Normalising the Anorexic Body. Violence and Madness in *The Vegetarian*, by Han Kang

Cornelia MACSINIUC
Ştefan cel Mare University of Suceava

Abstract: Han Kang's novel explores the relevance of food choices and eating habits to the articulation of gender relations and power structure in a family environment. The heroine's vegetarianism and then anorexia, accompanied by escapist fantasies of withdrawal from the symbolic order of conformity and submission defining a patriarchal society, her quiet "rebellion", which constitutes an assertion of autonomy, is subdued by literal and symbolic violence. Family and psychiatric hospital, the main settings for the action, represent places of normalisation, where the recalcitrant vegetarian and anorexic body is controlled and disciplined.
Keywords: *Han Kang, The Vegetarian, eating disorder, patriarchy, gender, violence, madness, normalization.*

Food is a liminal element: it belongs at the same time to nature, as a biological necessity, and to culture. The cultural and social dimension of food and eating habits has been the object of consistent analytic concern. Peter Farb and George Armelagos [1980], for instance, stressing the enormous cultural importance of food, emphasises the powerful social role of commensality: in all societies, food and eating are essentially involved in "initiating and maintaining relationships": "The simple fact of sitting down to eat together may convey important statements about a society" (4). Eating is not a simple act of nutrition, but a complex symbolic action through which certain values and beliefs are asserted and perpetuated: "Each society's culture is transmitted to children through eating with the family, a setting in which individual personalities develop, kinship obligations emerge, and the customs of the group are reinforced" [Ibidem, 5]. The same symbolic role of food and eating in consolidating social structures is asserted by Nick Fiddes [1991]: "we routinely use food to express relationships: among ourselves and with our environment. The obtaining and sharing of food can be an eloquent statement of shared ideology and as such expresses group affiliation and apparent solidarity" [38]. Food choices are largely irrational and the object of cultural prejudice [cf. Farb and Armelagos, 1980, 167–8], and they often have emotional significance. In certain cultures, particular items in the traditional diet are associated with features of character, with behavior or achievement [Ibidem, 3]. Food and eating habits are

BDD-A27722 © 2017 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:44 UTC)

closely associated with sex and with gender roles [Fiddes, 1991; Adams, 2010]. A "natural" equivalence may be established between the two "biological imperatives" of sex and eating – "both perpetuate life, (…) both may be pleasurable, and (…) both imply vulnerability by breaching normal bodily boundaries" [Fiddes, 1991:144]. Food is also culturally linked with gender, as "the responsibility for each phase of obtaining and preparing a particular kind of food is almost always allotted according to sex" [Farb and Armelagos, 1980:5]. Food is thus never a neutral necessity, an indifferent aspect of our "natural" being, but, as Roland Barthes had pointed out, a means of symbolically organising and reinforcing a social reality: "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behavior" [quoted in Fiddes, 1991:38].

These and many more implications may be brought to bear on a reading of Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* [2007], the recipient of the Man Booker International Prize in 2016 in its English translation by Deborah Smith. Its representation of eating practices and food patterns – more exactly, of their transgression – in the context of a traditional Asian family is a literary exploration of the symbolic and signifying value of food and eating habits and on their role in the articulation of a certain structure of social relationships.

The story turns around the sudden decision of Yeong-Hye to become a vegetarian and to ignore the established associations between food and family or gender roles, deploying with a carefully calculated gradation of intensity the painful process of the disintegration of an order, the collapse of an ordinary Korean family. The insistence on the heroine's estrangement from her family and from herself suggests that her vegetarian rebellion, as well as her subsequent life-threatening anorexia, accompanies an identity crisis: Richard Gordon argues that "female identity issues are at the core of eating disorders" [2001:3], with the observation that such disorders "do not necessarily express themselves as body image preoccupations" but rather evince patterns of psychosocial conflict [Ibidem]. Gordon cites evidence that eastern countries, South Korea included, previously seen as immune to such disorders, started, after the 1990s, to witness them, as a result of processes of industrialisation, urbanisation and consumerism, which "produced an enormously rapid cultural transition": "The emergence of eating disorders in South Korea is particularly remarkable, given traditional attitudes towards plumpness as a requirement for marriage, attitudes which held sway as recently as the 1970s" [7].

