



### Article Information

Received:	15 February 2026
Review:	17 February to 28 February 2026
Revision:	29 February to 20 March 2026
Accept:	3 April 2026
Published:	15 April, 2026
DOI:	<a href="https://doi.org/10.3126/ps.v24i1.92768">https://doi.org/10.3126/ps.v24i1.92768</a>
Available:	<a href="http://www.nepjol.info/index.php/ps">www.nepjol.info/index.php/ps</a>

## Buddhist Ethics, and Female Transformation in *The Vegetarian*

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### Abstract

This paper examines how Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* reflects the intersectional theme of Buddhist ethics and ecofeminist care for self and other as seen through Yeong-hye's prolonged engagement with plant-like simulation. So, the paper, through the intersecting lenses of Buddhist ethics, and women's empowerment, argues that the novel bases its thematic and structural outline in an ecofeminist–Buddhist perspective through the character of Yeong-hye. While doing so, it seeks to understand how the oppressive conceptual frameworks and dualisms, such as man/woman and nature/culture, are blurred by challenging anthropocentric and patriarchal structures that justify the domination over nature and women. Under the Buddhist-ecofeminist lens, the study employs textual analysis as a method. Yeong-hye's decision to eat meat is central to the exploration of nonviolence, interdependence, and compassion—key indicators of Buddhist thought. While drawing on Findlay's (2002) discussion of the Buddhist principle of an egalitarian relationship, the paper highlights the rejection of hierarchies between the self and the other. Furthermore, Khejoi et al. (2020) emphasize on the combined form of Buddhism, ecology, and feminism, which *The Vegetarian* articulates and empowers human subjectivity. The study also explores, by positioning Yeong-hye's resistance of sensory pleasure as a form of spiritual empowerment *The Vegetarian* reconsiders female subjectivity through an ecofeminist–Buddhist ethic that blurs the binarism to share a theme for an egalitarian relationship between ecological selves.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, ethics, female subjectivity, transformation

## Introduction

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is a novel that challenges the social conformity, and it, on the contrary, follows the Buddhist's practices of liberation. Yeong-hye's prolonged engagement with plant-like simulation is a combined form of Buddhist ethics and ecofeminist care. So, the paper, through the intersecting lenses of Buddhist ethics, and women's empowerment, revisits oppressive conceptual frameworks and dualisms that dominate one strata of life. It argues that an ecofeminist–Buddhist perspective seen through the character of Yeong-hye is a challenge to deep-rooted tradition of violence which Yeong-hye wants to avoid. Her practice of nonviolence, interdependence, and compassion—key indicators of Buddhist thought are discussed taking into consideration of Findly's (2002) discussion of Buddhist principle of an egalitarian relationship Khejoi et al. (2020) emphasis on the combined form of Buddhism, ecology, and feminism, which *The Vegetarian* is based on. The study problematizes Yeong-hye's resistance of sensory pleasure as a form of spiritual empowerment and her rejection to eat meat sharing a theme for a egalitarian relationship.

Resistance of sensory pleasure is a way to live far from bodily pleasure and by controlling bodily pleasures (such as rich food, comfort, luxury, or physical indulgence), a higher moral, ethical, or spiritual goal is met. The senses can distract a person from discipline, self-knowledge, or spiritual ascetic culture. Spiritual empowerment is a process of gaining inner strength, and moral base through spiritual practice, devotion, meditation. By Rejection of meat sharing and meat culture, represent: commitment to non-violence (ahimsa), resistance to social norms, purity or ascetic discipline and ethical protest against killing animals. An egalitarian relationship is one based on equality rather than hierarchy. The questions that the paper investigates are; how does Yeong Hye anticipate tree-like situation and follow simple life of Buddhist ethics? Why does she stop eating meat? The study assume that she stops eating meat and follows Buddhist –ecofeminist idea of respecting nature.

