



Metamorphosis in Han Kang's The Vegetarian: A Literary Exploration of Transformation and Resistance

Journal of Quranic
and Social Studies
24-50

© The Author (s) 2023
Volume:3, Issue:1, 2023

DOI:10.5281/zenodo.8335809

www.jqss.org

ISSN: E/ 2790-5640

ISSN: P/ 2790-5632



Sidra Shaikh

Ph.D Scholar & Lecturer, My University, Islamabad.

Abstract

This research examines the theme of metamorphosis in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, analyzing the protagonist's transformation as both a literal and symbolic process of change. Yeong-hye, the central character, undergoes a radical shift from a submissive wife to an individual who seeks to transcend human existence, ultimately aligning herself with plant life. This transformation functions on multiple levels: bodily, psychological, and existential, and serves as an act of resistance against the rigid structures of patriarchy, familial expectations, and social conformity. Drawing from a multi-theoretical approach, this study applies concepts of metamorphosis in literature, alongside psychoanalytic theory and ecofeminist perspectives, to analyze Yeong-hye's journey. From a psychoanalytic lens, her rejection of food and her progressive detachment from reality can be interpreted as a response to trauma and repression, revealing the deep psychological scars inflicted by her past. Simultaneously, an ecofeminist reading highlights her transformation as a rebellion against the objectification and consumption of both women and nature, positioning her metamorphosis as a critique of the violent exploitation inherent in patriarchal societies. This research also places *The Vegetarian* within a broader literary and philosophical discourse on identity, autonomy, and the fragmentation of selfhood. The novel presents metamorphosis as a fluid and unstable process, where the boundaries between human and non-human, self and other, sanity and insanity are continuously blurred. Through an in-depth textual analysis, this study reveals how Han Kang employs symbolic and surreal imagery to challenge conventional understandings of gendered oppression, bodily autonomy, and resistance. Ultimately, this paper suggests that Yeong-hye's transformation is not simply an act of self-destruction, but rather a radical rejection of societal norms; one that forces the reader to reconsider the relationship between the body, power, and freedom. By using metamorphosis as a means of subversion, *The Vegetarian* offers a compelling critique of cultural and patriarchal constraints, redefining the nature of agency and resistance in contemporary literature.

Keywords: Body Politics, Cultural Constraints, Metamorphosis, Non-Human Identity, Patriarchy, Resistance, Selfhood, Trauma, Transformation

Corresponding Author Email:

sidrashaikh@myu.edu.pk

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2000-0716>

Introduction

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007) presents a haunting narrative that goes beyond a simple account of physical transformation; it is a profound exploration of psychological, bodily, and existential change. The protagonist, Yeong-hye, is initially introduced as a conventional, submissive housewife, fulfilling the expected roles within a patriarchal family structure. However, her journey into metamorphosis begins when she renounces meat consumption and progressively retreats from the human realm. This rejection culminates in her desperate attempt to become a plant, symbolizing a complete detachment from human identity and the roles imposed upon her by society and family. Yeong-hye's metamorphosis is not merely a physical change, but a powerful act of resistance against societal, familial, and gendered expectations that confine her to a prescribed role. It challenges the conventional boundaries of identity, questioning the very essence of human existence in a world structured by oppressive norms. Her transformation becomes a radical departure from conventional understandings of autonomy, selfhood, and power.

In *The Vegetarian*, metamorphosis serves as a central thematic and structural device that allows Han Kang to explore the intersections of bodily autonomy, societal pressures, and gender roles. Through Yeong-hye's physical transformation, the narrative critiques the societal constraints that shape and limit the female experience. Her rejection of meat, which can be seen as an act of personal autonomy, marks the beginning of her estrangement from her family and her community. It is a rejection of the human body's traditional relationship with food and consumption, as well as a symbolic departure from human societal norms. In her refusal to conform, Yeong-hye not only rejects the consumption of meat but also subverts the patriarchal expectation that women must uphold the domestic order, nurturing both family and society. Her decision to become a plant, in contrast to a fully human existence, embodies an extreme form of liberation; an escape from the cycle of oppression, trauma, and subjugation to which she has been subjected. (Tsimpouki, 2021)

This study seeks to analyze how Han Kang uses the motif of metamorphosis to challenge dominant power structures. By integrating literary theories of transformation, psychoanalysis, and ecofeminism, the research explores the complex implications of Yeong-hye's evolution. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Yeong-hye's metamorphosis can be interpreted as a response to trauma and repression, serving as a form of psychic escape from the intense pressures she experiences. Her retreat into a non-human identity is both a rejection of the human condition, which she views as suffused with violence and exploitation, and an attempt to reclaim agency over her own body and existence. The ecofeminist framework highlights how her rejection of the human body ties into broader environmental and gendered concerns. By positioning herself in opposition to human consumption and human violence, Yeong-hye aligns with an ecological perspective that

values life in non-human forms, offering a critique of the exploitation of both the natural world and women's bodies.

This research will contribute to existing literature on *The Vegetarian* by offering a nuanced reading of the theme of metamorphosis in the novel. It will shed light on how Yeong-hye's transformation functions as both a rejection of human norms and a form of personal and existential assertion. Through this exploration, the study will engage with broader themes of gender, power, agency, and resistance, offering fresh perspectives on how bodily transformation can function as an act of defiance against the social, cultural, and patriarchal forces that shape individual identity. By focusing on metamorphosis as a pivotal element in the narrative structure, this paper seeks to deepen our understanding of how Han Kang uses this motif to critique societal constraints and offer a new vision of autonomy and self-determination in the face of overwhelming oppression. (Sahoo & Raj, 2024)

This study addresses the underexplored role of metamorphosis as a thematic and structural device in *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, particularly in its function as resistance to patriarchal, cultural, and societal norms. While existing studies have focused on psychological and gendered aspects of Yeong-hye's transformation, the intersection of bodily metamorphosis, identity, trauma, and resistance remains insufficiently examined. There is a gap in integrating psychoanalytic and ecofeminist perspectives to understand how Yeong-hye's rejection of meat and desire to become a plant challenges patriarchy and cultural expectations. This research aims to fill this gap by offering a more nuanced reading of the novel, combining theories of transformation, psychoanalysis, and ecofeminism, and contributing to feminist literary criticism by exploring the broader societal, cultural, and ecological implications of Yeong-hye's transformation.

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the multifaceted theme of metamorphosis in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, providing a fresh and in-depth analysis of the novel through the lens of psychoanalysis, ecofeminism, and literary theories of transformation. While *The Vegetarian* has garnered critical attention for its portrayal of a woman's drastic bodily transformation, much of the scholarly discourse has focused on the psychological and gendered aspects of the narrative. This study, however, seeks to offer a more comprehensive examination of how metamorphosis operates not just as a personal act of defiance, but as a structural and thematic device that challenges broader societal norms, including the patriarchy, cultural expectations, and the exploitation of both the human and natural world. (Adams, 1990)

By investigating Yeong-hye's transformation as both a psychological and symbolic process, this study positions *The Vegetarian* within a broader context of gendered resistance and ecological concerns. It addresses a gap in the existing literature by integrating

psychoanalytic and ecofeminist theories into the interpretation of the protagonist's evolution, thereby broadening the scope of feminist and postmodern readings of the text. This intersectional approach offers deeper insight into the novel's critique of patriarchal and societal power structures, which is essential for understanding the complex interplay of individual agency and collective oppression in contemporary literature.