The protagonist's conversion to vegetarianism and then her lapse into anorexia have indeed nothing to do with body image issues, such as "fat-phobia" as a standard reason in biomedical discourse (a reason which is shown to be largely absent among Asian patients) [Lee, 2001:38–40], although she ends up as a patient in a psychiatric hospital. Sing Lee points out that biomedical discourse on anorexia has obscured "the manifold metaphorical meanings of voluntary self-starvation and the variable subjectivities of anorexic individuals" [39], citing historical cases of food-rejection as a way to spirituality, as a religious experience, and remarking that modern

BDD-A27722 © 2017 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:44 UTC)

ages, with their tendency of rationalisation and normalisation, have branded such options as disorders: "anorexia nervosa was transformed from sainthood to patienthood" [Ibidem]. In Han Kang's novel, the heroine's sudden abandonment of meat-eating appears as a form of solitary resistance to custom and tradition, being explicitly constructed as the invasion of strangeness into the world of familial ordinariness, as a threat to the comfort of familiarity and unquestioned routine. Around these two food-consuming patterns, a cluster of implications build up along the novel into a significance which goes beyond the issue of ethnic specificity confronted with the seductions of globalisation, with its large offer of lifestyles; in a very general sense, Han Kang's novel explores, through the motif of food and eating, the tragic clash between tradition and the new tendencies which contest it.

The dichotomy ordinariness vs. strangeness is embedded in the narrative strategy of the novel itself. The main character, Yeong-Hye, a young wife described by her husband as a reassuringly unremarkable woman, emerges obliquely from the narrative perspectives of three other members of the family, each of them seriously affected in one way or another by her choice: the first-person story of her husband and the two third-person accounts focalising her brother-in-law and her sister, In-Hye, respectively. The three stories follow Yeong-Hye's passage from conformity and predictability to complete estrangement and finally insanity, with the family background as a metonymical representation of a larger social order. Interspersed in the first account, the rather bland narrative of her husband's increasing worry at his wife's estrangement and "unreadability," the few mysterious fragments in Yeong-Hye's own voice partly reveal and partly conceal the reasons for a choice that shattered the outward stability of a whole family.

These strange, almost incomprehensible fragments, offering a glimpse into a fluid, subjective realm of deep impression and sensation, contrast with the factual account of her spouse's attempt to understand her "appalling change" [Kang, 2007:6] by recording the stages of her alienation. He describes himself as a completely ordinary man, aware of his own dulness, with "unremarkable skills," seeking a "middle course in life" [4] and the company of people whom he felt inferior to him. His choice of Yeong-Hye as a wife was based on his perception of her own ordinariness and unremarkable character: "The passive personality of this woman in whom I could detect neither freshness nor charm, or anything especially refined, suited me down to the ground" [3]; "it was only natural that I would marry the most run-of-the-mill woman in the world" [4]. For the insipid husband, her suitability lay in her ability to reinforce the comfort of mediocrity, and her responsibility for his meals is an essential aspect of her role as a wife: "In keeping with my expectations, she made for a completely ordinary wife who went about things without any distasteful frivolousness. Every morning she got up at six a.m. to prepare rice and soup, and usually a bit of fish" [4]. Yeong-Hye's unexpected decision to stop eating meat, following a strange dream dominated by blood and violence, constitutes a breach in the family routine, as she also decides not to cook meat for her husband. This desertion from an established spousal role turns her

BDD-A27722 © 2017 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:44 UTC)

into an increasingly strange presence for her husband. His frustration at her unresponsiveness when he tries to understand the reason of her abrupt gesture of throwing away all the stored meat and other animal foods in the house makes him rationalise in his own terms the unexpected, unpredictable behaviour of his wife. The incomprehensible silence which accompanies her turn to vegetarianism is thus explained away to his own convenience, by falling back on stereotypes and traditional beliefs: "I convinced myself that this wouldn't be a problem. There's nothing wrong with keeping quiet; after all, hadn't women traditionally been expected to be demure and restrained?" [21].

His early attempts to understand his wife evince the gender issues and the social relevance of her sudden change of food choice, which is perceived as an act of inexcusable disobedience: it was "nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes" [14]. A major frustration caused by his wife's "new-found" vegetarianism comes from her failure to serve him as she used to – he is deprived of the rich appetising meals she used to cook so competently and she tries to impose "this ridiculous diet" on him, which is felt as a gesture of defiance [27]. The husband's comparison of his wife to her sister, In-hye, reveals the unwitting association between food and sex as equivalent sources of gratification, both of them denied him now:

> In-hye was also a skilled cook, just as my wife used to be. Seeing the lunch table she had swiftly set made me feel a sudden pang of hunger. Taking in her nicely filled-out figure, big, double-lidded eyes, and demure manner of speaking, I sorely regretted the many things it seemed I'd ended up losing somehow or other, to have left me in my current plight. [34].

