

Analyzing Yeong-hye's Silence, Resistance, and Madness in The Vegetarian from the Perspective of Foucault's Archaeology of Knowledge

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Abstract

The *Vegetarian* is a representative work by South Korean author Han Kang. It became the first Korean novel to win the International Booker Prize in 2016 and was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2024. The novel consists of three parts—"The Vegetarian," "Mongolian Mark," and "Flaming Trees"—narrating the physical and psychological transformation of the protagonist, Yeong-hye, from the perspectives of her husband, Yeong-hye herself, her brother-in-law, and her sister. The female characters in this work, especially Yeong-hye, undergo profound psychological and identity crises. Despite being the protagonist, Yeong-hye rarely speaks from a first-person perspective. Apart from describing her dreams at the beginning and murmuring to herself after becoming a vegetarian and noticing her emaciated body, she scarcely voices her inner thoughts. By the end of the novel, her attempt to transform into a tree plunges her into complete "silence." In fact, throughout the novel, other female characters also experience varying degrees of voicelessness. To explore the manifestations and causes of this "silencing" dilemma faced by Yeong-hye and other women, this study examines female discourse power through character analysis. It further reflects on how contemporary women can achieve self-redemption and liberation from such silence in society.

Keywords

The Vegetarian; female representation; dilemma of silencing.

1. Yeong-hye's Dilemma of Silencing

Foucault states in *The Order of Discourse*: "There are objects forbidden, discourses labeled 'inappropriate,' and speaking subjects disqualified [1]". In *The Vegetarian*, the protagonist Yeong-hye initially embodies the archetype of a devoted wife, described by her husband as: "She effortlessly fulfilled the role of an ordinary wife. Every morning at six, she prepared me a breakfast of soup, rice, and fish. Even her side job, maintained since before marriage, contributed modestly to our household expenses [2]". This portrayal of Yeong-hye as the "perfect housewife" exemplifies Foucault's revelation of how power constructs gender oppression through discourse and bodily discipline. The husband's narrative—a discursive practice from the male gaze—reduces female subjectivity to a functional signifier: The phrase "effortlessly fulfilled the role of an ordinary wife" implies society's naturalized disciplining of women; The daily repetition of "rising at six" and "preparing breakfast" reflects power's micro-control over the female body through temporal and spatial management; "Contributing to household expenses via side work" anchors female value within an instrumental framework of domestic service, quantified by economic utility. This androcentric discourse system, operating through mechanisms of exclusion and a regime of truth, strips Yeong-hye of her agency to articulate her own narrative, rendering her a spoken-for object.

In fact, Yeong-hye's habitual performance as the "perfect wife" stems partly from role replication within her family of origin. The novel depicts her familial atmosphere through her husband's perspective: "Thinking of my wife's family, I recall scenes of cooking and the smells of daily provisions. While men drank and grilled meat in the living room, women gathered in the kitchen for lively chatter[2]". This scene encodes gender oppression as 'natural' daily life through a quadruple disciplining of space, behavior, senses, and time:

(1) Spatial Discipline: Segregation as Power Technology

1. Male domain: The living room—a symbolic public power center for grilling meat and drinking. Female exile: The kitchen—a marginalized service zone.

2. Foucault (Discipline and Punish): "Spatial partitioning is fundamental to producing docile bodies[3]". The kitchen as "female-exclusive territory" solidifies bodies into gender-role containers.

(2) Behavioral Coding: Scripted Gender Performance

1. Male actions:

Grilling meat → symbolic dominance over life

Drinking → leisure privilege

2. Female actions:

"Lively chatter" confined to the kitchen → discursive imprisonment

Topics inevitably center on domesticity, constructing an invisible fence around speech that reinforces the "housewife" identity.

(3) Sensory Binding: Olfactory Politics

1. Female sensory mark:

"Smells of daily provisions" → kitchen labor seeping into skin/clothes as physiological markers of gender.

2. Male sensory privilege:

Savory meat in the living room → unequal distribution of culinary pleasure reinforcing dominance.

Foucault (HOS I): "Power operates through management of the body's subtlest sensory experiences[4]".

This odor dichotomy embodies micro-power's chronic colonization of female bodies.

(4) Temporal Enslavement: The Perpetual Kitchen Clock

1. Female time:

Kitchen labor lacks clear "endpoints" → infinite cyclical domestic time.

2. Male time:

Living room gatherings have defined "leisure periods".

Foucault: "Timetables are central to disciplinary power [1]". Women's "endless busyness" epitomizes the theft of bodily temporality, reducing them to perpetual components of household reproduction. The mother's kitchen labor, re-enacted daily, engrains "woman=servant" coding into Yeong-hye's bodily memory. Her automatic replication of this role as a wife reveals unconscious internalized discipline. Silence becomes the inevitable outcome: When the body is reduced to a functional signifier, language loses its *raison d'être*.

Yeong-hye grew up within her family of origin's coercive disciplinary environment, inevitably plunging into silencing from childhood. The family's disciplining of Yeong-hye was not a concluded past event but an enduring power mechanism. Her muteness in the marital sphere constitutes a projection of childhood trauma—a strangulation of subjectivity achieved through power's intergenerational transmission.

