

WHEN TRAUMA CANNOT SPEAK: SILENCE AND DESTRUCTIVE PLASTICITY IN HAN KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN*

¹Sysilia Putri Agustin, ²Uci Elly Kholidah, ³Sulistya Ningtyas

^{1,2}English Literature Study Program, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia,

³English Literature Study Program, Universitas Diponegoro, Indonesia

***Corresponding Author**

Email: sysilia.22087@mhs.unesa.ac.id

Received:
24 March 2026

Revised:
13 July 2026

Accepted:
24 July 2026

Published:
31 July 2026

How to cite (APA 7th style):

Agustin, S. P., Kholidah, U. E., & Ningtyas, S. (2026). When trauma cannot speak: Silence and destructive plasticity in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *FRASA: English Education and Literature Journal*, 7(2), 278–298. <https://doi.org/10.47701/frasa.v7i2.6077>

Abstract

Structural violence and patriarchal domination remain significant threats to women's existence, particularly within collective societies. This study examines Han Kang's novel, The Vegetarian, to investigate the protagonist's radical transformation as a response to systemic oppression. While existing research often focuses on psychological or feminist perspectives, there is a lack of analysis regarding how structural violence materially produces a new subjectivity through Catherine Malabou's theory of destructive plasticity. This qualitative study employs a thematic approach to analyze the novel, complemented by a biographical approach to trace the author's life trajectory through secondary data, specifically published written interviews with Han Kang spanning from 2016 to 2024. The analysis suggests that Yeong-hye's transformation constitutes an "ontological accident" triggered by latent childhood trauma and domestic objectification. This process produces a "New Wounded" subject who adopts a vegetal identity to achieve total detachment from a world perceived as inherently violent. Furthermore, the study posits that the erasure of Yeong-hye's voice reflects South Korea's socio-legal and patriarchal structures, representing a strategic choice to highlight the subject's alienation. Ultimately, this research concludes that becoming non-human constitutes a radical political act of extraction, allowing the subject to exist beyond the reach of patriarchal jurisdiction.

Keywords: Destructive Plasticity, Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, Structural Violence, Silence.

INTRODUCTION

Structural violence and patriarchal domination remain a threat to women around the world. Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is the most widespread form of violence, affecting around 30% of women worldwide (UN Women, 2015). IPV refers to physical, sexual, and psychological abuses committed by men or women against their partners (UN Women, 2015). Asian

countries that still adhere to traditional gender roles, such as South Korea, are also not immune to this global problem. JoongAng Daily media reported that The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in South Korea has conducted a survey of 7,027 adult women by the end of 2024, concluding that 36,1% of Korean women had experienced violence at least once in their lifetime, with 6.7% of them being categorized as IPV (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2025).

The role of the patriarchal system, which establishes men as having higher authority than women, is fundamental to the occurrence of structural violence, particularly in cases of domestic violence (Y. R. Han & Choi, 2021). As a form of rejection of patriarchal dominance, young women in South Korea have initiated the 4B (4非) movement: *bihon*, *bichulsan*, *bijeonae*, *bisekseu*, where the word "bi" (비/非) means "no" in Korean. In a global sense, the 4B Movement refers to the refusal of heterosexual marriage, childbearing, romantic and sexual relationships (Lee & Jeong, 2021). This collective strategy was intended to liberate women from gender-based power hierarchies that put them at imminent risk of psychological, economic, and physical violence within the household. In other words, the 4B movement could be seen as a resistant act against the patriarchal system and a preventive action concerning the collective and prior trauma caused by domestic violence. This is an issue that feminists in South Korea are still trying to resolve.

Furthermore, the 4B movement has surpassed geopolitical boundaries through dynamic transnational recontextualization within neighbouring Asian contexts. As demonstrated in Li and Gu's (2025) study of the Douban community, this phenomenon is clearly evident in China, where radical online feminist networks have adopted and developed the South Korean framework into the more advanced "6B4T" movement. Driven by the same systemic pressures across East Asia, such as severe gender inequality as reflected in the Global Gender Gap Index, deeply entrenched Confucian expectations regarding women's domestic roles, and state policies that treat women's reproductive capacity primarily as a patriarchal utility (Wu, 2024), Chinese women utilise this adapted framework as a vital "survival tactic" to achieve personal liberation and collectively resist forced domestication, marriage, and childbirth (Li & Gu, 2025). Although the original 4B movement in South Korea operates through open socio-political activism, the Chinese version is markedly different as it functions as a hidden digital alternative public space due to strict state censorship and algorithmic surveillance (Li & Gu, 2025).