The significance also extends to the way in which this study highlights the role of bodily transformation as a metaphor for the reclamation of autonomy and selfhood. In exploring Yeong-hye's rejection of human norms and her desire to become a plant, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding the intersections of identity, trauma, and bodily autonomy in literature. It proposes a new perspective on bodily metamorphosis as an act of radical resistance against not only the expectations placed on women but also the broader violence inherent in human systems of consumption and exploitation. (Plumwood, 1993)

Furthermore, this study has implications for broader discussions on the role of women in literature, particularly in postmodern narratives that challenge traditional forms of subjectivity and selfhood. It emphasizes the need to reconsider what constitutes agency and autonomy in a world that frequently reduces women to passive subjects defined by their relationship to others. In doing so, this study aims to contribute meaningfully to feminist literary criticism, offering a new framework for interpreting works that engage with themes of bodily autonomy, resistance, and transformation.

Ultimately, the significance of this study lies in its potential to further the understanding of *The Vegetarian* as a profound work that not only interrogates societal, cultural, and gendered norms but also reimagines the possibilities of selfhood and personal transformation in the face of overwhelming social forces. Through its detailed analysis of metamorphosis, this research enriches the broader academic conversation about literature's role in critiquing power structures and imagining new ways of being in the world.

Literature Review

The study of metamorphosis, particularly in relation to bodily transformation and resistance, has received significant attention across various academic disciplines, but Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* remains an underexplored subject within this framework. By integrating literary theories of transformation, psychoanalysis, and ecofeminism, this literature review examines the key works that inform the analysis of metamorphosis in the novel, while highlighting the gaps in the current scholarship.

Metamorphosis in Literature

Literary critics have often interpreted metamorphosis as a metaphor for psychological or social transformation. According to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, bodily change is intertwined with themes of punishment, escape, and divine intervention (Barkan, 1986). In

The Vegetarian, Yeong-hye's metamorphosis follows a similar trajectory but remains deeply rooted in human agency and resistance.

Metamorphosis and Transformation in Literature

The concept of metamorphosis, or bodily transformation, has long been a potent literary device used to examine personal and societal change. In literature, metamorphosis often symbolizes the character's inner turmoil, psychological shifts, or defiance against oppressive structures. Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) is perhaps the most well-known work exploring bodily transformation as both a metaphor for alienation and a manifestation of deeper existential crises. Kafka's protagonist, Gregor Samsa, undergoes a grotesque physical transformation that reflects his alienation from his family and his disillusionment with his role as a breadwinner. Similarly, Yeong-hye's transformation in *The Vegetarian* challenges traditional societal roles and represents her rebellion against conforming to patriarchal expectations. However, unlike Kafka's Gregor, whose transformation isolates him from society, Yeong-hye's metamorphosis carries a subversive power, with her rejection of meat symbolizing a refusal to participate in the cycle of exploitation and violence inherent in both human society and the natural world.

In feminist literary criticism, bodily transformation is often explored as a means of disrupting normative gender roles. *The Vegetarian* presents a significant departure from the traditional representation of female characters, who are typically confined to passive roles in the family structure. Yeong-hye's choice to reject food as a means of sustenance is an act of defiance that speaks to feminist concerns about the body's role within patriarchal structures. Critics such as Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and Luce Irigaray (1977) have explored how women's bodies are controlled and objectified in patriarchal systems, often symbolizing oppression. By turning away from traditional sustenance, Yeong-hye reclaims her body, challenging societal norms and highlighting the body's potential as a site of resistance.

Psychoanalysis and Metamorphosis

From a psychoanalytic perspective, bodily transformation in literature often symbolizes repressed desires and traumatic responses (Kristeva, 1982). Yeong-hye's refusal to consume meat and her gradual physical deterioration can be read as a manifestation of trauma. Freud's concept of the uncanny (Das-Unheimliche) suggests that transformation disturbs the boundary between the familiar and the strange, which aligns with the unsettling nature of Yeong-hye's metamorphosis (Freud, 1919).

Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Transformation

Psychoanalytic theory, particularly the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, provides an essential framework for understanding Yeong-hye's rejection of meat and her eventual desire to become a plant. Freud's concept of the "uncanny," or the feeling of

discomfort that arises from something familiar becoming strange, is particularly relevant in analyzing Yeong-hye's bodily changes. Her refusal to consume meat is not simply a dietary choice; it is an unsettling transformation that disrupts her familial and societal roles. As Freud (1919) explains, the uncanny arises when something repressed returns to consciousness in an unexpected and unsettling form, and Yeong-hye's transformation can be seen as a manifestation of this repression.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the concept of the "mirror stage" is central to understanding identity formation. According to Lacan (1949), the mirror stage represents a moment when an infant first identifies with their reflection, marking the beginning of self-consciousness and the formation of the ego. Yeong-hye's rejection of the mirror, a symbol of societal reflection, could be interpreted as a refusal to identify with her assigned role as a woman within a patriarchal society. Instead of conforming to the conventional roles of wife and mother, she seeks to form a new identity outside these predefined boundaries. (Casey, 2020).

Further psychoanalytic interpretations of Yeong-hye's actions can be found in the work of Julia Kristeva, particularly her theory of "abjection." Abjection refers to the process by which society separates what is deemed as socially unacceptable from the acceptable, casting it into a state of "otherness." Yeong-hye's rejection of meat and her attempt to embody a plant-like existence can be seen as an act of abjection, as she seeks to reject both human norms and her own human identity in favor of something "other." In doing so, she challenges the boundaries of what is considered acceptable and embraces an existence outside of the human framework. (Casey, 2020).

Ecofeminism and Metamorphosis

Ecofeminism highlights the connection between female oppression and environmental degradation (Plumwood, 1993). Yeong-hye's identification with plant life signifies a rejection of patriarchal consumption patterns, aligning her transformation with ecological resistance. By choosing to become one with nature, she resists both human domination over the natural world and male control over her body.

Ecofeminism and the Critique of Patriarchy

The intersection of feminism and ecological concerns, eco-feminism, offers another crucial lens for examining the themes of *The Vegetarian*. Ecofeminist scholars like Vandana Shiva (1993) and Carol Adams (1990) have critiqued the exploitation of both women and nature in patriarchal societies. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's rejection of meat aligns with ecofeminist concerns regarding the consumption of animal bodies and the environmental destruction caused by such practices. By refusing to eat meat, she not only challenges the exploitation of animals but also critiques the larger systems of oppression that commodify and consume both human and non-human lives. (Datta, 2021)

Carol Adams' work on "the sexual politics of meat" (1990) explores how the act of eating animals is deeply tied to patriarchal control over women's bodies. Yeong-hye's choice to renounce meat is a radical departure from traditional norms that associate women with the domestic sphere, where meat consumption is often tied to traditional gender roles. By rejecting this aspect of her identity, Yeong-hye subverts the dominant cultural narrative that links femininity with passivity and consumption, turning her bodily transformation into a symbolic act of resistance against patriarchal exploitation.

Additionally, ecofeminism views the separation of humans from nature as a patriarchal construct that has contributed to both environmental degradation and the oppression of women. Yeong-hye's attempt to become a plant can be seen as an ecofeminist act of reclaiming her connection with nature and rejecting the human-centered worldview that places men at the top of a hierarchical system. Her metamorphosis embodies a rejection of human exceptionalism, aligning with ecofeminist calls for a more harmonious and interconnected relationship between humans and the natural world.