This comparison also suggests that the expectedly appropriate behavior for a wife included shyness and modesty. Having chosen Yeong-hye as a wife on the basis of her "ordinariness," the husband implicitly expected her to be submissive in every way, and her rejection of meat as food and of feeding him meat is perceived, by the whole family, as a serious disruption of a sanctioned pattern. Through her abandonment of a meat diet, she actually initiates a re-arrangement in the hierarchy of domestic needs and duties, refusing to participate in the cultural distribution of roles in the household and placing her own needs first. The eating austerity that she imposes on herself accompanies another gesture of defiance: the refusal to wear a bra, the only "unusual" thing that her husband could find in her at the beginning of their marriage. This odd behaviour had always been just as inscrutable for him as was now her vegetarian turn, and, at one social event, which was important for his career, he registers with mortification how her non-conformism in this respect provokes "curiosity, astonishment and contempt" [22]. As a symbolic piece of garment, as part of a conventional dress-code, the bra is meant at the same time to obscure the marks of femininity – therefore to control symbolically feminine sexual power (the husband confesses that when he first realised she wasn't wearing one he felt arousal) –, and to provide correction for a

BDD-A27722 © 2017 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:44 UTC)

conventional image of femininity, in the absence of "shapely breasts" ("I would have preferred her to go around wearing one that was thickly padded, so that I could save face in front of my acquaintances") [5]. Her candid, unapologetic admission, at the same event, of her new meatless diet ("I won't eat it," she curtly says to the waiter bringing her dish) [22] turns vegetarianism into a table conversation topic, on which opinions varied: for some, meat-eating was "a fundamental human instinct, which means vegetarianism goes against human nature"; for others, vegetarianism was a matter of adhering to "a certain ideology"; still others saw it as a trend from "other countries" beginning to insinuate itself at home, while a prominent lady brought up the issue of holistic health ("A balanced diet goes hand in hand with a balanced mind, don't you think?") [23–24].

None of the various ways of rationalising vegetarianism is assumed by Yeong-hye. Her obsessive reply to the inquiries about the motifs of her choice is the mysterious "I had a dream." A structure of oppositions appears to emerge from the husband's narrative, in which meat-eating may be associated with the outwardness of a firm order, power, and health, while vegetarianism with the irrationality of the unconscious, with deviance (including disease) and resistance to power. This dichotomy acquires strong gender implications. On the one hand, the male-dominated world of tradition, custom and rigid family expectations, with its unwillingness to accept the inflections of strangeness (Yeong-hye's husband admits that he "didn't *want* to know" about his wife's "agonising dream" [18]; he "resisted the temptation to introspection. This strange situation had nothing to do with [him]" [19]), exerts an unbearable pressure on Yeong-hye, requiring her to look and act according to the wishes of her husband and her father. On the other hand, the inwardness of Yeong-hye's new-found femininity, unconcerned any longer with patriarchal expectations and obeying the inner laws of her sensibility, represents a rejection of the symbolic order of conformity and submission to male authority. It is significant that Yeong-hye's rejection of meat is accompanied by increasing taciturnity and by gradual obliviousness to the rules of the family as an embodiment of patriarchal power. Her apparent impassiveness and unresponsiveness to the reproaches, concerns, and bewilderment of those around her, her frequent "unnatural" silence (which could be taken no longer as appropriate demureness, but as a form of passive defiance), marks her alienation from a structure of relations resting on the exercise of power, with meat-eating habits as a symbolic form of this assertion of power in the form of violence to animals.

To a certain extent, Yeong-hye's decision to give up meat appears to be a case of "ethical vegetarianism," "a theory people enact with their bodies" [Adams, 2010:193], which rejects the culturally engrained idea that humans are superior to the rest of the creation. Her initial dream suggests this feeling of entrapment in cultural prejudice: there is pain and guilt in her discovery of a "bloody" self, overwhelmed by the rawness and ubiquity of meat:

BDD-A27722 © 2017 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:44 UTC)

> (…) A long bamboo stick strung with great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down. Try to push past but the meat, there's no end to the meat, and no exit. Blood in my mouth, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin.
> (…)
> But the fear. My clothes still wet with blood. Hide, hide behind the trees. Crouch down, don't let anybody see. My bloody hands. My bloody mouth. In that barn, what have I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood. [Kang, 2007:12]

From the enigmatic passages in which she attempts to recount dream fragments or childhood memories, or just random agonising thoughts, there emerges a harrowing sense that the violence underlying the habit of meat consumption has modified her whole being to the point of self-estrangement ("*my face, undoubtedly, but never seen before. Or no, not mine, but so familiar*" [12]). Her dream sensations open the road to a truth that she had long been repressing: "*Dreams of murder* (…) *Dreams overlaid with dreams, a palimpsest of horror. Violent acts perpetrated by night* (…) *Intolerable loathing, so long suppressed. Loathing I've always tried to mask with affection. But now the mask is coming off*" [28]. This intuited violence has "materialized" in her own body in the form of a lump she feels in her solar plexus, the sign of a lifetime of meat-eating which has marked her very flesh with ancestral memories of human savagery:

