

Universidad Internacional de las Americas

School of Education and Foreign Languages

**TRABAJO FINAL DE GRADUACIÓN PARA OPTAR POR EL GRADO DE
BACHILLERATO EN INGLÉS**

Literary Analysis of the Novel *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang using a Feminist Approach

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Julio 2025

Acknowledgement

First, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Lawrence Vega Miranda for his guidance and support throughout the process of writing this thesis. Also, I would like to thank all the university professors who have contributed to my growth as both a student and a professional. Thank you for implanting in me a deep appreciation for the English language and a lasting love for learning.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family.

To my parents, Mario and Gabriela, who have always supported me in my hardest moments and cheered for me in my happiest. Thank you for always showing interest in the things I love and for trusting me every step of the way. Without you, I would not have been able to do this.

To my siblings, Mariana and Sebastián, my greatest confidants, their love and support mean the world to me. Without you, I wouldn't be who I am today. Thank you for always having my back and for helping me when I needed it the most.

Abstract

This research project analyzes Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* through a feminist lens, focusing on how the protagonist's decision to stop eating meat serves as an act of rebellion against patriarchal structures. The study aims to explore gender power dynamics and forms of female resistance portrayed in the novel, as well as how it critiques patriarchal structures. To achieve this, an in-depth literary analysis was conducted, supported by the creation of comparative tables to organize the most important symbols, motifs, and feminist themes. Specifically, the research identifies representations of gender norms and social expectations placed on both male and female characters, examines Yeong-hye's use of her body and decision to become a vegetarian as an act of resistance, and considers how the novel's feminist critique of gendered power relations transcends cultural barriers.

Resumen

Este proyecto de investigación analiza la novela *La vegetariana*, escrita por Han Kang, enfocándose en cómo la decisión de la protagonista de dejar de consumir carne funciona como una manera de rebelarse contra un sistema patriarcal. Este estudio tiene como objetivo explorar las dinámicas de poder de género y las formas de resistencia femenina representadas en la novela, además de la manera en que se critican las estructuras patriarcales. Para lograr esto, se realizó un análisis literario profundo, así como la creación de tablas comparativas para organizar los símbolos más importantes, los motivos y los temas feministas. Esta investigación, en particular, identifica las representaciones de las normas de género y las expectativas sociales dirigidas a hombres y mujeres, analiza el uso que Yeong-hye hace de su cuerpo y su decisión de volverse vegetariana como un acto de resistencia, y finalmente evalúa de qué manera la crítica feminista del poder de género en la novela trasciende las barreras culturales.

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Chapter I

Introductory Framework

This research analyzes the novel *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang through a feminist approach. This novel won the Booker International Prize in 2016 and earned its author the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2024. The story follows a young woman named Yeong-hye, who shocks her entire family when she decides to stop eating meat after experiencing a series of unsettling dreams. Her decision is not well received, as her family perceives it as rebellious and offensive to their sensibilities, further alienating Yeong-hye from them. The novel explores various themes relevant to today's society and likely to resonate with readers, such as mental health, sexual violence, gender expectations, beauty standards, bodily autonomy, the male gaze, identity, and societal oppression.

This research examines the novel through a feminist lens, focusing on its complex narrative. The story is told from the perspectives of Yeong-hye's husband, brother-in-law, and sister, allowing readers to witness different viewpoints on the events that unfold. Feminism is not solely about female empowerment; it also seeks gender equality and freedom for all. The choice to have two male narrators is deliberate and adds complexity to the novel's exploration of gender dynamics. Additionally, Yeong-hye's sister's narration in the final section provides a sense of closure, offering insight into the long-term consequences of the events depicted in the story.

1.1 Problem Statement

Expectations are placed upon a person from the day they are born based on their gender. Most people can attest to this by looking back on their childhood and noticing how the clothes they wore, the way they were treated, the toys they played with, and even the emotions they were allowed to express were different compared to someone of a different gender. This is a universal reality, not limited to one country, though its severity may vary depending on the place. This disruption leads to conflict and social isolation, as portrayed in the novel. This same experience is reflected in the novel when the main character makes, perhaps, the first real decision about how she wants to live her life, which leads to her being alienated by everyone around her.

The Vegetarian is a multilayered novel that invites its readers to reflect on several issues affecting both women and men. The novel does not only criticize how women suffer under patriarchal societies but also reveals how such systems affect men as well, though to a lesser extent. The male characters' narration not only helps readers understand how the female characters, especially Yeong-hye, are ostracized and pressured to conform to societal expectations but also provides insight into how everyone is subjected to beauty standards and gender roles. The purpose of this research is to explore how Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian serves as an act of resistance against patriarchal norms. Therefore, the research question for this analysis is: How does Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian serve as a rebellion against a patriarchal system?

1.2 Objectives of the Investigation

1.2.1 General Objective

- To analyze gender power dynamics and forms of female resistance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* from a feminist perspective, to show how the novel criticizes patriarchal structures

1.2.2 Specific Objectives

- To identify the representations of gender norms and social expectations imposed on female characters in *The Vegetarian*
- To examine how the protagonist, Yeong-hye, uses her body and decision to become a vegetarian as acts of resistance towards patriarchy
- To explore how the novel conveys a feminist critique of power relations and gender oppression that transcends cultural barriers

1.3 Justification of the Study

The female experience depicted in the book transcends barriers and pages, as many readers may see themselves in Yeong-hye or her sister. In 2025, most women can attest to suffering in one way or another due to the patriarchal system they live in. In Yeong-hye's case, she is a woman who marries a man (as is expected of her) who does not see her for who she truly is but rather as a convenience, she is just a body to please him and prepare meals. He never loves her and constantly compares her to other women he deems more attractive, intelligent, or interesting. He does not find her remarkable in any way, and when she does things, he does not like, he tries to force her to change.

On the other hand, Yeong-hye's sister serves as both a symbol and a reminder that people must live for themselves in order to feel fulfilled. She is someone who always did what was expected of her, such as getting married and having a child, until one day, she realizes she has never truly lived for herself. Many women lose themselves and their essence in marriages that only benefit the man. This is the reason why conducting an analysis of this book is essential and develop a thorough understanding of its message, bringing more attention to these issues so that fewer women have to endure such experiences.

As mentioned before, the book explores how women's bodies are controlled by patriarchal structures, a reality that is evident in news from any country. From superficial aspects, such as how women should dress, to more important and political issues, like abortion bans and sexual assault laws, this book and research touch upon topics that may be controversial but are nonetheless important. Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian sparks a series of events that demonstrate how an individual's right to make choices about their own body is often controlled by patriarchal structures, making this important research that opens a discussion on gender, autonomy, and resistance.

This research is also valuable for those who wish to analyze the novel from different perspectives, such as cultural or psychological lenses. Additionally, this study raises awareness of how patriarchal attitudes perpetuate violence and the silencing of women.

1.4 Antecedents

The *Vegetarian* by Han Kang, first published in Korean in 2007 and translated into English in 2015, is an acclaimed novel that won the Booker International Prize in 2016 and contributed to Han Kang receiving the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature. This three-part story follows Yeong-hye and her decision to become a vegetarian. The novel is narrated by three different characters: her husband, her brother-in-law, and her sister. Each narration offers a unique perspective on the same issue, adding depth and complexity to the story. In this research, the feminist approach is used, therefore, it is important to recognize different perspectives to fully comprehend the novel.

An investigation conducted by Adelia Savitri (2017) titled *Subjectivity of women's body as a resistance to the domination of patriarchy in novel Vegetarian by Han Kang* highlights how the main character's resistance, in the form of liberating herself and her body from society's expectations, serves as a way to resist patriarchal domination, which is very present in South Korean society. In the novel, this domination can be seen in the violence that is perpetuated by the male characters, especially Young hye's husband and father, who embody patriarchal authority. Furthermore, the researcher identifies two primary resistance strategies used by the protagonist, Young-hye: her suicide attempts, which is her asserting control over her body, and then her choice to become a vegetarian, symbolizing liberation from patriarchal violence. Moreover, the way the novel is structured further exemplifies male objectification and violence. Finally, the researcher concludes that Young-hye's "madness" reflects her struggle for autonomy and liberation from societal constraints, which makes her body a symbol of resistance against patriarchal norms.

Paola Bica's (2023) investigation titled *The Vegetarian by Han Kang: A postmodern allegory for women's fight for power and freedom* provides another important feminist interpretation. She concludes that the novel is a feminist allegory that presents women's struggles and encourages others to rise against patriarchal norms, objectification, and violence. As the previous research also mentioned, the novel's structure and multiple perspectives, except Yeong-hye's, highlight the main character's lack of agency and the societal pressures she faces. Bica mentions that Yeong-hye's rebellion, transformation (from an oppressed woman to one looking for freedom and autonomy), and metamorphosis ultimately reflect the importance of female empowerment and resistance against male domination.

Additionally, another important investigation conducted by Xinyi Zhang (2020) titled *Preserving humanity: A medical ethical analysis of 'The Vegetarian' by Han Kang* advocates a

different perspective on the novel. The researcher states that most analysis focuses on plot and binary oppositions (such as animal/plant and male/female) when an important perspective that includes historical ethics and medical narratives exists. The researcher places an emphasis on the significance of Yeong-hye's dreams and the way her family reacts and understands her mental illness, emphasizing the ethical dilemmas faced by patients within a patriarchal medical system.

Finally, Jasmine Anand's (2019) work *Constricting life: Constructing / deconstructing violence in Han Kang's The Vegetarian* analyzes the novel through a vegan-feminist lens. The paper explores how the protagonist's rejection of meat serves as a symbol for the violence that exists within patriarchal structures and the subsequent rejection of said structures. Furthermore, the study also suggests that Yeong-hye's transformation into a plant metaphorically represents resistance against male dominance and the violence inherent in traditional gender roles.

1.5 Scope

The purpose of this research is to analyze the novel through a feminist perspective, examining how it critiques the patriarchal structure that affects the characters and how they either contribute to or resist these structures. Most importantly, this investigation aims to explore how Yeong-hye, the main character, is affected by this restrictive patriarchal system that, from a young age, has caused her a lot of pain and subjected her to abuse. Additionally, this investigation touches upon how the other male characters (Mr. Cheong, the brother-in-law, and the father) are affected by the same patriarchal structure, but also how they thrive in it and gain privilege over the female characters. Overall, this investigation wants to start a conversation about how a patriarchal society affects people in general, as it leads to emotional repression and mental health issues. In a patriarchal system, roles are assigned to men and women alike, and when someone does not conform to the norm, they face criticism. This shows how a system like that not only harms women but also anyone who deviates from their assigned role, and that is exactly what this research intends to showcase.

Furthermore, this research aims to analyze the different themes present in the novel, starting with mental health, which is a central aspect of the story. It can be seen in Yeong-hye, who, from the start, shows signs of mental illness that progress throughout the novel. This illness stems from years of suppressed trauma that began with an abusive childhood. Mental health issues

are also reflected in characters like In-hye and the brother-in-law. In the last chapter, In-hye suffers a kind of mental breakdown after being subjected to years of social expectations, emotional isolation, and unresolved trauma. The research aims to show how mental illness, when left ignored for many years, can cause irreparable damage to a person's psyche. Also, it discusses how society's perception of mental illness, and the way it is treated, not only by family members but also by medical professionals, can worsen its consequences.

The research also aims to explore the themes of sexual violence and gender expectations. In the novel, sexual violence occurs not only within marriages but also between family members. It is important to talk about these situations, even if they are uncomfortable, because most sexual abuse is committed by people who are trusted. When it comes to gender expectations, the novel portrays a society in which women are expected to be obedient and self-sacrificing. This mentality is instilled from childhood and ultimately shapes the characters' relationships and identities.