2. Yeong-hye's Resistance Through Vegetarianism

"Discourse is not merely linguistic expression but a site of power operations [1]". In the novel, Yeong-hye repeatedly references a dream before discarding all meat from the refrigerator, refusing to consume or cook any meat. Yet confronted with this radical behavioral shift, her husband responds only with irrational yelling, complaining about vegetarian dinners and blaming Yeong-hye—never probing the deeper causes behind her "bizarre" deviation from convention. This reaction fundamentally exposes the power-holder's instinctive panic toward loss of control. His grievance over "vegetarian-only dinners" targets not food itself, but punishes his wife's transgression of discursive boundaries. By constructing "meat-cooking" as the core signifier of the "wife" identity, societal discourse had already bound female bodies to domestic labor as a "natural obligation." Meanwhile, Yeong-hye's dream—an undisciplined counter-discourse—attempts to create a new system of meaning. However, exceeding the existing order of discourse, it is pathologized as "madness" through her husband's furious condemnation. This violent response exemplifies the literary manifestation of exclusionary procedures Foucault reveals in *The Order of Discourse*: Power maintains discursive monopoly by defining uncodifiable acts as "deviant" through its triple mechanisms—prohibition, division, and regimes of truth[1]. The husband's refusal to explore psychological motivations constitutes a refusal to acknowledge women's right to interpret their own experiences. Ultimately, the "madness" label completely erases Yeong-hye's subjectivity.

Yeong-hye's refusal of meat faces not only spousal violence but collective familial suppression—a literary embodiment of Foucault's power theory. The family, as a micro-apparatus of the disciplinary society, systematically annihilates female subjectivity through a triple suppression: Discursive violence; Bodily control; Truth production

Specific mechanisms of oppression:

(1) The father's forced feeding:

Constructs "meat-eating" as an irreversible patriarchal mandate, weaponizing physical coercion.

(2) The mother's moral condemnation:

Invokes "family shame" to internalize social ethics as tools of oppression, exposing how the "harmonious family" discourse silences female demands.

(3) The brother-in-law's "artistic creation":

Aestheticizes colonization of the body—transforming Yeong-hye's physical agony into a spectacle for the male gaze under civilizational pretense.

(4) The sister's "motherly persuasion":

Reveals the tragic internalization of discipline through compromised appeals to maternal duty.

Yeong-hye's resistance:

(1) Her body becomes the ultimate battleground for power inscription and defiance:

1. Self-harm: A desperate indictment of linguistic collapse

2. Starvation: Corporeal dissolution challenging disciplinary boundaries

(2) Power's co-optation:

These acts are subsumed by medical discourse as "madness", exposing power's core logic: Controlling transgression by: Excluding the "abnormal"; Defining "truth"; Converting resistance into tools legitimizing its authority.

This narrative confirms Foucault's warning: Power's profound terror lies not in overt violence, but in its micro-techniques permeating daily life—forging humans into "voluntary prisoners" (*Histoire de la folie*). [3, 4]

3. Yeong-hye's "Madness" and Self-Erasure

Yeong-hye's "madness" is inextricably linked to her family of origin—a seemingly "harmonious" and "happy" household concealing hidden trauma. From her perspective: "...the dog that bit my leg was tied behind Father's motorcycle[2]". The once-beloved pet was dragged to death for biting its owner's daughter, then cooked into dog-meat soup shared with neighbors. Young Yeong-hye witnessed it all, yet narrates: "I still remember that soup, the dog spewing bloody foam as it ran, its eyes meeting mine. But I didn't care—truly not at all [2]". This episode brutally illustrates Foucault's "silence of the archives": the systematic erasure of female trauma. The family, as a micro-archive of power, rewrites violence's essence—transforming a lynching into a "neighborly gift of dog-meat soup [5]". The father's "just punishment" narrative legalizes perpetrator logic. Yeong-hye's trauma is forcibly excluded from the family history's recordable domain. Her declaration "I didn't care" exposes archival violence's distortion of memory—sensory clarity clashes with hollow denial, revealing patriarchy's disciplining of "correct memory" to enforce female self-silencing. The father's coercion to eat the soup constitutes archival inscription on the body—internalizing the violent symbol ("dog-meat") to transform victim into accomplice. Her later "sudden" vegetarianism becomes corporeal cleansing against this contaminated bodily archive. Her final delusion of transforming into a plant is a desperate attempt to reconstruct a memory-carrier untainted by power. The neighbors' acceptance of the soup exposes society's role as patriarchal archive's accomplice, annihilating female trauma in collective narrative. When perpetrators and bystanders script violence as "upholding family order," Yeong-hye's pain becomes unspeakable dust in history's creases. Only through madness—shattering this counterfeit archive via psychic disintegration—does she utter the ultimate indictment of silence.

4. Conclusion

Through the lens of Foucauldian archaeology, Yeong-hye's "silencing" in *The Vegetarian* embodies the patriarchal discourse order's systematic erasure of her subjectivity. As a functional signifier of the "perfect housewife," internalizing spatio-temporal discipline within the domestic sphere, she is reduced to a mute object. The traumatic memory of her childhood "dog-meat soup incident" is violently expunged from the family archive. Her "resistance through vegetarianism" constitutes transgressive praxis waged on the bodily battlefield: Declaring autonomy via dreams and corporeal purification; Defying the power-coding of "woman = kitchen servant". Yet this rebellion is met with her husband's "madness" accusation and collective familial violence—literary proof of power's exclusionary mechanisms against discursive dissidence. Ultimately, Yeong-hye's "madness" and arboreal delusion simultaneously represent: Power's pathologizing co-optation and exclusion of resistance; Her desperate attempt to: Strip the disciplined body; Defect from human discourse
Reconstruct subaltern subjectivity through non-human form (tree). In power-defined "madness," she seeks ultimate self-dissolution and liberation.

References

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