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"Eating and Being Eaten": The Construction of Female Subjectivity in The Vegetarian and The Edible Woman

Yutong Wu[1, a]

[1]School of Chinese Language and Literature, Soochow University, Suzhou, 215123, China

[a]2201403125@stu.suda.edu.cn

Abstract

Han Kang's The Vegetarian and Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman both explore the theme of "eating" and "being eaten," symbolising the loss and resistance of female subjectivity. Despite their different cultural contexts and divergent plots, the two works exhibit a common thread: using "eating" as a means to rebel against "being eaten." In each novel, the heroines experience a progression from loss of subjectivity—to struggle through food metaphors to reclaim subjectivity—to the rebuilding of their subjectivity. The comparative analysis reveals three contrasting pairs of resistance strategies shaped by cultural context: internalised vs. externalised rebellion, family-centric vs. individual-centric identity, and punishment vs. acceptance by society. These differences underscore how deeply cultural factors influence the process and outcome of constructing female subjectivity.

Keywords

The Vegetarian; The Edible Woman; feminism; subjectivity.

1. Introduction

The loss and reconstruction of female subjectivity has long been a central concern in contemporary feminist literary criticism. As Judith Butler famously observes, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results", implying that Yeong-hye and Marian must performatively reconstruct their identities through acts of resistance [1]. The Vegetarian (채식주의자), a novel by Han Kang published in 2007, is composed of three parts—The Vegetarian, Mongolian Mark, and Flaming Trees—and tells the story of Yeong-hye, a housewife who, after a bloody nightmare, refuses to eat meat. This decision leads her to gradually sever ties with her family and society, ultimately descending into a state of plant-like existence and self-erasure. Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman, written in 1965, follows a young woman named Marian who, under the pressures of marriage and work, undergoes physical and psychological transformations. She eventually rejects marriage and symbolically reclaims her subjectivity by consuming a woman-shaped cake. Though originating from different cultural contexts and differing in narrative and conclusion, both novels share a thematic core: resisting "being eaten" through the act of "eating". In this context, "eating" symbolizes a shift in women's relationship to food and a rebellion against patriarchal discipline, while "being eaten" represents the objectification and surveillance of women's bodies within patriarchal society. Both protagonists undergo a shared trajectory: the loss of subjectivity, resistance through the metaphor of food, and ultimately, the reconstruction of selfhood.

In this essay, "Subjectivity" refers to Sartre's existential concept of being-for-itself (être-pour-soi). Sartre divides existence into être-en-soi and être-pour-soi: the former « est ce qu'il est », meaning it "is what it is" (for example, a stone or a table—closed, definite, and lacking consciousness), whereas the latter « n'est pas ce qu'il est », meaning it "is not what it is" (a

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conscious, open, negating form of being). A human is a "subject" precisely because he is not a finished fact but an unfinished possibility. It is in realizing that "what I am" is not equal to "what I must be" that one can freely choose, negate, and redefine oneself. This theory is perfectly applicable to The Vegetarian and The Edible Woman: Yeong-hye and Marian's construction of subjectivity follows a typical trajectory from "passively becoming a certain person" to "actively negating what one is and reaching toward what one is not." Both protagonists begin in a state of "being defined by others." Yeong-hye is a compliant wife and daughter, and Marian is the ideal fiancée about to step onto the track of a traditional marriage. Defined by society, family, and structures of consumption, they lose autonomy over "who am I," reduced to an in-itself existence shaped by others' norms. However, through actions such as refusing to eat, escaping the familial structure, and resisting social expectations, they gradually nihilate the fixed identity of "what I am." They start to negate the meanings imposed by others and attempt to create a space of meaning of their own. Importantly, this negation is not a destructive self-obliteration, but rather a practice of "existing for oneself," a reclamation of their subjectivity.