Another important theme presents in the novel that this research aims to discuss is beauty standards and the male gaze. Regarding beauty standards, it is important to note that they apply to both men and women. For men, the novel makes an important point by addressing male insecurities that stem from society's unrealistic expectations. Mr. Cheong and the brother-in-law both mention feeling insecure about their hair loss, body weight, and penis size. This causes both men to suffer from low self-esteem. For women, especially South Korean women, society places heavy pressure on cosmetic surgery to the extent that not having it done is seen as unusual. In-hye is a character who reflects this belief. She undergoes double-eyelid surgery, which is a common procedure. However, it is ironic that her husband finds Yeong-hye, who never had surgery, more attractive. On the other hand, Mr. Cheong cannot help comparing the two sisters and finds his sister-in-law more attractive. This highlights an important point: society always finds a way to make people feel that they are not enough and that there is always something to change or improve. That is why it is important to promote self-love from a young age.

As for the male gaze, having the first two chapters narrated by men helps the reader understand how they view women, and also serves as a commentary on how society in general perceives women. Other themes present in the novel include bodily autonomy, identity, and societal oppression. These three are interconnected. Yeong-hye's decision to stop eating meat is an attempt to reclaim control over her own body, control which her family, husband, and society have persistently attempted to suppress. As the novel progresses, this attempt becomes an act of self-definition. At the same time, it shows how society tries to dictate how people should behave,

think, and look, ultimately suppressing their identity. This denial can lead to suffering and alienation.

Furthermore, this research wants to show how gender, culture, and power dynamics interact in the novel, since they are closely connected. The story shows how women, especially Yeong-hye, are expected to follow traditional roles in Korean society, like being obedient daughters and good wives. These cultural expectations give men more power and control, while women are often silenced or ignored. Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian is not only about food, but also a way to resist the rules that others try to impose on her. The novel shows how culture and gender roles can affect a person's freedom and identity, especially when they go against what society expects.

Finally, as for what this research intends to discover, it aims to explore how the issues raised in the novel transcend cultural barriers and can be relatable to a broader audience. The female experience in the novel is not unique to South Korea. Many women may see themselves in Yeong-hye. They may relate to her experiences and her desire to disappear inside herself or rebel against a patriarchal system that tries to control her. Although Yeong-hye's desire for a metamorphosis can be seen as a result of her mental illness, it can also be understood as a metaphor for change and a longing for a different life.

Additionally, this research is beneficial because it provides a deeper understanding of the novel by analyzing it through a feminist lens. It shows how the main character's actions are connected to the way women are treated in a patriarchal society. The research focuses on gender to reveal hidden meanings behind the characters' behavior and how power operates in their relationships. This kind of analysis also helps readers think more critically about social roles and how literature can reflect real problems in society.

Chapter II

Theoretical Framework

This chapter explains different elements and concepts that must be understood to comprehend further chapters fully. Additionally, elements such as the author's biography, summary of the book, symbols, motifs, and themes are explained.

2.1 Definition of Concepts

2.1.1 Literature

Literature is defined by the Cambridge dictionary (n.d) as “written artistic works, especially those with a high and lasting artistic value”. In many cultures, literature functions as a means to discuss culturally significant events that have marked a society. Authors can often criticize or give readers different perspectives through their work that otherwise may not experience in their own culture. As Shalini and Samundeswari (2017) said, “In literature, we find stories designed to portray human life and action through some characters who, by their words, action and reaction, convey certain messages for the purpose of education, information and entertainment” (p. 170). It is important to comprehend that reading can help readers understand a society's defects and virtues as well as give insight into historical, political, and psychological events.

This is especially prevalent in the novel *The Vegetarian*, as well as in other Han Kang's works, since there are instances in which cultural differences can be the only answer to what is happening. Many times, the actions and decisions of characters are deeply tied to South Korea's societal expectations and historical traumas. Therefore, what makes sense to someone can be absurd to another. By understanding these differences, readers can better comprehend how literature reflects and challenges ideologies that have an iron fist in society, which is exactly what *The Vegetarian* does.

In South Korea, modern literature played a big role in shaping national identity, particularly in response to the country's “unique history of colonialism, war, postwar reconstruction, and authoritarian rule” (Zur, 2016, p. 193). Throughout its history, South Korea

has faced significant challenges, from Japanese colonial rule and the Korean War to internal conflicts such as the Gwangju Uprising. All of these events have left their mark on Korean literature, and since then, its literature has often explored themes of trauma, alienation, and resistance. Literature has become an important tool for discussing social issues and questioning established norms. This is why it is important to understand that *The Vegetarian* does exactly this, questioning the way things work and wondering if there is maybe a better path.

2.1.2 Feminism Definition

Feminism is an important theme present in the novel. It is defined by the Cambridge dictionary (n.d.) as “the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state.” Likewise, Raina (2017) defines it as “a wide range of political movements, ideologies and social movements that share a common goal to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal and social equality of sexes” (p. 3372). Both definitions put an emphasis on equality, which is important to highlight, as a common misconception is that feminism advocates for the superiority of one sex over the other: in this case, females over males.

Feminism, besides fighting for women’s rights and equality, also advocates against patriarchal structures that affect men and women alike. While the impact of patriarchy on men and women differs significantly, it is important to acknowledge that “the way we have set up that world of power causes immense pain, isolation, and alienation not only for women but also for men” (Kaufman, 1994, p. 59). As mentioned before, the novel’s first two chapters are narrated by the male characters, which not only serves as a way to emphasize Yeong-hye's lack of agency but also gives insight into the male characters' feelings and points of view. By reading their perspectives, we can recognize that they are also victims (to a lower degree) of the pressure and expectations inflicted by patriarchal structures.

2.1.3 Feminism in other Parts of the World

Feminism is a dynamic movement that differs from place to place because of various cultural, historical, and political contexts. For example, Western feminism focuses mostly on issues like equality in the workplace, abortion rights, and domestic violence and fights for legal

changes that pertain to these issues. Whereas in the Middle East and South Asia, feminist movements are often intertwined with the agendas against forced marriages, legal protection against domestic violence, and the right to education. In Latin America, movements like Ni Una Menos are predominantly concerned with fighting against femicide and gender violence. But in more traditional and conservative societies, feminism is treated like a taboo and has been vilified as it is typically considered a threat to traditional gender roles. That is why it is important to have a global perspective and see how it differs from a place like South Korea, which is still very much a society that debates the issue of gender in social and political spheres.

2.1.4 Feminism in South Korea

Before mentioning how feminism works in South Korean society, it is important to explain how Confucian ideology dominated and outlined the rules that would govern women till this day. During the Chosun Dynasty (1393–1910), Confucianism profoundly influenced the roles that women played, what they did, and how they were regarded by society concerning the other gender, thus reinforcing a strict gender hierarchy (Kim, 1996). Women had to take care of more domestic tasks and were seen as weak, while men took over the public domain and were strong. As mentioned, women were expected to be submissive and adhere to Samjonggido, which is defined by Kim (1996) as follows: “Women were supposed to obey three authorities, fathers when young, husbands when married, and sons when widowed throughout their life cycle” (p. 66). Of course, these three obedience’s pushed women to the sidelines and caused further repression.

Additionally, women had to remain within the home because chastity and fidelity were considered highly valuable, and any deviation could cause severe consequences, such as family expulsion. Overall, Confucian ideals not only divided people but made discrimination a common occurrence as it set the expectations and strict gender roles that affect South Korean society to date. Basically, and in the words of Kim (1996), “a Korean woman should be a faithful wife, a devoted daughter-in-law, and a self-sacrificing mother inside the home, and denied a role in public life. Obedience and endurance were the most important behavioral norms for women” (p. 66). Although things might have changed over time, this statement rings true for many and is still expected for many Korean women. Knowing this, it is easy to understand that feminism is a direct attack on the long-established rules that form part of South Korean culture.

Feminism in South Korea had a rise in the mid to late-2010s with different movements, especially on digital platforms. According to Kim (2021), “A key moment of in the recent

feminism reboot came in February 2015, when thousands of tweets with the hashtag #iamafeminist were posted on Twitter collectively reclaiming feminist identity in the face of the prevalent anti-feminist sentiment in Korea” (p. 76). This surge in support of the movement had deep repercussions as it increased the already existing gender conflict but also “with feminism gaining increasing visibility and mention in society, antifeminist discourse has also surged, particularly among young men” (Jung & Moon, 2024, p.217). Unfortunately, this sentiment towards feminism has not changed and continues to be a problem as many women fears taking part in the movement as it only makes them targets to violence and bullying.

2.1.5 Gender Roles

In the context of the novel, and particularly within the cultural setting in which it takes place, gender roles play a significant role in shaping the characters’ behaviors and thought processes. As Payne (2023) defines it, a gender role is a “culturally and socially determined set of expected behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics based on concepts of masculinity and femininity.” Because both cultural and social forces shape these roles, it is important to acknowledge that the gender expectations depicted in the novel are closely tied to Confucian ideals that continue to influence Korean society to this day. From a young age, both Yeong-hye and her sister are taught to conform to these expectations, first as obedient daughters and later as doting wives. Throughout the novel, various moments show how deeply ingrained these roles are; for instance, In-hye consistently feels compelled to fulfill the image of the ideal wife and mother, even at the expense of her own well-being.

2.1.6 Male Gaze

This concept is defined by the Cambridge dictionary (n.d.) as “the fact of showing or watching events or looking at women from a man's point of view”. In the novel, the first two chapters are narrated by men, Yeong-hye’s husband (Mr. Cheong) and her brother-in-law. Although they have different personalities and worldviews, their narratives reveal a common pattern: women are often viewed as commodities and are reduced by the men around them. For example, Mr. Cheong perceives his wife less as a partner and more as a symbol of social conformity. He views their marriage not as a sacred union, but as a logical and expected step toward fulfilling societal obligations. Yeong-hye, to him, represents a convenient means to an end.

Similarly, her brother-in-law uses her body to fulfill his artistic and erotic fantasies. In both cases, women are seen as objects or props of male desire and expectation.

2.1.7 Mental Health

Mental health plays an important role in the novel as a central theme. It is defined by the World Health Organization (2022) as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.” In the novel, mental health is not only explored through Yeong-hye’s psychological deterioration but also through the behaviors and reactions of those around her. Her family fails to recognize Yeong-hye’s pain and instead interprets her behavior as selfish or superficial. They also fail to respond with empathy, compassion, or understanding, which further alienates Yeong-hye. This overall behavior serves as a commentary on, and a critique of, how society perceives mental health, especially when it disrupts well-established social norms.

2.1.8 Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is another significant theme in the novel. It is defined by Cambridge dictionary (n.d.) as “the act of making someone take part in sexual activities, against their wishes, or without their agreement”. In the novel, Yeong-hye and In-hye are sexually assaulted by their husbands. Both men exhibit a sense of entitlement to their wives' bodies, reflecting a harmful yet widespread misconception: that being in a committed relationship implies ongoing, unquestioned consent. For instance, Mr. Cheong feels personally wronged when “his physical needs go unsatisfied” and believes that forcing himself on Yeong-hye is justified. Similarly, In-hye’s husband is driven by what he describes as “an uncontrollable impulse” and assaults her. Through these instances and others, the novel shows how sexual abuse is often normalized and overlooked within patriarchal systems, particularly when it occurs in the context of marriage.

2.2 Themes, Symbols, Motifs

When it comes to literary analysis, it is important to clearly understand the elements that are essential to the comprehension of the study. A theme is defined by the Cambridge dictionary as “an important idea in a piece of writing, art, music, etc.”. Themes appear throughout a novel because they are a key concept that an author wants to explore in their work. A theme is not supposed to be a concrete image but rather a collection of abstract ideas that work together to create a bigger picture. According to Sevilla (2024), “A story can have more than one theme.

However, most of them have a major theme and other minor ones. Identifying the theme of a story can be challenging because it is inferred rather than stated in the text” (p. 39). Themes are not stated explicitly; one must infer them, read between the lines, and examine very closely the interactions or train of thought that characters have.

Another important literary element is the symbols. A symbol can be classified into three categories: universal, regional, and personal. Universal symbols are symbols that carry the same meaning across different cultures, periods, and societies. They are widely recognized and often tied to fundamental human experiences. Regional symbols hold meaning within a specific culture, region, or community. They may not be universally understood outside that context. Finally, personal symbols are symbols that hold unique meaning to an individual. They often develop from personal experiences, memories, or emotions. As one can understand, symbols are objects, people, situations, or actions that have a deeper meaning. According to Aguilar (2023), a symbol “helps to understand a concept or idea outside of the general theme, and opposite to the motif, its presence is not repetitive; it is shown once or twice in the story” (p. 40). Symbols can give more information about a situation or a character when analyzed within context.

