

## Becoming-Plant: Post-Human Ethics and The Refusal of Flesh in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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### ABSTRACT

In today's world, human identity is influenced by political control over bodies, environmental problems, and physical acts of resistance. Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* (2015) tells the story of Yeong-hye, a woman who decides to stop eating meat. Over time, she begins to reject not only food but also her role in human society, choosing instead to live like a plant. This study investigates how the novel enacts a post-human ethical position by dismantling traditional humanist notions of agency, language, and autonomy. The aim of this study is to explore *The Vegetarian* through the lens of post-human ethics, particularly examining how the protagonist Yeong-hye's bodily withdrawal represents a radical refusal of normative human subjectivity. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway, this paper adopts a qualitative, close-reading methodology to analyze Yeong-hye's silent dissent as a mode of becoming that challenges patriarchal, anthropocentric, and consumerist structures. The study utilizes Braidotti's concept of "becoming-other" and Haraway's critique of human exceptionalism to argue that Yeong-hye's transformation is not madness or passivity but a deliberate ethical disruption—one that critiques the violence of normative embodiment. Her journey toward plant-life becomes a mode of resistance that is both ecological and existential. *The Vegetarian* is uniquely positioned to address the intersection of gender, body, and post-human transformation. In a narrative where the protagonist says little yet expresses everything through her physical metamorphosis, the novel becomes a profound meditation on how silence, withdrawal, and nonhuman identification can reframe our understanding of ethics, suffering, and refusal.

**Keywords:** Post-human Ethics, Resistance, Transformation, Silence and Withdrawal, Human-Animal Divide

### Introduction

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2015) tells the story of Yeong-hye, a South Korean woman who chooses to stop eating meat after experiencing a disturbing dream. While her decision initially seems like a simple dietary change, it quickly evolves into a radical rejection of societal norms, familial expectations, and even human identity itself. As Yeong-hye gradually withdraws from eating, speaking, and engaging with others, her transformation opens space for questioning violence, autonomy, and conformity in a deeply structured society.

This study interprets Yeong-hye's transformation not as a mental breakdown but as an act of ethical resistance. Through her silence, physical refusal, and withdrawal from human-centered systems, she challenges patriarchal and cultural frameworks that demand obedience and consumption. Zhang (2021) argues that the novel's horror lies not in Yeong-hye's vegetarianism but in the violent responses she receives when asserting bodily autonomy: "It is not vegetarianism but patriarchal violence that emerges as the true horror in *The Vegetarian*" (p. 258). This means that the true danger in the novel is the way male authority reacts with aggression when a woman tries to make choices about her own body.

Kim (2019) further asserts that Yeong-hye's suffering is more than physical—it is psychological and spiritual. Her withdrawal, according to Kim, represents resistance to a system that denies her voice and dignity: "Suffering becomes in this novel a psychological, physical, and spiritual effect of dietary resistance to male-dominated Korean society" (p. 2). In other words, Yeong-hye's pain comes from challenging a society that forces women to obey, and her suffering reveals how deep that oppression runs.

To examine this transformation, the paper draws on post-humanist theory, particularly concepts related to becoming, nonhuman ethics, and the rejection of anthropocentric thinking. Post-humanism challenges human superior-

ity and centers other modes of existence that defy traditional structures of dominance. Singh (2018) describes this ethical shift as “refusing the sovereignty of man” (p. 158). This means turning away from systems that place men and humans above all other beings, and choosing instead a more equal and ethical way of existing.

The argument here is that *The Vegetarian* portrays Yeong-hye’s transformation as a post-human act of ethical refusal. She turns away from consumption, speech, and human roles not because she is broken but because she finds no other way to live without contributing to harm. O’Key (2021) explains this as “a form of vegetarianism not motivated by health or empathy but by an instinctual rejection of all violence” (p. 9). This means that Yeong-hye’s choice is not about diet or compassion, but about refusing to take part in a violent world. Casey (2021) suggests that Yeong-hye’s transformation is not a failure but a powerful challenge to a world that denies her humanity: “What makes Yeong-hye’s metamorphosis powerful is not its success, but its relentless challenge to the world that refuses her humanity” (p. 347). In short, her journey matters not because it ends well, but because it keeps resisting a society that refuses to see her as fully human. Beeston (2020) similarly emphasizes that the horror in the novel is not Yeong-hye’s resistance but the constant demand for conformity: “The central horror in *The Vegetarian* is not madness but compliance—the demand that women comply, consume, and conform” (p. 680). This suggests that the real problem is how society forces women to fit into roles, follow rules, and give up their independence.