Metamorphosis as Resistance

Metamorphosis, as explored in *The Vegetarian*, is not simply an act of personal change but a form of resistance. Yeong-hye's transformation critiques the power structures that dictate societal norms and gender roles, challenging the prescribed paths of marriage, motherhood, and social conformity. As feminist scholars like Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and Judith Butler (1990) have argued, women's bodies have historically been sites of control and repression. Yeong-hye's rejection of these norms, and her attempt to transcend her human form, is an act of defiance that pushes against the boundaries imposed on her as a woman.

Moreover, Yeong-hye's rejection of human existence can be interpreted as a critique of the violence inherent in societal structures, both human and ecological. By attempting to become a plant, Yeong-hye seeks a purer existence, free from the violence of human interactions and the exploitation of the natural world. Her transformation becomes a symbolic challenge to the patriarchal forces that seek to dominate both the bodies of women and the earth.

Gaps in Existing Literature

While much of the existing scholarship on *The Vegetarian* has examined the novel's psychological and gendered dimensions, there remains a gap in the integration of psychoanalytic and ecofeminist theories in analyzing Yeong-hye's transformation. Most studies have focused on the symbolism of Yeong-hye's rejection of meat as a feminist statement or a psychological response to trauma, but the broader implications of her metamorphosis, especially its ecological and political dimensions, have yet to be fully explored. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a more comprehensive analysis of

metamorphosis as both a personal and collective act of resistance, examining the intersection of gender, ecology, and patriarchy in Han Kang's novel. (Lai, 2022)

While existing studies on *The Vegetarian* have focused on feminist and trauma-based readings, the theme of metamorphosis has not been extensively analyzed in relation to resistance and self-liberation. This study seeks to fill this gap by demonstrating how Yeong-hye's transformation functions as both a rebellion against patriarchal structures and an existential shift that defies normative human existence.

Metamorphosis as a literary motif has been explored in various contexts, most notably in works such as Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915). In Kafka's narrative, Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect symbolizes alienation and the absurdity of human existence. Similarly, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* employs metamorphosis as a means of exploring psychological and social estrangement. Unlike Kafka's protagonist, who is subjected to transformation passively, Yeong-hye's metamorphosis emerges as an act of will, an assertion of autonomy against familial and societal control.

In conclusion, the literature surrounding *The Vegetarian* offers valuable insights into the psychological, feminist, and ecological aspects of Yeong-hye's transformation. However, the combination of psychoanalytic and ecofeminist perspectives provides a more nuanced reading of the novel, allowing for a deeper understanding of its critique of patriarchy, societal expectations, and the exploitation of both human and non-human bodies. By examining these themes, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on *The Vegetarian* and offer new interpretations of its complex narrative of metamorphosis and resistance.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing textual analysis as its primary method. The data is drawn from *The Vegetarian*, with a focus on passages that depict Yeong-hye's transformation and its implications. The analysis employs an interdisciplinary framework combining literary studies, psychoanalysis, and ecofeminism. This theoretical approach allows for a multi-layered reading of metamorphosis, considering its psychological, social, and ecological dimensions. The study follows a close reading strategy, examining how specific linguistic and narrative choices contribute to the theme of metamorphosis. Additionally, secondary sources, including journal articles and critical essays, are used to contextualize the analysis within broader academic discussions.

Theoretical Framework

This research applies a comprehensive interdisciplinary theoretical framework to analyze the theme of metamorphosis in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007), combining psychoanalysis, ecofeminism, and literary theories of transformation. These three frameworks provide critical tools to interpret Yeong-hye's transformation not only as a

personal act but also as a social, psychological, and ecological commentary. In addition to investigating the psychological underpinnings of her metamorphosis, this research also examines how Yeong-hye's rejection of meat and her desire to become a plant resonate with broader cultural, ecological, and feminist critiques. Below is a detailed explanation of each theoretical approach used in this study, emphasizing their relevance and application in understanding the complexities of Yeong-hye's metamorphosis.

Psychoanalysis: Repression, the Uncanny, and Abjection

Psychoanalytic theory, particularly the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, provides essential tools to understand Yeong-hye's transformation as an outward manifestation of her inner psychological turmoil. Psychoanalysis is concerned with the unconscious mind, repressed desires, and the return of the repressed, concepts that are highly applicable in understanding the repressed aspects of Yeong-hye's identity and how they surface in the form of her rejection of meat and her desire to become a plant.

Freud's Concept of the Uncanny (1919)

Freud's concept of the uncanny explains the unsettling feeling one experiences when something familiar is rendered strange or distorted. This is especially relevant in *The Vegetarian*, as Yeong-hye's metamorphosis can be viewed as a psychological "uncanny" moment. Her rejection of meat, something essential to human survival and a common part of daily life appears as an irrational and strange act that shakes the reader's understanding of her as a normal woman. This physical rejection of the human body (symbolized by the consumption of meat) and the desire to become a plant reflect her deep-seated unconscious rebellion against her role in a patriarchal society. Freud explains that the return of repressed desires or aspects of identity often appears in unexpected forms, creating feelings of the uncanny. In Yeong-hye's case, her rejection of societal norms and her physical transformation into something non-human functions as a return of repressed psychological states, particularly those related to trauma and societal subjugation. (Willsie, 2019)

Lacan's Mirror Stage (1949)

Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, a moment in infancy when a child first recognizes itself in a mirror and forms an initial sense of ego, offers a useful lens for examining Yeong-hye's fragmented identity. The mirror stage is a key developmental moment in which an infant begins to form its "I" through the reflection of its body, but the image is always dissociated from the lived reality of the body. For Yeong-hye, this dissociation from her image in the mirror reflects her inability to reconcile her internal sense of self with the societal expectations placed upon her as a woman. Her rejection of both meat and the human body reflects an attempt to escape from the image of herself that patriarchal society has imposed on her. In rejecting her body and its physical needs, Yeong-hye attempts to reject the patriarchal mirror that distorts her identity.

Abjection (Kristeva, 1982)

Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection provides another psychoanalytic lens through which to view Yeong-hye's rejection of her body and humanity. Abjection refers to the process by which certain things or aspects of identity are cast aside as unclean, taboo, or "other." Kristeva argues that the abject is that which challenges the boundaries of the self and society, often representing a return of the repressed. Yeong-hye's rejection of her human body, specifically the act of refusing to consume meat (an essential aspect of human existence), can be understood as an act of abjection. By rejecting the human body and its natural urges, she distances herself from the social norms that define what it means to be human. This act of rejecting humanity itself can be seen as a refusal to conform to societal expectations, particularly those that place women in passive, subjugated roles. (Bica, 2023)

Ecofeminism: Gender, Nature, and Resistance to Patriarchy

Ecofeminism provides a crucial theoretical framework for analyzing Yeong-hye's transformation as a feminist and ecological act of resistance. Ecofeminist theory critiques the ways in which patriarchy dominates both women and the natural world, drawing attention to the interconnectedness between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the environment. This perspective is particularly relevant when examining Yeong-hye's desire to become a plant, as it questions the hierarchical relationship between humans (especially women) and the natural world.

Carol Adams' Sexual Politics of Meat (1990)

Carol Adams' work *The Sexual Politics of Meat* examines how the consumption of meat is tied to patriarchal structures and gender dynamics. According to Adams, meat consumption is not just an act of eating; it is culturally and symbolically gendered. Women, especially in traditional societies, are often associated with cooking and preparing meat, but they are simultaneously positioned as objects of male desire and consumption. Yeong-hye's rejection of meat can be viewed as a feminist critique of this gendered relationship to the body and food. Her transformation, which includes her refusal to participate in the patriarchal practice of eating meat, challenges the gendered power dynamics that define women's roles as passive, subordinate, and subjugated to male consumption. (Kim, n.d.)

