to rationalize her choices through empathy and deep psychological reflection. Each narrator appropriates her story, but none succeeds. As Oswald Spengler had said, truth is multitude, which it continually reads and hears. Through this structural silence, the novel also critiques the system that tries to claim authority over women's bodies and actions. Yeong-hye's refusal to speak within this narrative framework prevents her story from being reduced to one of the narratives that seeks to define it. Ultimately, *The Vegetarian* suggests that the most profound aspects of subjectivity may remain beyond the reach of narrative possibilities. The silent body at the heart of the narrative thus resists the narration that attempts to define it, revealing the complex dynamics through which meanings are constructed.

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