## Review of Literature

Han Kang was awarded Noble Prize for literature in 2024 for her novel *The Vegetarian* published in 2007. Different scholars analysed *The Vegetarian* from different perspectives since its publication. Jesook Song, et.al. in their collaborative article, "Against Confinement: Degeneration, Mental Disability, and the Conditions of Nonviolence in *The Vegetarian*" mention about the promotion of freedom by blurring the duality and violence. They state:

This very hierarchy of species and of no normative body-minds enables violence and determines how violence becomes legible and illegible. Species hierarchy and the desensitization to violence against those of lower rank are the ones that utterly collapse in Yeonghye's dream world in *The Vegetarian*. (p. 144)

The violence and discrimination are wrong practices. Kang's novel questions patriarchal confinement through protagonist Yeong-hye's transformation into plant-

like "nonviolence," which society labels as mental illness, revealing how rebellion against oppressive norms. Jesook Song, et.al. further write, "With these troubled desires in sexual realms being expressed via dietary metaphors, broadcasting one's eating on live social media (mōkpang) and network television shows has emerged as a major trend in entertainment" (p.145). The trouble sexualized desires expressed in the novel show tortured life of Yeong-hye.

Similarly, Jesook Song and Michelle Cho in "Against Confinement: Degeneration, Mental Disability, and the Conditions of Nonviolence in *The Vegetarian*" articulate, "Furthermore, many televisions shows frequently feature meat consumption and give out packaged meat as prizes, often directly increasing the availability and popularity of particular meat dishes" (p. 146). Though meat consumption is a common phenomenon in Korea, she vehemently objected it: "Cows and pigs bred and raised in South Korea are branded as providing the highest quality meat" (p. 146). Meat consumption is a daily practice in Korean culture, but Yeong Hye stops eating meat.

For Yu-Chen Tai, the novel is a resistance to human exploitation to nature. Tai also observes that Yeong-hye's experiences of various forms of violence, and domination from societal obligations: "Yeong-hye's oppression is manifested in multiple forms. In addition to explicit forms of sexual violence, domestic abuse, and vegan discrimination in a dominant meat-eating culture" (p. 629). Her oppression appears in multiple ways; gender and social oppression are visible in fullest forms.

In *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang portrays Yeong Hye as central character of ecological sensibility intending to become a tree. Here, I argue that Kang by blurring duality of men-women and nature-culture, the novel through Yeong Hye embodies an Ecofeminist-Buddhist perspective. Her Ecofeminist-Buddhist approach leads her reject meat eating and dichotomy between nature and culture. She first challenges patriarchal structures and voices for environmental protection keeping nature at the center, thereby reflecting the ecofeminist critique that domination of women parallels domination of nature. She prefers non-violence and peace by becoming a tree.

Therefore, this article examines and analyses how Kang's representation of the protagonist of *The Vegetarian*'s reliance on tree or her attempt in becoming a tree indicates tree as sentient things with dependent origination in Buddhist trend, focusing that all beings are interconnected. She practices non-harming principles resisting exploitative systems with perpetuating violence. Kang illustrates how Yeong-hye's empowerment in becoming a tree is inseparable from Buddhist notion of non-violence and ecofeminist notion of blurring duality to respect all the ecological selves. Yeong Hye's agency as a form of spiritual and social liberation—a convergence of ecofeminist critique and Buddhist ethical thought is key idea the novel implies.

### Methods

This article is based on a qualitative content analysis based on interpretivism as a research philosophy. While bringing ideas from Buddhist philosophy and

ecofeminist theory, it focuses on Key Buddhist concepts such as *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and the rejection of binary thinking, also find in ecofeminist ethics. This destabilizes hierarchical relation between gender, plants and nature. While doing so, it involves a nuanced reading of Yeong-hye's rejection to meat eating as both ethical and spiritual dimension in her life. It focuses on compassion, and ecological awareness and further synthesizes the close textual reading with theoretical insights from Buddhist studies, ecofeminist theory to explore ecofeminist–Buddhist ethics.

Non-violence can be defined as the ethical principle which does not harm others—physically, verbally, and it promotes compassion, empathy, and peaceful resistance to injustice. It often signals moral strength and spiritual discipline. It can function as a personal ethical practice (self-control, compassion) and a spiritual ideal (purification and respect for life). And the rejection of binarism means refusing to see the world only through rigid either/or oppositions such as male / female and human / nature.