Motifs are defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “an important and noticeable element or feature that typically appears throughout the work. It can relate to the theme, or it can be the dominant or central idea itself.”. Motifs, unlike symbols, appear constantly throughout a novel, and they tend to be more concrete, like physical objects, but they can be places, actions, situations, or even phrases. It is important to differentiate themes from motifs. According to Aguilar (2023), “motifs are actually a way to help identify the theme of the story, and the theme, as stated, is the central idea or the message of the text” (p. 40). Understanding this difference is crucial for literary analysis.

2.3 Authors’ Biography

Han Kang is a South Korean author born in 1970 in the city of Gwangju. She was the first South Korean author to win a Nobel Prize in Literature, but she has also won other awards, such as the Booker International Prize in 2016, which is a prestigious British award given to full-length novels in English. She is an author whose prose is often described as “experimental and imbued with metaphors, and her work addresses such themes as violence, grief, and patriarchy” (Ostberg,

2024). She grew up in a home where reading was a must since her father was a teacher and a novelist. She mentioned in an interview that “books were half-living beings that constantly multiplied and expanded their boundaries... I could feel at ease thanks to all those books protecting me. Before I made friends in a strange neighborhood, I had my books with me” (Kang, 2023). From a young age, Kang fell in love with literature and has yet to stop.

The author moved frequently when she was young. At the age of nine, she moved to Seoul, months before the Gwangju Uprising. This left a mark on the author, as she has mentioned “that her family’s incidental move before the uprising has left her with a sense of survivor’s guilt” (Ostberg, 2024). In fact, she wrote a novel called *Human Acts* that reflects on the events of the Gwangju Uprising, which was a mass protest against the authoritarian South Korean government in 1980. A quarter of a million people participated in this protest, and although it was brutally repressed, it is considered an important moment in the fight for democracy for the country (Ostberg, 2024). To this day, the Gwangju Uprising continues to be a painful memory for Korean people.

Kang made her debut in 1993 by publishing a collection of poems, and in 1995, she released her first short story. Shortly after this, she released several novels, short stories, and poems. But her first real breakthrough was with the novel *The Vegetarian*, which is a story narrated by three different people and their perspectives on a woman's decision to stop eating meat.

2.4 Plot

The novel starts with a man talking about his wife and how before she decided to become a vegetarian, he thought of her as unremarkable. Detailing her perceived plainness, he reveals his preference for an unchallenging relationship. However, none of this deterred him from marrying her as he had always preferred the easy path and knew that with her, he did not have to pretend or work hard. He then says that the only thing that made her wife a little bit unusual was her refusal to wear a bra as she claimed she couldn’t stand the way it squeezed her breasts. One night at 4 a.m., as he gets up to get a bottle of water, he finds his wife in the dark, standing motionless in front of the fridge. He tries to get her attention and make her explain what she is doing, to which she replies that she had a dream and then goes back to their room. The next

morning, he wakes up late for work, which he blames her for, and finds her getting rid of all the meat in their fridge. He loses his temper and calls her crazy, but ultimately heads for work thinking about the situation.

The situation does not get any better, as his wife refuses to cook any food that has meat in it; she only cooks vegetables. He still cannot believe that his wife is so selfish; he claims that “the very idea that there should be this other side to her, one where she selfishly did as she pleased, was astonishing”. He tries to reason with himself but cannot understand this new side of her as she had always eaten meat and had no problem with it.

Time passes, and his wife continues to refuse eating meat, losing a lot of weight and sleep, but none of this bothers him as much as the fact that she now actively avoids sex with him. He confronts her about it, and she responds that his body smells of meat, which disturbs her. After this, he starts wondering if “she might genuinely be going soft in the head”. However, he thinks about her family and how all of them are “normal” and tells himself that “there’s nothing wrong with her... this kind of thing isn’t even a real illness... This strange situation had nothing to do with me.”

After an incident with the husband’s coworkers, the man finally decides to call her family to inform them of what has been going on. He first calls his mother-in-law, and she is deeply disgruntled with her second daughter’s sudden behavior. Then he calls his sister-in-law, In-hye, who he says resembled his wife but was prettier and more feminine and whose voice always sent him “into a state of sexual arousal”. Just like her mother, In-hye is astonished by her sister's behavior and apologizes for it. He then finally considers calling his brother-in-law but decides that he would be overdoing it. However, after many failed attempts to persuade his wife to eat meat again by his mother-in-law and In-hye, the family decides to get together on a Sunday to eat.

The day of the family reunion arrives, and the couple heads out to In-hye’s apartment, which she shares with her husband and child. The family sat at the table and began to eat, but since Yeong-hye would not touch anything, all the family members, especially Yeong-hye’s father, became upset. The man tries to force meat into Yeong-hye’s mouth, but she refuses. He then slaps her and orders the other men in the house to take hold of her arms. The only person who tries to stop the man is In-hye, but he continues to hit Yeong-hye until she opens her mouth, and her father forces a piece of meat inside. The action causes “an animal cry of distress” to burst from her lips. Yeong-hye then frees herself, grabs a knife from the table, and cuts her wrists. She is taken to the hospital by her brother-in-law and her husband, Mr. Cheong. When the time to get her discharge

approaches, Yeong-hye disappears from the hospital room and then is found in the hospital's garden, sitting on a bench with her gown removed and naked from the waist up. Mr. Cheong approaches her even though he is extremely embarrassed and asks her why she is like that, to which she responds, "It's so hot, so I just got undressed".

The second part of the novel then starts with the narration of Yeong-hye's brother-in-law. He is an artist who works in a small studio (which he has to share with other artists) and is obsessed with an image that came to him one day. In it, men and women sat on the floor displaying their naked backs, which were covered from the napes of their necks to the small of their backs with overlapping flowers. However, this image that obsesses him came from a conversation he has with his wife one day. As they are getting their son ready, he comments on the child's Mongolian mark, which has yet to disappear. In-hye then says that some may never do like in Yeong-hye's case. This brings the picture of a woman with a blue flower on her buttocks, and he immediately correlates Yeong-hye's Mongolian mark with men and women having sex and their naked bodies covered with painted flowers. He feels an intense sexual desire for this image he painted, and he claims, "it was almost the first time since his marriage... that he'd felt such intense sexual desire, a desire which, moreover, was focused on a clear object". Painting this picture is not enough for him, he wants to make it a reality.

He decides one day to gather his courage and approach Yeong-hye, who now lives alone in a studio apartment after getting divorced, with a preposition. He wants her to model for him but to keep it a secret from In-hye. Yeong-hye agrees and meets him at M's studio. He instructs her to remove her clothing and proceeds to paint over her naked body. While he is painting, he decides to record the session. Once he is finished, he heads to his studio but then realizes that there is still more he wants to do. He asks Yeong-hye to come back to the studio and asks a friend of his to model for him. What he wants to do now is put a man and a woman with the backs painted with flowers and have them simulate having sex. However, the male model grows uncomfortable and leaves the session. Yeong-hye, on the other hand, says she is aroused because of the flowers that have been painted on her. At first, he tries to initiate a sexual encounter, but Yeong-hye refuses, saying that it is the flowers she wants. With this in mind, he drops Yeong-hye off at her apartment and asks an old friend of his to paint the flowers on his back.

Once his friend is finished, he heads to Yeong-hye's house and has sex with her while he records. He falls asleep and wakes up the next morning, realizing that the camcorder he used is gone. He searches around the apartment and finds his wife sitting on the kitchen floor, looking at

the tape. She had come into the apartment to drop some food for Yeong-hye and found the two lying on the mattress. He tries to explain himself, but she tells him that she has called emergency services. She is angry that he took advantage of her sister when it is clear that she is mentally unwell and, therefore, cannot consent. The police and medical services arrived and took him and Yeong-hye to the hospital.

Finally, the third chapter begins with In-hye's narration. She is heading to the Chukseong Psychiatric Hospital, where Yeong-hye now resides permanently. At this point, Yeong-hye refuses to eat anything, claiming that she does not need food and only needs oxygen like a tree. This has caused her to lose a lot of weight, and the only thing the doctors at the hospital can do to save her life is try to feed her intravenously. However, this proves to be a challenge since Yeong-hye won't cooperate, and while the doctors are trying to insert the feeding tube, Yeong-hye suffers from gastric bleeding, which means they need to take her to the main hospital in an ambulance. Both Yeong-hye and In-hye get inside the ambulance, and the novel ends with In-hye looking at the trees "as if waiting for an answer. As if protesting something."

2.4.1 Main Characters

2.4.1.1 Mr. Cheong

He is the first narrator and Yeong-hye's husband. He is self-conscious of the paunch that started appearing in his mid-twenties, his skinny legs, his arms that steadfastly refused to bulk up despite his best efforts, and the inferiority complex that he has about the size of his penis. He is said to always feel inclined towards "the middle course in life", as he would rather take the comfortable and secure option than aim for more at the risk of losing everything. He settled for a job where he would earn a decent amount of money and in which his unremarkable skills were valued. His brother-in-law describes him as having a narrow forehead, a pointed jaw, and a general look of stubbornness.

2.4.1.2 Yeong-hye

In the beginning, she is described by her husband as "middling height, bobbed black hair neither long nor short, jaundiced, sickly-looking skin, somewhat prominent cheekbones" with a "walk that is neither fast nor slow, striding nor mincing". He claims she has a timid and sallow

aspect. She is said to be a woman of few words and was subcontracted by a comics publisher to work on the words for their speech bubbles, which allowed her to work from home. Her favorite pastime is to read books “that looked so dull” it could put a normal person to sleep. Her only abnormal quality was that she did not like to wear a bra, not even when she went outside.

2.4.1.3 In-hye

She resembles her sister quite closely, but her eyes are described as “prettier and larger,” and overall, she is more feminine. She manages a successful cosmetics store and because of it, even before getting married, she managed to buy an apartment. She is said to be a very good cook and is four years older than Yeong-hye. Her husband describes her as having deep and clear eyes, thanks to the double-eyelid surgery she had in her twenties. Her face was a slender oval with a smooth feminine jawline.

2.4.1.4 In-hye’s Husband

He was an art college graduate who “liked to pose as an artist” yet did not contribute a single penny to their house finances. He had some property that he had inherited but did not win a salary with his art. He likes to use a small studio on the second floor below ground level of a K-pop group headquarters that he shares with 3 other video artists. He was very sensitive to the presence of others and could only become properly absorbed in his work when he was alone. He also seems insecure about his receding hairline and his paunch.

2.4.2 Secondary Characters

2.4.2.1 Yeong-hye’s mother

She is said to never seem to show much of an interest in her second daughter and runs a hole-in-the-wall shop in a small town. However, she seems worried and disgruntled when she finds out that her daughter has stopped eating and cooking meat. With an emphasis on the latter, the fact that she has stopped cooking for her husband takes precedence over everything else.

2.4.2.2 Yeong-hye's Father

He works at a sawmill in a small town “way out the sticks.” He once received the Order of Military Merit for serving in Vietnam and never gets tired of boasting about it. He is a physically abusive man who believes in physical punishment and has an incredibly violent temperament.

2.4.2.3 Yeong-ho

He is Yeong-Hye's younger brother. He is married and hot-tempered like his father.

2.4.2.4 Jiwoo

He is In-hye's son. He is three when the novel starts and is around five when it ends. He cares deeply about his mother and always tries to make her laugh.

2.4.2.5 Hee-joo

She is Yeong-hye's roommate in the Chukseong Psychiatric Hospital. She is in a better head space, so she helps take care of Yeong-hye.

2.4.2.6 J

He is one of the video artists who shares the studio with In-hye's husband. He is the model In-hye's husband chooses to paint alongside Yeong-hye, but he becomes uncomfortable and leaves.

2.4.2.7 M

He is the owner of the studio, In-hye's husband used to paint Yeong-hye. He had managed to secure a full-time post at a Seoul university at only thirty-two

2.4.2.8 P

She dated In-hye's husband for four years until she broke up with him. She married a lawyer, and he was the main breadwinner, but she had managed to successfully combine married life with her own work. She had held several private exhibitions and managed to become something of a name among collectors. She helps paint flowers on In-hye's husband's back.

