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"All I Need is Sunlight": Disability and Resistance in Han Kang's The Vegetarian

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Han Kang's The Vegetarian through the lens of disability studies, employing Alison Kafer's and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's theoretical frameworks to reinterpret Yeong-hye's (the protagonist) bodily refusal as a process of social disablement rather than psychological collapse. Yeong-hye actively refuses to consume animal products due to a dream and her determination which leads to her demise profoundly unsettles her family members. Shunned by everyone, she merely requests sunlight as her sole source of life and ultimately, she identifies as a plant. Kafer's concepts of the curative imaginary and crip time illuminate Yeong-hye's rejection of compulsory health, productivity, and futurity. Garland-Thomson's theories of the normate and the spectacle of the extraordinary body clarify how the novel's gaze disables Yeong-hye by turning her difference into visual excess. Together these frameworks reveal how Han Kang exposes the violence of normalization: Yeong-hye is expelled from the normate category, thus rendered a disabled individual, objectified through familial and medical stares, and temporally displaced into crip time. The study concludes that The Vegetarian reimagines disability as both a personal and a political resistance. Her rebellion is an ethical refusal of the curative imagination and an unsettling invitation to envision non-normative futures in a patriarchal, ableist societal structure.

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, disability studies has been the recipient of scholarly attention. Disability studies centers itself around body politics and how societal norms and cultural representations regard abled vs. disabled individuals. This branch of academia does not merely aim to portray a preexisting framework in which disabled voices can be heard; rather, disability studies is a rethinking of the structure of society whose logics inform our understanding of bodies. The world as it is now, is in conflict between the boundaries of normalcy and abnormality. Integrating disability studies into critical conversations with ecology and feminism, Han Kang’s novel, *The Vegetarian* (2007) provides a fertile terrain for a literary analysis. Han Kang is a South Korean author who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2024. This analysis shall be against the backdrop of the theories of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Alison Kafer who interrogate the construction and regulation of bodily differences in a modern societal context. Disability studies and feminism are two entangled disciplines whose intersection comports as a site for advocating “reproductive technology, the place of bodily differences, the particularities of oppression, the ethics of care, the construction of the subject” (Garland-Thomson 2002, 2).

The Vegetarian’s multifaceted approach toward societal issues has rendered it the ultimate case study for readings of disability and ableism, patriarchal norms, and human and animal abuse. Winner of the Man Booker International Prize in 2016 and developed as a tripartite narrative, *The Vegetarian* tells the story of a South Korean woman named Yeong-hye who, followed by a dream, refuses to consume any animal product. Each novella has a different title: “The Vegetarian,” “The Mongolian Mark,” and “The Flaming Tree.”

Commencing with the viewpoint of her husband in “The Vegetarian”, Mr. Cheong, the reader gains a clear vision of the power dynamics in the story. Mr. Cheong is less than pleased with her decision as it becomes clear that her diet directly affects him as well. Yeong-hye disposes of all the meat in the fridge and only cooks food that contains vegetables. In a family intervention, her father in a very abusive manner attempts to force-feed her some meat but fails miserably as she slits her wrist open in protest to their actions. The family and even her husband give up on her and she begins to live alone while her older sister, In-hye, takes care of her from a distance.

Her brother-in-law, an artist, is an opportunist who, with the excuse of an art project, takes advantage of her and aesthetically fetishizes her anorexia, leading to more chaos. Yeong-hye is not institutionalized and radically renounces meat and speech as the chronicle comes to an end. Her human identity is reduced to nothing since she identifies as a plant. This transformation can be interpreted through the theoretical apparatus of feminist disability studies which does

not simply render Yeong-hye's act of resistance as "madness." Descending into her vegetal state, the responses of her family members reveal how bodily productivity is culturally invested.

1.1. Research Gap and Questions

As witnessed above in the literature review, much scholarship has been dedicated to feminist psychoanalysis, ecofeminism and philosophical intersections, and postcolonial studies. Interpreting Yeong-hye's vegetarianism as symbolic of patriarchal resistance leading to a trauma-induced psychosis is a frequent theme in the literature. While yielding valuable insights, these works are confronted with a theoretical gap which is engaging systematically with disability studies as a means to examine Yeong-hye's radical bodily refusal. Normally, her story is treated as a pathological narrative of madness where systematic body politics is overlooked and the typical theoretical approaches of disability fail to demonstrate the protagonist's invisible disability. This paper aims to demonstrate via Garland-Thomson's and Kafer's theory what takes place in a woman's life when she makes an active decision to not comply with the conventional bodily image. Certain critics may see her actions as a breakdown; however, the institutional violence that governs Yeong-hye's life is overpowered by her sheer resistance to the body image and productivity which is expected of her. Representing Yeong-hye as "disabled" in *The Vegetarian* depends on the definition of disability. A strictly medical definition does not wholly capture her case. Notwithstanding, both Alison Kafer and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson reconceptualize disability not as a medical defect but as a cultural, political, and representational category. Under their frameworks, Yeong-hye's bodily refusal and social banishment perspicuously locate her within a disabled position. Addressing the theoretical gap in the scholarship, the present study cites *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang as a pivotal work for rethinking disability beyond Western contexts and seeks to paint a picture of how this novel theorizes body politics in transnational literature.