Vandana Shiva's Ecological Feminism (1993)

Vandana Shiva's work on ecofeminism highlights how the oppression of women and the exploitation of the environment are deeply intertwined, often driven by patriarchal ideologies that place men at the top of a gendered and hierarchical social order. Yeong-hye's rejection of her human identity and her desire to become a plant can be understood as an ecofeminist act of defiance against the anthropocentric worldview that separates human beings from nature. Her metamorphosis into a plant symbolizes an attempt to resist the patriarchal system that not only oppresses women but also exploits and commodifies the

natural world. The ecofeminist framework allows us to view Yeong-hye's transformation as an attempt to transcend the boundaries between the human and the non-human, critiquing the hierarchical relationships that dominate both women and nature.

Nature as Other and Gendered Nature (Plumwood, 1993)

Val Plumwood's work on the dualism of nature and culture and gendered nature further explores how human society has constructed a binary opposition between nature and culture, with nature often being represented as "other" and inferior to culture. Plumwood argues that this dualism has been used to justify the exploitation of both women and the environment. Yeong-hye's desire to become a plant challenges this binary by blurring the lines between nature and humanity. Her transformation calls into question the hierarchical separation between humans and nature and challenges the traditional gender roles that associate women with the "inferior" position of nature. By embracing the plant world, Yeong-hye seeks to resist the patriarchal constructions of both gender and nature. (Tsimpouki, 2021)

Literary Theories of Metamorphosis: Symbolism and Subversion

Metamorphosis, in literary theory, is often used as a device to critique societal norms, explore identity, and challenge the boundaries between the human and the non-human. The transformation of Yeong-hye in *The Vegetarian* is not only a personal journey but also a symbolic and political act that challenges the cultural and gendered expectations of her society.

Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnivalesque (1981)

Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque is relevant for understanding how Yeong-hye's metamorphosis functions as a rebellion against societal norms. The carnivalesque is a concept in which social hierarchies and norms are overturned, allowing for the free expression of the self and the subversion of traditional roles. Yeong-hye's rejection of human existence and desire to become a plant is a form of this subversion. It acts as a "carnivalesque" break from the social norms of patriarchy and femininity, allowing for the possibility of transformation, freedom, and rebellion. (Sahoo & Raj, 2024)

Michel Foucault's Biopolitics (1976)

Foucault's theory of biopolitics, the regulation of human bodies through societal norms and practices, provides a lens for understanding Yeong-hye's resistance. In Foucault's view, power is not only exercised through laws and institutions but also through the regulation of bodies, behaviors, and biological processes. Yeong-hye's refusal to conform to the biologically and socially constructed norms of the human body (including eating meat and reproducing) can be interpreted as an act of resistance against the biopolitical control that seeks to regulate women's bodies. By rejecting these norms, she challenges the

gendered control of her body and asserts her autonomy over her own identity and existence.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework applied in this study draws from psychoanalysis, ecofeminism, and literary theories of metamorphosis to explore the complex implications of Yeong-hye's transformation in *The Vegetarian*. Each theoretical approach provides a unique lens for understanding the ways in which Yeong-hye's rejection of societal norms and her physical metamorphosis critique patriarchy, gendered power structures, and the exploitation of both women and the natural world. Through the intersection of these frameworks, this study seeks to offer a comprehensive analysis of how metamorphosis serves as both a personal act of resistance and a broader critique of social, ecological, and cultural norms. (Adams, 1990)

Data Analysis & Findings

The findings of the study are as follows.

Yeong-hye's Bodily Transformation: A Symbolic and Existential Rejection

Yeong-hye's bodily transformation in *The Vegetarian* is the focal point of her journey of resistance against the violence and oppression ingrained in society. Her transformation, which begins with a dream, is symbolic of her rejection of not only the physicality of meat-eating but also of the patriarchal and cultural constraints imposed on her identity. The transformation moves from a simple dietary choice to an extreme act of self-rejection, eventually culminating in her belief that she is turning into a tree. This transformation is more than just an individual, physical change; it is deeply rooted in psychological trauma, societal pressures, and a desire for autonomy. Through her metamorphosis, Yeong-hye embodies a profound critique of both patriarchal expectations and the violence inherent in human society.

The Dream: The Catalyst for Transformation

Yeong-hye's initial decision to stop eating meat is triggered by a disturbing dream, which serves as a key moment in the text. The dream is vividly described, showcasing the visceral and horrific imagery of animal slaughter:

"I had a dream. I was eating meat. I saw my hands covered in blood. My mouth was full of the raw taste of blood" (Kang, 2007, p. 12).

This dream is more than a mere subconscious manifestation; it acts as a catalyst that leads Yeong-hye to renounce not only meat but also the human practices that are entwined with violence and consumption. The image of blood, raw meat, and violence in the dream is both repulsive and symbolic. It speaks to Yeong-hye's subconscious rejection of the violent systems of domination inherent in human society, systems that are normalized and naturalized through the act of consuming meat. In psychoanalytic terms, this can be viewed

as the manifestation of repressed feelings of disgust and alienation from her own role within society. (Plumwood, 1993)

The act of eating meat is heavily gendered, particularly in the context of Yeong-hye's role as a wife and woman within a patriarchal household. Meat consumption in many cultures is associated with masculinity, strength, and dominance, while women are expected to fulfill a more passive, nurturing role. Yeong-hye's dream can be read as an unconscious rebellion against this gendered expectation. Her revulsion towards the violence of meat-eating and the subsequent rejection of it represents a refusal to be complicit in the patriarchal consumption of both animals and women.

Rejection of Meat: A Step Toward Existential Rejection

Yeong-hye's rejection of meat is not merely a dietary change but a deeper existential rejection. As she distances herself from meat, she symbolically distances herself from the violence of human society. Her refusal to eat is a rejection of the norms and expectations that shape her existence. In this sense, her transformation is also a refusal to live according to the prescribed roles and expectations placed upon her, particularly as a woman in a patriarchal society.

By refusing to eat meat, Yeong-hye asserts a sense of autonomy over her body, rejecting the societal impositions that govern both her gender and her identity. Eating meat, in her case, becomes a symbol of patriarchal violence, violence against both animals and women. In rejecting it, she refuses to comply with the patriarchal view of the body as something to be consumed, controlled, and objectified. This rejection is not just an act of dietary choice; it is a rebellion against the systemic violence and exploitation that she has long endured, both psychologically and physically. (Plumwood, 1993)

Escalating Transformation: Isolation and the Desire to Become a Tree

As the novel progresses, Yeong-hye's transformation becomes increasingly radical. Her refusal to eat extends beyond meat to food in general. She stops eating altogether, a decision that marks her gradual withdrawal from society and an increasing estrangement from the human world. The physical manifestation of her transformation, the refusal to consume sustenance, becomes a literal form of resistance, as she distances herself from the corporeal and societal structures that have long defined her existence.

In her complete withdrawal from the physical world, Yeong-hye begins to believe that she is turning into a tree. This belief is not a simple act of madness, but rather an expression of her desire to transcend human existence and the violent systems that come with it. The tree, in many cultural contexts, symbolizes life, growth, and connection to nature, concepts that are in stark contrast to the violence of human society. By believing she is turning into a

tree, Yeong-hye is attempting to escape from the human condition, which she perceives as inherently corrupt and violent.