Chapter III

Methodological Framework

This chapter outlines the methodological framework for the literary analysis of *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang. The methodological framework chapter is an important part of a research project because it allows the researcher to answer the research question by following a structured and clear path that makes the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data easier. It is important to remember that this literary analysis intends to understand how the main character's decision to become a vegetarian serves as a rebellion against a well-established patriarchal system. The following sections detail the research approach, research design, sources of information, analysis categories, data collection instruments, and the process of data collection and analysis.

3.1 Research Approach

There are three types of research approaches: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed. Depending on the type of research and the data a researcher wants to collect and analyze, an approach is picked. A quantitative approach “collects data to understand a pattern, question, or make predictions. This data is usually numeric, which gives a clear view of the number of people who belong to a specific group and the magnitude of an issue” (Sevilla, 2024, p. 54). This type of research usually uses surveys, experiments, or statistical analysis.

Qualitative research focuses on understanding phenomena, interpretations, and contexts. This type of research normally uses interviews or content analysis. A qualitative research method is used in this study since it seeks to interpret and analyze textual content in the novel. A qualitative approach is particularly beneficial for literary analysis, as it enables an in-depth examination of the text. The final type of investigation is the mixed approach, which combines both approaches (quantitative and qualitative), allowing the researcher to examine a problem from different angles. According to Aguilar (2023), “This approach is usually used when the investigator needs to gather extensive and complete information for a better understanding of research problems” (p. 46). This approach is a great option for conducting thorough investigations.

Additionally, this research uses a feminist approach to help analyze the novel and provide a clear path towards the completion of the objectives. A feminist approach is rooted in feminist

theory. According to Ferguson (2017), “Feminist theory today is a sprawling, productive, diverse intellectual and political assemblage. It grows through imaginative interdisciplinary work and critical political engagements. Feminist theory is not only about women ... it is about the world, engaged through critical intersectional perspectives” (p. 270). This means that feminist theory is not only used to study the experiences of women, but also to understand how power works in society and how it affects people in different ways. Having this outlook helps this research because it is going to help the researcher examine how the main character is treated by others and how she tries to resist the roles that society expects her to follow. Overall, this approach makes it easier to focus on the struggles of the female characters and to show how the novel criticizes the way women are often controlled by patriarchal systems.

3.2 Research Design

This research follows a descriptive research design. According to Aguilar (2023), a descriptive research design “is a type of design that seeks, analyzes, and presents data in order to characterize a phenomenon, situation, or population. In other words, it assists in providing answers to the research questions: what, when, where, and how” (p. 47-48). In the context of this study, this definition is particularly relevant as it helps to guide the systematic examination of *The Vegetarian* by defining the most important themes, character development, and symbolism and helps in constructing a comprehensive interpretation of how the text engages with issues of identity, autonomy, and oppression.

3.3 Information Sources

This refers to where the researcher gets their information and data. Information sources constitute the foundation of any investigation, and they are divided into three categories: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary sources are defined by Huffman (2023) as the “firsthand accounts of research or an event, including original scholarly research results, raw data, testimony, speeches, historic objects, or other evidence that provides unique and original information about a person or an event.” They give reliable information to a researcher. Secondary sources are the ones in which primary sources are analyzed and examined. They are not the main source of evidence but rather a commentary on the original source. Finally, tertiary sources are wide recapitulations of

primary or secondary sources. According to Huffman (2023), “Tertiary resources often provide data in a convenient form and provide context of the topic for a frame of reference.” These types of sources are used to understand complex data or events. The primary source used for this study is the book *The Vegetarian* itself. Secondary sources include reliable academic articles, literary critiques, and theoretical works concerning similar subjects such as feminism, mental health, sexual violence, gender expectations, beauty standards, bodily autonomy, the male gaze, identity, and societal oppression.

3.4 Analysis Categories

The analysis is structured around three important categories that align with the overall purpose of this study. The first category, identity and transformation, explores the protagonist’s physical and psychological journey, focusing on how she perceives herself and the society around her. The second category, oppression and resistance, examines how the novel critiques social norms and expectations, highlighting the extensive influence of patriarchy in the characters' daily lives. This, in turn, creates tension and disrupts the apparent normalcy enjoyed by the male characters.

The third category, narrative structure and perspective analyze how the novel’s narrative style deepens the reader’s understanding of the characters while also serving as a mechanism for the protagonist’s alienation and lack of agency. Additionally, for this section, a table was created to mention and explain Yeong-hye’s dreams. Since Yeong-hye never narrates a chapter, her dreams are the only moments where the reader hears her voice directly. These dreams are essential not only because they mark the beginning of her transformation but also because they provide rare access to what is going on in her mind.

Table 1. Yeong-hye's Dreams and Their Possible Meanings

Dream Description / Quote	Possible Meaning or Interpretation

3.5 Data Collection Instruments

Since this study is a literary analysis, data collection is conducted primarily through close reading, which helps identify significant themes and motifs in the novel. Additionally, charts and tables are used to present the analysis in a clearer and more structured format. Comparative tables, in particular, are valuable research tools as they help organize information, facilitate comparisons between variables, and visualize patterns and trends. They aid in interpreting results and identifying relationships between variables or study groups, which in turn enhances the overall research process (Morera, 2023). These tools also improve the readability and clarity of the information presented. By using comparative tables, themes and motifs are analyzed in relation to similar works, further enriching the literary analysis.

Table 2. Symbols, Themes, and Motifs in The Vegetarian

Element type	Description	Quote	Researcher's Interpretation

This table organizes the most important symbols, themes, and motifs in the novel with brief explanations from a feminist perspective. Additionally, it provides a description or explanation and a quote from the book to further support the claim.

Table 3. Comparative Analysis of Themes and Motifs with Similar Works

Theme/Motif	In The Vegetarian	Work and Author	In Similar Work	Comparative Analysis

This table matches themes and motifs in *The Vegetarian* with those found in other feminist literary works. It provides a comparative analysis that shows how the struggles faced by the female characters in the novel are universal and can be found across different literary works.

3.6 Data Collection Process and Data Analysis

In this section of the chapter, the researcher reads the novel diligently as many times as needed to understand the novel's literary devices, structures, and other elements. Notes are taken to highlight important and relevant elements found in the text; this aids in making the tables and charts since the researcher determines the most significant excerpts needed to complete them. Furthermore, patterns and recurring symbols are categorized, and references to relevant literature are established to support the analysis. Finally, the findings are put together into coherent discussions that address the research objectives to present a balanced interpretation of the implications of the novel.

Chapter IV

Data Analysis

The purpose of this section is to provide an in-depth analysis of the novel *The Vegetarian*, which tells the story of a woman who decides to stop consuming meat, much to the displeasure of those around her. The aim is to gather sufficient information through the different instruments mentioned in the previous chapter in order to answer the research question and fulfill the study's objectives. The data analysis section of a research project involves selecting an approach to help develop the investigation. In this case, a feminist approach is used to analyze the novel's themes, motifs, and symbols.

4.1 Approach to the Investigation

When starting a research project, it is important to have a clear plan or strategy; therefore, choosing an approach helps the researcher carry out the study in the best possible way. This research project uses a feminist approach to analyze the novel and discuss how gender roles and power dynamics are represented. As explained by Napikoski (2025), "feminist literary criticism examines how women are portrayed in literature and challenges male-centered viewpoints. This criticism supports including women's voices in literature and values their experiences and knowledge." This perspective guides the analysis of the novel and assists with understanding how the female characters are portrayed and how their struggles are connected to the patriarchal society they live in. Most importantly, this approach helps explain how Yeong-hye challenges traditional gender roles through her actions. With this in mind, the research aims to show the importance of women's voices and explore how the novel criticizes gender-based oppression.

4.2 Theories vs Literary Work

For this section, the researcher chose three categories. Dividing the analysis into these three categories is helpful because it makes it easier to explore the main ideas of the novel in an organized way. Each category focuses on a different part of the story, which helps break down complex topics. The first category, identity and transformation, helps to understand the protagonist's personal struggle. The second one, oppression and resistance, looks at how the

characters are affected by social rules and how they react to them. The third category, narrative structure and perspective, shows how the way the story is told affects the reader's understanding and highlights the main character's isolation. Overall, these categories help guide the analysis and make it easier to study the novel using a feminist approach.

4.2.1 Identity and Transformation

The main character's transformation is one of the most important aspects of the novel. First, in the opening chapter, which is narrated by Yeong-hye's husband, Mr. Cheong, she is described as dull and uninteresting before becoming a vegetarian. He says:

“Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way. To be frank, the first time I met her I wasn't even attracted to her. Middling height; bobbed hair neither long nor short; jaundiced, sickly-looking skin; somewhat prominent cheekbones; her timid, sallow aspect told me all I needed to know. As she came up to the table where I was waiting, I couldn't help but notice her shoes—the plainest black shoes imaginable. And that walk of hers— neither fast nor slow, striding nor mincing” (p. 9).

Of course, it is important to note that having the book tell Yeong-hye's story through the eyes of others and giving her input only in very few moments (when she recounts her dreams) shows readers only a fraction of who she truly is. We only see her as they want to see her, which in this case is as unremarkable. However, the first thing that made Yeong-hye different was not becoming a vegetarian but rather her refusal to wear bras. In the book, Mr. Cheong says, “The only respect in which my wife was at all unusual was that she didn't like wearing a bra” (p.11). When he first realizes this, he thinks she is doing it for him, to arouse him; however, he soon finds out that this is just one of her peculiarities and that she cannot stand the way it would “squeeze her breasts.”

Considering that Yeong-hye, for most of her life, lived in a rather repressed way, this act served as her first rebellion, since in most societies, not wearing a bra is frowned upon. Her not wearing a bra is, at first, one of the things that deeply unsettles her husband. During one occasion at a business dinner with Mr. Cheong's colleagues, Yeong-hye refuses to wear a bra, and he recounts: “She was wearing a slightly clinging black blouse, and to my utter mortification I saw

that the outline of her nipples was clearly visible through the fabric. Without a doubt, she'd come out without a bra" (p. 27).

Again, this small act of rebellion is perhaps the precursor to what would undoubtedly happen as the novel progresses. Moving on, Yeong-hye continues to refuse meat and any product that comes from an animal, and she gets rid of all animal products she owns. However, her decision to become a vegetarian is not only about eating meat, instead, it is Yeong-hye's attempt to reclaim her life, a life that, from the start, people around her tried to control, especially her father, a clear patriarchal figure in the story. In the final chapter, In-hye looks back to a time when they were younger and had gotten lost in the woods. At the time, Yeong-hye had suggested not coming back, but in that moment, she could not understand why her sister would say such a thing. She says:

"Only after all this time was, she able to understand why Yeong-hye had said what she did. Yeong-hye had been the only victim of their father's beatings. Such violence wouldn't have bothered their brother Yeong-ho so much, a boy who went around doling out his own rough justice to the village children. As the eldest daughter, In-hye had been the one who took over from their exhausted mother and made a broth for her father to wash the liquor down, and so he'd always taken a certain care in his dealings with her. Only Yeong-hye, docile and naive, had been unable to deflect their father's temper or put up any form of resistance. Instead, she had merely absorbed all her suffering inside her, deep into the marrow of her bones" (p.160).

It is not until the end that In-hye realizes that her sister has suffered for a long time and repressed a lot of pain inside, pain which later on would push Yeong-hye to crave change or transformation. Additionally, by looking at the snippets above, we can tell that from the very beginning, Yeong-hye was portrayed as a quiet and submissive woman. There is a moment in which Mr. Cheong comments on her quietness and says: "She hadn't said a single word on the way here, but 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?" (p.26).

Everyone expects her to comply with their expectations and live in the shadow of her husband and family. Her identity is shaped by the roles she is expected to play: daughter, wife, and later, the object of desire of her brother-in-law. Her vegetarianism becomes the first clear act of

self-definition and signals her refusal to comply with societal norms and the expectations of those around her.