> Yells and howls, threaded together layer upon layer, are enmeshed to form a lump. Because of meat. I ate too much meat. The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there. Blood and flesh, all those butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny, and though the physical remnants were excreted, their lives still stick stubbornly to my insides. [49]

One particular memory stands out, in a relatively more coherent rendition: her being bitten by a dog, at the age of nine, entails a cruel retaliation on the part of her father, who scorches the dog with a lamp and kills it by tying it to his motorcycle and driving in circular laps. The vividness of the description of the tortured dying dog suggests the enormous impact of the scene on the child witness. The killing of the animal was followed by its ritual consumption, at a feast where the "*big man*" invited "[*a*]*ll the middle-aged men from the market alleyways (…), everyone my father considered worth knowing*" [42]. She recalls finding it natural then, even while remembering the agony of the dog, to believe the local saying that "*for a wound caused by a dog-bite to heal you have to eat that same dog*" [Ibidem].

Kang's novel shows how deeply the brutality involved in our culinary culture reverberates into the larger social fabric. Eating the flesh of the overpowered animal in the company of the significant patriarchal figures of the community suggests very eloquently the link between meat and masculine power. There is something of the ritual in this scene in every act of meat consumption, whose latent associations with power and with the pride of Man's "civilised elevation above nature" [Fiddes, 1991:151] also raises issues of sex and gender

BDD-A27722 © 2017 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:44 UTC)

inequality. Meat is a "quintessentially masculine food," Nick Fiddes argues [1991:146], finding the roots of this inequality far back in the history of the race, in the ancestral activity of hunting or, later, its equivalents. The archetype of "Man the Hunter," which represents, according to Fiddes [145], a culturally widespread conception of maleness, especially in traditional cultures, explains the elevation of meat to the status of privileged food and its symbolic reinforcing an asymmetric social structure:

> [M]en are routinely and ritually in a position of controllers, hunters, providers, and also primary consumers of meat, with first claim on the available resources. Or, to put it another way, meat is almost ubiquitously put to use as a medium through which men express their 'natural' control, of women as well as of animals. [1991:146]

The cultural symbolism of meat differs according to gender, as Nick Fiddes points out. In the case of men, this symbolism is underlain by the equation between "the strength endowed by meat and his supposed sexual and physical potency," while when applied to women, it suggests their perception by men as analogous to the hunted, or else farmed meat," as "edible objects," or "Man the Hunter's willing prey" [1991:150–151], as an object of chase and conquest. In a more simple formulation, "men are meat in the sense that meat is full of power, whereas women are meat in the sense that it is consumed as a statement of power" [154].

The discourse and practices involving meat-eating, varied as they might be, are thus charged with a strong symbolical significance in defining the status of women in relation to men. In *The Vegetarian*, the heroine's revulsion at the actual butchering of animals for human consumption acquires a larger meaning. Continuing to eat meat, she would not only have endorsed the same absurd act of ritual assertion of the "civilised elevation" of humans over the rest of the sentient world, which ethical vegetarianism condemns, but she would have also continued to acquiesce to the perpetuation of a structure of social and familial relations based on gender asymmetry, oppression, and violence. Her decision to turn vegetarian, her abhorrence of meat, is the manifestation of her quiet rebellion against a patriarchal order in which eating habits and food are carriers of gender status.

Carol J. Adams finds that we can speak about the "sexual politics of meat" and that "our meat-advocating cultural discourse" has always been in the service of patriarchal interests:

> Meat's recognizable message includes association with the male role; its meaning recurs within a fixed gender system; the coherence it achieves as a meaningful item of food arises from patriarchal attitudes including the idea that the end justifies the means, that the objectification of other beings is a necessary part of life, and that violence can and should be masked. [2010:27]

BDD-A27722 © 2017 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:44 UTC)

Her own experience as a vegetarian feminist has led her to the conclusion that, far from being a simple matter of dietary choice, vegetarianism is an act of "radical cultural critique" [197]; not the regressive embracing of the eating habits of a bygone pastoral age, but a choice determined by the desire of reform, a response to "oppression and repression" [198]. She also emphasises the "feminist meaning" which reverberates in such a choice [26], which would enable the questioning of the largely unexamined assumptions of the patriarchal "texts of meat," that is, those discourses and practices which produce the "meat's meaning" in a political-cultural context [Ibidem].