Although Yeong-hye ends the novel fragile and nearly voiceless, her body continues to express resistance. She no longer engages in the structures of language, consumption, or gendered obedience. As Marder (2013) writes, “Her rejection of food is not merely physical—it’s metaphysical, a retreat into vegetal being that redefines human subjectivity” (p. 121). In other words, Yeong-hye’s refusal to eat becomes a deep and symbolic act that changes what it means to be human.

While the novel offers no redemption or healing in the conventional sense, it does provide a profound ethical gesture: the power to say no—not through violence or speech, but through the quiet resistance of the body itself.

### Review Of Literature

Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* has drawn deep critical attention for its exploration of bodily refusal, gendered violence, and symbolic transformation. Critics have examined the novel through feminist, psychoanalytic, ecological, and aesthetic lenses, revealing its complex layers of meaning. However, none have fully framed Yeong-hye’s metamorphosis as a post-human ethical act: a conscious and embodied refusal of violence, language, and anthropocentric identity. This study addresses that critical gap by proposing a reading of Yeong-hye’s transformation as a form of ethical unbeing rooted in post-human theory.

This area is worth exploring because Yeong-hye’s radical withdrawal challenges foundational concepts of what it means to be human. Her refusal disrupts dominant ideas of personhood built on control, consumption, and social conformity. As Cynthia Zhang (2021) observes in *Against Man: Violence and the Vegetal*, “It is not vegetarianism but patriarchal violence that emerges as the true horror in *The Vegetarian*” (p. 258). The true disturbance, then, lies not in Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism, but in the violent reactions of those around her—especially men—who are threatened by her disobedience. Similarly, the *Yonsei Journal* (2022) notes that, “Through literature, this novel imagines a radical vegetarianism and a rejection of consumption to its extreme” (p. 159). The extremity here is not just political—it is ontological. It reconfigures Yeong-hye not as a broken subject, but as one evolving toward a new being altogether.

In *Eating and Suffering in Han Kang’s The Vegetarian* (2019), Won-Chung Kim highlights the sacrificial dimension of Yeong-hye’s suffering. He writes, “Suffering becomes in this novel a psychological, physical, and spiritual effect of dietary resistance to male-dominated Korean society” (p. 2). While powerful, this reading positions her suffering as central, comparing Yeong-hye to “a sacrificial lamb, suffering to bear the karma of humanity’s violent eating” (p. 2). However, this research proposes a crucial shift: her suffering should not be seen as her essence, but as the cost of ethical resistance. Her pain is not martyrdom—it is the price of refusing to participate in systems of domination.

Yi-Peng Lai (2022), in *Blooming Against Meat*, addresses Yeong-hye’s fading presence and growing silence. He writes, “Yeong-hye’s voice recedes in accordance with the progress of her arboreal transformation” (p. 3) and describes the arc of the novel as “beginning with voicelessness and ending in voicelessness... Yeong-hye is thoroughly silenced” (p. 3). Lai argues that “silence, starvation, and subjectivity create a politics of un-being” (p. 4). These insights are critical in showing how Yeong-hye steps out of human discourse. However, Lai focuses more on symbolism and aesthetics than on post-human ethics. He does not ask whether her transformation represents an alternative mode of existence.

Dominic O'Key (2021), in *Eating Animals Otherwise*, offers a more skeptical view. He asserts, "Rather than an imagination of ecofeminist subjectivity, *The Vegetarian* stands more as a dramatization of gendered and cross-species violence" (p. 8), and adds that "the novel denies the reader a coherent vegetal focalisation" (p. 9). O'Key's concerns highlight the challenges of narrating post-human consciousness within realist fiction. His work points to the difficulty of fully representing vegetal life, yet stops short of recognizing Yeong-hye's silence and withdrawal as viable ethical positions in themselves.