2. Emergence through Dissolution: Yeong-hye's Construction of Subjectivity

2.1. Yeong-hye's Loss of Subjectivity

Jean-Paul Sartre asserted that the moment a person is "seen by the Other," they are suddenly transformed from a free, self-determining subject ("pour-soi") into a "looked-at object," an object-in-itself ("en-soi"). In that instant, one's subjectivity is threatened and one is objectified by the gaze. "Being seen" engenders shame, as the subject realises "I am not what I myself have chosen to be, but what others have named me." The subject ceases to control their own being and is reduced to a labeled "Other," that is, "c'est-à-dire de me reconnaître dans cet être dégradé, dépendant et figé que je suis pour autrui."(I know myself not as I am but as I appear to the Other in a devalued, subordinate, fixed state) [2]. Prolonged exposure to others' scrutiny causes the subject to gradually become a "functional" existence - a useful object serving others' purposes. Their being is no longer free or transcendent, but instead is instrumental, a tool within the social structure, losing the right to define themselves.

At the beginning of The Vegetarian, Yeong-hye's husband openly admits he chose her as his wife precisely because "그녀에게 특별한 매력이 없는 것과 같이 특별한 단점도 없어 보였기 때문이었다 " (She has neither particular charm nor obvious flaws) [3]. From his perspective, Yeong-hye's role is to be an ordinary, self-effacing wife who will not outshine him. He never regards her as a free agent with independent will; rather, he sees her as a "useful role" that serves his own social identity, not as a being pour-soi. Her husband's obsessive concern with Yeong-hye's eating habits further symbolises his control over her body. When Yeong-hye decides to stop eating meat, his first reaction is not genuine worry about her health, but a feeling of "shame" and abnormality. This is because he realises her body is no longer existing "for him" - she has deviated from the role he imposed, disrupting the social script of "how a wife should eat" in public. He equates Yeong-hye's body with an extension of his own social image; once she strays from the norm, his own subject-position feels undermined. He similarly attempts to assert sexual domination over her body. When Yeong-hye refuses his sexual advances, he reacts with rage, unable to accept that his wife has exercised the freedom to say "no" - that she possesses a will that negates "being what he wants her to be." Her act of negation triggers his anxiety and desire to reassert control.

Yeong-hye's father represents a more traditional patriarchal authority. During a family dinner, upon witnessing Yeong-hye's vegetarianism, he angrily forces meat into her mouth in an effort to violently restore "order." This is not only physical coercion but an attempt to re-impose the "being seen order" of patriarchal norms. As Sartre explained,"I become what I am in the

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freedom of the Other". Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat signifies stepping outside the identity defined for her "by patriarchy". Her father's violent force-feeding is essentially an attempt to nail her back into the place of the compliant daughter, to make her "être vu me constitue comme un être sans défense pour une liberté qui n'est pas ma liberté" (an existence without defense before a freedom not her own) [2].

In this turmoil, Yeong-hye becomes the target of not only her father's violence but the collective gaze of her entire family. In the Confucian East Asian tradition, women are expected to be obedient and self-sacrificing; by deviating from this norm, Yeong-hye becomes a source of family "shame". Under the condemning stares of her relatives, she can only view herself as an object being watched. Her agency is stripped away, and she is cast out as a pariah from the family order.

Even the gaze of Yeong-hye's brother-in-law is a form of objectification, albeit under the guise of art. Under the pretext of "artistic" interest, he records Yeong-hye's naked body and paints flowers on her skin. He pretends to "liberate" her from moral norms, yet in doing so he transforms her into an object of aesthetic consumption. Through the brother-in-law's camera lens, Yeong-hye's body is denied any self-definition; it becomes a projection of his desires and fantasies. He professes to "appreciate" Yeong-hye's "purity", but this is not true empathy—it is control masked as admiration. Yeong-hye no longer has a say in how she exists; she can only be observed, recorded, and interpreted by others.

The combined pressures of husband, father, and brother-in-law form a triadic structure of oppression that drives Yeong-hye through a cycle of objectification, shame, and discipline. Her body is continuously transformed into a "looked-at object" and her subjectivity is relentlessly eroded along this chain of gazes and coercion. Ultimately, her only escape from this alienated existence of "being for others" is a path of self-destruction.

