

Enforced Gender Performativity and Objectification of Women by Society in Han Kang's The Vegetarian

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Abstract

Human bodies have been associated to different roles by society on the basis of their body anatomy. A female body has been assigned to the feminine roles prescribed by patriarchal society. The protagonist of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2018), Yeong-hye denies to cook and eat meat which is an essential part of her culture. Her decisions and actions are perceived as abnormal, thus subjected to correction. This study examines the role of traditional gender norms in objectification of women in the novel employing Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Fredrickson and Roberts's theory of objectification as the modes of inquiry. It reveals that Yeong-hye falls victim to traditional gender roles and becomes an object to her husband, family and society. Her husband, father and brother-in-law perceive her as a body rather than a complete human being with her own subjectivity. Yeong-hye's abstinence from carnivore diet and sexual relationship with her husband leads to her abandonment and alienation from the society. The continuous pressure on her to fit in the conventional norms results in deterioration of her physical and mental health. When Yeong-hye is compelled to fit in stereotypical roles, she is objectified and deprived of her subjectivity. Her body has been understood as an object and expected to operate according to the conventions of society. This paper concludes that strict rules of gender performativity lead to loss of subjectivity and objectification of women.

Keywords: body, gender roles, feminine roles, objectification, patriarchy, women's body

Introduction

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2018) presents struggle of an ordinary South Korean woman whose life takes unexpected turn after she stops consuming meat. The protagonist of the novel, Yeong-hye is a member of Korean family where meat is integral part of their diet and culture. But she stops eating and cooking meat after she dreams of eating red raw meat with her bloody hands and her clothes soaked with blood. Her husband, Mr. Cheong is utterly perplexed by his wife's decision to become vegetarian because he thinks that his wife is the most ordinary woman he has met in his life. He is deeply unsettled by his wife's unusual behavior as she avoids sex along with meat. He expects his wife to sincerely obey his orders, serve him and satisfy his sexual desires. Being a husband, he does not try to understand his wife's feelings but sexually abuses her to fulfil her desires. Eventually, he abandons her like other discarded objects because he can no more take advantage from her. Similarly, Yeong-hye's father, a Vietnam War veteran is a domineering male figure and the head of the family. He believes that his family members should obey his orders and his daughter, being a wife, should cook meat and feed her husband well. Yeong-hye has endured physical assault of her father since her childhood. He gets furious at Yeong-hye's decision of becoming vegetarian. They organize a family dinner at Yeong-hye's sister's place to get her eat meat. As she boldly declares that she won't eat meat, her father forcefully puts meat into her mouth. Unable to control his anger, he yells at her and strikes on her face. Amidst unbearable pressure from the people around her, Yeong-

hye slits her wrist with a knife to end her life. Furthermore, Yeong-hye's brother-in-law uses her body as an object for displaying his art. After he hears about Mongolian mark on her buttocks from his wife during a random conversation, he becomes obsessed with the thought of filming a video of that Mongolian mark. Yeong-hye's body with the Mongolian mark arouses sexual desire in him. He paints flowers all over her naked body and films a video of them having sex. Yeong-hye's husband, father and brother-in-law treat her as an object to fulfil their desires and perceive her body as an embodiment of female roles.

This study explores how the deeply rooted gender norms dictate and constrain women's roles, behavior and identities in a patriarchal society. When Yeong-hye's body is forcefully imposed upon female roles regardless of her interests and desires, it results in deterioration of her physical and mental health. She is continuously pressurized to become a good wife by obeying her husband. Her parents feel ashamed of her for her decision to become vegetarian. Her husband treats her like a servant and comfort woman rather than a companion. Yeong-hye's sexual relationship with her brother-in-law is not an emotional intimacy, but only his obsession for her body. These incidents reflect the male members' perception towards women in the novel. Their perception of Yeong-hye's body as an object and failure to understand her feelings and desires affect Yeong-hye. She is unable to lead a normal, healthy and happy life due to the circumstances created by the men in her life. In the end, Yeong-hye denies to eat anything except for water and wants to live like a tree, disconnected from human world.

This paper analyzes *The Vegetarian* through the combined frameworks of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Fredrickson and Roberts's objectification theory. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity suggests that gender is not something innate or fixed, but a norm created and expressed through repeated behaviors, actions, and performances. Individuals perform their gender based on societal norms and expectations, rather than simply expressing a pre-existing identity. Fredrickson and Roberts's objectification theory links cultural sexual objectification to self-objectification and its harmful psychological consequences. Sexual objectification is defined as the experience of being treated as a body or collection of body parts that is valued mainly for its use or consumption by others. Societal treatment of women's bodies shapes their self-perception and mental health.