Her belief in becoming a tree can also be interpreted as an expression of her desire to shed the identity imposed upon her by patriarchal and cultural norms. As a woman, she has been objectified, controlled, and constrained by societal expectations. Her transformation into a tree, a living organism rooted in the earth, represents a desire to reconnect with nature, to escape from the gendered and patriarchal roles that have shaped her life, and to reassert control over her body in a way that transcends human norms. (Casey, 2020).

The tree is symbolic of her ultimate resistance to the exploitation of both the natural world and her own body. Trees, unlike humans, are not commodities to be consumed, objectified, or controlled. They grow, flourish, and live in harmony with nature. Yeong-hye's belief in becoming a tree signifies her rejection of the human condition, as well as her desire to transcend the rigid structures that confine her.

Bodily Transformation as a Form of Feminist Resistance

Yeong-hye's bodily transformation can be read as a feminist act of resistance. Throughout the novel, her body is viewed by others, especially the men in her life, as a site of control, exploitation, and objectification. Her rejection of meat and her eventual belief that she is turning into a tree can be seen as an attempt to reclaim autonomy over her body and to escape the patriarchal control over women's bodies. In this context, Yeong-hye's refusal to conform to social norms regarding food, gender, and body image becomes an act of defiance, rejecting not only the physical practices of patriarchal consumption but also the cultural and gendered expectations placed upon her.

Moreover, her refusal to eat and her isolation from society highlight the feminist critique of the female body as a site of both oppression and resistance. By rejecting the body as something to be consumed or controlled, Yeong-hye reclaims her bodily autonomy, even if it means retreating from the human world altogether. Her transformation, though extreme, reflects the ways in which women's bodies are often subject to external forces, and how resisting these forces can take on a variety of forms, from subtle acts of rebellion to more radical, life-altering changes.

Yeong-hye's Metamorphosis: A Critique of Human Violence and Patriarchy

Yeong-hye's transformation can also be interpreted as a critique of the violence inherent in human society. The act of eating meat, particularly in the context of patriarchal cultures, is often associated with dominance and control. Meat consumption is a deeply ingrained social norm, tied to gendered expectations and the exploitation of both animals and women. Yeong-hye's rejection of meat is a symbolic refusal to participate in this cycle of violence.

Her decision to believe she is turning into a tree further emphasizes this critique. Trees, as symbols of nature, growth, and life, stand in stark contrast to the violence associated with human civilization. By transforming into a tree, Yeong-hye is rejecting the destructive forces of human culture and seeking to reconnect with a purer, more harmonious existence. Her belief in becoming a tree represents an ultimate rejection of the patriarchal violence that underpins human society, a desire to shed her human identity and become part of a more peaceful and natural world. (Datta, 2021)

The Radical Nature of Yeong-hye's Transformation

Yeong-hye's transformation in *The Vegetarian* is radical and multifaceted. It begins with her rejection of meat, symbolizing a deeper existential rebellion against the violence of human society. As her transformation progresses, her refusal to eat altogether and her belief that she is turning into a tree further illustrate her desire to escape the societal constraints imposed upon her as a woman and a human being. Through her bodily transformation, Yeong-hye critiques not only patriarchal and cultural norms but also the violence and exploitation inherent in human existence. Her metamorphosis, both physical and psychological, is an act of radical resistance, a refusal to conform to the oppressive forces of society and a desire to transcend the human condition altogether.

Yeong-hye's transformation is a complex and profound commentary on identity, autonomy, and resistance. It challenges the reader to consider the ways in which bodily autonomy can be a form of resistance and how rejecting societal norms can lead to radical self-discovery and liberation. Through Yeong-hye's metamorphosis, *The Vegetarian* opens up a critical space for questioning the power structures that govern our bodies, identities, and lives, ultimately offering a feminist and ecological critique of the human condition.

Resistance through Metamorphosis

Yeong-hye's bodily transformation in *The Vegetarian* functions as a radical form of resistance against patriarchal and cultural norms. Her refusal to eat meat marks a symbolic rejection of masculine power, consumption, and the domestic expectations imposed on women. As her identity shifts toward a plant-like existence, Yeong-hye challenges the notion that women's bodies must serve social and familial roles.

From a feminist and ecofeminist perspective, her metamorphosis destabilizes human-centered values and exposes the violence embedded in everyday practices of eating, reproduction, and gendered control. By imagining herself as a tree, Yeong-hye reclaims autonomy over her body and resists being defined through patriarchal categories. Thus, her transformation becomes not a passive withdrawal but an act of defiance that critiques systems of domination over both women and nature.

Physical Transformation as a Form of Defiance

The passage where Yeong-hye is described as “laying there, her back curved like a crescent moon, her arms raised above her head, her fingers curling like tendrils” (Kang, 2007, p. 137) serves as a key moment in illustrating the bodily transformation that signifies her resistance. This description emphasizes the shift from a human body to one that increasingly resembles a plant. The imagery of a crescent moon suggests an unnatural or unnatural shape, one that stands in stark contrast to the human form. Her arms raised above her head and fingers curling like tendrils emphasize her growing identification with nature, her resistance to human constructs, and her departure from patriarchal ideals of the feminine body.

In patriarchal cultures, women's bodies are often viewed as sites of control, reproduction, and domesticity. Yeong-hye's transformation is, therefore, a radical rejection of this view. By rejecting meat, withdrawing from society, and eventually attempting to become a plant, she escapes the norms that shape and constrain the female body. Her physical state, described in terms of plant growth, becomes a means of asserting control over her own body in a way that the social and cultural structures cannot dominate. Her bodily metamorphosis symbolizes not only the rejection of her roles as wife and woman but also a desire to escape from the violence and exploitation associated with human existence. (Lai, 2022)

The Metamorphosis as Feminist Resistance

Yeong-hye's bodily transformation can be interpreted as a feminist act of resistance. Within the patriarchal context of her family, she is constantly controlled, objectified, and constrained. In her marriage, her role is largely passive; she is expected to fulfill the duties of a wife and mother. Her transformation, beginning with her rejection of meat and later evolving into her desire to become a tree, challenges these imposed roles. In refusing to conform to the expectations of womanhood, she asserts her agency, even if it means retreating into a non-human identity.

The imagery of her body resembling plant growth reinforces the idea that Yeong-hye is rejecting the patriarchal, human-centered world and seeking an alternative form of existence. As a plant, she is no longer subject to the control of the human world. Unlike women, whose bodies are often commodified and controlled by male desire, plants grow in the natural world without the need for human intervention. By aligning herself with the image of a plant, Yeong-hye seeks to escape the objectification and control that she faces as a woman in a patriarchal society.

Resistance to Human Norms

Yeong-hye's decision to stop eating meat, to withdraw from the human world, and to eventually identify as a tree can be seen as an extreme form of resistance to human societal norms. Meat consumption, particularly in the context of her family, is associated

with masculinity, strength, and dominance. Yeong-hye's refusal to partake in this practice represents a rejection of the patriarchal norms associated with food, gender roles, and the human experience. Her rejection is not merely dietary; it is a refusal to participate in the violence of human society.

The transformation into a tree, then, can be viewed as an effort to transcend the boundaries of human existence altogether. In her belief that she is becoming a tree, Yeong-hye distances herself from the violence, consumption, and exploitation inherent in human society. Trees, unlike humans, are not consumed, controlled, or objectified; they grow independently, grounded in nature. In her metamorphosis, Yeong-hye challenges the conventional understanding of human autonomy and resistance by embodying an existence that is beyond human norms. (Singh, 2025)

Her metamorphosis is, in many ways, an act of liberation. By distancing herself from human society and transforming into a plant, she frees herself from the limitations placed on her by gender, family, and societal expectations. This extreme form of resistance signals her desire to escape the rigidity of human identity and move toward a more fluid, natural existence. In the process, Yeong-hye exposes the violence and control that pervade human society, using her transformation as a means of defying these forces.