> None of us chooses the meanings that constitute the texts of meat, we adhere to them. Because of the personal meaning meat has for those who consume it, we generally fail to see the social meanings that have actually predetermined the personal meaning. Recognising the texts of meat is the first step in identifying the sexual politics of meat. [Ibidem]

In *The Vegetarian*, the protagonist's sudden interrogation of these cultural food "texts" creates an understandable anxiety among those around her who took them for granted. It is significant that Yeong-hye is presented from the very beginning as an avid, passionate reader, immersing herself in books that her husband did not understand and found "dull" and completely uninviting. Her pleasure in reading, despised by her husband, is a metaphorical indication of her availability to question and interpret cultural messages, of her capacity of discerning the hidden meanings in the patriarchal script. Refusing to eat meat and to cook it for her husband – rejecting, that is, the prevailing texts of meat of the tradition in which she was born and raised – represented an intolerable act, perplexing to those who couldn't or wouldn't "read" the ideological script. Her completely unimaginative husband deliberately ignores her dream precisely because his engrained beliefs admitted no challenge. Yeong-hye's change comes as a result of her effort to understand the mysterious message of the dream, and such an effort requires the imagination of a competent "reader," confirming Carol J. Adams' assertion that "[v]egetarianism is an act of the imagination. It reflects an ability to imagine alternatives to the texts of meat" [2010:232].

The discomfort of incomprehension felt at Yeong-hye's radical deviation from the familiar – and familial – "text of meat" produces a disturbance that culminates in actual violence. There are three major instances in the first part of the novel in which Yeong-hye becomes the victim of hostility and violence as a reprisal for her recalcitrance. The dinner scene, when the husband is his boss's guest for the first time – a circumstance with high social stakes for him –, is such a relevant moment: here, veiled comments on the enormity of the vegetarian choice suggest the hatred and contempt towards difference. Reassured by the embarrassed husband that Yeong-hye's rejection of meat is due to an obstinate gastroenteritis, one of the table companions confesses: "Well, I must say I'm glad I've still never sat down with a proper vegetarian. I'd hate to share a meal with someone who

BDD-A27722 © 2017 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:44 UTC)

considers eating meat repulsive, just because that's how they themselves personally feel… don't you agree? [Kang, 2007:24]. Commensality is thus an ideal opportunity for the reinforcement of dominant norms and the marginalisation of deviance. For most of the dinner, Yeong-hye was left out of the conversation: "Gradually, the other guests learned to ignore her presence and the conversation started to flow again" [25]; her exclusion from the social game – a sublimated form of violence – brought back the relaxation of a group who shared a common stock of values and beliefs, and allowed the guests to enjoy, without further serious reflection, the luxurious dishes described with great relish by the husband-narrator.

In the absence of marital affection, with her increasing remoteness turning her into an alien presence in the house, Yeong-hye becomes conveniently just a domestic fixture, "someone who puts food on the table and keeps the house in good order" [30]. The husband's opaque frustration at her estrangement opens the door to abuse: in the second significant moment related to violence in the story, the act of marital rape is rationalised as the man's absolute entitlement to have his "physical needs" satisfied at any time by a wife who is thus marked symbolically as "farmed meat." The husband's brutal assault on Yeong-hye casts her in the role of hunted animal, whose overpowering – the equivalent of lustful devouring – brings sexual gratification:

> I grabbed hold of my wife and pushed her to the floor. Pinning down her struggling arms and tugging off her trousers, I became unexpectedly aroused. She put up a surprisingly strong resistance and, spitting out vulgar curses all the while, it took me three attempts before I managed to insert myself successfully. [30]

This initial victory over the chased victim opens the way to habit: "After this first time, it was easier for me to do it again" [31]. At the same time, the husband's half-acknowledged sense of guilt engenders "a feeling of abhorrence when [he] looked across at her" [Ibidem]. These ambivalent feelings are the result of his failure to obtain due submission on the part of his wife. The assertion of authority and power by means of physical force is not socially "natural"; for an efficient working of the patriarchal system, submission and domination should be smooth, automatic processes, beyond challenge and contestation. Vegetarianism appears in this novel as precisely a form of dissidence from the patriarchal script, because it does not acknowledge the privilege of meat, which connotes patriarchal power.

It is Yeong-hye's uncompromising refusal to acknowledge the status-quo that determines her father's outburst of unspeakable brutality, at one of their family gatherings, plotted especially in order to give her a "dressing down" [29]. Again, commensality provides the frame for the assertion of dominance, this time to a degree of violence that ends up in literal blood-shedding. Sitting at the lunch table, everyone in Yeong-hye's family expresses their anger and disappointment at what they consider an irrational decision, although many of their own arguments are on the side of irrationality, such as her father's recourse to the authority of tradition: "It's preposterous, everyone eats meat!" [39]. They all find themselves entitled to