This article has an introduction, theoretical analysis of the text, and a conclusion. Firstly, it examines Yeong-hye's role as a daughter and wife using Butler's concept of gender performativity. It explores how she is forced by her family and society to fit in conventional role of women. She is expected to be an obedient daughter, a submissive wife to do cooking for her husband and satisfy his sexual needs. Secondly, it deals with the protagonist's body's objectification by her husband, father and her brother-in-law. Thirdly, it analyzes the negative impact of forcefully imposed gender norms and objectification of the protagonist's body in the novel. As a result of long endured oppression and multiple sexual assault from her husband, Yeong-hye loses her mental stability. The paper

concludes that the protagonist's resistance to male domination and struggle to maintain her decision of becoming a vegetarian culminates in deterioration of her physical and mental health.

Critical Readings on the Vegetarian

The Vegetarian has garnered acclaim from critics worldwide and has been interpreted from various perspectives. One prominent theme in the novel is the domination of males in Korean society. Savitri (2018) argues that Han Kang's work illustrates a woman's struggle to free herself from the chains of patriarchal domination, highlighting the oppressive societal structures that confine women. Pokharel, Banu and Sharma (2025) view "Willingness to be a vegetarian represents not just the protagonist's dietary preference but also a symbol of ideological resistance against patriarchy-guided and deeply ingrained cultural norms" (p. 30). On the contrary, Hakyoun Ahn (2024) discusses the politics of voice and performativity in the novel, "voiceless protagonist as "an oppressed female object of patriarchy and a human-turned-into-tree" (p. 277). Ahn questions the ambivalent depiction of sexual agency of the protagonist. Similarly, Adhikari and Pokharel (2025) explore the efficacy of Yeong-hye's resistance, questioning whether her withdrawal signifies empowerment or a retreat into passivity. They argue that her total rejection of family and societal norms ultimately leads her to retreat into a world of plants. Furthermore, Rose Casey (2020) defines Yeong-hye's desire for tree life as "willed arboreality that is propelled by her subjugation under both local and global patriarchies" (p.20). Casey argues that Kang

presents misogyny's constitutive influence on Yeong-hye in the text.

Panta and Adhikari (2025) shift the focus to the male characters in her life: her husband, father, and brother-in-law. They contend that patriarchal systems utilize violence, objectification, and domination to undermine women's autonomy (p. 34). They argue that when Yeong-hye fearlessly defies conventions, it threatens the male characters' sense of agency. For instance, Panta and Adhikari note that Mr. Cheong's inability to reconcile Yeong-hye's vegetarianism with his strict desires for a submissive wife underscores his insecurity in the face of female agency.

Anand (2019) analyzes subtle perpetration of violence as the way of imposing moral or routine order under patriarchy. She asserts that Yeong-hye's submissive character is reflected by her abstinence from meat eating practice in a masculine world. Won-Chung Kim (2019) examines cases of psychological, physical and spiritual suffering that results from dietary resistance in male-dominated Korean society. Yeong-hye is interpreted as victim of meat-based sexist culture and a social system that threatens her safety and integrity of society. Yeong-hye becomes the object of consumption and exploitation.

Devi and B. (2023) approach the novel from a cultural and gender perspective, concluding that *The Vegetarian* is a multi-layered narrative addressing various issues in Korean society, including gender differences and the relationship between food and social status. Through Yeong-hye's rebellious nature against societal norms, Kang highlights the challenges of resisting established stereotypes.

"The author rebels against patriarchal authority and challenges gender power dynamics in Korean Culture" (p. 1570). Yeong-hye's vegetarianism symbolizes her resistance and becomes a challenge to patriarchal values. Munir and Liaqat (2024) discuss the novel from the perspective of Foucauldian discourse analysis who found that Yeong-hye's rejection of meat is a resistance against human-created power structures. "Her post-human wish to turn into a plant becomes her final means to escape all human forms of discipline and punishment" (p. 97). Human society operates on the principle of discipline and punishment where an individual becomes subject to punishment if she breaks the rule of society. In her society, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is unacceptable; therefore, she wants to live a tree-life.

