



The Confrontation of Human-Nature Existence in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract. This research examines the confrontation between the existence of the self and nature in Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian*. In the novel, the principle of vegetarianism emerges as a response to environmental issues and the mistreatment of animals in society. Specifically, this study focuses on the protagonist's adoption of vegetarian ideology stemming from her childhood trauma. Employing textual analysis methods with an ecocriticism approach, the research investigates the main character's quest for the existence of the self and nature. By applying Irigaray and Marder's theory of the vegetal being, the study uncovers how the protagonist merges her existence with the desire to transform into a tree, striving to exist as a distinct entity. However, the eventual collapse of the protagonist indicates her inability to find meaning in her own existence and the existence of nature. This analysis provides a deeper understanding of the protagonist's journey and the complexities surrounding her relationship with herself and nature.

Keywords: Existence, Self, Nature, Vegetarianism, *The Vegetarian*.

1 Introduction

The issue of human impact on the environment has gained significant attention, with much focus on the various problems caused by human actions [1]. These problems cover pollution [2], deforestation [3], [4], loss of biodiversity [5], climate change [6], [7], habitat destruction [8], and erosion, including soil erosion [9] and water erosion [10]. Furthermore, human activities have led to environmental issues such as unplanned urbanization and industrialization [11], which have caused significant environmental degradation. It is a global concern to safeguard the existing natural resources and preserve them for future generations.

The Vegetarian by Han Kang is a literary work that discusses environmental problems caused by human behavior. The novel tells the story of a woman named Yeong-hye who becomes a vegetarian due to the trauma she experienced in her childhood and her dreams about the atrocities committed by humans against animals. Yeong-hye later decides to become a tree, which goes beyond the limits of reasonableness since humans and plants have different manners of living. The novel's portrayal of Yeong-hye's character exposes the lack of awareness that humans have of their subjectivity

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and connection to the natural world, which can be analyzed through an ecocriticism approach.

By employing textual analysis methods, this study will discuss the theory of vegetal being argued by Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder. They proposed the idea of non-anthropocentrism, which includes the following concepts: (1) plant subjectivity and agency, recognizing that nature is not just an object but a subject that can experience its existence; (2) sensory perception, understanding that plants have their unique sense of existing in nature; and (3) ethics of relation, acknowledging the interconnect-edness between humans and nature, and the importance to respect each other. Based on those three concepts, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* represents the lack of human awareness of the subjectivity of nature, and it can be analyzed through Irigaray and Marder's concept of non-anthropocentrism.

Previous studies have explored various aspects of the complex relationship between humans and plants in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, such as [12], [13] and [14]. However, these studies have not extensively examined the existence of human beings and nature within the narrative. Therefore, this present study aims to address this gap by analyzing the issue of human-nature coexistence in Han Kang's literary work. Drawing on the theoretical framework of the vegetal being proposed by Irigaray and Marder, the study will explore the intricate dynamics between human beings and the natural world depicted in the novel. By focusing on this aspect, the study intends to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the interaction between humans and nature in *The Vegetarian*.

2 The Subjectivity and Agency of the Self and Nature

Human existence and its role cannot be separated from nature. Nature as a subject means a right and obligation to be protected from damage. Nature has a strange characteristic that does not separate between exterior and interior, which results in humans feeling complete freedom when they are in nature. Nature is a refuge for humans living their lives because nature is an entity that has rights and interests that need to be respected and protected [15]. Nature provides everything humans need in the form of necessities for life, security, and freedom. It is a place of life for living things. It is fitting that humans, as living beings, take good care of nature.

On the other side, humans are social creatures requiring interaction with other humans, animals [16], and nature. As a sentient being, the experience of human life is a personal and subjective one that can only be genuinely observed by the individual. The acknowledgment and confirmation of this existence is a process that occurs internally, commonly referred to as thinking [17]. Human existence itself refers to human life. In this case, humans have an essential role in the world's life. Human presence in this world affects the environment, society, and nature. In this regard, humans have a role to play by protecting the environment, maintaining social justice, and contributing to the general welfare.

By focusing primarily on their priorities, however, humans often perceive life in the world from an anthropocentric perspective. This perspective suggests that humans

only prioritize their needs and interests above other species in the whole ecosystem. They neglect the significance of other non-human elements, such as animals, plants, and nature. Thus, [15] proposed a non-anthropocentric perspective that challenged the traditional view on placing the role of humans and nature. They emphasized that nature is not merely as a passive object that can be explored by humans. According to both philosophers, plants possess their particular subjectivity, making them living as subjects, not solely objects used by humans.

