

THE VEGETAL REBIRTH: Bodily Autonomy and Posthuman Interconnectedness in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

~ ADITI ROY

Undergraduate

Department of English

Presidency University [Kolkata]

ABSTRACT

A woman chooses to stop eating meat and that singular decision unravels her entire life. By the time the story ends, we see the protagonist has abandoned all her human identity in favour of being a plant. Her sister too, feels a deep connection and a symbolic appeal in nature that resonates with her own suffering and desire to escape her circumstances. That is the foreground of this novel from South Korea. This paper examines how this interconnectedness reflects post-humanist ethics: dissolving species boundaries, challenging human exceptionalism, and advocating for ethical relations between humans, non-humans, and the environment. *The Vegetarian* thus functions as a work of posthuman renaissance literature, staging processes of rebirth and transformation that resist Eurocentric, anthropocentric, and patriarchal legacies of fixed identity. Its fragmented, multi perspective structure mirrors the porous and multiple subjectivities central to posthuman identity, contesting monolithic notions of selfhood. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti's concept of posthuman becoming as a non-unitary, embodied process that disrupts human exceptionalism, and Donna Haraway's cyborg theory, the paper argues that the novel destabilizes binaries such as human/animal, culture/nature, and male/female. In doing so, it advances a feminist posthuman politics of refusal and alternative forms of agency. Ultimately, this paper positions *The Vegetarian* as a post-humanist text that foregrounds transition and the breaking away from normative identity narratives through a dialogue with key feminist theorists.

KEYWORDS: AGENCY, FEMINISM, POSTHUMANISM, INTERCONNECTIVITY

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* opens with an apparently small domestic decision: a woman chooses to stop eating meat. This single act initiates a process of unravelling that fundamentally changes her existence, maritally, familiarly, bodily, psychologically, and socially. By the end of the book, Yeong-hye has rejected not only meat consumption but also her human identity, opting for a plant life instead. Parallely, her sister In-hye experiences a deep affective pull toward nature that reflects her own exhaustion and wish to exit oppressive circumstances. These two unique trajectories constitute the narrative's foreground and provide a conceptual entry point into questions of posthumanism, ethics, identity, and feminist refusal.

This paper argues that *The Vegetarian* functions as a work of posthuman renaissance literature, staging processes of rebirth and metamorphosis that challenge anthropocentric, Eurocentric, and patriarchal models of fixed identity. Yeong-hye's vegetal becoming dissolves species boundaries and disrupts human exceptionalism, while In-hye's recognition of its symbolic and affective appeal foregrounds an ethics of relationality rather than individual transcendence. Reading the novel through Rosi Braidotti's concept of posthuman becoming and Donna Haraway's cyborg theory, the paper contends that the text destabilizes key binaries like human/animal, culture/nature, male/female and advances a feminist posthuman politics of refusal.

Refusal here, however, does not signify passivity; rather, it operates as an alternative form of agency grounded in withdrawal from normative identity structures.

The novel's fragmented, multi-perspective narrative structure formally mirrors the multiple subjectivities central to posthuman identity, thereby challenging the notion of a unified self. Ultimately, *The Vegetarian* positions posthumanism not as abstraction but as a lived, embodied process.

Posthuman Becoming and the Refusal of Human Exceptionalism:

Central to posthuman theory is the rejection of human exceptionalism, that is, the belief that human beings exist above the rest of life. In *The Vegetarian*, this critique unfolds through Yeong-hye's nightmares, her disgust toward animal flesh and her desire to stop participating in the violence toward animals. Her vegetarianism is not framed as ethical consumerism or lifestyle choice. Instead, it is a visceral reaction that disrupts her core beliefs.

Braidotti defines posthuman becoming as a non-unitary, embodied process in which the subject is constituted through dynamic relations with other forms of life. Yeong-hye's transformation exemplifies this process. She does not become "less human" by accident or illness, she actively rejects the social and cultural category of "human" that is based exclusively around hierarchy, aggression and instrumentalization of non-human life.

Her vegetal desire does not indicate elevation of plant life above human life. It collapses the hierarchical distinctions and rejects the very framework that privileges the human as moral centre.