Psychological and Existential Dimensions of Resistance

Yeong-hye's transformation is not just a physical act; it is also deeply psychological and existential. Her body's metamorphosis reflects her internal struggles, her trauma, and her rejection of the human condition. Her refusal to eat is symbolic of her refusal to participate in the violence of human existence, a violence that is deeply rooted in both the personal (her familial relationships) and the cultural (patriarchal societal norms). As her physical transformation becomes more radical, she is increasingly alienated from human society, and her belief that she is becoming a tree reflects her desire to escape the violence of human life altogether.

The psychological implications of Yeong-hye's transformation are profound. Her refusal to eat, her withdrawal from the world, and her ultimate belief that she is turning into a plant can be interpreted as a manifestation of her trauma. She has been subjected to various forms of violence and control throughout her life, violence from her family, her society, and from her own body. Her bodily metamorphosis, then, can be seen as an expression of her internal resistance to these forces. By rejecting the body as a site of consumption and control, Yeong-hye attempts to reclaim her sense of self and her autonomy, even if it means retreating into a non-human identity.

In this way, Yeong-hye's transformation becomes a powerful form of psychological resistance. Her metamorphosis reflects her attempts to transcend the limitations of her existence, to move beyond the roles and identities that have been imposed upon her. As she

transforms, she is not merely rejecting human norms; she is also trying to escape from the psychological and existential constraints that define her life. Her body's metamorphosis represents her desire to find a new form of existence, one that is free from the trauma, control, and violence of human life. (Willsie, 2019)

Resistance to Patriarchal Control and Cultural Expectations

Yeong-hye's bodily metamorphosis also functions as a direct resistance to patriarchal control and cultural expectations. As a wife and woman, she is expected to fulfill certain roles, roles that involve obedience, submission, and participation in the domestic and societal order. Her rejection of meat and her eventual desire to become a plant are acts of defiance against these roles. Through her transformation, Yeong-hye asserts her independence from the patriarchal structures that seek to define and control her.

Her physical transformation is not just an escape from human norms; it is also a rejection of the cultural expectations placed on her as a woman. In a patriarchal society, women's bodies are often viewed as sites of reproduction, domesticity, and consumption. Yeong-hye's transformation challenges these expectations by rejecting the human roles and identities that have been imposed upon her. Her metamorphosis, in this sense, becomes a feminist act of resistance, rejecting the social and cultural frameworks that seek to limit and define women's bodies.

By aligning herself with the natural world, Yeong-hye rejects the violence and exploitation associated with human existence. Her desire to become a tree reflects her longing for an existence that is more harmonious, more independent, and more autonomous. In doing so, she critiques the patriarchal and cultural norms that seek to confine her to a particular role and identity. Through her metamorphosis, she creates space for alternative understandings of selfhood, autonomy, and resistance.

A Radical Form of Resistance

Yeong-hye's metamorphosis in *The Vegetarian* is a radical form of resistance to the patriarchal, cultural, and societal structures that seek to control, define, and objectify her. Her transformation challenges human norms and expectations by rejecting the violence of human existence and embracing an identity that transcends the limitations of gender, society, and the human condition. Through her bodily transformation, Yeong-hye reclaims autonomy over her body, rejecting the roles and identities that have been imposed upon her. Her metamorphosis becomes a powerful act of resistance, one that challenges the patriarchal control over women's bodies and critiques the exploitation of both human and non-human worlds. Ultimately, her transformation serves as a critique of the societal structures that limit and control autonomy, offering a radical form of feminist and ecological resistance.

The Role of Trauma

Yeong-hye's metamorphosis is also deeply tied to her psychological trauma. Her disturbing dream of blood and raw meat reveals repressed fears that resurface as abjection, in Kristeva's sense, where the body rejects what it cannot assimilate. Her refusal to eat and eventual withdrawal from human life embody a desperate attempt to escape the violence she has endured within her family and society.

From a psychoanalytic lens, her transformation reflects the return of the repressed: memories of domination by her father, neglect by her husband, and the larger weight of patriarchal control. These unresolved wounds manifest somatically, turning her body into the stage upon which trauma is both expressed and resisted. Unlike the ecofeminist reading, which stresses political resistance, the psychoanalytic view highlights metamorphosis as a psychic response to unbearable internal conflict. (Bica, 2023)

Bodily Transformation as a Response to Trauma

Yeong-hye's decision to stop eating meat, which initially appears to be a simple act of rejection, is closely linked to her psychological trauma. Her dream, in which she imagines herself eating meat and seeing her hands drenched in blood, symbolizes the violent, traumatic relationship she has with the world around her. The blood that she envisions in her dream represents a deeper wound, one that is psychological and existential. The transformation of her body into something more plant-like is a direct response to this trauma; it marks her attempt to escape from the violent and exploitative nature of human existence.

Trauma, according to psychoanalytic theory, is often represented physically in the body. Yeong-hye's metamorphosis can be understood as a form of somatic expression of this trauma. The rejection of meat, the refusal to eat altogether, and her eventual belief that she is turning into a tree can be seen as a manifestation of her attempt to distance herself from the violence that has characterized her existence. Her physical changes reflect the internal struggle and pain that she has been unable to express through words or traditional forms of action. Her body becomes the site through which she is able to process and deal with her trauma.

Kristeva's Concept of Abjection and Bodily Change

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection offers a helpful lens through which to examine the role of trauma in Yeong-hye's transformation. In her seminal work *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva defines abjection as the process by which a subject expels or rejects that which is considered impure or taboo, often in the form of bodily fluids, waste, or other forms of material that threaten the boundaries of the self. Abjection is both a repulsion and a desire

to purge something that violates the established order, and in many ways, it is a reflection of the trauma that the subject has experienced.

In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's body undergoes a transformation that can be interpreted through the lens of abjection. Her rejection of meat, the very substance that sustains life, is a symbolic act of abjection, as it involves a deliberate attempt to distance herself from the violence of human existence. The bodily change that follows is a manifestation of her desire to expel what she perceives as impure and corrupt. The abject becomes the means by which Yeong-hye expresses her trauma and attempts to reclaim agency over her body. However, this process is not without tension. While she seeks liberation from the violence of the human world, she is simultaneously repulsed by her body's association with that violence, resulting in a constant struggle between repulsion and liberation.

For example, Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat, coupled with her intense guilt over consuming animal products, can be seen as a reaction to the trauma of witnessing violence. The visceral imagery in her dreams, where she imagines herself eating meat and experiencing the physical consequences of this act, highlights her deep psychological disturbance. This is not merely a rejection of food but a symbolic attempt to cleanse herself of the violence inherent in human consumption and the cultural associations that come with it.

Kristeva's theory helps to explain the complex psychological dynamics at play in Yeong-hye's transformation. The abject, in her case, becomes the means through which she attempts to separate herself from the violence that she associates with human life. However, this attempt to purge the self is never fully realized, as her transformation into a plant is itself a form of reification, her identity becomes more rigid, more fixed, even as she seeks to escape societal constraints. The trauma she experiences is thus embodied in her metamorphosis, as her desire for liberation becomes entangled with her internal repulsion and guilt. (Park, 2016).