Moreover, as the story continues and shifts to the narration of Yeong-hye's brother-in-law and sister, her transformation becomes more extreme. When her brother-in-law's turn to narrate the story comes, we find out that she is no longer with her husband and gradually distances herself from all human interaction and speaks even less than she used to. In fact, during a phone call, he says: "Her voice had no weight to it, like feathers. It was neither gloomy nor absentminded, as might be expected of someone who was ill. But it wasn't bright or light-hearted either. It was the quiet tone of a person who didn't belong anywhere, someone who had passed into a border area between states of being" (p.76).

From this point onwards, things go downhill. What once started as a refusal to eat meat turns into a belief and desire to become a plant or a tree. Yeong-hye believes that what is wrong with her can be cured if she becomes one with nature. At first, she believes that if flowers bloom from her crotch, things are satisfactory; this is the reason why she allows her brother-in-law to do the things he does to her. In fact, she says to In-hye when she visits Yeong-hye at the psychiatric hospital: "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..." (p.152).

But later on, she has an epiphany: what she truly wants is to become a plant and that she does not need food at all; instead, she needs to water her body like a tree.

These changes, although interpreted by others as madness, represent her ultimate break from the human world that has caused her so much pain. Realistically, Yeong-hye is diagnosed with schizophrenia and anorexia, but her desire to become a tree, this transformation, is so much more. Yeong-hye's transformation and change in identity is not a descent into illness; it is, metaphorically, an attempt to find peace in her own body and mind and to reject the patriarchal rules imposed on her. She wants to become a plant because, unlike humans, they are peaceful and non-violent, and their rules are much simpler.

4.2.2 Oppression and Resistance

Oppression is a recurrent theme in the novel, particularly seen in the way the male characters enforce their will on Yeong-hye. This begins with Mr. Cheong, who sees Yeong-hye as a tool for his own comfort. At the beginning, when he talks about their marriage, he says:

However, if there wasn't any special attraction, nor did any particular drawbacks present themselves, and there was no reason for the two of us not to get married. 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. There was no need to affect intellectual leanings in order to win her over, or to worry that she might be comparing me to the preening men who pose in fashion catalogues, and she didn't get worked up if I happened to be late for one of our meetings. (p. 9).

He describes their marriage as ordinary and is mainly concerned with appearances, especially hers, even though he has his own insecurities, which he ultimately downplays in favor of constantly criticizing his wife. However, when Yeong-hye stops eating meat and enforces this regimen on everyone in the house, he suddenly finds that he can no longer deal with it. He does not try to understand his wife's emotions or train of thought, and when she reveals that a dream was the reason she became a vegetarian, he dismisses her entirely. He makes no effort to understand the source of her discomfort. Instead, he quickly becomes angry and seeks to control and embarrass her by calling her family in an attempt to "fix" her.

First, he calls his mother-in-law and tells her that Yeong-hye has stopped eating meat, complaining that she has not cooked it for him either. His mother-in-law is at a loss for words, and her immediate reaction is to tell him to order Yeong-hye to stop with her ridiculous diet. This, once again, shows how little people think of Yeong-hye and how easily they walk over her. Afterwards, he calls his sister-in-law and explains his predicament, and in return, he receives apologies for Yeong-hye's behavior and reassurances that they try to help. Again, this demonstrates how little control Yeong-hye has over her own life.

However, Yeong-hye's mother and sister's efforts to persuade her to quit her rebellion fail, and she continues to refuse meat. Everything comes to a head during a family gathering, where an intervention of sorts takes place. The family reunites and tries to convince Yeong-hye to give up

her vegetarianism. Although it could be argued that this comes from a place of concern, since she had lost a lot of weight and did not look well, it is important to remember that, ultimately, their discomfort comes from seeing a woman who never stood up for herself suddenly making a real choice on her own.

When words fail to reach Yeong-hye, her father decides to get physical. He slaps her after she refuses to eat the meat her mother offered, and he orders Mr. Cheong and his brother-in-law to hold Yeong-hye by the arms so he can force a piece of meat into her mouth. This act of violence leads Yeong-hye to grab a knife from the table and slit her wrists.

This is an important moment in the novel because now Yeong-hye's refusal is not just about consuming meat; instead, it has become an act of resistance against all the control and violence she had to endure from a young age. Her decision to harm herself is a desperate way to reclaim autonomy over her body, and not just a reaction to the physical violence and force used against her at the family get-together. By using the knife on herself rather than allowing her father to force food into her mouth, Yeong-hye is showing that even if she cannot speak up, she does not allow others to violate her will. Her silence and physical withdrawal from reality become her way of protesting the oppressive world around her. Instead of engaging in arguments or trying to explain her reasoning, she removes herself completely, both emotionally and physically. Her rebellion becomes quiet but powerful, and although others interpret her actions as madness or illness, they are, in fact, signs of someone who has found the only way she knows to reject a system that never gave her a voice.

Another important element present in the novel is the sexual violence that the female characters experience. This is important to mention because, in an oppressive patriarchal society, sexual assault becomes one of the most extreme and personal forms of control over women's bodies and autonomy. In the novel, there are various instances of such acts, starting with Mr. Cheong, who believes that, as a husband, he is entitled to his wife's body. Through his actions, the belief that a woman's body can be dominated, silenced, or used without her consent is brought to light, reinforcing the idea that women exist to serve others. In the novel, he says:

But it was no easy thing for a man in the prime of his life, for whom married life had always gone entirely without a hitch, to have his physical needs go unsatisfied for such a long period of time. So yes, one night when I returned home late and somewhat inebriated

after a meal with colleagues, 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. Once that had happened, she lay there in the dark staring up at the ceiling, her face blank, as though she were a “comfort woman” dragged in against her will, and I was the Japanese soldier demanding her services. As soon as I finished, she rolled over and buried her face in the quilt. I went to have a shower, and by the time I returned to bed she was lying there with her eyes closed as if nothing had happened, or as though everything had somehow sorted itself out during the time, I’d spent washing myself. After this first time, it was easier for me to do it again, but each time, I would be seized by strange, ominous premonitions. (p. 35-36).

The reference to a "comfort woman" is especially disturbing and important because it shows the level of violence that Yeong-hye is subjected to, even within her own home. Comfort women were women forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military during World War II. According to Nozaki (2005), “Scholars estimated that between fifty thousand and two hundred thousand women were enslaved to provide sexual service to Japanese officers and soldiers. The majority of these women were Korean and Chinese” (pp. 3–4). By comparing his wife to one of these women, Mr. Cheong subconsciously reveals to himself and to the reader what he is doing and how serious it is. Additionally, the reference connects Yeong-hye’s suffering to a much larger historical and cultural trauma, where women’s bodies have been used, controlled, and abused during times of war. The fact that he continues with the act even after thinking of this comparison shows how normalized this kind of violence is in his world, especially between couples, and he somehow makes it worse by viewing it as something unpleasant but acceptable, something that does not need to be questioned.

On the other hand, we have In-hye, who is also a victim of sexual abuse in her marriage. In chapter two of the novel, her husband recounts the moment in which he assaults his wife:

He’d reached out in the darkness and pulled his wife to him, without giving himself time to think about what he was doing. Surprised and confused by this apparent show of desire, his wife still had no reason to question that this was what it was...He’d put his hand over her

mouth then, so he wouldn't have to hear that nasal voice...When it was all over, she was crying. He couldn't tell what these tears meant—pain, pleasure, passion, disgust, or some inscrutable loneliness that she would have been no more able to explain than he would have been to understand. He didn't know. I'm scared, she'd muttered, turned away from him. No, it wasn't that. You're scaring me... She might have lain there sobbing for hours in the darkness. He didn't know. But the next morning she hadn't acted any different from usual. On the phone just now, there'd been no trace in her voice of what had happened between them, no particular sense of hostility toward him. It was just that her way of speaking...made him feel incredibly uncomfortable. He walked a little faster, trying to shake that feeling off. (p.86-87)

This quote from the novel reveals that In-hye, like her sister, is also trapped in a relationship that disregards her autonomy and ignores the importance of her consent. Her husband's narration of the event makes the act seem somewhat ambiguous, as if her tears are difficult to interpret, but In-hye's own recollection removes all doubt and makes the reality clear:

When he arrived back at the house early one morning, sneaking in like a thief after several days away, got into bed and tried to put his arms around her, she pushed him away...“Just put up with it for a minute,” he said. She remembered how it had been. Those words had run through her semi-conscious mind again and again. Still half asleep, she'd managed to get through it by thinking to herself that it was all right, it would just be this one time, it would be over soon, she could put up with it. The pain and shame had been washed away by the deep, exhausted sleep she slipped into immediately afterward. And yet later, at the breakfast table, she would all of a sudden find herself wanting to stab herself in the eyes with her chopsticks, or pour the boiling water from the kettle over her head. (p.167)

The sharp contrast in how she reacted during and after the assault shows how women in patriarchal systems are taught to suppress pain and mask trauma for the sake of peace and not rock the boat. Much like Yeong-hye, In-hye is expected to endure and stay silent, and this causes her immense emotional pain that, for a moment, makes her consider suicide. These two perspectives show how normalized sexual violence becomes within marriage, where, oftentimes, consent is assumed and the emotional damage caused is ignored.

Another important aspect of the novel that is mentioned in the final chapter, narrated by In-hye, is how Yeong-hye actively resists the medical treatment given to her. Even though she is in a psychiatric hospital, surrounded by doctors and nurses who are supposed to help her, she refuses to follow their instructions. She does not eat, does not speak, and refuses medication. In the novel, it is mentioned:

In fact, the doctor doubted whether Yeong-hye had been taking her medication at all. He even blamed himself for not being as vigilant as he should have been, after things had initially seemed to be going well. Just that morning, the nurse had been asked to check that Yeong-hye took her medicine, but apparently Yeong-hye hadn't listened when she'd been told to stick out her tongue. When the nurse then forced her tongue up and used a flashlight to look inside, the tablets were still there. (p.156)

Yeong-hye's refusal to follow the treatment can be seen as her way of fighting against being brought back into the world that caused her so much pain. Her resistance shows that what she truly wants is not to be "cured" in the way others expect, but to continue with the transformation she has chosen for herself. For Yeong-hye, becoming a plant means freedom and peace. In the novel, she says, referring to In-hye's question about thinking if she can really turn into a tree, "You're right. Soon now, words and thoughts will all disappear. Soon." Yeong-hye burst into laughter, then sighed. "Very soon. Just a bit longer to wait, sister." (p. 157). In-hye tries to understand her sister's choices, but at the same time, she feels helpless because nothing she does can bring Yeong-hye back to the person she once was, or thought she was. This final resistance is not madness, but rather Yeong-hye's last attempt to take control of her own life and body in a world where she was never allowed to.

4.2.3 Narrative Structure and Perspective

The novel is divided into three parts, all told from a different point of view, and all of whom are very close to the main character, Yeong-hye, bringing their own biases. The first chapter is narrated by Yeong-hye's husband, Mr. Cheong; the second by her brother-in-law (In-hye's husband); and the third and final chapter by her sister, In-hye. This structure is intentional for two different reasons. The first is that each narrator represents an aspect of Yeong-hye's life: Mr. Cheong represents her marriage, her brother-in-law represents her as a member of society, and her sister represents Yeong-hye's birth family. Not having Yeong-hye narrate, reinforces her lack of voice and agency throughout the story. The second reason this structure is important is that the novel, at its core, explores how a patriarchal system affects, or benefits, different people. For the men in the novel, we see that they never face any real consequences for their actions. This applies to Mr. Cheong, the brother-in-law, Yeong-hye's brother (Yeong-ho), and her father. It is clear that they thrive in the society they live in. A good example of this is how Yeong-ho never had to deal with any of the violence inflicted by their father, simply because he was a boy. In the novel, In-hye says this when talking about how Yeong-hye was their father's usual target for his anger:

Only after all this time was, she able to understand why Yeong-hye had said what she did. Yeong-hye had been the only victim of their father's beatings. Such violence wouldn't have bothered their brother Yeong-ho so much, a boy who went around doling out his own rough justice to the village children. (p. 160).