While much discourse has centered on gender roles and male domination in *The Vegetarian*, the relationship between gender performativity and objectification has received less attention in previous studies. This study aims to address the gap by connecting gender performativity and the psychological impacts of objectification on the protagonist's life. The rigid gender roles prescribed by a male-dominated society suppress women's subjectivity, resulting in objectification. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Fredrickson and Roberts' objectification theory, this research connects unstable physical and mental health of Yeong-hye with oppression caused by gender norms and objectification of her body. Subverting the traditional notion of gender fixity, Butler emphasizes that gender is constructed by sociocultural practices rather than being

inherent.

Fredrickson and Roberts link gender performativity with psychology of women. They discuss the psychological and experiential consequences that sexual objectification incurs in many women's lives. They define objectification as a state when “women are treated as bodies and in particular, as bodies that exist for the use and pleasure of others” (1997, p. 175). “Many women are characterized as nurturant, emotional, nonassertive, self-sacrificing, and relationship oriented...these traits can compromise women’s mental health” (1997, p. 187). Fredrickson and Roberts objectification theory posits that the pervasive sexual objectification of women in society can have detrimental mental health outcomes such as unipolar depression, anxiety, anorexia, sexual dysfunction and self-objectification. Yeong-hye’s prolonged depressed moods, loss of pleasure in most activities and her desire of becoming a tree reflect the psychological consequences of objectifying treatment.

Gender Performativity and the Repression of Autonomy

As a daughter and a wife, Yeong-hye has been assigned norms and roles by her family and society. Her performance of those gender roles constitute her identity as a female member of her family and society. Regarding the connection between gender role and identity, Judith Butler argues, “what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (1988, p. 520). Gender roles are constructed by society and institutionalized by continuous practice. According to convention of society, as a wife she has to cook for her

husband and obey his orders. Butler mentions that defining a female body as “woman” is to “compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility” (1988, p. 522). In the beginning, Yeong-hye performs all the roles and duties assigned to her as a female member. In the five years of their marriage, all the household chores are done by Yeong-hye. Her husband describes her as “completely unremarkable in every way” (Kang, 2018, p. 3), “the most ordinary woman in the world” (Kang, 2018, p. 18). As mentioned by her husband, she used to be an obedient, passive, non-assertive wife silently obeying his decisions and orders. But after the nightmare, she refuses to eat and cook meat. Her initial refusal to eat meat marks her first visible break from the societal expectation and responsibilities assigned to her as a Korean wife. “Young Hye’s decision to become a vegetarian is the beginning of conflicts, which ‘open’ the relation of female and male characters in this novel” (Savitri, 2018, p. 2). This relation reflects the domination of men to women in it. When she denies to serve her husband, he is shocked by the fact that his wife dares to become unconventional displaying unexpectedly unusual behavior like not eating meat at all, avoiding sex and not wearing a bra. Her husband, deeply ingrained with patriarchal ideology, is not ready to accept the changes in her behavior. He scolds her, “You’re insane! You’ve completely lost it” (Kang, 2018, p. 11). When she stops cooking meat for him, he thinks that she has lost her senses and become self-centered. His inability to understand her inner subjectivity reveals that a female’s

identity is expected to align with gendered social performance rather than personal agency.

The conventional norms of gender performativity demands male and female bodies to act within the culturally constructed boundaries of their gender. Butler states, “gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives” (Butler, 1988, p. 526). While living in a society, an individual person has to act and behave as directed by the norms of that society. Society operates and maintains order by imposing cultural norms and behaviors on all the members. In such system, an individual person loses individuality and subjectivity since the person is compelled to conform to the norms of society. “Gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions” (Butler, 1988, p. 527). The continuous imposition of gender roles on Yeong-hye by her husband and father results in the repression of her autonomy. In the family dinner, her father forcefully feeds meat to Yeong-hye. No one respects her personal choice because cooking and eating meat is part of their culture. She is not allowed to choose her freedom over her culture. Pokharel, Banu and Sharma (2025) view that “Her actions represent her agency and ability to make decisions based on her convictions, rejecting the expectations imposed upon her by her husband and society” (2025, p. 34). However, her actions fail to make remarkable impact on the people around her. Unable to exude her power of decision over the restrictions imposed on her, she gradually