Domestic violence rooted in persistent gender-based roles (GBV) causes trauma to the victims themselves as well as collective trauma to women (Pain, 2022). To fully comprehend how this trauma is embedded in both sides, a theoretical approach to the concept of trauma is essentially needed. In the psychoanalytic theory developed by Sigmund Freud, trauma is understood as a repressed event that is always carried unconsciously, while Jacques Lacan defines trauma as a disturbance of the Real that cannot be symbolized (Yansori, 2018). Radically, Catherine Malabou insisted that trauma does not merely deal with symbolic conflict, but an existence and a being. Trauma is an extreme event that destroys the old subject and forms a new subject that loses access to the previous subject (Malabou, 2012).

This intersection of bodily autonomy and resistance against patriarchal structures is vividly prefigured in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2015), offering a crucial literary framework for analysing modern feminist discourse. Consequently, contemporary literary studies serve as a vital means of bringing systemic issues such as structural violence, trauma and resistance to the fore as credible academic research, particularly through the novel's distinct narrative style.

Whilst existing scholarship has largely focused on general themes such as ecofeminism or individual madness in the novel, this research addresses a significant gap by contextualising Han Kang's specific writing techniques within the socio-legal history of South Korea. The novel was written in 2007, a critical historical turning point just before the official abolition of the *Hojiye* system (patriarchal household leadership) in 2008. Although this century-old patriarchal law, which legally preserved paternal lineage and male dominance within the household, has been abolished, this patrilineal hierarchy continues to indirectly govern modern Korean society (Nam, 2010). This enduring socio-legal erasure bears a striking resemblance to the literary construction in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, in which the structural oppression of the *Hojiye* system correlates closely with the absolute narrative absence of the protagonist, Yeong-hye. By analysing that her silence is not merely a psychological condition, but a literal manifestation of social silencing, this study offers a new perspective on how contemporary literature maps the intersection between domestic trauma, state-sanctioned patriarchy, and women's behavioural resistance.

The core narrative of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* starts when the main character, Yeong-hye, has a nightmare about bloody violence that leads her to make a radical change to become a vegetarian. This unexpected change elicits negative reactions from those closest to her in the form of condemnation and coercion to return to eating meat. This violence is perpetrated by her entire family, including her husband and father, who consider Yeong-hye to be no longer normal. The negative remarks and attempted coercion from Yeong-hye's relatives demonstrate that she exists within a rigid patriarchal structure that demands absolute conformity and discipline of the female body. This novel provides the accurate situation regarding the image of women's bodies as the final battleground against structural violence when they no longer have the freedom to speak and act.

Yeong-hye's subsequent alteration of eating habits, physical form, and behavior is construed not merely as irrationality, but as a direct, though ultimately thwarted, act of resistance against the structural trauma rooted in domestic and social oppression. This extreme change can be observed not only in terms of emotional responses, but also in radical profound shifts that shape an entirely distinct personality. Her transformation into a wholly different subject from her previous self can be seen through Malabou's lens of destructive plasticity. This idea was proposed in Malabou's works *The New Wounded* (2012b) and *The Ontology of The Accident* (2012a) to determine the particular kind of traumatic accident that induced the alteration. Malabou emphasizes that trauma not only harms the subject, but destroys the subject itself so that the new subject that is created is no longer linked to the old subject. This perspective can help to understand Yeong-hye's radical alteration as a result of the structural violence she endured.

Research on *The Vegetarian* frequently identifies Yeong-hye's vegetarianism and silence as tragic resistance against patriarchal violence (Gupta, 2025; Mundhe & Tripathi, 2025). This aligns with the perception of her narrative absence as a mechanism that forces readers to construct her identity through the objectifying gazes of others (Gupta, 2025). While these studies employ feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks, recent literary applications of Catherine Malabou's "destructive plasticity" offer a different perspective. To build upon these existing literary applications, this approach, similar to the "plastic reading" of traumatic

memories (Trimarco, 2023) or the "ontological accidents" found in filmic subjects (Tyrer, 2016), highlights the birth of a new subject through total silence.