2. Literature Review

Inviting a wide-ranging body of scholarship, *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang has been situated at the crossroads of multiple critical approaches. Enlightening the brutality occurring in the novel and juxtaposing it with the lack of sympathy for nature in today's world, *The Vegetarian* informs ecofeminist interpretations. Chandran and Pai (2017) demonstrate an ecofeminist reading of the novel by scrutinizing the exploitation of women and also nature. In addition, hailing the resolution of the protagonist, much research has been dedicated to identity studies. Savitri (2018) elaborates on Yeong-hye's aversion to the patriarchy which has bound her to its social norms. Her subjectivity is on the line as she is manhandled in her relationship with her husband and even her father. She refuses to accept any form of forced identity and it is through her "madness" that she achieves liberation.

On the grounds of this novel being a quest for autonomy and selfhood through vegetarianism, the politics of food is highly explored. Ecofeminist readings shed light on these matters. Kim (2019) expands on the correlation between food and carno-phallogocentric ideology. In rejecting this system, Yoeng-hye undergoes a suffering that is simultaneously psychological, physical, and spiritual. Eventually, her sense of identity both as a woman and as a vegetarian is assaulted. Further on this topic, Kakkat and Mohanty (2020) have contested that *The Vegetarian*’s atypical narrative redefines Yeong-hye’s identity via embracing vegetarianism. Hence, food plays a crucial role in her self’s deconstruction and aids in contriving her senses anew. Estok (2023) concentrates on carnivorism's intensity in South Korean culture which considers consuming meat as the norm and vegetarianism as chaotic. This study ties violence and patriarchy in *The Vegetarian*. Hyojeong Byun (2024) has argued about the momentousness of virtue and ethics which Yoeng-hye attempts to uphold in a context where little of them is seen. The paper demonstrates that her choice of diet is a way of reclaiming empathy and a moral code.

Furthermore, the issue of anorexia and its relation to gender norms and veganism is underscored in many scholarly works. Macsiniuc (2017) explores how food choices and eating practices intersect with gender relations and structures of power within the family. Yeong-hye’s turn to vegetarianism, and later anorexia, is accompanied by fantasies of withdrawal from the patriarchal order of conformity. Ultimately suppressed through both literal and symbolic violence, her act of rebellion is framed as a bid for autonomy. Through the lens of some vegan studies, however, *The Vegetarian* may not be held in the highest regard. For instance, Carretero-Gonzalez (2019) contests that Yeong-hye’s veganism is merely a superficial act of trying to put an end to the killing of animals and is more about yearning to attain a level of purity. She also does not represent the joys which accompany veganism. Regardless, situated within anorexia studies, Laura Wright (2020) examines “the slippage between the categories of vegan and anorexic – between self-actualized ethical mode of existence and culturally sanctioned madness” (122).

Additionally, philosophical inquiries have been conducted on the novel. Magdalena Zolkos in her distinguished “Bereft of Interiority” (2019) places Luce Irigaray’s “ethics of reciprocity and desire through analysis of her ‘plant-idioms’ of fecundity, touch, roots and breath” in dialogue with Yeong-hye’s vegetal metamorphosis (102). Persisting with “becoming plant”, Mijeong Kim (2020) employs the concepts of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari of “becoming” to explore the ethical possibilities of vegetability. Moreover, the theories of Michel Foucault regarding power and discipline have informed considerable papers. Munir and Liaqat (2024)

intersect Foucault's theories with a posthumanist approach while Nie and Kaur (2025) emphasize biopolitics.

Strikingly, there are certain scholars who are in dispute with the novel. O'Key (2021) attests that despite critics claiming Yeong-hye's passivity to be an act of resistance, "her retreat from humanity does not remake the world, nor unmake it, but rather unmakes the self in the face of the world" and there are limits to reading the work as a posthumanist piece (22). On the other hand, Godley (2021) maintains that the English translation in South Korea has faced backlash due to its inaccuracies and has been denounced as a "national disgrace". By reading Han's novel alongside Smith's translation, however, Godley exposes how both colonial and nationalist forces distort the representation of female experience. What unsettles nationalist critics is not Smith's supposed failure to render Korean culture faithfully, but rather her success in foregrounding aspects of Korean female subjectivity that nationalist narratives prefer to ignore (193). Notwithstanding, Caspari (2022) believes that *The Vegetarian* has been praised for it "hints at a conception of 'world literature' beyond both cosmopolitan celebrations of border-crossing and a postcolonial politics of incommensurability" (39).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Disability and the Norm

Disability studies as a field has long been attentive to the cultural representations of the healthy and productive able body. This area of academic research emerged in the 1970s across the Western world and is still expanding into the 21st century (Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009, 48). Apart from the particular limitations for a disabled person, the individual is subject to discrimination in society. Societal norms either reinforce or resist certain bodies. Carol Thomas, in his book *Sociologies of Disability and Illness,* cites Paul Abberley as the one who introduced the term Disablism which refers to "the social beliefs and actions that oppress/exclude/disadvantage people with impairments" (2007, 13).