distances herself from others which shows her submissiveness. She is not able to establish her agency powerfully in her family and society. In addition, her husband brutally rapes her multiple times to satisfy his physical needs after she avoids sex with him because “his body smells of meat” (Kang, 2018, p. 17). While her husband rapes her, she remains silent without showing any response like a helpless object. He is not worried to maintain a husband-wife relationship as he thinks that he could be well just thinking of her as “a stranger, or no, as a sister, or even a maid, someone who puts food on the table and keeps the house in good order” (Kang, 2018, p. 30). It reflects that her husband takes her body as his possession, which should be available to him when he wants it. He decides that her strict vegetarianism was a proof that she will never be ‘normal’ again; therefore, he abandons his wife like a useless object “as though she were a broken watch or household appliance” (Kang, 2018, p. 70). In all these actions, Yeong-hye remains a silent, passive victim. Her body and identity are controlled by others. She is not allowed to be self-governed and live a life that she chooses. When her body and identity is manipulated by others, her autonomy is silenced.

The Father’s Violence: Enforcing Patriarchal Control

Yeong-hye’s father represents a typical dominating male figure, an embodiment of patriarchal authority. He believes that it is his daughter’s duty to serve and satisfy her husband regardless of her own desires and feelings. He becomes aggressive when his daughter refuses to eat meat as he has ordered. Since he plays the role of patriarch

in the family, he perceives his daughter's refusal as disobedience of his order. "Her refusal to consume meat symbolizes resistance to patriarchal norms" (Pokharel, Banu and Sharma, 2025, p.30). Her resistance troubles masculine sentiment of superiority. When his daughter refuses to do what he says, he responds with violent enforcement of his authority upon her. His yelling at Yeong-hye exudes his authority, "My heart will pack in if this goes on any longer! Don't you understand what your father's telling you? If he tells you to eat, you eat!" (Kang, 2018, p. 38). In a frightening scene, he attempts to force-feed her meat during a family gathering, resulting in a physical assault when she refuses. "Eventually he flew into a passion again, and struck her in the face once more" (Kang, 2018, p. 40). His actions reflect his belief that his daughter's body is not her own, but an extension of his authority and family honor. Ahn states the connection between meat eating culture in Korea and male domination, "meat is symbolic of the historical cultural oppression Korean women have suffered within the male order" (Ahn, 2024, p. 281). Yeong-hye is treated not as a thinking, feeling individual but as a body to be regulated. Adhikari and Pokharel (2025) observe that "Yeong-hye's tragic end suggests that there is loss and depletion of human dignity in the society that prioritizes only profit and control" (2025, p. 62). Father's actions demonstrate that a woman's value is measured by her compliance with expectations of femininity: docility, obedience, and care for appearances. Yeong-hye's denial to consume meat, cook meat for her husband becomes a matter of shame for her father and mother; therefore, they insist on feeding her

meat. They believe that her unconventional action is something to be corrected through coercion because she does not fit in the gender norms defined by her society. Yeong-hye's father's infliction of violence on her depicts that patriarchy not only expects performance but also enforces it through physical and emotional violence when women attempt to deviate.

Female Body as an Object of Male Gaze

Yeong-hye's brother-in-law, an artist hears about Mongolian mark on Yeong-hye's body from his wife; then, he becomes obsessed with her body. "In precisely that moment he was struck by the image of a blue flower on a woman's buttocks, its petals opening outwards" (Kang, 2000, p. 59). He wants her body not as a person, but as an object of artistic and sexual fantasy. "Though her face was missing, the woman in his sketch was undoubtedly his sister-in-law. No, it had to be her" (Kang, 2018, p. 59). His desire is awakened not by her as a person, but by her body as a blank canvas—an unresponsive, silent, passive figure who can be employed into his vision of aesthetic perfection. Furthermore, this fetishism represents an insidious form of objectification. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) explain sexual objectification as one form of gender oppression process, "girls and women are typically acculturated to internalize an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves" (1997, p. 173). Drawing again on objectification theory, it becomes evident that Yeong-hye is stripped of agency and reduced to a visual object a bearer of meaning rather than a maker of meaning.

“ Sexual objectification occurs whenever a woman's body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing her” (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997, p. 175). The use of her body in his art video, painting flowers on her naked body, symbolizes his attempt to possess her, beautify her, and ultimately erase her subjectivity. Similarly, the act of sexual intercourse between him and Yeong-hye is not one of emotional intimacy, but of bodily infatuation. Ahn views this intercourse as Yeong-hye’s “liberation” and “empowering for her” since she breaks away from societal restriction (Ahn, 2024, p. 282). Although Yeong-hye appears to consent, it is not a meeting of equals but an enactment of power. Her passivity is interpreted as availability. Her brother-in-law does not have any feelings for her. He uses her as object for displaying his artistic skills at first and uses her for pacifying his sexual infatuation later on.