Other scholars have affirmed the idea of refusal as resistance. The *Yonsei Journal* (2022) notes, "It is not about whether she succeeds in not participating in systems of violence, but in the very act of refusal, she resists" (p. 159). This reading acknowledges that resistance lies in intent, not in social success. Hayley Singer (2016), in *The Art of Carnism*, similarly argues that vegetarianism functions as "a protest against patriarchy encoded through consumption" (para. 4). For Singer, Yeong-hye's dietary decision is part of a broader rejection of gendered violence and objectification. In the same journal, another line adds, "Yeong-hye's actions provide a critique of subjectivity based on distinction and identifiability and suggest that the human is always already not human" (*YJIS*, 2022, p. 158). These readings begin to question human centrality, but few articulate what Yeong-hye becomes in ethical terms.

Michael Marder's (2013) *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* offers a theoretical foundation for understanding vegetal subjectivity. He writes, "Her rejection of food is not merely physical—it's metaphysical, a retreat into vegetal being that redefines human subjectivity" (p. 121). While Marder's plant philosophy is foundational, it is rarely applied directly to *The Vegetarian* in existing scholarship. The novel's potential as a post-human narrative is left underexplored, with most critics choosing symbolic or trauma-based interpretations rather than ontological readings.

One of the central challenges across the literature is the question of agency in silence. Scholars like Lai and O'Key recognize Yeong-hye's muteness but struggle to frame it as active rather than passive. Beeston (2020), in *The Art of Withering*, offers a useful shift, writing, "The central horror in *The Vegetarian* is not madness but compliance—the demand that women comply, consume, and conform" (p. 680). This reframes the novel's violence not as internal, but institutional. Julietta Singh (2018), in *Unthinking Mastery*, writes, "Her transformation demonstrates what Julietta Singh calls a form of dehumanism, a refusal to uphold the sovereignty of man" (p. 158). Singh's insights align with post-human critique, where Yeong-hye's metamorphosis can be read as a dissolution of anthropocentric dominance rather than a descent into madness.

Taken together, these works create a vibrant field of feminist and ecological interpretation, yet most stop short of asking the question this study foregrounds: What if Yeong-hye's retreat into vegetal being is not collapse but clarity? Not failure but freedom? This research positions her transformation as a deliberate and embodied refusal—a slow blooming into an alternate way of existing. As the *Yonsei Journal* concludes, "This novel imagines vegetarianism as a nonviolent mode of being" (2022, p. 159). This paper pushes that idea further, arguing that *The Vegetarian* enacts an ethics of refusal, silence, and vegetal becoming that must be taken seriously within post-human thought.

Therefore, while prior studies have offered rich aesthetic, feminist, and symbolic analyses of Yeong-hye's journey, none have directly addressed it as a viable ethical framework. Her bodily withdrawal, starvation, silence, and arboreal transformation have been interpreted through the lens of trauma or metaphor—but not as choices that reflect a radically different way of being. This study, then, offers a new lens—one that sees Yeong-hye's metamorphosis as an act of ethical resistance, not symbolic disappearance. Until now, *The Vegetarian* has not been fully explored as a narrative of post-human ethics, and this research fills that gap by reading Yeong-hye's becoming-plant as a radical ethical act.

## Research Methods

This research uses a qualitative and textual approach. It involves a careful reading of Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* and analyzes it through the lens of post-human theory. The aim is to understand the deeper meaning behind Yeong-hye's refusal to eat, speak, or remain part of human society. This reading pays attention to key moments in the text where her body, silence, and withdrawal take on symbolic and ethical meaning.