Dissolution of duality as suggested by ecofeminism perfectly matches with Buddhist concept of non-violence. With this, this also focuses on self-governed life through non-violence where human becomes a part of nature. Buddhism gives emphasis to non-violence, peaceful existence, detached from daily life, isolated but meaningful life. In this regards, Rita M. Gross asserts:

The deeper claim of ecofeminism is that the root of the entire ecological problem lies with Western systems of dualism and hierarchy, which are not dualisms between interdependent elements in a whole system, but dualisms of higher and lower, better and worse. (p. 18)

The deeper claim of ecofeminism is that the root of the entire ecological problem lies with Western systems of dualism and hierarchy, which are not dualisms between interdependent elements in a whole system, but dualisms of higher and lower, better and worse are socially constructed to fit for the dominating group. Gross further argues:

In ecofeminist thinking the planet is so polluted and overcrowded because nature is viewed as something to be dominated and used by human beings, without regard for its intrinsic worth or its limits; women are so oppressed because they are viewed as beings who should be dominated by men, whose primary purpose is to care for men and children. (p. 18)

Here, Gross again worries how nature has been polluted and dominated irrespective of its inherent worth and its limits that Buddhism also raises voice to respect the inherent worth of each thing to be considered with respect. This is not found in reality as the reality is based on master model for Gross:

The master key, however, is claimed to be Western hierarchical dualism with its long lists of higher and lower, better and worse, dominator and dominated. Spirit and mind were said to be superior to matter and the body. Earth and this world were definitely not as worthwhile as heaven and the next world. Nature, of course, was

linked with matter and the body, and men were always on the top of the duality, women always at the bottom. (p. 20)

The quote clarifies that master key as an outcome of Western hierarchical treats nature as inferior object to be treated as an object and placed on the bottom whereas men are placed on the top of the duality, and with the same formula, women always placed at the bottom which Buddhism also questions.

Buddhism supports gender equality as discussed by Khejoi et al. (2020) that Buddhism as a religion supports gender equality, “Over the last few decades Buddhism, environmentalism, the ecological movement and feminism have been the subject of much interdisciplinary work” (p. 26). Buddhism, environmentalism, the ecological movement and feminism are interdisciplinary topics. In the same way, Dhammananda K. Srihas explained the women’s position in Buddhism in his book title “What Buddhist Believe” that the Buddha gave women full freedom to participate in a religious life. The Buddha was the first religious Teacher who gave this religious freedom to women” (Khejoi et al. 2020, p. 29). Buddha gave women full freedom to participate in a religious activity. The Buddha was the first religious Teacher who gave this religious freedom to women. Srihas argues, “Buddhism about twenty-five centuries ago inculcated the values of equality, justice and moral strength and spiritual energy by making woman empowered. The concept of women’s empowerment has gained more and more significance in the present times” (Khejoi et al. 2020, p. 35). The values of freedom, justice and morality and spiritual vigor come with women empowerment. The aforementioned critical insights are the theoretical parameters of this study. These parameters constitute the theoretical framework of this study.

### **Discussion: Buddhist Ethics, Women’s Empowerment, and Transformation**

In *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang foregrounds Yeong Hye as an agent of ecological consciousness, non-violence, and peaceful life. With this, it offers a rich site for an ecofeminist-Buddhist reading. For example, she stops eating meat to follow simple life, “I don’t eat meat” (Findly, 2002, p. 22). This foregrounds the theme of Women’s Empowerment, Buddhist Ethics, and Transformation.

Actions, activities, and experiences taken by humans have ripple effects throughout the ecosystem, which understands the Buddhist understanding of karma as the ethical consequences of deliberate action. Ecofeminist Buddhist reading suggests that moral responsibility extends beyond human society to include all sentient and non-sentient beings, a perspective that reinforces both ecofeminist and Buddhist ethics. While reading Yeong Hye as a character with ecofeminist cum Buddhist’s take on non-violence, this argument moves forward integrating ecofeminist critique with Buddhist ethical principles, where *The Vegetarian* positions female position in center to empower all ecological selves.

While challenging conventional patriarchal authority by Yeong Hye, she celebrates inclusiveness accepting tree-like situation and cultivating relational awareness, compassion, love, care, ethics and responsibility toward the natural world. In this sense, Kang’s work exemplifies how the convergence of ecofeminist

theory and Buddhist thought is grounded on inclusiveness and blurring of duality. Her freedom is more than personal one as she questions anthropocentric understanding of trees as mere resources. Carolyn Merchant's assertion is that the domination of women is historically and culturally linked to the domination of nature. This is a daily affair with Yeong Hye until she begins to resist patriarchy by avoiding her role as a dutiful wife. She uncovers the complex dominating networks of male-dominated culture that dominate her, and she goes on enacting empowerment through resistance and care.