2.2. Yeong-hye's Reclamation of Subjectivity

In The Vegetarian, Yeong-hye's resistance unfolds as a gradual struggle moving from the physical to the spiritual, from the human to the natural. She does not challenge her oppression through language or overt social action; instead, she withdraws via a refusal of consumption, slowly escaping the fate of "being eaten." This journey is essentially a transformative reconstruction from objectified Other to self-possessed subject. As Simone de Beauvoir observed: Chaque fois que la transcendance retombe en immanence il y a dégradation de l'existence en « en soi », de la liberté en facticité ; cette chute est une faute morale si elle est consentie par le sujet ; si elle lui est infligée, elle prend la figure d'une frustration et d'une oppression ; elle est dans les deux cas un mal absolu.(when a woman's transcendence is stifled by the consciousness of the Other, her existence is pushed back into immanence and becomes "an absolute evil") [4]. In the male-defined world of "absolute evil" as the Other, Yeong-hye strives to regain agency over her body and existence.

Yeong-hye's defiance begins instinctively with a dream - a disturbing vision of bloody meat and violence triggers her subconscious revolt against the patriarchal order of violence. Until that moment, her life had entirely been a product of others' gaze: her husband saw her as an "ordinary, completely unremarkable" object; her family viewed her as a tool for maintaining harmony. By refusing to eat meat, Yeong-hye symbolically steps out of the position of "being eaten" for the first time. In the novel, meat is not just food; it symbolises male violence and social discipline.To reject meat is to refuse to "se connaître et se choisir non en tant qu'elle existe pour soi mais telle que l'homme la définit"(to know herself and to choose herself not as she exists for herself, but as man defines her) [4]. Hou JiaQi notes that the motif of"meat"becomes"the signifier of Yeong-hye's fate",such that in the closed loop of "eating and being eaten"[5].Yeong-hye's rebellion at this point may be intuitive rather than fully rational, but it clearly expresses an instinctive rejection of the passive status of the "Other." Despite the

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violent reactions of her husband and father—who attempt to re-"consume" her revolt by forcing meat into her mouth—Yeong-hye has already quietly taken the first step beyond existing "for others".

In the middle stage of her resistance, Yeong-hye's body becomes the sole battleground. She continues to use "not eating" as a weapon against discipline. For instance, she refuses to cook for her family, which signifies not only rejecting the regime of food but also refusing to provide sustenance for others. No longer functioning as a cog in the family machine, she begins to transcend the identity imposed on her. Simultaneously, she refuses to have sexual relations with her husband; appetite and sex are both "consumptive" mechanisms through which patriarchy disciplines the female body. Yeong-hye's refusals are a direct assertion of her autonomy—she transforms from "the eaten" to "the one who refuses to be eaten", a free agent claiming ownership of herself.

Yeong-hye's resistance reaches its extreme when she completely extricates her consciousness from human identity and turns toward a "plant-like" existence. Beauvoir posits that the tragedy of woman lies in "conflit entre la revendication fondamentale de tout sujet qui se pose toujours comme l'essentiel et les exigences d'une situation qui la constitue comme inessentielle" (the conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject to assert itself as essential" and "the constraints of a situation that constitute her as inessential") [4]. In traditional social structures, the female body is often treated as "food" to be viewed and consumed. By choosing to define herself as a plant, Yeong-hye rejects all relationships of "being eaten" or "being defined". Her embracing of a vegetal existence is not a passive "dehumanisation", but an active withdrawal from the gender and social roles imposed by human society. In doing so, she utterly negates the paradigm of existing "for others", achieving the kind of transcendence of inner being that Beauvoir advocated for women.

2.3. "Self-Destructive Transcendence"—The Outcome of Yeong-hye's Resistance

Some critics view Yeong-hye's mode of resistance as overly passive or a failure, because it is silent and unseen by others. However, the essence of her rebellion is not to be seen—it is precisely to escape the state of being seen; it is not to change the rules of society, but to escape the rules entirely. Yeong-hye chooses to exist no longer as food or as object. In contrast to the overt confrontations championed by Western feminism, her approach aligns more with an East Asian philosophical notion of "negative transcendence": only by dissolving the identity of being "edible" or "useful" can one truly attain freedom of the self. This spirit is reflected in Chinese cultural metaphors such as Nezha returning his bones to his father and flesh to his mother, or Zhuangzi's useless chû tree and the little turtle that prefers "dragging its tail in the mud" - all emphasise freedom through non-being or non-conformity.