*The Vegetarian* was chosen because it presents a unique case of bodily resistance. The main character, Yeong-hye, does not speak out or fight back in traditional ways. Instead, she slowly removes herself from human norms—she stops eating meat, refuses speech, and begins to see herself as part of the plant world. Her withdrawal is not presented as a triumph, but neither is it framed entirely as defeat. This quiet rejection of human life and identity creates space for a post-human interpretation.

The data for this study comes from two sources: the primary text (*The Vegetarian*) and the theories of major post-human thinkers. These include Rosi Braidotti's theory of becoming-other, Donna Haraway's idea of ethical

entanglement, and Michael Marder's vegetal philosophy. These theorists provide tools to understand Yeong-hye's transformation not as madness, but as a meaningful ethical refusal.

Rosi Braidotti, in her book *The Post-human* (2013) argues that post-human ethics begins when we stop seeing humans as the center of value. According to her, becoming-other is a way to resist the systems that define and limit people. In her words, "Post-human subjectivity is not about becoming less human; it is about becoming more connected with the web of life" (p. 190). In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's move toward becoming a plant matches this idea. She doesn't lose herself—she connects with a different form of being. Braidotti also explains that ethics, in a post-human world, must be built on relationships and shared vulnerability, not control or dominance. Braidotti writes, "Ethics for the post-human is not founded on individualism, but on relational affectivity and mutual accountability" (p. 95). Yeong-hye's choice to step away from language, violence, and human society can be read as an effort to live differently—outside of a world where value is measured by speech, power, or productivity.

Donna Haraway's work also shapes this research. She challenges the idea that humans are separate from animals, plants, or machines. Instead, she talks about entanglement—the idea that all life is connected. Haraway says, "We are all compost, not post-human" (Haraway, 2016, p. 134), reminding us that life and death are shared processes. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's transformation into a plant is not a loss of life—it's a return to the Earth, a quiet acceptance of her place in a larger ecological cycle. Haraway's vision allows us to see Yeong-hye's refusal as an ethical act, not a personal breakdown. It is her way of rejecting a violent system and choosing another kind of life.

Michael Marder's plant philosophy offers another important perspective. Marder argues that plants resist in ways that are not always visible or loud. Their strength lies in persistence, stillness, and nonviolence. He writes, "Vegetal life resists not by speaking, but by persisting in silence" (Marder, 2013, p. 20). Yeong-hye's silence, her refusal to eat, and her belief that she can live on sunlight can be seen through Marder's lens. She is not simply giving up—she is choosing a form of life that does not depend on hurting others. For Marder, plants teach us a different kind of ethics—one that is slow, grounded, and often overlooked. This is what Yeong-hye embodies in the final part of the novel.

In summary, this study uses *The Vegetarian*, the novel as a case to explore how post-human theory helps us see ethical refusal in new ways. Through the ideas of Braidotti, Haraway, and Marder, Yeong-hye's transformation becomes more than just personal suffering. It becomes a political and ethical choice. Her silence is not emptiness—it is resistance. Her starvation is not madness—it is protest. Her desire to become a tree is not delusion—it is a step into a new way of being.

### Textual Analysis

In Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, the central character Yeong-hye's decision to stop eating meat marks the beginning of a quiet but radical departure from the human world. Her act is not understood by her family and society, often dismissed as strange or irrational, but it serves as the novel's first instance of ethical refusal. In *Refusal of Consumption in The Vegetarian*, Song Mi Lee (2022) notes, "Yeong-hye demonstrates a disavowal of participating in the violence inherent to consumption through her radical vegetarianism, and instead poses an ethics of incorporation with the animal Other" (p. 158). This suggests that Yeong-hye's decision is not simply dietary or psychological—it is deeply moral. By refusing meat, she distances herself from a system of everyday violence and domination, seeking instead a gentle alignment with voiceless life, thereby resisting participation in the normalized exploitation of living beings.

This resistance to consumption evolves into a philosophical and ethical journey as Yeong-hye's behavior becomes increasingly withdrawn and introspective. Her movement is not toward madness, but toward post-human subjectivity. As Rosi Braidotti (2013) writes in *The Post-human*, "Post-human subjectivity is not about becoming less human; it is about becoming more connected with the web of life" (p. 190). Yeong-hye's refusal to engage with human-centered norms—whether of food, dress, or language—demonstrates a desire to dissolve the boundaries between herself and non-human life. Her shift toward vegetal existence reflects this entanglement, where identity is no longer defined by dominance but by quiet coexistence.