BDD-A27722 © 2017 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:44 UTC)

rebuke, advise, and warn her about excluding meat from her diet, trying to defuse the subversiveness of her choice by appealing to the medical discourse, used in order to focus on the threatening alteration of her body. Her sister-in-law, for instance, remarks: "When I saw her I thought she was a different person. I'd heard about it from my husband, but I never would have guessed that going vegetarian could damage your body like that" [36]; while In-hye, her sister, tells her in alarm: "Just look at your face!" [Ibidem]. When health arguments fail, her mother tries to feed her herself, as if she were a reluctant child, thrusting pieces of meat up to her tightly closed mouth, urging her to try this or that meat dish, coaxing her into submission with memories of childhood culinary pleasures: "Haven't you liked these since you were little? You used to want to eat them all the time…" [37]. Her unshaken resistance finally brings about paternal fury: failing to obtain her compliance from his position of carer ("Everything I say is for your own good. So why act like this if it makes you ill?" [38], her father unleashes his anger, as the ultimate authority in the family, hitting her "so hard that the blood showed through the skin of her cheek" [39] and then tries to force meat into her mouth: he "mashed the pork to a pulp on my wife's lips as she struggled in agony. (…) Eventually he flew into a passion again and struck her in the face once more" [40]. The force of the hit opened her mouth and he managed to insert the meat; suicidally frantic, she reached for a fruit knife, to everyone's consternation, and cut her wrist, her violent response to abuse reminding of her fierce opposition to rape. Like her husband, Yeong-hye's father also re-enacts the ancestral posture of the "hunter," struggling to subdue the resisting prey, displaying, in his frenzy, something of the archetypal fear of Woman identified with unpredictable, indomitable Nature, both of them a threat to male domination [cf. Fiddes, 1991:154].

Her father represents absolute patriarchal authority, seeing himself almost as a disembodied receptacle of this incontrovertible power, which is suggested by his way of talking to Yeong-hye as if he were a third person: "Don't you understand what your father's telling you? If he tells you to eat, you eat!" [Kang, 2007:38]. This is indicative not only of the fact that he considers her still a child owing obedience to her parents (her mother explicitly refers to her as "that child" – [cf. 27], but also of his belief that his authority is actually conferred by the supra-personal, timeless instance of tradition, which is held to justify the irrational strictness of his demands. He is described as fixated on his military past (he repetitively boasted about the decoration he had received for serving in Vietnam), indifferent to modernisation ("He'd never used a telephone in his life" [29]), rigid and disciplined, manifesting an "incredibly violent temper" [39] and being a "heavy-handed father" [129] to both his daughters. His extreme rage at Yeong-hye's recalcitrance is out of proportion with the health hazards invoked; it suggests that meat-eating is not just a matter of nutrition, but a matter of social compliance, the sign of acquiescing to a social expectation. Rejecting meat signified rejecting a certain power-structure; in the words of Carol J. Adams, "male dominance requires a continual recollection of itself on everyone's plate" [2010:62].

BDD-A27722 © 2017 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:44 UTC)

The father enlists the younger men in the family in the brutal act of subduing Yeong-hye in the name of gender solidarity, but his patriarchal power is backed up by the women as well. Yeong-hye's mother expresses deep concern for the husband's plight; like the father, who apologises to Yeong-hye's husband for his daughter's disobedience, her mother also worries that the latter might feel ashamed at his wife's insouciant appearance and behaviour in public, at her inconsiderate disregard of all expectations. In-hye, in her turn, assumes the role and responsibilities of a mother-figure – a carer [cf. Kang:139] – for her sister, but also a kind of authority over her, especially during her confinement in the psychiatric hospital. However, In-hye's is an ambivalent position: to a certain extent, she is, like her mother, an instrument in the patriarchal exercise of power, but she is also, like her sister, the subject of this power. In her own family, traditional gender roles are reversed, as she is the one materially supporting the family by hard work, without the privilege of male ascendancy, and her sister's descent into madness awakens her to her real condition as a woman in a male-dominated world: her reluctance at having Yeong-hye discharged after her second hospitalisation does not come, as she told the doctor, from her "worry about a possible relapse," but, as she finally admits to herself, from a kind of long-repressed envy:

> She was no longer able to cope with all that her sister reminded her of. She'd been unable to forgive her for soaring alone over a boundary she herself could never bring herself to cross, unable to forgive that magnificent irresponsibility that had enabled Yeong-hye to shuck off social constraints and leave her behind, still a prisoner. And before Yeong-hye had broken those bars, she'd never even known they were there. [142-143]