According to Goodley, disability was deemed a "a personal tragedy, biological deficiency and psychical trauma" by medicalized and psychologized hegemonies (84). Disability studies has now moved disability to "social, cultural, economic and political registers" which entails that an impaired body does not bracket with disability; "in contrast, disability was a problem of society" (2017, 84).

Amongst the numerous scholars' works, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's and Alison Kafer's theories devise a dynamic thesis formed as a fundamental rethinking of the logics which construct our understanding of autonomy. Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* reframes disability as a cultural category rather than a mere medical condition. In her definition, disability is "the unorthodox made flesh, refusing to be normalized, neutralized, or homogenized" (1997,

24). Her set of conceptual tools allows the literary readers to convert disability from a descriptive property of characters to an analytic lens which illuminates the boundary between ordinary and extraordinary, abled and disabled.

Garland-Thomson puts disability in the broader political and cultural context and accuses the medical field of simply lifting the moral blame off of disabled people but imposing a failure of “normalcy” unto them (xi). She concedes that having an extraordinary body is not the sole reason for accounting one’s disability but also being perceived as a disabled, hence, disqualified person by our society. Her work pursues moving “from isolation to community, from ignorance to knowledge about who we are, from stigma to dignity, and from exclusion to access” (xvii).

Her project insists that critics locate meaning not in bodies alone but in the institutions, discourses, and aesthetic forms that constitute disability as a category. She underscores representation by stating that “in the broadest sense, this book investigates how representation attaches meanings to bodies” (5). Her work is postmodern in the sense that she probes the peripheral to gain a new view on the whole (6). Building her discourse on visual rhetorics, Garland-Thomson expands on disability and femininity and condemns the “normal” distinction put on women who are either “normal” or “pathological” (27).

In the same vein, Kafer’s seminal work *Feminist, Queer, Crip* provides a foundation for analyzing embodiment and futurity in *The Vegetarian*. Kafer confirms that her work is unequivocally politicized (2013, 6). She criticizes solely medical approaches to disability studies since by foreclosing a different acknowledgement of disability, this field is divorced from programs of social transformation. Thus, there is no future envisioned for disabled individuals. An apolitical perception of disability places it merely in the medical category and is deemed a problem in need of being solved (8-9).

Kafer furthers her agenda through probing the definition of disability and who may be called “disabled.” Her political model discerns disability “as a site of questions” instead of congealed definitions (11). “Can it encompass all kinds of impairments…? Do people with chronic illnesses fit under the rubric of disability? … What about people with … visible differences that have no bearing their physical capabilities, but that often prompt discriminatory treatment?” (11) Her concepts of prognosis time, crip time, eco-purity, and normative feminist futurity collectively destabilize the linear and moralistic visions of progress that underpin modern constructions of the “good life.”

3.2. The Normate and the Feminine

Coined by Garland-Thomson herself, the neologism “normate” has paved its way into the scholarship as it removes the haunting denotations of the word “normal” used in disability studies (1997, 8). Her argument avows that since the disabled body is treated as “corporeal

insufficiency," it becomes a site for social anxieties about control and identity (6). In other words, normate is "the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them" (8). The deviant "others" threaten the normate and the constructed power relations by existing on the margins. This "otherness" stems from situating, interpreting, and granting meaning to bodies (10).

In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Garland-Thomson elaborates on the intersection of disability studies and feminism. Tracing it back to Aristotle and reviewing scholarly pieces written until the nineteenth century, she confirms that the male sex is perceived as essential and being the female sex is in and out of itself a deformity, deviance, and ultimately a disability (1997, 19). Therefore, the weight of "extraordinaryness" is heavier on women who do not comply with the normate. In a patriarchal society, conditions such as anorexia blurs the line between being normate or pathological because the state of the woman can determine whether she is adhering to the normate feminine standards or she is medically challenged (27).

Femininity and cultural capital go hand in hand. The cultural capital of a woman is augmented when she is "feminized" and it is reduced when she has a disabled body (28). Feminization increases a woman's cultural capital, disability reduces it. The further a female body retreats from absolute beauty, the more abnormal it renders itself. On the other hand, disabilities "are imagined to be random transformations that move the body away from ideal forms. In a society in which appearance is the primary index of value for women, beautification practices normalize the female body and disabilities abnormalize it" (28). The infamous gaze is only gained by feminization while disability only elicits the stare. Hence, the feminine disability narrative gets more complex.

Correspondingly, departing from the feminine ideal while simultaneously being disabled stigmatizes the circumstances. Garland-Thomson cites Ervin Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* and notes that this is in line with what Simone de Beauvoir called "Otherness" (30). Extending his theory, some social psychologists have used the term "mark" to name a stigmatizable physical or behavioral attribute (31). Stigmatization creates a shared, socially maintained conception of a normate. "Though any human trait can be stigmatized, the dominant group has the authority and means to determine which differences are inferior and to perpetuate those judgments" (31). Stigma theory is valuable as it relocates the problem from the disabled body to the "social framing" of that body (32).