The non-anthropocentric perspective is depicted by the protagonist, Yeong-hye, in her overall intention to transform into a tree. Referring to the concept of non-anthropocentric perspective suggested by [15], Yeong-hye has the same thought that nature, specifically plants, possess subjectivity and agency similar to other creatures. As explained by [17: p. 212], “plants are able to integrate diverse sources of information; to make decisions; and may even be able to perform predictive modelling.” It shows that the subjectivity and agency of plants can be scientifically explored, especially by employing plant neurobiology. Yeong-hye believes in the capabilities of plants, thus, she expects plants—not only humans—to also become the center of life, neglecting the established anthropocentric paradigm.

While she waits for the doctor to come down from the consultation room, she turns to look at the zelkova tree that stands in the hospital’s front garden. The tree is clearly very old, easily four hundred years. On bright days it would spread its countless branches and let the sunlight scintillate its leaves, seemingly communicating some-thing to her. Today, a day sodden and stupefied with rain, it is reticent, and keeps its thoughts unspoken. [18]

The quotation above narrates the part when In-hye, the older sister of Yeong-hye, visits her sister in the psychiatric hospital. She used to observe the zelkova tree outside the hospital building. As a literary work that promotes a non-anthropocentric perspective, Han’s narrative provides space for nature, particularly plants, so that they are on an equal level with humans. She used personification for the zelkova tree to show the tree’s behavior, and further, the tree’s emotions. The narrative supports the theory of the vegetal being proposed by [15] related to plant subjectivity and plant agency, particularly the way plants communicate with other living beings.

Furthermore, the zelkova tree is assumed to give energy to Yeong-Hye. The first time Yeong-Hye comes to the hospital, she notices the big tree. Her sister is relieved that Yeong-Hye can see the tree from her room window. The sensibility of plants is explained by [15] as the agency of plants to perceive signals from their environment and respond to them through subtle gestures, chemical exchanges, and vibrations. Just like the sibling relationship between the two, the plants are also connected with one another. They establish an interconnectedness among the same and various species in the ecosystem. Thus, as observed by Yeong-hye, “[...] all the trees of the world are like brothers and sisters.” [18].

The final concept of plant subjectivity and agency that are portrayed in *The Vegetarian* is self-expression and adaptation. As suggested by [15], the former deals with the strategies employed by plants to manifest their distinctive features, needs, and re-

sponses to their environment. Meanwhile, the latter is concerned with the mechanisms of plants to adjust to different ecological conditions. Their adaptation might be carried out on several levels, including structural, psychological, reproductive, and behavioral adaptations [19], [20]. As explained by Yeong-hye in the quotation below, the trees in the psychiatric hospital perform an adaptation to their environment:

“I thought trees stood up straight... I only found out just now. They actually stand with both arms in the earth, all of them. Look, look over there, aren’t you surprised?” Yeong-hye sprang up and pointed to the window. “All of them, they’re all standing on their heads.” [18]

With her unusual imagination, Yeong-hye generates her understanding of how plants, specifically trees, adapt to their environment. Yeong-hye did a handstand for hours for some days in a row to conclude her observation. She believes that trees’ branches are like humans’ arms. They grip the soil to absorb both macronutrients and micronutrients as well as organic matter, water, and oxygen to have proper growth and development. This adaptation allows the plants to conform to their surroundings, increasing the probability of survival and reproduction.

3 Unveiling the Existence of the Self and Nature

In *The Vegetarian*, the protagonist, Yeong-hye, establishes a profound connection with nature, especially plants. This relationship gets significantly closer when she makes a bold decision to adhere to vegetarianism, an ideology that contrasts with the common ideology in society because Korean society used to serve meat in their daily dishes. The transformative decision is rooted in a past trauma that haunts her, causing unending nightmares. She sees plants as a source of purity; she believes that their existence is free from the depravity of human life.

The bond between Yeong-hye and plants turns out to be remarkably intense when her brother-in-law paints flowers on her body for an art project. To her brother-in-law, she “[...] radiated energy, like a tree that grows in the wilderness, denuded and solitary” [18]. Because of the strong connection between her and plants, she does not even want the flower painting to come off. She believes that the flower painting stops her nightmarish dreams from coming. Further, beyond reasonable limits, she is willing to make love with her brother-in-law just because he painted his body with flowers, as she wished.

Yeong-hye’s failure in understanding the vegetarianism ideology leads her to make a life-altering decision to become a tree. The idea of transforming into a tree does not emerge abruptly in her thoughts; instead, it is slowly built through her life experiences, whether she is aware of it or not. Initially, even before becoming a vegetarian, she used to have a “no bra look” style [18, p. 13]. As time passes, she tends to have a peculiar habit of taking off her clothes while doing house chores. She is also casually undressed in a public space when being treated in a hospital after attempting suicide.