Her refusal to eat meat initiates an ethical reorientation that goes well beyond her dietary practice. It reconfigures her relation to all forms of life, including her own body. She gradually stops imagining herself as a functioning member of the human society and begins to conceptualize herself within vegetal temporality: rootedness, stillness, non-violence and non-consumption. This trajectory unsettles assumptions such as agency requiring productivity, verbal articulation or compliance with social roles. In posthuman terms, Yeong-hye becoming a plant is not a mere metaphor but an ontological reconfiguration in general.

Feminist Politics of Refusal and Alternative Agency:

Yeong-hye's decision exposes the extent to which society enforces patriarchal control through the female body. Her husband interprets her vegetarianism as a personal outrage to domestic order. Her

father reacts with coercive violence, attempting to force meat into her mouth. Her brother-in-law sexualizes and exploits her altered state. Psychiatric institutions respond not by interrogating the social structures that produce her distress but by disciplining her into normative functioning.

These reactions reveal that Yeong-hye's transformation is threatening not because it is irrational, but because it refuses systems that rely on the female body as an instrument of labour, reproduction and obedience. Her repeated refusals to justify, explain or persuade is central here.

Rather than being interpreted as lack, *her silence operates as agency through non-participation*. She refuses to speak the language of those who demand relentless sacrifices. Her withdrawal from sexuality, speech, and social productivity manifests as alternative political practice: the politics of refusal. Yeong-hye neither argues nor protests. She opts out. The body becomes the site of resistance not through visibility but through strategic absence from available roles. In this sense, her "madness" is socially produced: the system pathologizes that which cannot be assimilated.

Interconnectedness: Ethics Beyond the Human:

The ethical core of this novel, however, is interconnectedness. Posthumanism rejects the autonomous, sovereign subject and foregrounds relational ontology (the idea that beings exist through networks of relations with human and non-human others.) In *The Vegetarian*, interconnectedness manifests in three major ways: ecological, affective, and ethical.

Ecologically, Yeong-hye begins to perceive herself as part of a wider continuum of life. She desires to photosynthesize, to be sustained by sun and water rather than animal death. This reimagining of sustenance is not mere naturalism; it is a pointed critique of violent metabolic economies inherent to human societies. Her aspiration to become plant does not erase interdependence; it radicalizes it. She seeks a mode of existence defined by minimal harm and maximal embeddedness within nonhuman systems.

Affectively, interconnectedness is expressed through the relationship between Yeong-hye and In-hye. In-hye remains within convention, with motherhood, work, care responsibility, but begins to experience profound resonance with Yeong-hye's withdrawal. She feels both enticed and afraid of the vegetal alternative. In-hye does not "follow" but she understands and, in this understanding, the text performs posthuman ethics as relational recognition rather than imitation. Interconnectedness here is less about shared action than about shared vulnerability.

Ethically, the interconnectedness in this novel, challenges anthropocentric moral frameworks. Haraway's critique of dualisms: nature/culture, human/animal, provides a theoretical scaffold for interpreting these dynamics. The novel rejects the idea that ethical consideration belongs exclusively to the human domain. The suffering of animals, the exhaustion of women and the consumption of other forms of life are interwoven rather than separable.

Yeong-hye's refusal brings these relations into visibility. *Interconnectedness is, thus, not a sentimental unity but an ethical complication: recognizing that all life participates in systems of dependency that must be re-examined.*

Narrative Fragmentation and Porous Subjectivity:

The narrative structure of *The Vegetarian* is tripartite, shifting perspective between husband, brother-in-law and sister. Yeong-hye herself never directly narrates. This formal decision is not simple marginalization; it constitutes a structural feature of posthuman subjectivity. The absence of a unified central voice destabilizes expectations of singular identity.

Posthuman identity, in Braidotti's terms is porous, multiple, and relational. The novel mirrors this by refusing to grant Yeong-hye full narrative authority while simultaneously showing that every other

character's identity becomes reorganized around her transformation. The husband's masculinity fractures when his domestic order collapses. The brother-in-law's artistic and fantasies intersect destructively with Yeong-hye's vegetal becoming. In-hye's sense of familial duty and selfhood destabilizes as she perceives the enticing possibility of escape.