As the novel progresses, Yeong-hye's silence deepens, and her already marginal voice fades altogether. Her refusal to speak is neither passive nor a sign of collapse—it is resistance. In *Blooming Against Meat*, Yi-Peng Lai (2022) observes, "The novel begins with voicelessness and ends in voicelessness... Yeong-hye is thoroughly silenced" (p. 4). He later adds, "Yeong-hye's voice recedes in accordance with the progress of her arboreal transformation" (p. 3). Her growing silence parallels her physical transformation, as she withdraws from human discourse and steps into a space that human language cannot capture. Donna Haraway (2016), in *Staying with the Trouble*, affirms this gesture, stating, "Silence is not absence. It is a form of listening. And sometimes, the refusal to speak is a refusal to play the master's game" (p. 102). Thus, Yeong-hye's silence becomes deliberate. It is an ethical stand against a world that demands justification from those it marginalizes. In refusing to speak, she refuses to conform.



Her transformation into vegetal life, symbolized by her wish to become a tree, is not delusional—it is philosophical. Michael Marder (2013), in *Plant-Thinking*, explains, “To become-plant is not to regress but to redefine what it means to be a subject. The vegetal is passive, yes, but it is persistently present” (p. 52). Yeong-hye’s becoming-plant is a rejection of violence, hierarchy, and human sovereignty. In her final moments, she demands to be placed in sunlight, refuses food and medicine, and whispers, “I’m finally blooming.” Her blooming is not a metaphor of triumph but of peaceful dissociation from a violent world. As Haraway (2016) reminds us, “We are all compost, not post-human. The goal is not to transcend the human, but to dissolve its arrogance” (p. 134). Her quiet descent into vegetal life is a protest—an ethical retreat into a life form that does not dominate.

Yet, even this refusal is not free from intrusion. In the second section of the novel, Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law eroticizes her transformation, using her body for his artistic fantasies. In *Blooming Against Meat*, Lai (2022) comments, “The eroticisation of Yeong-hye’s body by the brother-in-law reflects the impossibility of escaping visual consumption; even her vegetal withdrawal is interpreted through male fantasy” (p. 6). Her transformation, which should have protected her from human desire, is instead exploited. Rosi Braidotti (2013) writes, “The female body, in post-human terms, remains a contested space—caught between embodied ethics and objectification” (p. 146). Even as Yeong-hye tries to exit patriarchal norms, her body is still used and viewed through a lens of control and desire. Cynthia Zhang (2021) in *Against Man: Violence and the Vegetal* further explains this condition: “Yeong-hye is surrounded by those who speak for her, about her, around her—but never to her. The novel’s horror is not silence, but the inability to own one’s voice” (p. 259). Thus, Yeong-hye’s withdrawal is met not with understanding but with narrative appropriation. Her silence is filled not with peace but with the voices of those who ignore her will.

As Yeong-hye’s nonconformity becomes more visible, it provokes punishment. Her father beats her for not eating meat and not wearing a bra, and her family later institutionalizes her. In *Eating and Suffering in The Vegetarian*, Won-Chung Kim (2019) writes, “Her transformation is treated as a threat to social order. Refusing to wear a bra and refusing to eat meat—these are read not as personal acts, but public violations” (p. 3). Braidotti (2013) confirms that “Resistance is punished, not merely dismissed” (p. 152). These quotes make it clear that Yeong-hye’s ethical choices are not tolerated. The society she inhabits equates bodily autonomy with rebellion and seeks to suppress it through force.