This left her brother-in-law wondering about her intention, as shown in the following quotation below:

“He couldn’t ask: in that case, why did you use to bare your breasts to the sunlight, like some kind of mutant animal that had evolved to be able to photosynthesize? Was that because of a dream too?” [18, p. 98]

The quotation above demonstrates Yeong-hye’s desire to engage in photosynthesis as if she is a part of the plant that is able to produce her own source of energy. The narrative also shows her demands for water, sunlight, and wind to carry on a biological process. It illustrates her extreme yearning to merge her existence with nature, and eventually, becomes a primary part of the natural world by transforming into a tree. By adopting the survival strategies of a tree, she is unbecoming human [13].

Apart from the horrific dreams that keep haunting her, Yeong-hye’s idea to transform into a tree is also supported by a dream. In the dream, she saw herself converted into a tree. Leaves and roots grow from her body. She also wants to have flowers to bloom from her genitals. The dream further solidifies the idea to withdraw herself from reality and reshape herself into a tree. This absurd idea ultimately pushes her sister into a state of madness.

Had Yeong-hye mistaken the hospital’s concrete floor for the soft earth of the woods? Had her body metamorphosed into a sturdy trunk, with white roots sprouting from her hands and clutching the black soil? Had her legs stretched up high into the air while her arms extended all the way down to the earth’s very core, her back stretched taut to support this two-pronged spurt of growth? As the sun rays soaked down through Yeong-hye’s body, had the water that was saturating the soil been drawn up through her cells, eventually to bloom from her crotch as flowers? When Yeong-hye had balanced upside down and stretched out every fibre in her body, had these things been awakened in her soul? [18].

Eventually, Yeong-hye declares that she is no longer an animal. She assures her sister, saying “I don’t need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight” [18, p. 159]. Even though she vomited blood because of stopping consuming food, she is determined with her purpose of rebirth as a tree. Her actions definitely challenge her human identity. She merges her human identity with the plant identity, neglecting the unique features of each living being. She disregards the conventional expectations enforced by society, and instead, exerts herself to live in a state of a tree. Her separation from the cultural norms and social systems marks her independence as a free living being.

Yeong-hye’s attempt to transform into a tree has transcended the bounds of rationality. It is not surprising that, in the end, her life comes to an end as her body has failed to survive the new way of living. Both the mental and physical aspects of her body prove her inability to sustain life. As suggested by [15], the interconnectedness between humans, plants, and the natural world is arranged by particular ethics of rela-

tion. It means that the three elements are expected to have mutual, reciprocal, and cooperative relationships, by still maintaining each original role in the ecosystem [21].

To be able to coexist with the plants living in the natural world, humans are supposed to acknowledge the subjectivity and agency of plants. As explained in the former section of this paper, plants are proven to have their subjectivity and agency to remain alive. By abandoning the anthropocentric perspective, humans may build a stronger connection with nature, admitting the interdependence of every living organism. An anti-anthropocentric perspective promotes the worldview that neglects human beings at the center of existence. Additionally, humans are not assigned the highest value among other creatures. This alternative viewpoint proposed by [15] encourages respectful relationships between humans and plants that exist side by side in the natural world.

The ethical relationship that regulates the manner of living among humans and other entities results in the emergence of responsibility towards the environment. It drives humans to reevaluate their performance in the vegetal world. By recognizing the inherent value of the vegetal elements, humans set limits in managing the resources from nature. Plants are not seen as passive objects and mere commodities that can be exploited. Oppositely, plants are cultivated for humans' needs, and at the same time, preserved to regenerate so that their species can be saved from extinction.

In Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, the protagonist missed the core value of the ethics of relationship. Because of her mission of transforming into a tree, she breaks the limit that separates the essential roles of humans and plants. She makes the identity fluid, ignoring her principal function as a human being. As she goes beyond the nature of human beings, however, she fails to survive. Her loss of life at the end of the story marks the failure of her transformation into an unbecoming human.

4 Unveiling the Existence of the Self and Nature

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* portrays the complexities of human-nature existence. Driven by her childhood trauma, the protagonist has a mission to become a vegetarian and, ultimately, to transform into a tree. The radical act eventually proves futile, instead, the protagonist descends into madness and meets her demise at the end of the story. By investigating the case from the perspective of [15], it can be seen that the protagonist has moved beyond her limit. By defying societal expectations, she refuses to conform to her primary role labeled by society. The protagonist confronts the anthropocentric view in her actions, believing in the subjectivity and agency of plants. She is concerned about plants' sensibility, strategies of communication, self-expression, and adaptation. As she assigns substantial value to plants, however, she neglects her nature as a human being. Genuinely, once she comprehends the ethics of relationships between humans and plants, she might be able to coexist in balance with other entities.

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