3.3. Visual Rhetorics

Stigmatized, disabled women are a marked and excluded group within the larger social class of women. Hence, they are denied the privileges of normate women. Feminist disability studies,

as purported by Garland Thomson in her 2002 essay “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” addresses the “unity of the category woman, the status of the lived body, the politics of appearance, the medicalization of the body, the privilege of normalcy, multiculturalism, sexuality, the social construction of identity, and the commitment to integration” (4). Ability systems and gender gender and ability systems exert social pressures to sculpt and normalize disabled bodies. This regulation is carried out chiefly through two intertwined cultural frameworks: medical discourse and visual appearance (10).

Throughout history, the appearance of bodies of the disabled women has been the site of projecting fantasies and anxieties (Garland-Thomson 1997, 56). Within this visual economy, once one is deemed “disabled,” they are rendered spectacles of “otherness,” while those marked as normate remain invisibly protected within the domain of normalcy. In this way, the “cultural self” and the “cultural other” emerge as interdependent opposites which sustain systems of social, economic, and political privilege that are rationalized through physical discrepancies (8).

Eccentric disabled individuals who were called “freaks” in the past centuries, formed a spectacle for the “normate” people to gaze upon in the format of human exhibits called “freak shows” (60). Across history, so-called “freaks” were reduced to corporeality alone, denied the social recognition of humanity. Their bodies not only generated commercial value but also produced “narratives of pathology” through which institutions such as the Royal Society and the Académie des Sciences built intellectual authority (57).

“Freaks” were not inherent identities but cultural productions, generated when particular bodies were appropriated as raw material to fulfill the ideological and practical purposes of audiences. What we now categorize as “race,” “ethnicity,” and “disability” was staged and orchestrated at “freak shows” where they paraded bodily differences. Those shows, through ritualized performances, transformed physical discrepancies into cultural otherness.

As a spectacle, the freak show was “a cultural performance that gives primacy to visual apprehension in creating symbolic codes and institutionalizes the relationship between the spectacle and the spectators”. In this context, the extraordinary body functioned as an exaggerated text, to be interpreted through the desires and anxieties of its spectators. Through conventions of staging and narration, freak shows situated these disabled bodies both in physical space and within cultural narrative frameworks (60). In a nutshell, a gaze has always landed on a disabled person, especially on a woman whose identity has been reduced to a spectacle.

3.4. Curative Time

Concentrating on the future imagined for disabled people, Kafer introduces the concept of "prognosis time" (2013, 36). By examining a case study of a girl whose growth was stunned at an early age, she depicts it as liminal temporality which casts out the disabled individual into a dwindled progression of the stages of life (36). Not only the future is diminished but the past and the present are cluttered.

The past is noted as an amalgam of possible causes for the present illness or a progression of their wasted time. "The present takes on more urgency as the future shrinks," and the future is marked in augmentation of "treatment and survival even as the future becomes more tenuous" (37). This is a state of stagnation where the future has shaped a temporality where their present does not differ relevantly from the imagined future.

Futurity is often composed in "curative" terms which underscore rehabilitation. In line with such a mentality, Kafer scrutinizes "curative time" and asserts that this temporality seeks treatment and elimination of the impairment (28). She inaugurates other approaches to futurity for disability studies and enunciates that the compulsory nostalgia for the lost able body is preventing the individual to leave the curative time devised by normativity (44). Disabled people are written out of the future due to their hypernormative traits. The linear temporality of curative time bends the disabled bodies to fit rigid temporal structures.

Disabled people's future is usually determined by their family and doctors, contingent upon the severity of their illness. Their quality of life is measured from the perspective of others based on the functionality of their bodies and the level of their pain. Regardless of their will, numerous disabled people receive adaptive therapy which is administered by family and doctors. Unerring in real life and in literature, this notion has been confirmed by Garland-Thomson as she maintains, "representation tends to objectify disabled characters by denying them any opportunity for subjectivity or agency" (11). Nonetheless, since the descriptions differ in various ways depending on the relation to the person, there are inconsistencies regarding the nature of the illness and also the quality of life (63).

3.5. Ecopurity

Shifting her focus from societal normativity to environmental discourse, Kafer maintains that similar to the discussion of society, disabled people are a limit to the perfect future imagined for abled people. Hence, even in environmental studies, disabled people are out of place when interacting with nature (Kafer 2013, 130). Evans argues that the culturally dominant idea of what counts as "nature" becomes most visible when we examine the stories of people who are not typically permitted or expected to access those natural spaces (191-192).

Kafer warns against the prominent peril of using disability as a metaphor for environmental crises in her analysis of vastly different ecological accounts; including an environmental memoir, a controversial ad in a magazine, and an autobiographical article in ecofeminist philosophy. She claims that by invoking disability in the narrative, the ultimate goal is to clearly disavow it by elucidating that there is no place for disability in the wilderness. The result is “making disability the dystopic sign of human failure, or potential failure, in nature” (131).

On the other hand, ecofeminism enables abled women by romanticizing their connection to nature. Studying Linda Vance’s “Ecofeminism and the Politics of Reality,” Kafer concludes that Vance ties her connection to nature through her activity and experiences nature through hiking (135). This activity is so vital to her relationship with nature that “without such hikes, ‘an ecofeminist’ will remain in some way separate from nature. Once again, able-bodiedness is necessary in order to bridge or transcend the essential separation between human and nature” (135).