Yeong-hye's rejection of the familiar/familial "meat-text" – i.e. an ideology of female subordination articulated in eating practices – and turn to vegetarianism counts as a declaration of autonomy and independence, indeed of freedom from a script that In-hye followed, as she admits, out of "sheer inertia" [139]. However, meat-eating and vegetarianism are opposites in a binary structure which still keeps the subject captive. True freedom would lie in the total exteriority to such a system, and Yeong-hye's complete refusal of food is an indication of her utmost despair of resisting to the pressures of the given order; the only way of escaping it is not opposing it, because this would inherently continue to breed violence, but extracting herself from it. Her compensating fantasies of turning into a plant and living on photosynthesis ("On sunny days she would press herself up against the window, unbutton her hospital gown and bare her breasts to the sun" [138]) are an escape from the horror at the manifest or hidden violence that underpins, through the metaphor of meat, the whole structure of familial and social relations, especially in its gender polarisation. Her self-starvation visibly modifies her body, gradually depriving it of the marks of femininity and returning it to the condition of a baby or a child – her sister remarks the hair growing on her cheeks and forearms, "fine but unusually long, like the faint down that babies often have" [151], and she wonders:

BDD-A27722 © 2017 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:44 UTC)

> Is Yeong-hye trying to turn herself back into a pre-adolescent? She hasn't had her period for a long time now, and now that her weight has dropped below thirty kilos, of course there's nothing left of her breasts. She lies there looking like a freakish overgrown child, devoid of any secondary sexual characteristics. [Ibidem]

Her earlier escape from the hospital into the woods, among "brothers and sisters" (looking out of the window of her hospital ward, Yeong-hye enigmatically whispered: "Sister…all the trees of the world are like brothers and sisters" [144]), reflected her desire to break free from the pain and frustration which had attended her humanity. In the hospital, she had taken to doing handstands, in an imaginary identification with a tree, which had been suggested to her also by a dream:

> "Well, I was in a dream, and I was standing on my head…leaves were growing from my body, and roots were sprouting from my hands…so I dug down into the earth. On and on… I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch so I spread my legs; I spread them wide…" [148]

With the atrophy of her sexual and gender features – a symbolic evasion of a reality in which, as a woman, she was subjected to patriarchal control – and of all her "insides" as a result of willed anorexia, she looks forward to getting rid of all bodily constraints: "I'm not an animal any more, sister (…) I don't need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight" [153–154]. Her withdrawal from all communication, which made her, as her sister remarks, "difficult to read" [129] and indicated that "she was retreating from herself' [130], represents the fantasised withdrawal from Culture, with its conflicting meanings and repressive mediation – as is the mediation of the natural process of eating into coded social practices and customs –, into the silent, non-sentient vegetable kingdom, where the human turmoil of consciousness will end: "Soon now, words and thoughts will all disappear. Soon" [154].

Family and hospital represent, in *The Vegetarian*, symmetrical environments in which Yeong-hye is subjected to processes of "normalisation," and both these institutions – or social spaces – are the equivalent of a prison. In-hye explicitely makes this association as regards her family [143], and the "heavy looking set of bars running vertically across [the window]" [144] marks the hospital ward as another place of confinement and discipline. The young doctor reminds of the father in the anger he feels "towards those patients who fail to live up to his expectations" [140]. In the psychiatric hospital, Yeong-hye's rejection of food becomes the object of scientific attention, it is categorised and labeled, and benefits from standardised protocols of treatment, and this professional supervision is the analogue of the control that the patriarchal family exercises on women in the name of tradition.

Discussing the origins of the modern psychiatric institutions in his *History of Madness,* Michel Foucault points out the dilemmas that madness raised in its early

BDD-A27722 © 2017 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:44 UTC)

institutional approach, such as in what social sphere should it be situated: "prison, hospital, or family aid" [1988, 234]. Foucault's analysis of *The Retreat*, an asylum purporting to offer moral treatment to the insane, founded by William Tuke in 1796 and constituting a model for dealing with madness in the next ages, evinces the "parental complex" that underlies the history of the asylum from that point on [253]. The success of the York *Retreat* comes from the symbolic recreation of the family structure in the asylum, the reconstitution around madness of "a simulated family, which is an institutional parody but a real psychological situation," substituting for the inadequate family, incapable of containing madness, "a fictitious family décor of signs and attitudes" [254]. The asylum "constituted in the family mode" [253] was itself a locus of power because it replicated the madman's "minority status" [272]. "Madness is childhood" [252]; that is, the discourse of reason deprives of madman of any autonomy, keeping him in a system of constraints and interdictions and "deliver[ing] him entirely, as a psychological subject, to the authority and prestige of the man of reason, who assumed for him the concrete figure of an adult" [253]. It is in this adult figure, as Foucault notices, that the "prestige of patriarchy" is revived:

> The physician could exercise his absolute authority in the world of the asylum only insofar as, from the beginning, he was Father and Judge, Family and Law—his medical practice being for a long time no more than a complement to the old rites of Order, Authority, and Punishment. [272]