Identity is thus distributed across perspectives rather than consolidated through a singular, central voice.

This fragmentation shifts liberal humanism to relational interpretation. Yeong-hye's subjectivity cannot be captured fully in language, diagnosis or gaze. The text thereby enacts resistance to labels and insists on the unknowability beyond established human categories.

Destabilizing Binaries: Human/Animal, Culture/Nature, Male/Female:

The novel systematically dismantles central binaries that support humanist and patriarchal ideology.

The Human/Animal binary collapses through Yeong-hye's nightmares and disgust toward meat consumption, where animal bodies appear not external but internal to her own. She experiences contamination not separation. The violence done to the animals echo as violence enacted upon her body. The text thus undermines the assumption that human life is ethically superior or ontologically distinct.

The Culture/Nature binary erodes as Yeong-hye increasingly rejects social norms, including marriage expectations, work discipline and family obligation in favour of a vegetal existence. Nature here is not a romantic escape, rather, it is a radical alternative to a culture that is organized around cruel domination and productivity. By seeking rootedness rather than mobility and growth without consumption, she challenges cultural valuations placed upon agency and progress.

The Male/Female binary becomes visible in how differently bodies are disciplined. Male characters respond to Yeong-hye not with comprehension but with control and enforcement. Female experience is marked by care labour, endurance and internalisation of responsibility. Yeong-hye's refusal of gendered expectations demonstrates the instability of this binary by stepping outside the system.

Haraway's cyborg theory argues that binaries exist to justify domination. The Vegetarian dramatizes their erosion. Yeong-hye's becoming-plant is neither natural nor artificial, neither purely self-determined nor externally imposed. It occupies a liminal space that defies categorization, exemplifying posthuman multiplicity.

Rebirth Without Redemption:

To call *The Vegetarian* posthuman renaissance literature is not to romanticise renewal but to describe a reorientation. Renaissance here signifies rebirth in the literal sense: emergence of new modes of being that refuse to reproduce humanist assumptions. *Yeong-hye's vegetal becoming reconfigures subjectivity, not toward transcendence, but toward non-participation in violence.*

Rebirth in the text carries no promise of healing or social integration. Instead, it pushes identity beyond recognisable boundaries. Yeong-hye's refusal generates suffering for those around her, but that suffering itself exposes structures of coercion, care burden and gendered expectation. The novel thus resists closure. It neither pathologizes nor celebrates transformation. Posthuman renaissance literature, as enacted here, foregrounds transition, fluidity, and undoing, rejecting fixed identity while still remaining immanently embodied. *Yeong-hye's desire to be sustained by sunlight is impossible in biological terms but conceptually rigorous: it signals wish to inhabit life without predation or dominance.*

Conclusion:

The Vegetarian ultimately reworks bodily autonomy by refusing to treat the body as a bounded, self-possessed unit. Autonomy here is not liberal individual self-ownership. Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat and perform a heteronormative life operates as a radical redefinition of autonomy. It is agency as noncompliance and reorientation of desire away from human-centered norms. This autonomy is inseparable from interconnectedness.

The novel shows that bodies are always already relational, circulating through kinship, violence, care work, institutional power, plants, landscapes, and dreams. Hence, any change in one body reverberates through others. In-hye's partial identification with Yeong-hye makes this clear. Autonomy is never isolated, it is, at the very least, affectively transmitted and structurally constrained.

By tracing vegetal becoming as both liberation and cost, the text rejects sentimental resolutions and simple emancipation narratives. Instead, it exposes how autonomy is continually negotiated within networks of dependency that include the more-than-human world. Posthuman feminism here does not celebrate transcendence, but insists that subjectivity is vulnerable and co-constituted with nonhuman life.

The novel's refusal to restore normative personhood functions as an ethical provocation: it forces readers to confront how human exceptionalism sustains patriarchal control over bodies and environments alike.

Bodily autonomy and interconnectedness emerge not as opposites, but as mutually defining. Freedom becomes meaningful only when understood through relations and relations become ethical only when they cease to claim ownership over another's body or being.