Thus, an ecofeminist-Buddhist reading of *The Vegetarian* offers a framework for examining the ecological, and spiritual aspects of woman's empowerment and role in modern literature. Her inclination towards Buddhism, though implicitly, interpreted is more liberating than limiting her in household chores. Becoming a beautiful woman is meaningless to her: "Her thick, naturally black hair was fluffed up, disheveled, and she was wearing her usual white ankle-length nightdress" (Findly, 2002, p. 7). She is in harmony with nature. For Min Young Godley, it is a concept of new woman: "The New Woman's aspiration for a career that was unavailable in her domestic land was depicted as a sign of selfishness, putting the personal above the national; her choice in fashion, which involved short hair" (p. 202). This is both liberation from patriarchy and decorated pompous life.

Her stopping of eating meat is further followed by her simple life as she avoided her make-ups indicating her renunciation: "What's wrong with your lips? Have not you done your make-ups?" (Findly, 2002, p. 20), this is what her husband asks her but she denies it. In this condition, her recognition of simplicity echoes the theme of Buddhism. This is seen in her firm resistance of meat: "I won't eat it. . . I don't eat meat" (Findly, 2002, p. 22). Yeong hye rejects violence and oppression in a silent way following Buddhist trend of peaceful co-existence. Her wish to escape the inherent violence is seen in her desire not to eat meat. She is against meat consumption. Then, she becomes a vegetarian. Her metamorphosis of vegetarianism symbolizes her trajectory towards spiritual realm where one can transcend bodily pleasure and pain. The Buddhist ideal of minimizing harm to all living beings also applies in her life as she does not want to harm anyone. Yumi Pak (2020) mentions this as "Han's subversive articulation of the elusiveness of subjectivity" (Findly, 2002, p. 11).

Yeong-hye's attempt to seek a state of innocence, as a "purity" that she feels as she experiences the tree-being. Her decision to become a plant-like is a quest of spiritual tranquility. Her act of becoming a tree-lie supports the concepts of biocentrism and interconnectedness. Yeong-hye's "ecophilia" is her assertion that she has become a tree and her spiritual connection with nature is filled with Buddhist's notion to happiness. Eventually, she keeps on seeking to become a tree. Her remark that "all the trees of the world are like brothers and sisters" (p. 31) reflects a biocentric approach of looking world and her worldview that values all life equally, applies to Buddhism.

Her decision to become a vegetarian is beyond expectation in patriarchal Korean society. Yeong Hye's transformation can be extended as an exploration of resistance and self-determination. Her control over patriarchal rules and roles, and her diet and her determination to remain vegetarian is a claim of autonomy in a

society where she is repeatedly violated and controlled by males. She goes on asserting that she is a plant and the tree-like situation is experienced by her: "Look, sister, I'm doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands...they delve down into the earth" (Findly, 2002, p. 127). Findly (2002) argues, "Generally, at the time of early Buddhism, living beings are divided into two main categories: the movable and the immovable" (Findly, 2002, p. 261), indicating the theme of egalitarian principle to acknowledge the self and other at the same level which support the idea of non-violence—ahimsa:

Practicing ahimsa themselves and, on the other, by allowing practice of generating donor goodwill and avoiding cen-householder donors to freely use plants and plant products in their daily lives. This latter Buddhism does by being silent about plants as living things and, later, about whether plants are living beings. The exclusion actively excluding them as objects of a non-violent of plants from this category is found, generally, in the ethic (Findly, 2002, p. 252).

By practicing non-violence, one can recognize the personhood in plant and this is what Yeong-hye does in her life: "She was convinced that she was no longer human, but a plant" (Findly, 2002, p. 129). It is the breaking of boundaries between human and plant, indicating a partnership where human existence becomes part of vegetal life. In short, it is called human-tree relation and partnership ethics. Her rejection of meat is a challenge to Korean society. Though vegetarianism, this is also a rejection of human domination over other forms of life and showing her connection to botanical world with her implicit alignment with plant-based relations. This is the, "the transformative possibility of trees. When her sister compels her to eat, she denies it: "I don't need to eat any more" (Findly, 2002, p. 141) hinting her transformation into a tree. She justifies her living presence, "I need to water my body, I don't need this kind of food, sister. I need water" (Findly, 2002, p.148). Her becoming into a plant-like existence is her assurance of Buddhists' trend of treating all the species equally.