Likewise, only by destroying her socially-sanctioned self—the performance of the "perfect wife" and "dutiful daughter"—can Yeong-hye break free from the gaze and the fate of "being eaten". By progressively becoming plant-like and even approaching death, she transcends her predetermined social roles and re-establishes her existence on her own terms. Yeong-hye's apparent "self-destruction" is therefore not a defeat. It is through the gradual vegetative negation of her body, even unto death, that she reconstructs her subjectivity. By disappearing from social existence, she is able to return to nature as an unfettered being. For Yeong-hye, subjectivity does not depend on existing within society; rather, she finds the eternal in non-existence. This integration with nature is a form of transcendence in line with Eastern philosophy, showcasing a uniquely East Asian expression of self-destructive resistance. In the end, the self-destruction of Yeong-hye is not a failure at all. It is the very means by which she reclaims herself. Her final "vegetal" state, and indeed her approach to death, represent the

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completion of her transformation and the ultimate assertion of her freedom from the oppressive structures that sought to consume her.

3. Reconstruction through Symbolism: Marian's Construction of Subjectivity

3.1. Marian's Loss of Subjectivity

In The Edible Woman, Marian's loss of subjectivity unfolds along both an overt and a subtle axis. The overt narrative is Marian's relationship with her fiancé Peter - his gaze and control directly lead to her loss of appetite. The subtler undercurrent is the insidious influence of consumer culture shaping female identity and the discrimination against married women in the workplace - a structural form of discipline.

Marian's subjectivity is first eroded in her relationship with Peter. Peter embodies the archetypal male of a patriarchal society: he likes to control everything, including Marian's body, behaviour, and appearance. His affection for Marian is not based on her uniqueness or personhood, but on the fact that she is "sensible" and "suitable for marriage". In his eyes, she is reduced to the functional object of an ideal wife. At a dinner party, as Marian watches Peter carve a steak while recounting a hunting story, she feels nauseated and loses her appetite. This visceral reaction stems from her subconscious recognition of her fate as something that is to be "consumed". She realises that she is not a free pour-soi, but an en-soi in Peter's gaze - an object on the platter of his life.

After their engagement, Marian's eating problems intensify until she can hardly eat at all. This inability to swallow food symbolises her inability to stomach the identity being forced upon her by Peter and society. Her body's rejection of food is, in fact, a rejection of Peter's gaze and the social role of consumable woman that she is expected to play. When posing for a camera, Marian's entire body stiffens - even the muscles of her face freeze, and she wants to resist but cannot move. This is a classic scene of a woman petrified under the gaze. Peter, looking through the camera lens, pins Marian down into an image of docile, controllable femininity. Marian feels not only shame in that moment, but an existential tearing of her being.

Beyond Peter's direct control, the novel uses advertising, shopping, makeup, and hair products to show how consumer society further alienates women into commodities and images. When Peter asks Marian to "do something with her hair" and "buy a bright-coloured dress" for a party, Marian, though inwardly displeased, complies - "She didn't think it was really her, but the saleslady did. 'It's you, dear'" [6]. This reflects Marian's habitual catering to external expectations, and reveals how women in consumer culture gradually lose the power to choose their own image. As Beauvoir noted, "la femme a la passivité de l'immanence"(a woman's beauty has the passivity of immanence) [4]. This very passivity destroys woman's transcendence. It is often repackaged as the pursuit of "beauty" and "ideal image", luring women to willingly imprison themselves within it. Ubiquitous advertisements promoting slimness, prettiness, and docility construct an ideal of how a woman "should look," causing women to unconsciously internalise the position of "edible object," becoming "The Edible Woman".

3.2. Marian's Reclamation of Subjectivity

Marian's process of reclaiming her subjectivity, unlike Yeong-hye's silent self-destruction in The Vegetarian, is enacted through more active bodily actions. This is most evident in her two acts of running away and her climactic act of devouring the "woman cake." These actions mark her transformation from a passive Other to an active subject, and through physical space and bodily symbolism, she rebuilds her sense of self.