Perceived as a problem in need of a solution, providing disability-friendly technologies or artifacts is mostly met with little enthusiasm. Ironically, this matter is not an issue when nature is altered to adhere to abled individuals. Atypical bodies tend to create problems for society when they ask to be taken into account of access. “It is often only disability access that comes under such interrogation [which] suggests an act of ableist forgetting” (138). This narrative designates that nature alteration in favor of disabled people renders nature “disabled” in a similar vein. The purity of nature would be forfeit the same way that disabled individuals have lost the typical traits of typical individuals. What the discourse lacks here is conceding that experiencing nature is not limited to normative manners and different disabled people come into contact with it disparately (135).

4. Discussion

4.1. “I had a dream”: From Ordinary to Extraordinary Body

The Vegetarian comprises three parts which form a chronological plotline. The first part is titled “The Vegetarian” and it opens with a first person point of view featuring the protagonist’s husband, Mr. Cheong. He has been unimpressed with his wife, Yeong-hye, ever since they met. Han begins *The Vegetarian* by framing Yeong-hye as “ordinary,” echoing what Garland-Thomson calls the “normate” which is “the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings” (1997, 8). Mr. Cheong states that he marries her nonetheless as “it was only natural that I would marry the most run-of-the-mill woman in the world. As for women who were pretty, intelligent – they would only ever have served to disrupt my carefully ordered existence” (Han 2007, 10). In his eyes, Yeong-hye is not demanding and

behaves as normal as possible with the exception of her clothing. This is his only issue with Yeong-hye since he is caught up in what his acquaintances think of him (11).

Yeong-hye's harmless behavior switches when one day she is standing motionless in front of the fridge. She has no reaction upon Mr. Cheong's touch and after some time she simply mentions that she has had a dream (12). Later, he finds her curled up in the living room, breathing faintly. As he leaves her alone, he comes to find her again in front of the fridge with bags of meat scattered across the kitchen floor. Even though he gets violent in his tone and behavior, Yeong-hye remains composed. Instead of thinking of his wife's circumstances, his main issue at hand is that he is not seen off to work and she has not handed him his belongings (13). With the progression of the story, Yeong-hye stops cooking and eating meat at all. Her husband wonders about the cause and assumes that "it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as mine had done" (15). So far it is evident that Mr. Cheong craves unchallenged power and obedience in his household which is now at risk. The gendered power dynamics at play are shaking to their core as Yeong-hye's controlled, passive body is now rejecting his authority (Munir and Liaqat 2024, 103).

The narrative redirects to Yeong-hye as she describes her dream in which she is trapped in a freezing, enclosed space filled with blood, highly resembling the fridge from which she took out the meat packets and threw them away. She runs out of that building into the woods and she hides in the trees while people are feasting on meat (Han 2007, 14). Kang now shifts the viewpoint to the husband. As Yeong-hye keeps refusing her husband's demands, he gets more agitated and comes up with scenarios: "what if, by chance, these early-stage symptoms didn't pass? If the hints at hysteria, delusion, weak nerves and so on, that I thought I could detect in what she said, ended up leading to something more" (17)?

The female body is subject to the beauty standards at all times even when it is undergoing drastic changes. Mr. Cheong firstly appreciates her weight loss but then is frustrated as her body "resembled nothing so much as the skeletal frame of an invalid" (17). Yeong-hye is not given proper medical attention even in the slightest. Her condition is shunned by her husband since he believes that

Even given the extreme unpredictability of her condition, I wasn't prepared to consider taking her for an urgent medical consultation, much less a course of treatment. There's nothing wrong with her, I told myself, this kind of thing isn't even a real illness. I resisted the temptation to indulge in introspection. This strange situation had nothing to do with me. (17)

Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat goes beyond the closed doors of her home. At a dinner table with her husband's colleagues, she is questioned as to why she became a vegetarian. In disdain they ask her "A balanced diet goes hand in hand with a balanced mind, don't you think? …

Was there some special reason for your becoming a vegetarian? Health reasons, for example… or religious, perhaps” (20)? The situation turns dire when Yeong-hye and her husband are invited to a family dinner at her parent’s house. The dinner is more of a violent intervention with the guise of helping her. Her father forcefully attempts to feed her some meat which she coughs out (28). Yeong-hye’s decision not to consume animal products transgresses the codified social acceptability and is “met with violent attempts to force her back into the position of appropriate daughter and wife” (Wright 2020, 131). Nonetheless, Sands reminds us that her rejection of consuming animal products is in favor of renunciating violence due to shared vulnerability rather than competition and she ultimately craves to escape her suffering (2023, 328).

The initial rejection at giving credence to her condition simply exacerbates the relationship dynamics amongst the family members. Yeong-hye is now mentally and physically distressed and her immediate family are intensifying the plight. In reaction to her father’s violence, she grabs a knife and cuts her wrist open (Han 2007, 29). She is admitted to a hospital and Mr. Cheong’s primary focus is how he is going to live with her and how he needs to keep up appearances (30-31). Her mother is of no help either as she protests, “how can you call yourself my daughter” (33)? Her transformation begins not through injury but through refusal, alienating her from the “normate” category since “representation attaches meanings to bodies” (Garland-Thomson 1997, 5). Yeong-hye’s body, once unremarkable, becomes overdetermined with moral and medical significance once it ceases to conform. Her family reads her abstention from meat as sickness and her husband as deviance. These responses render her as disabled through what Garland-Thomson calls the “ideological power of the norm,” which “parades the marked body as deviant, subordinate, and particular” (130).