The bond of plants and humans is a central issue from plant-human concern. Yeong-hye's decision to stop eating meat, she does not like animal pain and she inspired by a dream of animal suffering, which significantly transforms her perceive identification with plants. This shift changes how fragile and violent human existence can be in the peaceful existence of plant life. Here are some key ways the novel portrays plant-human relations. Yeong-hye's seemingly impractical attempts are based on Buddhism if examined closely. This is understood in spiritual and non-violent way. With the perspective owes much to her self-starvation and retreat into a non-human existence. She frequently objects to her sister: "Sister', Yeong hye said, her voice low and calm as if intending to comfort her. Yeong hye's old black sweater gave off the faint scent of mothballs. When In-hye didn't answer. Yeong hye whispered one more time. 'Siser...all the trees of the world are like brothers and sisters" (Findly, 2002, p. 144).

Han Kang in a talk with Krys Lee mentions, “Violence is part of being human, and how can I accept that I am one of those human beings? That kind of suffering always haunts me. Yes. I also think my preoccupation extends to the violence that prevails in daily life. Eating meat, cooking meat, all these daily activities embody a violence that has been normalized” (p. 64). Eating meat for her is a crime or violent activity. By denying meat, she is giving justice to nature. David Schlosberg in this regard, states, “The central concern of many environmental justice groups is community and cultural survival in a system where recognition is denied and communities and cultures are thoroughly devalued” (Findly, 2002, p. 62). Jesook Song, et.al. have studied the novel from the perspective of freedom entitled “Against Confinement: Degeneration, Mental Disability, and the Conditions of Nonviolence in *The Vegetarian*”. Similarly, the novel has also been read by Yu-Chen Tai from the perspective of resistance in the essay, “Hopeful Reading: Rethinking Resistance in Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*”.

This paper explores and critically analyses the intersectional theme of Buddhist ethics and ecofeminist care for self and other in Yeong-hye’s prolonged engagement with plant-like situation in the novel under study. The intersecting lenses of Buddhist ethics, and women’s empowerment as outlined in the character of Yeong-hye is found as the character blurred by challenging anthropocentric and patriarchal structures that justify the domination over nature and women. Her decision not to eat meat is a key for the exploration of nonviolence, a Buddhist principle of an egalitarian relationship highlighting the rejection of hierarchies between self and other. It challenges the social conformity, and it, on the contrary, follows the Buddhist’s practices of liberation.

### Conclusion

Through an ecofeminist–Buddhist lens, *The Vegetarian* articulates how Yeong-hye’s bodily transformation, from highly pleasure seeking girl to spiritual-non-violent woman, rejects the violence of patriarchal and anthropocentric culture. Her decision to stop meat is a key takeaway towards the respect of all ecological and ethical being. She does not want to harm any sentient beings, which ultimately helps her figure out her “self” located in the harmonious relation with tree, as a part of nature. This echoes the Buddhist tenet of *ahimsa* and the recognition of interconnected life in relation with nature. In blurring the boundary between human and non-human, Yeong-hye blurs what Findly (2002) identifies as hierarchical distinctions creating problems for life forms in the nature. It thus focuses on egalitarian mode of living grounded in interdependence. Though the novel does not explicitly show the human domination of nature, it critiques gendered domination and anthropocentrism as the society of Yeong-hye finds problem in her attempt to find solace and joy in becoming a tree-like. Furthermore, Yeong-hye’s body is a contested site controlled by male authority figures until she become a plant-like where she could not feel pain or pleasure any more. Thus, by reflecting ecofeminist claims that women and nature are similarly subjected to exploitation, this paper shows how the novel go on dissolving the nature/culture binary, and Yeong-hye’s gradual identification with plant life. This shows a Buddhist articulation of

dissolving of ego and self-centered desire. Thus, this study brings a transformative ethics that aligns Buddhism, ecology, and women's empowerment to the fore where all the ecological selves enjoy their life to the fullest.

**Ethical approval for the research:** Not applicable

Consent for publication: Not applicable

**Conflict of interest:** The author does not have any conflict of interest with any institutions concerning this research

**Ethical conduct of research:** This paper is written ethically

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### **About the Author**

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