Also, In-hye benefits somewhat by going along with what was expected of her. In the novel, she says: "As the eldest daughter, In-hye had been the one who took over from their exhausted mother and made a broth for her father to wash the liquor down, and so he'd always taken a certain care in his dealings with her" (p. 160). This shows how, even though she suffered too, by following her father's expectations, she ultimately, or at least in that moment, benefited from the patriarchal system. Overall, the choice of not having Yeong-hye narrate her own experience is purposeful as the author shows how women are often silenced in a patriarchal society. Yeong-hye is constantly judged and misunderstood by those around her, and readers can only understand her a little through her actions and the opinions of other characters.

Each narrator shows a different reaction to Yeong-hye's predicament. Mr. Cheong sees her as a problem and feels embarrassed by her. The brother-in-law uses her for his own interests, pretending to care but actually ends up taking advantage of her. In-hye is more understanding, but even she cannot fully connect with her sister's pain. These different points of view help readers see how easy it is to misjudge someone when they are not given the chance to speak for themselves.

Because Yeong-hye never tells her own story, the reader feels distant from her. This adds to the feeling of loneliness and isolation that she experiences in the novel. It also shows how society often ignores or pushes away people who do not follow the rules or are considered as outcasts.

Even though Yeong-hye never narrates directly, there are moments in the novel where we hear her voice, and this is when she recounts her dream, divided into six sections. These dream sequences are very important because they are the only times when her thoughts and feelings come through clearly. The dreams give us a look into what is going on inside her mind and help us understand her pain and what she truly wants. The following table includes some of Yeong-hye's dreams and their possible meaning in the story:

Table 1. Yeong-Hye's Dreams and Their Possible Meanings

Dream Description / Quote	Possible Meaning or Interpretation
<p>“Dark woods. No people. The sharp-pointed leaves on the trees, my torn feet. This place, almost remembered, but I’m lost now. Frightened. Cold. Across the frozen ravine, a red barn-like building. Straw matting flapping limp across the door. Roll it up and I’m inside, it’s inside. A long bamboo stick strung with great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still</p>	<p>The dream begins in a forest, a place she recognizes but where she feels afraid and vulnerable. This setting symbolizes her sense of disconnection and isolation from reality, rooted in the oppression she has endured. Her feet are torn, which suggests suffering, as if she is forced to walk through something painful without protection (her life). She then sees a red</p>

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.

Somehow a way out. Running, running through the valley, then suddenly the woods open out. Trees thick with leaves, springtime' green light. Families picnicking, little children running about, and that smell, that delicious smell. Almost painfully vivid. The babbling stream, people spreading out rush mats to sit on, snacking on kimbap. Barbecuing meat, the sounds of singing and happy laughter. 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 had 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.

Chewing on something that felt so real, but couldn't have been, it couldn't. My face, the look in my eyes...my face, undoubtedly, but never seen before. Or no, not mine, but so familiar...nothing makes sense. Familiar and yet not...that vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling.” (p.17-18)

barn. Inside, she finds herself trapped, surrounded by slabs of meat dripping blood onto the ground and into her mouth. This disturbing imagery of meat processing and violence serves as a powerful metaphor: just as animals are consumed for human use, women in patriarchal societies are similarly objectified and consumed by men.

Moving on, she mentions that the meat is endless. This part of the dream is important because it solidifies her disgust for meat and provokes her decision to become a vegetarian. The meat mentioned is more than just animal flesh; it is a metaphor for violence, and the fact that her mouth is filled with it even though she does not want it suggests that she has no control over the things that have happened to her. And later, when she finally leaves the barn and finds herself in a beautiful place, she realizes that she is no longer like the rest; she feels alienated from it all, so she hides. At the end of the dream, she sees her own face, or at least a face that looks like hers, chewing on meat. This shows how disconnected she feels from herself and how the person she sees is no longer a reflection of who she is inside, but rather of the woman she has become, shaped by the expectations of others.

<p>“The morning before I had the dream, I was mincing frozen meat— remember? You got angry.</p> <p>“Damn it, what the hell are you doing squirming like that? You’ve never been squeamish before.”</p> <p>If you knew how hard I’ve always worked to keep my nerves in check. Other people just get a bit flustered, but for me everything gets confused, speeds up.</p> <p>Quick, quicker. The hand holding the knife was working so quickly, I felt heat prickle the back of my neck. My hand, the chopping board, the meat, and then the knife, slicing cold into my finger.</p> <p>A drop of red blood already blossoming out of the cut. Rounder than round.</p> <p>Sticking the finger in my mouth calmed me. The scarlet color, and now the taste, sweetness masking something else, left me strangely pacified.</p> <p>Later that day, when you sat down to a meal of bulgogi, you spat out the second mouthful and picked out something glittering.</p> <p>“What the hell is this?” you yelled. “A chip off the knife?”</p> <p>I gazed vacantly at your distorted face as you raged.</p>	<p>The second time we hear Yeong-hye is somewhat fragmented, because it is a recollection of her everyday life experience and her dream. She talks about how hard it is for her to keep calm and stay present.</p> <p>She is so nervous that she slices her finger, and the taste of blood calms her. In that moment, she finds some kind of peace or comfort in her own pain. Later, when her husband gets upset, she is surprised to see how calm she is, which shows how she is slowly extracting herself from reality.</p> <p>Everything starts to “slide away,” as if she is no longer part of the physical world.</p>

<p>“Just think what would have happened if I’d swallowed it! I was this close to dying!”</p> <p>Why didn't this agitate me like it should have done? Instead, I became even calmer. A cool hand on my forehead. Suddenly, everything around me began to slide away, as though pulled back on an ebbing tide. The dining table, you, all the kitchen furniture. I was alone, the only thing remaining in all of infinite space.</p> <p>Dawn of the next day. The pool of blood in the barn...I first saw the face reflected there.” (p.24-25)</p>	
<p>“Dreams of murder. Murderer or murdered....hazy distinctions, boundaries wearing thin. Familiarity bleeds into strangeness, certainty becomes impossible. Only the violence is vivid enough to stick. A sound, the elasticity of the instant when the metal struck the victims head...the shadow that crumpled and fell gleams cold in the darkness.</p> <p>They come to me now more times than I can count. Dreams overlaid with dreams, a palimpsest of horror. Violent acts perpetrated by night. A hazy feeling, I can't pin down...but remembered as blood-chillingly definite.</p>	<p>The third dream is perhaps a bit more violent than the previous ones, where confusion was more prevalent. The focus is now on violence (murder). She wonders: “Murderer or murdered,” which shows that Yeong-hye can no longer tell if she is the one causing harm or the one being harmed. This suggests how trauma and violence have shaped her identity to the point that she does not recognize her own place in it anymore. She says, “Familiarity bleeds into strangeness,” which reflects how the people and world around her, possibly even her own thoughts, have started to feel alien and unsafe.</p> <p>The violence in the dream is described with strong, clear images, like the sound of</p>

<p>Intolerable loathing, so long suppressed. Loathing I've always tried to mask with affection. But now the mask is coming off. That shuddering, sordid, gruesome, brutal feeling. Nothing else remains. Murderer or murdered, experience too vivid to not be real. Determined, disillusioned. Lukewarm, like slightly cooled blood.</p> <p>Everything starts to feel unfamiliar. As if I've come up to the back of something. Shut up behind a door without a handle. Perhaps I'm only now coming face-to-face with the thing that has always been here. It's dark. Everything is being snuffed out in the pitch-black darkness." (p.33-34)</p>	<p>metal hitting someone's head and a body falling in the dark. This shows how Yeong-hye feels completely surrounded by the violence, and the fact that she keeps having these violent dreams, what she calls "a palimpsest of horror", shows that her mind is full of past pain. These dreams are not random. They come from memories and emotions that she has buried inside. When she says, "intolerable loathing, so long suppressed," it shows that something she has kept hidden for a long time is finally coming out, maybe anger, shame, or even hatred toward herself, feelings she used to hide by pretending everything was fine. Finally, in the last section, she says, "Perhaps I'm only now coming face-to-face with the thing that has always been here." This part means that Yeong-hye is finally confronting all the pain and violence that she has experienced, and that ultimately has shaped her. The "door without a handle" is a strong imagery for being trapped in a situation with no way out, and the darkness at the end of the dream symbolizes a complete disconnection from not just the outside world, but from herself too.</p>
<p>"Dreams of my hands around someone's throat, throttling them, grabbing the swinging ends of their long hair and</p>	<p>This section is perhaps one in which, as readers, we can tell that Yeong-hye is deeply struggling with her emotions and</p>

hacking it all off, sticking my finger into their slippery eyeball. Those drawn-out waking hours, a pigeon' dull colors in the street and my resolve falters, my fingers flexing to kill. Next doors cat, its bright tormenting eyes, my fingers that could squeeze that brightness out. My trembling legs, the cold sweat on my brow. I become a different person, a different person rises up inside me, devours me, those hours... Saliva pooling in my mouth. The butcher's shop, and I have to clamp my hand over my mouth. Along the length of my tongue to my lips, slick with saliva. Leaking out between my lips, trickling down.

If only I could sleep. If I could shrug off consciousness for even just an hour. The house is cold on all these nights, more nights than I can count, when I wake up and pace about in bare feet. Chill like rice or soup that has been left to go cold. Nothing is visible outside the black window. The dark front door rattles now and then, but no one comes to knock on the door or anything like that. By the time I come back to bed and put my hand under the quilt, all the warmth is gone.

Sleeping in five-minute snatches. Slipping out of fuzzy consciousness, its back—the dream. Can't even call it that now. Animal eyes gleaming wild, presence of blood,

identity. In the other dreams, most of the violent actions were hard to pinpoint who did them. However, this dream is full of violent thoughts that feel almost uncontrollable. She dreams of hurting others in very physical ways, choking someone, pulling their hair, poking into an eyeball. These thoughts she has are deeply personal, and she is no longer capable of pretending like her anger (towards all the injustice she has faced) is not there (something she would do before her dreams). Even when she is awake, her body reacts as if she is still in the dream. She describes how her fingers twitch with the desire to hurt something, like the neighbor's cat, and how her legs tremble from the effort of holding herself back. It is as if something inside her is taking over, “a different person rises up inside me, devours me”, showing that she no longer feels in control of who she is.

Toward the end of the dream, Yeong-hye starts focusing on her body. She says she can only trust her breasts because they are the only part of her that cannot hurt anyone. Everything else (her hands, her feet, her tongue, and her gaze) has become a weapon. But even her breasts are changing. They are shrinking and losing their softness, and she does not understand

<p>unearthed skull, again those eyes. Rising up from the pit of my stomach. Shuddering awake, my hands, need to see my hands. Breathe. My fingernails still soft, my teeth still gentle.</p> <p>Can only trust my breasts now. I like my breasts; nothing can be killed by them.</p> <p>Hand, foot, tongue, gaze, all weapons from which nothing is safe. But not my breasts. With my round breasts, I'm okay. Still okay. So why do they keep on shrinking? Not even round anymore. Why? Why am I changing like this? Why are my edges all sharpening— what I am going to gouge?"</p> <p>(p. 38-39)</p>	<p>why. Her body is slowly becoming a weapon, and she asks, "What am I going to gouge?" That question shows just how frightened she is of what she is becoming and of the violence that might already live inside her.</p>
<p>"... the dog that sank its teeth into my leg is chained up to Father's motorcycle. With its singed tail bandaged to my calf wound, a traditional remedy Mother insisted on, I go out and stand at the main gate. I am nine years old, and the summer heat is stifling. The sun has gone down, and still the sweat is running off me. The dog, too, is panting, its red tongue lolling. A white, handsome-looking dog, bigger even than me. Up until it bit the big man's daughter, everyone in the village always thought it could do no wrong</p> <p>While Father ties the dog to the tree and scorches it with a lamp, he says it isn't to be flogged. He says he heard somewhere</p>	<p>This section is an important one because it is the only time Yeong-hye talks about her childhood, and it is unfortunately filled with violence, guilt, and emotional repression. She remembers it was a hot day outside, and she was nine years old. She was bitten by a big white dog who, at that point, everyone thought would never do anything wrong, but that was until it bit "the big man's daughter." Her father, always a symbol of control and cruelty, decides that rather than beating the dog, he drives it to death by tying it to his motorcycle. What makes the scene even more disturbing is that Yeong-hye does not try to stop it. Instead, she stands at the gate</p>

that driving a dog to keep running until the point of death is considered a milder punishment. The motorcycle engine starts, and Father begins to drive in a circle. The dog runs along behind. Two laps, three laps, they circle around. Without moving a muscle I stand just inside the gate watching Whitey, eyes rolling and gasping for breath, gradually exhaust himself. Every time his gleaming eyes meet my own I glare even more fiercely. Bad dog, you'd bite me? Once it has gone five laps, the dog is frothing at the mouth. Blood drips from its throat, which is being choked with the rope. Constantly groaning through its damaged throat, the dog is dragged along the ground. At six laps, the dog vomits blackish-red blood, trickling from its mouth and open throat. As blood and froth mix together, I stand stiffly upright and stare at those two glittering eyes. Seven laps, and while waiting for the dog to come into view, Father looks behind and sees that it is in fact dangling limply from the motorcycle. I look at the dog's four juddering legs, its raised eyelids, the blood and water in its dead eyes. That evening there was a feast at our house. All the middle-aged men from the market alleyways came, everyone my father considered worth knowing. The saying

and watches everything without moving, staring the dog down as if it deserves what is happening.