The climax of “The Vegetarian” happens when Yeong-hye is found topless outside the hospital building and is firmly gripping the corpse of a dead bird in her hand. “It was a small white-eye bird, with feathers missing here and there. Below tooth marks that looked to have been caused by a predator’s bite, vivid red bloodstains were spreading” (Han 2007, 35). Yeong-hye is perceived by others to have been a psychiatric patient who lacks mental functionality. It is accurate that she does not conform to the expected, “normate” behavioral patterns due to her mental condition and this does impose a disabled identity on her. Yet the very assumption held by the people around her constitutes what Garland-Thomson and Kafer attest when it comes to disability.

The prominent medical model which exists today is on the lookout for solutions to the problem of disability. Kafer’s notion of the curative imaginary amplifies this process. The curative imaginary “expects and assumes intervention but also cannot imagine or comprehend

anything other than intervention" (Kafer 2013, 27). Yeong-hye's family performs precisely that corrective impulse via her father's violence and her husband's disgust. Through this lens, Yeong-hye's bodily autonomy becomes disabled by the social structures attempting to normalize her. Kafer's claim that "a future with disability is a future no one wants" encapsulates their motivation (3). Yeong-hye's refusal is seen as a rejection of futurity itself, something intolerable in a society organized around productivity, family, and reproduction.

In the new political model instigated by Kafer, the mind or body of the disabled individual is not the site of disability anymore but in "built environments and social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds, and ways of being" (6). Furthermore, Garland-Thomson affirms that society creates a hierarchical division of bodies and minds in order to "legitimate an unequal distribution of resources, status, and power within a biased social and architectural environment" (2002, 5). Thus, the definition of disability shifts from an objective fact of the body or mind to a product of social relations. In this construction of meanings, Yeong-hye, though medically not challenged enough, can be described as "disabled" in reference to how the power system and relations treat her.

4.2. The Spectacle of a Disabled Flower

The claim to her disability can be more thoroughly proved when one reads the next part of the narrative titled "The Mongolian Mark." She is now discharged from the hospital and placed in an apartment where she lives alone. Her parents are not keen on visits since they believe her refusal to eat meat and/or comply with her husband's wishes is blasphemous and her sister, In-hye, is her only connection to her previously normate world. Mr. Cheong has also left her as he is convinced that her vegetarianism means that Yeong-hye will never be normal again (Han 2007, 45). Once Yeong-hye's deviation is visible, her body transforms into what Garland-Thomson calls an "extraordinary body," a site of cultural anxiety and spectacle. In *The Vegetarian*, this occurs through the scenes of public eating, hospitalization, and especially the brother-in-law's artistic project. As a spectacle, Yeong-hye is a freak on the platform so that they can gaze upon her with amused superiority and faint contempt while emphasizing her otherness (Garland-Thomson 1997, 133).

"The Mongolian Mark" is narrated from the third-person omniscient point of view yet it mainly underscores Yeong-hye's brother-in-law who remains unnamed. He is an artist who revels in visual arts and is looking for a new muse. Flipping through his sketchbook, he finds a drawing of a woman with a Mongolian mark resembling the shape of a flower and he immediately remembers that this mark in real life resides on Yeong-hye's body (Han 2007, 40). His enthusiasm toward her takes a leap and transforms into physical fancy. In his mind she is

“like a tree that grows in the wilderness, denuded and solitary” (42). The vegetal imagery dominates the plot as Yeong-hye begins her vegetative metamorphosis.

Infatuated with the blue mark on Yeong-hye’s back, the brother-in-law sees her in a new light (45). He plans to meet her and to convince her to star in his new art project which is in the format of a video. She unassumingly accepts the offer. This confirmation leads to more fantasizing on his part and he now sees in front of himself an object of art instead of an “object of pity” (44).

The fact that she didn’t eat meat, only vegetables and cereal grains, seemed to fit with the image of that blue petal-like mark, so much so that the one could not be disentangled from the other, and the fact that the blood that had gushed out of her artery had soaked his white shirt, drying into the dark, matte burgundy of red bean soup, felt like a shocking, indecipherable premonition of his own eventual fate. (46)

His obsession gets worse as he invites a friend to film an intimate scene with Yeong-hye roleplaying a couple with flower paintings. He convinces the two and takes the lead to paint Yeong-hye’s body. Before that day he used to think to himself that the mark was “of photosynthesis, and he realized to his surprise that there was nothing at all sexual about it; it was more vegetal than sexual” (51). However, during his painting session he had an entirely different idea:

starting from the nape of her neck, he began to paint. Half-open buds, red and orange, bloomed splendidly on her shoulders and back, and slender stems twined down her side. When he reached … [her back] he painted an orange flower in full bloom, with a thick, vivid yellow pistil protruding from its center. He left … the Mongolian mark, undecorated. Instead, he just used a large brush to cover the area around the bluish mark with a wash of light green, fainter than the mark itself, so that the latter stood out like the pale shadow of a flower. (52)

The brother-in-law seemingly appreciates Yeong-hye as an art piece and he attests that even though she is a pretty woman who is conventionally an object of desire, “yet it was a body from which all desire had been eliminated. But this was nothing so crass as carnal desire, not for her—rather, or so it seemed, what she had renounced was the very life that her body represented” (52). Yeong-hye’s body is isolated and aestheticized and her painted, flowered skin becomes a fetishized surface rather than a human presence. As Garland-Thomson explains, “the tyranny of the norm makes extraordinary bodies into freakish bodies, which both compel and repel the normate sensibility” (1997, 130).