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The first pivotal turning point occurs after she hears Peter graphically describing a hunt. Peter and his friends enthusiastically discuss carving up their prey, reveling in the male thrill of domination over nature. Marian does not respond with words; instead, her body reacts. She suddenly lets go of Peter's arm and takes off running: "All at once she started to run, sprinting down the sidewalk, only realising her legs were moving after the fact". This unexpected flight is a long-suppressed instinctual rebellion, a wordless negation of her role as a passive object. It is the initial action through which she asserts, however unconsciously, that she refuses to remain a "hunted" thing. This moment is Marian's first step toward becoming a subject pour-soi.

The second flight occurs during their engagement party. Marian finds herself once again reduced to a "social prop" - Peter flirts with other women while trying to pose her for a photograph, treating her like a display piece. This time, her escape is more deliberate: "She told herself;I can't come back" [6]. With that resolve, Marian quietly slips out of Peter's party. She throws on her coat, finds her shoes, and makes her way down corridors and staircases, running all the way to the laundry room. "She could not let him catch her this time. Once he pulled the trigger she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change" [6]. Here, in Marian's imagination, Peter is the "man in black with the rifle," and she is the prey caught in the crosshairs. Her act of running is a rebellion against this predatory dynamic - a leap from being a passive target to an agent in motion.

At the novel's end, Marian bakes and then eats a "woman-shaped cake," completing her transformation from object to subject. Her return of appetite symbolises a renewed acceptance of her body and desires. After Peter's marriage proposal, Marian had been almost unable to eat, a physical manifestation of her instinctive rejection of a forced identity. When she finally says, "I'm able to chew and swallow again" and even remarks that "It tastes wonderful". it signals her regained control over her body and its boundaries. The very act of baking the cake is a satire of socially constructed "feminine" norms. The cake is formed in the shape of a woman adorned with stereotypical feminine features (a swimsuit, eyelashes, a smile), a figure meant to be consumed. Marian then "neatly severs the head from the body" with a fork and proceeds to devour the cake herself. This destruction of the male-fantasy female image is Marian's refusal to continue playing that image herself. By literally consuming the edible woman, she refuses to remain someone else's consumable object and instead claims the role of consumer, the active agent. Udhayakumar (2021) notes that the novel is "filled with various symbolic and metaphorical elements that support the author's presupposition of her world view", highlighting the importance of these symbolic acts [7].

3.3. "Symbolism as an End?"—The Outcome of Marian's Resistance

Marian's rebellion, on the surface, contrasts with Yeong-hye's silent self-effacement: one is dramatic and symbolic, the other quiet and self-destructive. Yet fundamentally, they share a similarity. Yeong-hye achieves resistance by destroying her own body (the self that others defined), while Marian achieves it by destroying the symbol of her objectified self. In both cases, they annihilate the version of themselves that has been "othered" and constructed by external forces. Crucially, Marian does not wait for Peter to "accept" the woman-shaped cake she offers him, nor does she compromise her act to elicit any particular response from him. She eats it herself, declaring, "It's only a cake."In doing so, she no longer needs to exist as an object of interpretation or "meaning" for someone else to consume. Instead, she asserts her identity as an actor who defines meaning for herself.

However, the challenges Marian faces are not solely embodied by Peter; they stem from an entire society's enforcement of the "ideal female" image and the systematic undermining of individual women. Although Marian escapes Peter's direct control, she cannot completely evade the deeper conditioning of consumer culture and gender norms that have shaped her.

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After eating the cake, she finds that gentle fantasies of Peter still float unbidden through her mind, revealing that the shadow of otherness has not been entirely cast off. Marian's rebellion, ultimately, remains at the level of symbol - she breaks the physical representation of her oppression, yet the underlying social structures that bind her and women at large persist. Her liberatory act is brave and significant, but also complex and incomplete.

4. The Influence of Cultural Context on the Construction of Female Subjectivity

Although The Vegetarian and The Edible Woman are rooted in East Asian and Western contexts respectively, both use food as a medium to depict the loss and reconstruction of female subjectivity under patriarchy. Yeong-hye and Marian's paths of resistance share common ground, but their methods, family relations, and societal responses highlight clear differences shaped by cultural backgrounds.