She watches in silence as the dog exhausts itself, eventually dripping blood from its mouth. Afterwards, when they cook and eat the dog, she eats the soup without hesitation. This shows that from an early age, Yeong-hye forces herself not to feel anything, even when things are not okay. This memory shows the way Yeong-hye has learned to cope with the bad things, and that is by disconnecting from her surroundings. It also shows how violent the environment she grew up in is, and how the people closest to her are so easily driven to cruelty when things do not go to plan. Furthermore, when she eats the dog that bit her, even though she watched it die so cruelly and sees its eyes in the soup bowl, all of this shows how twisted everything around her has become. Overall, through this dream, we can see that the detachment we see in her as an adult can be traced back to her childhood.

<p>goes that for a wound caused by a dog bite to heal you have to eat that same dog, and I did scoop up a mouthful for myself. No, in fact I ate an entire bowl full with rice. The smell of burnt flesh, which the perilla seeds couldn't wholly mask, pricked my nose. I remember the two eyes that had watched me, while the dog was made to run on, while he vomited blood mixed with froth, and how later they had seemed to appear, flickering, on the surface of the soup. But I don't care. I really didn't care." (p.46-48)</p>	
<p>"I don't know why that woman is crying. I don't know why she keeps staring at my face, either, as though she wants to swallow it. Or why she strokes the bandage on my wrist with her trembling hands. My wrist is okay. It doesn't bother me. The thing that hurts is my chest. Something is stuck in my solar plexus. I don't know what it might be. It's lodged there permanently these days. Even though I've stopped wearing a bra, I can feel this lump all the time. No matter how deeply I inhale, it doesn't go away. Yells and howls, threaded together layer upon layer, are enmeshed to form that 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</p>	<p>This is the last time Yeong-hye narrates something in the book. This recollection is less violent and more emotional. It starts with a mysterious woman who is crying and looking at Yeong-hye intensely while she touches the bandage on her wrist. She does not recognize the woman and does not understand why she is acting the way she is. This shows that Yeong-hye is disconnected from reality and does not understand the severity of the situation and what she has done to herself. The injury in her wrist does not matter to her anymore, it is her chest that is bothering her. She feels a lump that seems to be impossible to get rid of, even though she has tried everything (inhaling deeply and not wearing a bra). The lump stuck to her chest is a metaphor</p>

nook and cranny, and though the physical remnants were excreted, their lives still stick stubbornly to my insides.

One time, just one more time, I want to shout. I want to throw myself through the pitch-black window. Maybe that would finally get this lump out of my body. Yes, perhaps that might work.

Nobody can help me. Nobody can save me. Nobody can make me breathe.” (p.54)

for all the things that she has been unable to express (her anger, trauma, and guilt). She blames it on all the meat she has eaten, but this can be seen as an allegory and not just in a literal way. She says that “the lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there,” which shows that she carries a lot of guilt and disgust for being part of a world so violent and cruel, and so all the blood and flesh sticks to her even after they are gone, as if her body has absorbed something it was never meant to carry. Therefore, by the end of the passage, she feels desperate and hopeless. She wants to get rid of that feeling and is willing to do anything in order to achieve this. When she says that “Nobody can help me. Nobody can save me. Nobody can make me breathe,” the reader realizes how trapped she feels (emotionally and physically). Even something as simple as breathing feels impossible. This dream shows us not just Yeong-hye’s suffering, but also how isolated she feels in that suffering.

4.3 Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

4.3.1 Symbols, Themes, and Motifs in Novel

Table 2. Symbols, Themes, and Motifs in The Vegetarian

Element type	Description	Quote	Researcher's Interpretation
Symbol: Meat	Meat represents the human capacity for violence.	<p>"... You're claiming that you're not going to eat meat at all from now on?" She nodded.</p> <p>"Oh, really? Until when?"</p> <p>"I suppose...forever." (p. 19)</p>	Meat represents the violence Yeong-hye has witnessed throughout her life (sexual, physical, and emotional). By becoming a vegetarian, she refuses to continue being part of an endless cycle of abuse and rebels against the oppressive system that tries to control her.
Symbol: Becoming a vegetarian	It is a placeholder for women's aspirations	<p>"Meat eating is a fundamental human instinct, which means vegetarianism goes against human nature, right? It just isn't natural." (p. 29)</p>	In the novel, everyone finds Yeong-hye's choice of becoming a vegetarian scandalous. But it is very easy to swap vegetarianism for a woman's desire to do something outside of the norm. Society tends to dismiss a woman's aspirations the moment she becomes a wife or a mother and expects them to throw away her dreams.

Symbol: Plants	Plants represent innocence, purity and nonviolence.	“I need to water my body. I don’t need this kind of food, sister. I need water.” (p. 152)	Plants contrast with meat, whereas one represents violence, the other represents pacifism. Yeong-hye’s insistence on becoming a tree is just her way of trying to lead a more peaceful life, away from all the cruelty that surrounds her.
Symbol: Mongolian mark	The mark symbolizes both innocence and sexual attraction.	“The birthmark was thumb sized, imprinted on the upper left buttock. How could such a thing still be there after all these years? It didn’t make any sense. Its pale blue-green resembled that of a faint bruise, but it was clearly a Mongolian mark... and he realized to his surprise that there was nothing at all sexual about it; it was more vegetal than sexual.” (p. 88)	At first, the mark is seen by the brother-in-law as something sexual, especially because of his dreams. When he realizes that Yeong-hye has the mark, he becomes obsessed with her. But it is important to note that his son also has the mark (because it is something usually seen on children), so this mark that he finds so alluring is something he later realizes has nothing sexual but instead has a sense of innocence to it.
Symbol: The polyp	It symbolizes the pain In-hye feels inside.	“The middle-aged male doctor then pushed a cold abdominal scope deep into her vagina	The polyp is a representation of all the pain In-hye carried inside of her. Because of it, she

		and removed a tongue-like polyp that had been stuck to the vaginal wall. Her body flinched away from the sharp pain.” (p. 165)	realizes that for most of her life, she has only survived and has not truly lived. In the book, she is caught by surprise at the feeling that she had never lived her life for herself and instead had only endured.
Symbol: The white bird	The bird represents escape or release.	<p>“What did the bird look like? What color was it?”</p> <p>“White...yeah, it was pretty.”</p> <p>... “It must have meant it was a mummy bird,” she’d said, hoping to placate him... she slipped a hand under his chin and tilted his head up. “Look, your mum’s right here. I haven’t changed into a white bird, you see?” (p. 183)</p>	<p>In-hye thinks of killing herself after her husband sexually assaults her.</p> <p>Coincidentally, the same day, her son wakes up from a nightmare involving a white bird. This symbolizes In-hye’s desire to escape her reality and all the things that burden her (her marriage, the trauma of her sister’s condition, and her own deep exhaustion).</p>
Symbol: Bras	Bras represents Yeong-hye’s resistance to oppressive social norms.	“Even though I’ve stopped wearing a bra, I can feel this lump all the time. No matter how deeply I inhale, it doesn’t go away.” (p. 54)	Even before becoming a vegetarian, Yeong-hye refused to wear a bra. It was her first rebellion against the constrictive and patriarchal society she lived in.

Motif: Dreams	Dreams help reveal the character's repressed emotions and trauma.	<p>“It’s because of a dream I had.”</p> <p>“A dream?” he repeated.</p> <p>“I had a dream...and that’s why I don’t eat meat.”</p> <p>“Well...what kind of dream?”</p> <p>“I dreamed of a face.” (p. 96)</p>	Dreams allow Yeong-hye to show her inner transformation before it happens in real life and introduce her to a way to resist the abuse and control of her reality. Dreams blur the line between sanity and madness, and help express themes like violence, identity, and freedom.
Motif: Blood	It is a reminder of violence.	<p>“A drop of red blood already blossoming out of the cut. Rounder than round. Sticking the finger in my mouth calmed me. The scarlet color, and now the taste, sweetness masking something else, left me strangely pacified.” (p. 25)</p>	Blood is a recurrent motif throughout the novel. It symbolizes violence, guilt, and the physical and emotional pain the characters endure.
Motif: Nature	Nature represents peace, freedom, and escape from human violence.	<p>“Yeong-hye, who at the time was just beginning to speak again, cast her gaze toward the zelkova tree on the other side of the window and said, “Yes...there are big trees here.” (p. 147)</p>	Nature is a recurrent motif in the novel since it is Yeong-hye’s crutch. It is the thing she holds on to as a way to reject the cruelty and violence of the world, and in it, she finds a gentler way of existing.

<p>Motif: Self-harm</p>	<p>It is seen as a way to escape the violence.</p>	<p>“Jaw clenched, her intent stare facing each one of us down in turn, my wife brandished the knife... Blood ribboned out of her wrist. The shock of red splashed over white china.” (p. 46)</p>	<p>Both sisters resort to self-harm as a way to escape the physical and emotional violence they face. Yeong-hye’s suicide attempt and self-starvation are her attempts to distance herself from the violence she has endured. In-hye has self-harming ideation tendencies that come to light when she can no longer deal with all the pain she carries inside.</p>
<p>Theme: Regret</p>	<p>It shows how past actions or inaction shape their lives.</p>	<p>“Had they run away from home that evening, as Yeong-hye had suggested, would it all have been different? At the family gathering that day, if she’d been more forceful when she grabbed their father’s arm, before he struck Yeong-hye in the face, would it all have been different then?” (p. 161)</p>	<p>In-hye looks back on the past and wonders what she could have done to prevent things from spiraling out of control. She feels guilty for not doing more to help Yeong-hye or herself. She thinks about their childhood and how she could have protected her sister from her father.</p>
<p>Theme: Alienation and isolation</p>	<p>Different characters distance themselves</p>	<p>“The one thing that caused her distress was that, as she got older, Yeong-hye became</p>	<p>Yeong-hye, as she gets older, starts to distance herself from her reality. She feels misunderstood</p>

	because they feel misunderstood by those around them.	more and more taciturn.” (p. 132)	and alone, which reflects how society rejects those who don’t fit in.
Theme: Mental illness	The novel explores how mental illness is treated and misunderstood.	“I know I told you this last time, but fifteen to twenty percent of anorexia nervosa patients starve to death. Even when they’re down to nothing but skin and bone, the subject is still convinced that they’ve put on weight. There can be all manner of psychological factors at play...but Kim Yeong-hye’s is one of those particular cases where the subject refuses to eat while suffering from schizophrenia. “(p. 144)	Yeong-hye’s behavior is seen as madness, but it also reflects her deep trauma and suffering that have been left untreated and unnoticed for a long time. When she starts to present the first signals that something is not okay, she is left ignored, and nobody bothers to try and understand her. Everyone around feels inconvenienced by her mental illness.
Theme: Bodily autonomy	The novel talks about people taking ownership of their bodies after being stripped away	“People are always telling me to eat...I don’t like eating; they force me. Last time I threw it up...yesterday as soon as I’d eaten they gave me an	Yeong-hye wants control over her own body, especially by refusing meat, medication, and later, by trying to become a plant. It shows her fight to make choices for herself.