Cultural stereotypes consider disabled women as asexual, dependent people who are generally unattractive to the public eye since they are eliminated “from the sphere of true womanhood and feminine beauty. Depression, anorexia, and agoraphobia are female-dominant,

psychophysical disabilities that exaggerate normative gender roles" (Garland-Thomson 2002, 17). The brother-in-law reckons that her state is no longer "normal" and assesses a curious look in Yeong-hye's eyes which makes him "want to look away" (Han 2007, 53). She is now evidently the "other" and her femininity is reduced (Garland-Thomson 1997, 28). Stripped from her womanhood, the brother-in-law is at awe when he witnesses how calm she is and describes her as "something sacred. Whether human, animal or plant, she could not be called a 'person,' but then she wasn't exactly some feral creature either—more like a mysterious being with qualities of both" (Han 2007, 54).

Through Kafer's framework, the brother-in-law's art is also a reenactment of the curative gaze. It is a voyeuristic desire to interpret, contain, and reframe nonnormativity. His art replaces medical discourse but performs the same ableist work: translating Yeong-hye's nonnormativity into spectacle. Kafer argues that disability is not located solely in bodies but in the social relations that construct them and this clarifies how this visual framing disables her (2013, 6). What Garland-Thomson calls "the exploitative dynamics of spectacle" (1997, 129) and Kafer identifies as social construction converges at this moment: Yeong-hye's body is reconstituted as disabled through visual appropriation.

4.3. Becoming Plant: Refusal of Normative Futurity

"The Mongolian Mark" concludes with the brother-in-law taking advantage of Yeong-hye. By turning Yeong-hye's extraordinary body into a source of aesthetic pleasure the brother-in-law deviated into sexual aberration of her spectacle (Garland-Thomson 1997, 56). Her sister, In-hye finds them in the morning while Yeong-hye has a blank face and "her gaze was utterly devoid of any form of expression" (Han 2007, 69). After assessing her mental and physical state, in the next part of the novel titled "Flaming Trees," Yeong-hye is admitted to a psychiatric hospital. In-hye is the sole person visiting her even though her own marriage and family have been ruined. Feeling maternal toward her little sister, In-hye dedicates her energy to taking care of Yeong-hye (76).

Yeong-hye has become a totally different person since her overnight decision to become a vegan, both in her own mind and upon the gaze of others. This conversion has been compared to Kafka's metamorphosis (Taylor 2020, 225). In lieu of becoming an insect, Yeong-hye metamorphoses into a plant, all willingly. Han herself has mentioned in an interview that her source of inspiration was the Korean modernist poet Yi Sang where he "describes catatonic withdrawal as a symptom of oppression. 'I believe that humans should be plants,' he wrote" (Interview with Han Kang). In spite of Kafka's metamorphosis being rather absurd, Yeong-hye's conversion to veganism indubitably aligns more with Yi's concept of catatonia as a form of resistance. By persistently pursuing her dream of becoming a plant, Yeong-hye exhibits

profound determination to withdraw from systematic violence, and "her botanophilia is clearly linked to a will to cease being implicated in violence" (Taylor 2020, 226). Her choice is unintelligible to those who see health as progress; her slow starvation and photosynthesis are acts of crip resistance against "curative time," the temporal regime that seeks treatment and elimination of the impairment (Kafer 2013, 28).

Yeong-hye is in a dire state, both physically and psychologically as her stay at the hospital progresses. In-hye witnesses her severe dissociation from reality and how she starves herself. Additionally, she displays no signs of pleasure in communicating:

After her initial bout of mental illness she'd returned to the stage where she was able to speak to others, only to now withdraw into silence once more. But it wasn't simply that she didn't engage in conversation; back in the closed ward, she'd taken to squatting down in a sunny spot where she wouldn't be disturbed and muttering incessantly to herself. As before, she refused to eat meat, and if she so much as set eyes on a side dish containing meat she would scream and try to run away. (Han 2007, 80)

The case gets to a point where In-hye has to be confronted by the doctor regarding the possible death of her sister:

…fifteen to twenty percent of anorexia nervosa patients will starve to death. Even when they're down to nothing but skin and bone, the subject is still convinced that they've put on weight. There can be all manner of psychological factors at play; a power struggle with a domineering mother, for example…but Kim Yeong-hye's is one of those particular cases where the subject refuses to eat while suffering from schizophrenia. … But we're still not sure exactly why it is that Kim Yeong-hye is refusing to eat, and none of the medicines we've given her seem to have had any effect. (81)

The concept of "curative time" elaborated by Kafer is manifested here as the doctor expects Yeong-hye to respond to the medicine within the expected time span since it is "a challenge to normative and normalizing expectations of pace and scheduling" (2013, 27). Yeong-hye did not appear as sickly as she truly was when she was admitted (Han 2007, 82). Now, as she has vividly digressed from that norm, she is forced to become typical. Despite the fact that the patient herself has not requested the treatment, the people around her are stripping away her agency for her disabled mind and body. She is resisting her compulsory normate future written by the society. Kafer asserts that those with developmental and psychiatric impairments are faced with institutionalization, violence, and abuse. These factors have "greatly limited, and often literally shortened, the futures of disabled people" (46).