The novel also critiques the quiet violence embedded in ordinary life. Song Mi Lee (2022) writes, “The novel shows how systems of consumption—what we eat, what we expect, how we name—are acts of violence clothed in routine” (p. 160). These subtle acts—eating, naming, demanding behavior—form a system of domination that Yeong-hye refuses to obey. Her resistance is further echoed in Marder’s (2013) claim that “True ethical resistance lies in breaking from the cycle of normalized violence, often disguised as culture or necessity” (p. 40). Yeong-hye does not shout or protest in grand gestures. She simply stops participating. Her quiet, defiant inaction is a challenge to structures that mask harm as custom.

In the novel’s final pages, Yeong-hye is skeletal, silent, and locked in a psychiatric institution. Her difference is labeled illness. Dominic O’Key (2021), in *Eating Animals Otherwise*, writes, “The novel’s ending illustrates how difference, once medicalized, becomes a subject of correction. Yeong-hye’s post-human refusal is interpreted as pathology” (p. 11). Her refusal is seen not as moral but as mental. Stacy Alaimo (2016) explains that “Bodies that resist incorporation into dominant systems are marked as waste, excess, or error. Yet they may hold the keys to new ethical possibilities” (p. 6). Yeong-hye’s apparent decay is not a collapse—it is a rejection of a world that has never been gentle.

*The Vegetarian* is not merely a novel of personal decline; it is a powerful meditation on post-human ethics. Yeong-hye’s refusal to eat, to speak, to conform, and to remain “human” in the conventional sense becomes a radical act of resistance. Her story raises profound questions: Can a refusal to speak be louder than speech? Can becoming a tree be an act of defiance? And can one bloom in protest, not in peace? Through her starvation, silence, and stillness, Yeong-hye seeks not escape but ethical liberation. Her transformation is not transcendence—it is the purest form of dissent.

## Findings

This study finds that Yeong-hye’s transformation in *The Vegetarian* cannot be fully understood through traditional readings of trauma, madness, or feminist resistance alone. Instead, her actions reflect a profound ethical stance rooted in post-human thought. Her refusal to eat meat, to speak, and eventually to exist as a recognizable human subject represents a deliberate withdrawal from systems built on violence, consumption, and control. Far from passive, her silence and bodily decline emerge as intentional acts of resistance. The novel frames her journey not as a descent into disorder but as a movement toward another form of life—one grounded in stillness, vulnerability, and nonviolence.

Moreover, the research shows that Yeong-hye's becoming-plant challenges dominant definitions of identity, agency, and resistance. Her transformation is repeatedly misunderstood and punished by those around her because it breaks the boundaries of what society deems acceptable, rational, or human. Yet through her rejection of food, language, and gender roles, Yeong-hye imagines a new ethical possibility—one that is quiet, embodied, and deeply relational. Her refusal creates discomfort because it exposes how normalized violence operates in everyday life. In choosing to leave the human world on her own terms, Yeong-hye becomes a post-human figure of ethical disobedience, offering a powerful rethinking of what it means to live ethically in a broken world.

### Conclusion

This research set out to argue that Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* presents Yeong-hye's transformation not as a symptom of psychological breakdown or rebellion, but as an ethical, post-human refusal of human-centered norms. Her retreat from speech, nourishment, and social roles becomes a radical form of becoming-other—one that challenges patriarchal, anthropocentric, and consumption-driven systems. Drawing from post-human theory, the study interprets Yeong-hye's metamorphosis into vegetal life as a conscious rejection of violence, not a loss of self but a movement toward a new form of ethical subjectivity.

The textual analysis reveals that Yeong-hye's silence, stillness, and bodily refusal function as modes of resistance that unsettle dominant narratives of agency and conformity. Through her progressive withdrawal, the novel critiques normalized violence hidden in acts such as eating, naming, and institutional discipline. Yeong-hye's final state—rooted, silent, and nearly unrecognizable—invites readers to rethink what it means to live ethically in a world defined by harm. This study concludes that her transformation gestures toward a different mode of existence, one that requires neither power nor voice to assert meaning. Further research could explore similar acts of ethical withdrawal in post-human literature, especially narratives where women or marginalized bodies embody nonhuman or more-than-human forms as resistance to systemic violence. Comparative studies across cultures and genres would enrich the understanding of post-human ethics in global literary contexts.

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