	<p>from their freedom, control, and ability to make personal choices, especially in a society that tries to dictate how they should live, behave, and even eat.</p>	<p>injection to put me to sleep. Sister, I don't like injections, I really don't like them...please let me out. I don't like being here." (p. 159)</p>	
<p>Theme: Resistance and rebellion</p>	<p>The main character's actions serve as a way to rebel against a patriarchal society that tries to control her.</p>	<p>"A long time ago, she and Yeong-hye had got lost on a mountain. Yeong-hye, who had been nine at the time, said, "Let's just not go back." At the time, In-hye hadn't understood what she meant. "What are you talking about? It'll get dark any minute now. We have to hurry up and find the path." (p. 160)</p>	<p>Yeong-hye tries to resist society's rules through her actions. She understood from a young age that staying silent and obedient only brought more pain, so her quiet rebellion becomes her way of taking back control, even if no one else understands it.</p>
<p>Theme: Gender roles</p>	<p>The novel shows how women are</p>	<p>"She hadn't said a single word on the way here, but I convinced</p>	<p>Yeong-hye and In-hye struggle because of the expectations set for</p>

	<p>expected to be quiet, obedient, and self-sacrificing.</p>	<p>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?" (p. 26)</p>	<p>women; neither of them is comfortable with the idea of being submissive, but they have to if they want to survive. Men, on the other hand, thrive in their society.</p>
<p>Theme: Identity and transformation</p>	<p>Yeong-hye changes slowly from a quiet wife into someone who rejects society completely.</p>	<p>"Had Yeong-hye mistaken the hospital's concrete floor for the soft earth of the woods? Had her body metamorphosed into a sturdy trunk, with white roots sprouting from her hands and clutching the black soil? ... As the sun's rays soaked down through Yeong-Hye's body, had the water that was saturating the soil been drawn up through her cells, eventually to bloom from her crotch as flowers?" (p. 173)</p>	<p>Yeong-hye begins to change even before becoming a vegetarian. She slowly retreats into herself and starts rejecting the roles others have forced on her, she begins a quiet transformation that leads her to find a new identity beyond what society expects from a woman.</p>

4.3.2 Comparative Analysis of Themes and Motifs with Similar Works

Table 3. Comparative Analysis of Themes and Motifs with Similar Works

Theme/Motif	In The Vegetarian	Work and Author	In Similar Work	Comparative Analysis
Rejection of patriarchy	<p>In the novel, Yeong-hye rejects patriarchy by refusing to comply with the expectations placed upon her. She makes her first real decision when she stops eating meat (which is a metaphor for the violence born from male dominance, control, and the normalization of suffering in a patriarchal society).</p>	<p>The Awakening by Kate Chopin</p>	<p>In the novel, Edna rejects patriarchy by slowly stripping away from her domestic role. She finds that she no longer feels okay with the label of being a “mother-woman.” This label was placed upon her by the patriarchal society she lives in. She realizes she wants more for herself and wants to explore her sexuality, which at the time was heavily looked down upon.</p>	<p>Both characters resist societal constraints, but Edna seeks freedom through her sexuality while Yeong-hye through a transformation.</p>

Mental illness	<p>In the novel, Yeong-hye's desire for a transformation has her institutionalized. She develops anorexia and schizophrenia, as she believes that the only way to reject the violence around her is through becoming a plant.</p>	<p>The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath</p>	<p>In the novel, Esther Greenwood suffers from depression due to the pressure she feels from the society she lives in.</p>	<p>Both novels portray mental illness as a response to restrictive female roles.</p>
The female body as a battlefield	<p>In the novel, Yeong-hye's body becomes one of her greatest weapons against the oppressive society she lives in. Throughout the story, multiple people try to force her to conform, and it becomes almost like a game of tug-of-war, with each person trying to pull her back into</p>	<p>The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood</p>	<p>In the novel, Offred's body is controlled by the state, and she tries to fight back in quiet and subtle ways.</p>	<p>In both stories, the female body is like a battleground. The characters fight to gain control over their bodies in different ways.</p>

	the roles she refuses to accept.			
Nature and transformation	In the novel, Yeong-hye begins a transformation or metamorphosis because she sees in nature an innocence that humans do not have.	Surfacing by Margaret Atwood	In the novel, the unnamed narrator finds herself unraveling when surrounded by nature.	Both protagonists find solace in nature and, thanks to it, find an identity outside the patriarchal society they live in.

Chapter V

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this section of the research paper, the investigator gathers all the conclusions and presents them to the reader. The research questions, as well as the general and specific objectives, are restated and analyzed in hopes of fulfilling what was originally proposed. Additionally, the purpose of drawing conclusions is explained, along with some recommendations from the researcher and contributions that, in the researcher's view, may be useful for future thesis writers.

5.1 Purpose of the Conclusion

The conclusion is perhaps one of the most important parts of a research project. When a reader reaches this section, they are reminded of the significance of the research and restates the most important findings. Therefore, writing a strong conclusion is just as important as writing the body of the thesis. In the case of this research, the purpose of the investigator was to show how, through the main character's actions, especially her decision to become a vegetarian, she was renouncing and removing herself from the oppressive society she lives in, ultimately challenging and critiquing the patriarchal structure.

5.2 Conclusion

In this section, the general objective and all the specific objectives are restated and analyzed. The researcher provides an in-depth explanation of how each objective was accomplished.

5.2.1 General Objective: To analyze gender power dynamics and forms of female resistance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* from a feminist perspective, to show how the novel criticizes patriarchal structures

In order to accomplish this objective, a close reading of the novel and a feminist literary analysis were conducted. The analysis was structured around three main categories, supported by the creation of tables that helped showcase the novel's critique of patriarchal structures. Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian has been mentioned multiple times throughout this project because it represents the ultimate form of resistance against a patriarchal society that has always tried to control her. It marks her first real decision made for herself, despite the immense personal

cost, and reflects how deeply she yearns for autonomy after years of having her needs and desires ignored. Her refusal to eat meat symbolizes a rejection of violence and the traditional roles and expectations imposed on her as a woman.

5.2.2 Specific Objectives

5.2.2.1 Specific Objective 1: To identify the representations of gender norms and social expectations imposed on female characters in *The Vegetarian*

In the novel, gender norms are what drive the characters' actions. For women, it is clear that they are expected to be submissive, quiet, and obedient, while the men around them benefit from a society that places them above everyone else. For example, Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian goes against everything expected of a married woman, not because of the diet itself, but because she refuses to bend to her husband's will. This simple act of saying "no" becomes a powerful rejection of the role she is supposed to play.

On the other hand, social expectations are what drive characters like In-hye. She is someone who, from the very start, feels the need to fulfill the roles expected of her as the eldest daughter, a responsible sister, a loyal wife, and a devoted mother. She carries these responsibilities without question, always putting others before herself. It is not until the very end of the novel that she realizes she has never truly lived for herself. In that moment of reflection, she feels jealous towards her sister, who, despite the cost, has managed to break free and choose her own path.

Therefore, in order to accomplish this objective, the researcher examined the novel through three categories: the first was identity and transformation, the second was oppression and resistance, and the third was narrative structure and perspective. The category that was directly related to this objective was the second one. The oppression faced by the female characters is deeply interwoven with the gender norms and social expectations placed upon them. By analyzing the novel through the category of oppression and resistance, it became clear how the women in the story are shaped by a society that dictates who they are supposed to be and demands their submission. Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat, wear a bra, or obey her husband challenges what is expected of a wife. Meanwhile, In-hye's constant efforts to meet her roles as a daughter, wife, and mother show how deeply she carries these expectations.

5.2.2.2 Specific Objective 2: To examine how the protagonist, Yeong-hye, uses her body and her decision to become a vegetarian as acts of resistance towards patriarchy

In order to accomplish this objective, the researcher examined the novel through a mix of the categories of identity and transformation and oppression and resistance. It is stated that from the very beginning, Yeong-hye's body is not seen as her own. A decision that is so personal, that is, becoming a vegetarian, turns out to be a direct blow to what is deemed normal and acceptable. Her decision to stop eating meat is the first real choice she makes for herself, and it represents the beginning of her transformation. Her refusal to eat animal products grows into something more, because Yeong-hye now starts to reject not only just meat, but also everything that has ever been forced onto her: societal roles, gender expectations, and even the physical presence of others. Her silence, her withdrawal from others, and her belief that she is turning into a tree are all signs of her resistance.

5.2.2.3 Specific objective 3: To explore how the novel conveys a feminist critique of power relations and gender oppression that transcends cultural barriers

In order to accomplish this objective, the researcher used a combination of the three categories, as well as the creation of a table that compared the themes and motifs present in the novel to those in other literary works, in order to show how the topics treated in the novel do not only apply to South Korean women but to all women. The categories helped in identifying different layers of the novel. The category of identity and transformation showed how Yeong-hye's switch to vegetarianism, and later on total disconnection from human life, represented a rejection of the patriarchy. The second category, oppression and resistance, made it possible to closely identify how the women in the novel are constantly stripped of their autonomy by the men around them. The third category, narrative structure and perspective, shows how women's perspectives are often silenced, by examining Yeong-hye's removal from the narration. Finally, the creation of a table comparing the themes and motifs present in the novel to those in other literary works showed how certain elements are consistently used to portray the female experience in a way that goes beyond Korean culture.

5.3 Restatement of the Research Question

In chapter one, in the section of the problem statement, the research question was stated: How does Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian serve as a rebellion against a patriarchal system? Throughout the investigation, the researcher was able to conclude that Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian is an act of rebellion against the violence perpetuated by a patriarchal system, one that would never benefit her and would always place her dreams and desires beneath those of a man. For Yeong-hye, meat comes to represent the human capacity for violence, domination, and cruelty. After a violent dream that reveals all the hurt and trauma she carries inside, she refuses to eat it any longer. It is important to note that Yeong-hye's rejection extends beyond food she rejects, but instead, it is the violent and oppressive structures of her society. Instead, she turns toward something more innocent and nonviolent: nature, and in there she finds a space where she can imagine freedom and peace.

5.4 Unexpected Results

When the researcher started the project, the focus was mainly on how the novel portrayed the issues experienced by the female characters. However, during the close reading and in-depth analysis, it became interesting to note that the novel also touches on how patriarchy can affect men as well. Even though they may benefit from it at times, the expectations placed on women, such as being submissive and quiet, are mirrored by expectations placed on men, like being the provider and not showing emotions. Men are also victims of body scrutiny, where normal and human things like weight gain or hair loss become major causes of concern. Therefore, the novel shows that its critique is not aimed at men themselves, but rather at an oppressive structure and system that limits emotional freedom, identity, and relationships for everyone.

5.5 Recommendations

After completing the project, the researcher finds that *The Vegetarian* offers rich opportunities for further investigation and comparison with other fields and approaches. While this study adopted a feminist approach, it would also be interesting to examine the novel through other lenses. For example, a psychoanalytic approach could provide deeper insight into Yeong-hye's

descent into madness, exploring the motivations behind her transformation and the reasoning of her trauma. Similarly, a cultural or sociological approach could analyze how South Korean culture, traditional family roles, and social expectations shape individual behavior, particularly concerning women, marriage, and mental health.

Another recommendation for future research would be to conduct a more in-depth comparative study with other novels that explore similar themes. Comparing Yeong-hye and her motivations with other female protagonists could reveal recurring patterns of resistance, oppression, and identity in literature.

Additionally, further research could benefit from centering the analysis more explicitly on Korean culture, since the novel is deeply rooted in it. Topics such as traditional Korean food, family hierarchies, and historical influences, especially how Korea's past has shaped its present economy, society, and gender norms, could enrich the understanding of the characters and their context.

Finally, reading a novel set in a culture vastly different from one's own gives the opportunity to conduct a side-by-side analysis that highlights both differences and similarities. Creating such work would show how some human experiences are universal, but that there are some others that are shaped by culture.

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