The Trauma of Family and Patriarchy

Yeong-hye's trauma is not solely a product of her internal psychological struggles but is deeply rooted in the external violence and oppression she faces at the hands of her family. The patriarchal structures of her family, and particularly her relationship with her husband, contribute to her deep sense of alienation and despair. Her husband's insistence on her conforming to traditional gender roles and his refusal to acknowledge her inner turmoil exacerbate her sense of powerlessness. This emotional and physical repression is compounded by her father's earlier control over her, which contributes to her feelings of being trapped within the expectations placed on her as a wife and woman.

As Yeong-hye's body begins to transform, it becomes increasingly clear that her metamorphosis is a response to these familial and patriarchal structures. Her refusal to eat meat and her eventual withdrawal from all human consumption can be seen as an attempt to rid herself of the patriarchal impositions that have suffocated her. Her transformation into a plant represents her desire to escape from these controlling forces, as she seeks to reassert agency over her body in a way that goes beyond the traditional roles of wife and mother.

Her body becomes a battleground, not only reflecting the trauma of her past but also manifesting her struggle to resist the patriarchal control that has shaped her identity. The trauma she experiences is embodied in her desire to distance herself from the roles that have been forced upon her. In her transformation, Yeong-hye is attempting to carve out an existence that is independent of the patriarchal expectations that have defined her life.

The Impact of Trauma on Identity

As Yeong-hye's transformation progresses, it becomes clear that her bodily changes are a direct response to her fractured sense of identity. The trauma she has experienced the violence, repression, and control, has shattered her sense of self. Her transformation into a tree, which she believes is a way of becoming something other than human, is a symbolic attempt to reconstruct her identity in a way that is free from the constraints imposed by her family and society. The act of becoming a plant represents an effort to rebuild herself as something autonomous and separate from the violence of human existence.

However, this reconstruction of identity is not straightforward. Yeong-hye's belief that she is turning into a plant underscores the fragmentation of her identity. Her trauma has created a rift between her sense of self and the reality of her situation, and her bodily transformation is an attempt to reconcile this divide. Her transformation is an effort to reconstruct her identity, but it is also a sign of her inability to fully resolve the trauma she has experienced. The trauma remains embedded in her body, which continues to undergo physical changes as she struggles to assert her autonomy.

Yeong-hye's metamorphosis, therefore, becomes a psychological struggle for identity. Her trauma, both internal and external, has caused her to question her place in the world and her role in society. Through her transformation, she seeks to reassert control over her identity, but the process is fraught with tension, as her body becomes a site of both liberation and constraint. The trauma she experiences is inseparable from her bodily transformation, and it is through this transformation that she attempts to heal, though, ultimately, it remains a complex and unresolved process. (Park, 2016).

Trauma as a Catalyst for Transformation

Yeong-hye's metamorphosis in *The Vegetarian* is deeply tied to the trauma she experiences, and this trauma functions as a catalyst for her bodily changes. Her rejection of meat, her withdrawal from society, and her belief that she is turning into a plant all reflect her attempt to escape the violence of human existence and reclaim autonomy over her body. Kristeva's concept of abjection helps to explain how Yeong-hye's bodily changes are both an act of repulsion and a form of liberation, as she attempts to expel the trauma and violence that have shaped her identity.

Her transformation can be understood as an embodied response to the trauma of patriarchal control, family repression, and societal violence. As she seeks to distance herself from these forces, Yeong-hye's metamorphosis becomes a powerful act of resistance, one that is both personal and psychological, offering a complex and nuanced exploration of trauma, identity, and transformation. Through her bodily changes, Yeong-hye's journey becomes a profound meditation on the ways in which trauma can reshape the self and the body, and how the struggle for autonomy can manifest in the most radical of ways.

Discussion

Yeong-hye's metamorphosis in *The Vegetarian* profoundly challenges the boundaries of identity, agency, and humanity. Her transformation is not a passive occurrence nor an external imposition, as often seen in traditional narratives of bodily change. Rather, Yeong-hye's decision to undergo this transformation is an active one, signifying a deliberate, conscious rejection of the systems and structures that have shaped her life. This self-imposed metamorphosis positions bodily change as a radical act of self-liberation, offering a unique critique of both societal and patriarchal norms.

Redefining Autonomy through Bodily Change

At the heart of Yeong-hye's metamorphosis lies her assertion of autonomy. In a world where women's bodies are often objectified and controlled, Yeong-hye's decision to renounce meat and, eventually, human existence, becomes a bold act of resistance. By choosing to reject food, and later the very fabric of human identity, Yeong-hye is effectively rejecting the conventions that define her role as a woman, wife, and daughter. Her body, instead of being subjected to the demands of those around her, becomes a vehicle through which she reclaims control over her own existence.

Yeong-hye's transformation challenges the common understanding of autonomy as merely the ability to make choices within an existing framework. In this context, autonomy is not about conforming to societal structures but about redefining the very nature of existence and rejecting the constraints that society imposes. As she evolves from a passive, submissive housewife to a figure who physically disconnects from human norms, her bodily transformation signifies an alternative form of autonomy. This rejection of meat, and

ultimately of human identity itself, becomes a direct confrontation with the patriarchal structures that seek to define and control her.

Yeong-hye's metamorphosis can be seen as a radical attempt to assert agency over her own body. As she withdraws from human consumption and rejects societal norms, she asserts her independence in a way that transcends traditional understandings of personal freedom. In a patriarchal society where women's autonomy is often defined by their roles within the family or their ability to fulfill cultural expectations, Yeong-hye's bodily change redefines what it means to be truly autonomous. Her rejection of the familiar, the human, and the consumable challenges the very framework through which autonomy is understood in the modern world.

Critique of Consumption Culture

Yeong-hye's refusal to consume meat functions as a symbolic rejection of consumption culture, which is both a critique of the global food system and a metaphorical challenge to the patriarchal consumption of female bodies. Her refusal to eat meat, traditionally seen as a symbol of power, vitality, and masculinity, becomes a direct challenge to the cultural norms that associate strength with consumption, particularly of animal bodies. By rejecting meat, Yeong-hye distances herself from a culture that glorifies consumption at the expense of other living beings, symbolizing her desire to sever ties with the violence inherent in human food practices.

However, her rejection of meat is not merely a critique of dietary practices; it is also a pointed critique of gender roles and the ways in which women's bodies have been commodified and consumed throughout history. In a patriarchal society, women's bodies are often reduced to objects of consumption, whether in terms of sexuality, labor, or familial roles. Yeong-hye's refusal to consume meat can thus be interpreted as an act of reclaiming her body from the patriarchal systems that seek to appropriate and control it. Her act of abstaining from meat symbolizes a rejection of the commodification of women, not only in terms of food but also in terms of how society views and consumes female labor, sexuality, and agency.

This critique of consumption culture is further compounded by Yeong-hye's subsequent refusal to consume anything at all, even water. This radical withdrawal from all forms of consumption can be understood as a symbolic critique of the excesses of modern life, where human beings are caught in an endless cycle of consumption, whether of food, resources, or, in the case of women, their labor and bodies. Yeong-hye's refusal to participate in this cycle becomes an act of protest against the very systems that sustain and perpetuate such consumption.

Moreover, the notion of consumption in *The Vegetarian* is intricately tied to gender and sexuality. As a woman, Yeong-hye is subjected to the patriarchal expectation that she

fulfill certain roles, wife, mother, daughter; each of which involves the consumption of her body by familial and societal structures. By rejecting meat, and by extension all forms of consumption, she pushes back against this system, asserting her autonomy not just in terms of her physical body but also in her ability to resist the symbolic and literal consumption of women within patriarchal systems. (Choi, 2015).