Yeong-hye refuses to eat at all. As her sister brings her some food, she ignores it and frantically gives a speech on the trees and the 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. All of them, they're all standing on their heads…. Do you know how I found out? Well, I was in a dream, and 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 need to water my body. I don't need this kind of food, sister. I need water. (Han 2007, 85)

Yeong-hye identifies as a plant now and everything she does reinforces this idea. She absorbs sunlight as if she is photosynthesising and reminds her sister that very soon her only remaining human trait will be gone, "Soon now, words and thoughts will all disappear" (88). Yeong-hye cannot find positive mutual touch with other people so she resorts to non-human bodies (Lee 2020, 343).

Reflecting on the possible reasons as to why Yeong-hye has turned out to be this fanatic, In-hye recalls their childhood where their father would beat them. In her view, Yeong-hye "had been unable to deflect their father's temper or put up any form of resistance. Instead, she had merely absorbed all her suffering inside her, deep into the marrow of her bones" (Han 2007, 89). The violence inflicted in her early childhood is revived when she, even as an adult, is coerced to obey the patriarch's orders. With as little agency as Yeong-hye has, she attempts to gain control of her life by restricting her diet and behavior to what she sees fit. In spite of dying due to her determination, she believes that "It's your body, you can treat it however you please. The only area where you're free to do just as you like. And even that doesn't turn out how you wanted" (99).

In the final scenes, Yeong-hye is yet again force-fed. This time, the hospital team attempts to insert a feeding tube which ends in a bloody mess. Macsiniuc claims that this staining blood is a manifestation of the violence of every societal structure that is based on oppression (116). Garland-Thomson's critique of representation complements Yeong-hye's identity argument. She observes that "representation tends to objectify disabled characters by denying them any opportunity for subjectivity or agency" (Garland-Thomson 1997, 11). In Han's rebellious narration, especially in the hospital scenes, one can witness Yeong-hye's partial reclamation of agency through withdrawal. By suspending herself in nonaction, she denies both cure and narrative closure, embodying Kafer's call to imagine futures "otherwise" (2013, 46). In this sense, Yeong-hye's vegetative state is not a tragic end but a temporal and bodily rebellion against compulsory normalcy.

5. Conclusion

Mostly from the male point of view, as two of the three parts of the novel are dedicated to her husband and brother-in-law, *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang depicts the patriarchal oppressive system which keeps itself in charge of every social norm. The ableist society upheld by the

“ordinary” people cannot imagine a future or even a place for the “extraordinaries.” Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* resists conventional readings of female madness, martyrdom, or aesthetics by portraying a body that is disabled into being through cultural violence. Framed within Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s and Alison Kafer’s theories, Yeong-hye’s transformation from an “ordinary wife” to a vegetal being becomes a critique of the structures that define, pathologize, and attempt to cure difference. Garland-Thomson’s observation that representation attaches meanings to bodies is vividly realized in Yeong-hye’s trajectory: once her behavior departs from normative scripts of wifehood and productivity, her body is over-read as diseased, immoral, and threatening.

Her father’s coercive feeding and the hospital’s interventions literalize Kafer’s curative imaginary where disability is a problem that must be corrected. Under that logic, her refusal of meat and of medical treatment becomes unintelligible; her very survival is rendered contingent on compliance with the able-bodied norm. Garland-Thomson’s concept of the normate exposes the ideological foundation of this violence. Yeong-hye’s family performs the normate position; they have the invisible authority that demands conformity and punishes deviation. When she ceases to inhabit that role, she is forced into spectacle. Her husband’s disgust, her father’s brutality, and her brother-in-law’s eroticized art all reproduce the spectacle of the extraordinary body: the disabled figure made hypervisible so that normality may define itself in opposition.

Kafer’s theory of crip time reframes Yeong-hye’s final withdrawal from food and speech as a temporal refusal rather than a death wish. In suspending herself outside recovery and futurity and in photosynthesizing, Yeong-hye creates a temporality elsewhere and elsewhen in which disability is understood otherwise. Her imagined photosynthesis, “all I need is sunlight,” articulates a crip ecology that rejects human-centered productivity and embraces stillness, interdependence, and non-normative survival. What appears to others as regression is a radical reconfiguration of time and embodiment. Ultimately, *The Vegetarian* dismantles the binary between health and illness, sanity and madness, human and nonhuman. Through Garland-Thomson’s visual politics and Kafer’s temporal critique, the novel exposes how social systems disable non-conforming bodies and how resistance can emerge through refusal. Yeong-hye’s vegetal becoming is thus not annihilation but defiance; it is a crip gesture that interrupts curative progress and imagines a world where difference need not be healed to be whole.

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