Psychological Dissociation: The Internalization of Objectification

Yeong-hye’s strong determination to become vegetarian results in her abandonment by her husband and family. She is physically and psychologically assaulted. She is raped by her husband, beaten by her father. Moreover, the filming of her nude body and sexual relationship with her brother-in-law is also psychologically unsettling. Other people comment on her vegetarianism at the dinner with her husband’s colleagues. Her violent father forcefully puts meat into her mouth. These incidents make Yeong-hye think that nobody understands her. She experiences

physical and mental mistreatment from everyone. Gradually, trauma inflicted upon her leads to deterioration of her physical and mental health. “Yeong-hye became more and more taciturn” (Kang, 2018, p. 129). Her unusual and strange behavior and treatment of her own body reflects the internalization of the objectifying gaze. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) explore negative impacts of objectifying on women's subjective experiences. They point out primarily three psychological disorders: “unipolar depression, sexual dysfunction, and eating disorders” (1997, p. 185). They suggest that women in objectifying environments are prone to self-objectification, leading to body shame, anxiety, and dissociation. Yeong-hye refuses to eat anything. “I don’t need to eat any more” (Kang, 2018, p. 147). She starts fantasizing herself as a tree. “I was standing on my head... leaves were growing from my body, and roots were sprouting from my hands... so I dug down into the earth...I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch” (Kang, 2018, p. 148). Yeong-hye’s descent into silence, refusal to eat, and belief that she is becoming a plant all suggest a disconnection from her human identity. “It was a body from which all desire had been eliminated...she had renounced the very life that her body represented” (Kang, 2018, p. 85). She chooses to stay away from human world and constantly says that she wants to become a tree. By rejecting food, language, and social interaction, she attempts to rid herself from the human form that has been the site of her oppression. In this act, she asserts a radical autonomy choosing her own extinction over submission. However, this resistance comes at a great cost. Yeong-hye’s breakdown reveals the consequence of prolonged objectification

and gendered violence. “Sexual objectification fosters a duplicity of self, accompanied by recurrent and perhaps uncontrollable shame and anxiety” (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997, p. 189). Her retreat from traditional roles does not lead to her liberation and powerful agency of woman, but to passive isolation, trauma and eventual disappearance. “Yeong-hye loses touch with reality and her wish to turn into a plant becomes her final means to escape all human forms of discipline and punishment” (Munir and Liaqat, 2024, p. 97). Rather than a triumphant rebellion, Yeong-hye’s resistance is a slow erasure, a refusal to be part of a system that fails to acknowledge true female agency. Society denies her true personhood because she denies the roles forced upon her. Her disappearance from the social world is tragic. This depicts how patriarchal societies impose performance of gender, and punishes those who fail or refuse to perform accordingly.

Conclusion

In *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang offers agonizing experiences of a female character who refuses to conform to the conventional gender roles of society. Through the character of Yeong-hye, Kang demonstrates that societal norms dictate not only how women must act, but also how they are perceived, treated, and ultimately dehumanized as objects. By employing Judith Butler’s theory of gender as performance and Fredrickson and Roberts’ objectification theory, this study has demonstrated that Yeong-hye is compelled to become an ideal woman by following the gender roles, but her personal desire to become vegetarian is ignored. She is perceived as a physical body, an object

deprived of subjectivity. The behaviors of Yeong-hye’s husband, father, and brother-in-law each represent different modes of patriarchal oppression. Her husband treats her as a domestic object whose purpose is to serve and conform; her father enforces traditional gender roles through violence, seeing her body as a vessel for family honor; and her brother-in-law fetishizes and exploits her body on the name of artistic expression. In each case, Yeong-hye’s subjectivity is denied, and her body becomes the site of others’ projections, expectations, and desires.

Yeong-hye’s eventual retreat into silence, starvation, and desire to transform into a tree are the consequences of long endured objectifying treatment of her body by the men in her life. Yeong-hye’s retreat into silence, anorexia and lack of sexual desire for her husband are effects of objectification as discussed by Fredrickson and Roberts. She experiences alienation and a complete breakdown of her sense of self. In this way, the novel critiques the traditional gender norms along with the violence inherent in their enforcement. Yeong-hye’s journey is not just the story of one woman’s breakdown, but a broader commentary on the devastating effects of patriarchal domination and objectifying treatment of women.

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