Metamorphosis as a Critique of Patriarchy

In addition to her critique of consumption, Yeong-hye's transformation becomes an essential critique of patriarchal authority. Her decision to transform herself into a plant is a radical rejection of the human condition, one that positions her outside of patriarchal and societal control. As Yeong-hye moves toward becoming a tree, her body literally "grows" in ways that defy the expectations imposed upon her by her husband, father, and society at large. Her transformation represents a refusal to remain within the confines of a system that defines women in relation to men.

Her husband's reaction to her metamorphosis is telling: "She just lay there, her back curved like a crescent moon, her arms raised above her head, her fingers curling like tendrils" (Kang, 2007, p. 137). This image of Yeong-hye's body bending toward something more organic, more plant-like, challenges the patriarchal desire to control and regulate her body. Instead of fitting into the conventional roles that society has for women, Yeong-hye's metamorphosis challenges the notion that women's bodies must be submissive and molded into traditional expectations. She moves beyond the confines of patriarchal expectations, as her bodily changes suggest that she is in the process of becoming something independent and untamable.

In this way, Yeong-hye's transformation becomes a direct act of resistance against patriarchal authority. She is not passively submitting to her transformation; instead, she actively chooses to reject the very notion of the human, transcending the roles that society has defined for her. Her metamorphosis, in its radical disconnection from human society, symbolizes the power of rejecting patriarchal structures, offering a new form of autonomy that exists outside the rigid boundaries of human norms.

The Metaphor of Plant Life: Resistance and Renewal

The metaphor of plant life is central to Yeong-hye's resistance, and it becomes a symbol of her desire for renewal and escape from societal constraints. As she moves toward the belief that she is becoming a tree, her metamorphosis takes on a more spiritual and existential significance. Trees, in various cultural and philosophical traditions, are often symbols of growth, connection to nature, and regeneration. Yeong-hye's transformation into a tree is not only a rejection of the human world but also an attempt to reconnect with something more fundamental, more organic, and more authentic.

The plant metaphor is significant because it challenges human-centric notions of existence. As Yeong-hye embraces this transformation, she moves away from the human need for dominance and control over nature. By rejecting meat, and later human existence itself, she is symbolically returning to a purer, more elemental state, one that is not shaped by human exploitation, violence, or oppression. Her transformation into a plant is, therefore, not just a rejection of human society but a re-imagining of what it means to live, to grow, and to exist outside of the constraints of patriarchal, human-centric ideals.

In conclusion, Yeong-hye's metamorphosis in *The Vegetarian* serves as a radical form of resistance, both to patriarchal control and to the culture of consumption that dominates modern society. Her bodily change is a challenge to the very notion of human identity and autonomy, offering a profound commentary on the ways in which bodies are regulated, consumed, and controlled. Through her transformation, Yeong-hye redefines the possibilities of resistance, autonomy, and self-liberation, offering a new understanding of bodily change as a tool for challenging oppressive structures.

Conclusion

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* offers a profound exploration of metamorphosis as both a site of resistance and a realm of suffering, where bodily transformation becomes a complex negotiation between autonomy, trauma, and societal oppression. Through Yeong-hye's metamorphosis, Kang invites readers to engage with the multifaceted nature of identity, self-assertion, and the boundaries between the human and the non-human. Yeong-hye's decision to reject the norms of society, particularly patriarchal expectations, reflects a radical assertion of autonomy, while her subsequent withdrawal from human existence emphasizes the deep psychological and existential struggles that accompany such a transformation.

Yeong-hye's transformation is not a simple journey toward liberation; rather, it embodies a tension between freedom and destruction. Her refusal to partake in the consumption of meat and her eventual desire to become a plant challenge the fundamental structures of societal power, including those of patriarchy, gender norms, and cultural expectations. At the same time, her bodily metamorphosis can be seen as a response to trauma, both personal and collective, where the physical change becomes a mechanism through which Yeong-hye seeks to distance herself from the violence, control, and commodification that her body has endured. In this sense, her metamorphosis offers a way to resist not only the external forces of society but also the internalized psychological wounds that have been inflicted upon her.

The novel intertwines psychoanalytic concepts of trauma, ecofeminist critiques of human-nature relations, and feminist explorations of bodily autonomy. Yeong-hye's rejection of human existence is a form of resistance that critiques patriarchal control over female bodies, while simultaneously questioning the ethics of consumption, exploitation, and the

anthropocentric worldview. As Yeong-hye's metamorphosis deepens, it becomes clear that the act of transforming one's body, whether through rejection of human identity or alignment with nature, can never be fully liberating or wholly destructive. Instead, it becomes an expression of both survival and rebellion, where the boundaries of the self, the body, and the world are continuously in flux.

In the broader context of contemporary discussions on gender, autonomy, and ecology, *The Vegetarian* stands as a vital and challenging text. Yeong-hye's transformation invites readers to reconsider the relationships between body and society, autonomy and control, and nature and humanity. Her struggle to redefine her existence in the face of overwhelming societal forces remains a potent reflection of the ways in which individuals negotiate their identities in an increasingly complex world. As such, *The Vegetarian* continues to resonate as a work that reflects the struggles of resistance, survival, and the search for a more liberated form of existence.

Ultimately, the novel illustrates how transformation, both physical and psychological, can be a means of navigating trauma, agency, and oppression. Yeong-hye's metamorphosis in *The Vegetarian* serves as a powerful metaphor for the difficulties of transcending societal expectations, confronting personal trauma, and seeking a more liberated self. The novel suggests that transformation, while fraught with suffering, also carries the potential for profound change, whether for survival, self-liberation, or the critique of dominant cultural and patriarchal systems.

Bibliography

1. Barkan, L. (1986). *The gods made flesh: Metamorphosis and the pursuit of paganism*. Yale University Press.
2. Freud, S. (1919). *The uncanny*. Penguin.
3. Kang, H. (2007). *The Vegetarian*. Portobello Books.
4. Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. Columbia University Press.
5. Plumwood, V. (1993). *Feminism and the mastery of nature*. Routledge.
6. Adams, C. J. (1990). *The sexual politics of meat: A feminist-vegetarian critical theory*. Continuum.
7. Tsimpouki, T. (2021). All I need is sunlight: Ovidian metamorphosis and the language of arboreal metamorphosis in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *Posthuman Studies*, 5(2), 206–222.
<https://doi.org/10.5325/poststudies.5.2.0206>
8. Sahoo, S., & Raj, S. (2024). Identity performance in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *Library Progress International*, 44(3), 211–220.

9. Casey, R. (2020). Willed arboreality: Feminist worldmaking in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 61(5), 543–556. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1841725>
10. Datta, A. (2021). Ethics of witnessing: Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 6(2), 228–234.
11. Lai, Y. P. (2022). Blooming against meat: Silence, starvation, and arboreal metamorphosis in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 63(3), 345–359.
12. Singh, R. (2025). Queerness and the female body in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*: Metamorphosis, refusal, and the politics of unbecoming. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Gender Studies*, 3(1), 87–96.
13. Willsie, J. (2019). At an impasse: The possibilities of feminist resistance in *The Vegetarian* (Master's thesis, University of British Columbia). <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0416489>
14. Bica, P. (2023). *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang: A postmodern allegory for transformation and feminist critique. *Humanidades*, 12(2), 113–125. <https://rihumso.unlam.edu.ar/index.php/humanidades/article/view/313>