In terms of mode of resistance, Yeong-hye's struggle is more secretive and internal, whereas Marian's is more overt and confrontational. In Korean society, steeped in Confucian tradition, women are expected to be submissive and there is little space for openly asserting oneself. Thus, Yeong-hye's rebellion is carried out through silence - a refusal to eat that eventually leads to her becoming plant-like. In contrast, in the Canada of the 1960s, amidst the rise of feminist thought, Marian is able to express her dissent through dramatic actions: running away in public, withdrawing from social engagements, and staging symbolic acts like eating the "woman cake." Marian's inner struggle is externalised in ways that Yeong-hye's, due to cultural restraints, is not.

Regarding identity construction, Yeong-hye's sense of self is anchored in family, while Marian's is more individualistic. Within the Confucian patriarchal family system surrounding Yeong-hye, a woman's identity is inextricably linked to family roles. The moment she deviates from her expected role, she faces collective censure. The family dinner where Yeong-hye's father forces her to eat meat exemplifies the family's harsh punishment for a woman who breaks the norm. Marian, on the other hand, though she faces pressures from romance and work, does not have her parents acting as primary disciplinarians. Canadian society offers the possibility for a young single woman to live independently, so Marian's awakening is propelled more by personal choice than the pain of severing family ties.

In terms of societal response, Yeong-hye's rebellion is met with punishment, whereas Marian's appears to be met with surface-level acceptance. Yeong-hye, by persisting in her "plant-like" transformation, is eventually committed to a psychiatric hospital - her awakening is thoroughly marginalised both physically and psychologically by society. Marian, after breaking off her engagement, does not face obvious punishment; on the surface, life goes on. Yet, her rebellion is subtly absorbed by the very consumer society she resists. In the final chapter, Marian's lingering nostalgia for Peter hints that patriarchy's influence has not been eradicated. Society may not openly punish Marian, but it "recuperates" her protest, smoothing its radical edge.

Juxtaposing the two narratives, we see that East Asian patriarchy quells female transcendence through overt suppression, while Western society, though more open, can diffuse rebellion through assimilation. Understanding Yeong-hye and Marian's journeys toward reclaiming subjectivity thus requires careful attention to their cultural milieus. This comparative perspective sheds new light on the different predicaments women face across social systems. On the road to gender equality, only by breaking the shackles of the gaze and objectification can women truly attain the status of subjects in their own right.

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5. Conclusion

Both The Vegetarian and The Edible Woman illustrate how patriarchal cultures consume women - figuratively "eating" them until they act to reclaim themselves. Yet Han Kang and Atwood imagine different roads to the same end: Yeong-hye's silent withdrawal versus Marian's active confrontation. Theoretically, this comparison contributes to feminist literary criticism by highlighting that subjectivity can be disintegrated and remade in culturally specific ways. As seen, Yeong-hye's revolt through self-erasure and Marian's revolt through self-symbolism both achieve a renegotiation of womanhood beyond patriarchal scripts.

This study also underscores the significance of cultural context. In Eastern settings, preservation of harmony may force rebellion inward, while in Western contexts, rebellion can be performed and witnessed. In both cases, the protagonists use the metaphor of food to externalize internal struggles. Critically, Yeong-hye and Marian show that constructing subjectivity often requires destroying the self as defined by others - whether by consuming one's representation or abandoning one's body entirely.

Ultimately, the comparison reveals that reclaiming agency requires challenging dominant discourses that "eat" women. Butler's insight that gender identity is performatively constituted reminds us that both Yeong-hye and Marian must actively re-perform what it means to be a woman. In this light, Atwood's ending - Marian consuming the edible woman - initiates a critique of dualistic logic, while Han's ending - Yeong-hye merging with nature - envisions a transcendence of social roles. Hsin-Yu Chai (2025) points out that Atwood ultimately proposes "a more inclusive ethic" that attempts to dismantle binary logic and extend care even to "non-human others," even as this project "exposes the subject to vulnerability and disempowerment" [8]. This invites readers to reflect on how constructions of female subjectivity might evolve by breaking the cycles of consumption. In both Eastern and Western contexts, The Vegetarian and The Edible Woman thus offer powerful meditations on identity, resistance, and the possibility of a self no longer defined by being "eaten."

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