In *The Vegetarian*, there are many suggestions that the world of the psychiatric hospital where Yeong-hye was committed by her sister – the only "adult figure" remaining by her side after the scandals created by her alienated behavior – is a place in which the normalising function of the family is replicated, but also the place where she is submitted to similar control, where domination takes the form of medical mastery. The re-creation of the "family" environment was found to be a solution for the better management of inmates: "In this hospital, the patients who are in good control of their faculties look after those with more acute and psychological problems, and receive a little pocket money in return" [Kang:150]. When Yeong-hye had become "difficult to manage," refusing all kind of food, she was placed in the care of Hee-joo, an alcoholic and hypomaniac, who is deeply empathetic and feels responsible for the young woman's suffering. She acts like a surrogate sister in the artificial "family" of the hospital, thus disguising the authoritarian nature of the confinement. On the other hand, the medical procedures to which Yeong-hye is submitted echo the violence and the relation of dominance between "minor" and adult in her own family: feeding her, even against herself, has become a medical priority, and her struggles to resist these attempts are the same she had put up against her father. The doctor treating her appears indeed as figure of power, exercising his authority with a self-confidence given by the fact, as In-hye speculates, that "the patients here are not free to leave" [171] – a situation of confinement which echoes the inescapability of family relationships. His

BDD-A27722 © 2017 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:44 UTC)

ultimate decision to force-feed her by having a tube inserted through her mouth creates a scene which is disturbingly similar to the one describing her agony when her angry father forced meat into her mouth. Just as her father had needed the help of the two young men in the family to hold her, she has now to be overpowered by two carers, who try to "bind her arms and legs," while she thrashes her body with an unexpected force, yelling wildly. Her bound limbs continue to struggle and, as with her father, she manages to articulate her aversion: "'I … don't … like it!' For the first time, Yeong-hye enunciated clearly, though her voice still sound like the roar of some savage beast. 'I … don't … like it!' 'I … don't … like eating!'" [174]. The scene in the hospital ends in bloodshed, like the scene among her family, when she responded with self-mutilation to the violent horror inflicted on her ("Blood ribboned out of her wrists. The shock of red splashed over white china" [41]): although the doctor manages to insert the tube and the feeding starts, the force of the rejection provoked a massive hemorrhage, and the gushing blood "is splashed all over the doctor's white gown" [176].

Foucault pointed out that conceiving the asylum as a surrogate family, keeping the insane "in the imperative fiction of the family" [1988:254], relied on the "myth of a disalienation in patriarchal purity" [253], i.e. the smaller world of the family, as opposed to the alienating influences of the larger society, could provide the suitable model for dealing with madness, as it offered both caring and the authority of Reason in the presiding father-figure. Han Kang's novel exposes the falsity of such a myth, suggesting that the blood which stains the patriarchal scene and its hospital equivalent indicates the inevitable violence yielded by all structures based on domination.

Yeong-hye's pitiful, tortured body is the place where this violence, in its many forms, is inscribed, and her desire to escape from it into a fantasy of plant-like autonomy, quiet, and non-sentience pits her against the prison bars of prejudice, intolerance, and incomprehension. Carol J. Adams points out that those discourses which "distort" the vegetarian body, placing it in the range of deviance and abnormality, tend to replace the *political* motives of vegetarianism (its symbolic contestation of the dominant culture) by *psychological* motives (it is the individual that is dysfunctional, not the society) [2010:199]. Disease is more comprehensible and more socially acceptable than rebellion, as is suggested by the fictitious medical explanation for his wife's vegetarianism given by the husband at the director's dinner (Kang, 24). The authority of the medical discourse dispels any unease at Yeong-hye's eccentricity, precisely because it contained the prospect of normalisation. In *The Vegetarian,* the psychiatric discourse and normalising practices, like the patriarchal pressure to be "ordinary," aim at "rescuing" the anorexic body by suppressing its recalcitrance.

BDD-A27722 © 2017 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:44 UTC)

WORKS CITED

Adams, Carol J., 2010 (1990). *The Sexual Politics of Meat. A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.

Farb, Peter, and George Armelagos, 1980. *Consuming Passions. The Anthropology of Eating*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company

Fiddes, Nick, 1991. *Meat: A Natural Symbol*. Routledge

Foucault, Michel, 1988 (1965). *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Transl. by Richard Howard, New York: Vintage Books

Gordon, Richard A, 2001. "Eating disorders East and West: A culture-bound syndrome unbound", in Mervat et al., 1–15

Kang, Han, 2007. *The Vegetarian*. Portobello Books.

Lee, Sing, 2001. "Fat phobia in anorexia nervosa: Whose obsession is it?" in Mervat et al., 37–50

Nasser, Mervat, Melanie A. Katzman, and Richard A. Gordon (eds.), 2001. *Eating Disorders and Cultures in Transition*. Brunner-Routledge

BDD-A27722 © 2017 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:44 UTC)