However, a critical gap remains as existing research often overlooks how Korea's patriarchal structures materially produce this absence rather than just representing it. To address this limitation, this study fills these gaps by investigating how Yeong-hye's bodily destruction exposes deeper systems of power and alienation, guided by two research questions: 1) How is Yeong-hye's traumatic transformation depicted? and 2) How does Han Kang's life trajectory shape this characterization?

METHOD

The primary data used in this study is the English translation of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* by Deborah Smith, published globally in 2015. All narrative elements, including dialogues and textual representations within the novel, serve as the main source of data. Secondary data include contextual materials such as scholarly articles, historical documents, and specifically 13 published written interviews with Han Kang spanning from 2016 to 2024. These secondary sources function strictly as supporting evidence to provide a contextual backdrop for interpreting the primary data.

The data collection process involves a rigorous close reading of the novel to identify linguistic cues and narrative fragments reflecting the protagonist's transformation. These fragments are systematically tagged and organized using QDA Miner Lite as a digital repository. The collection focuses on extracting data that fit into four primary coding schemes: Ontological Accident (Traumatic Experience, Nightmares), Destructive Plasticity (Abrupt Behaviour, Physical Decay, Vegetal Identity), Objectification (Systemic Pressure, Fetishistic Gaze), and Ontological Void (Narrative Absence, Zero POV).

The data analysis employs an integrated thematic and biographical approach, positioning the thematic analysis as the primary tool for textual interpretation and the biographical aspect as a contextual authorial analysis. Referring to Braun and Clarke (2017), thematic analysis is used to identify and code hidden patterns of structural trauma within the text. To answer the first research question, the researcher evaluates the accumulated codes of Ontological Void and Destructive Plasticity to test the hypothesis of Yeong-hye's narrative silence and erasure throughout the plot. For the second research question, this integrated approach correlates the Objectification codes (specifically Systemic Pressure) with the insights gathered from the 13 published interviews. This stage involves analyzing how the author's documented commentary on the socio-political climate shapes the characterization of the protagonist.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Traumatic Transformation of Yeong-hye

Analysis of the deconstruction of Yeong-hye's identity in *The Vegetarian* requires an approach beyond conventional psychological diagnosis. Her transformation can be seen as an "ontological accident" (Malabou, 2012a) triggered by systemic patriarchal violence. This study applies Malabou's concepts to domestic oppression as a legitimate source of ontological destruction where Yeong-hye, facing an "impossibility of flight," undergoes a "metamorphosis by destruction" (Malabou, 2012a). This transition into a plant-like state is a form of survival

through self-annihilation, effectively severing her existence from the "usual order of things" to become "The New Wounded"—a persona characterized by emotional detachment and total severance from the social world. By tracing her identity's development, this analysis illustrates how trauma unleashed destructive forces, bringing her to the threshold between life and death.

Whilst conventional trauma frameworks offer insightful perspectives on psychological wounds, Malabou's approach provides a distinct analytical advantage when examining the nature of permanently altered identities. Traditional trauma theories, particularly Cathy Caruth's model (2016), essentially view trauma as an unexpected event that repeatedly resurfaces in exactly the same form in the future. Similarly, Dominick LaCapra (2014) emphasizes the process of "acting out," in which a survivor becomes trapped in a melancholic cycle of compulsive repetition that obstructs the future. These approaches generally assume that the core structure of the original self remains intact, processing the crisis through recurring memories or a struggle toward narrative recovery. Yeong-hye's journey in *The Vegetarian* involves a more radical transformation through an irreversible severing of identity, which transcends the cycle of remembering or acting out domestic violence. In this context, Malabou's destructive plasticity offers a crucial complementary tool because it explains the actual production of the "New Wounded" subject that emerges from the definitive closure of the old identity, rather than its preservation. While Caruth and LaCapra help unravel how an identity grapples with the continuous return of history, Malabou elucidates the specific mechanisms by which an entirely new subjectivity is forged from ontological emptiness.

Although Malabou does not explicitly categorize destructive plasticity into stages, this study proposes a four-phase analysis to trace the escalation of Yeong-hye's transformation. These phases map the mechanical destruction of her identity alongside domestic and patriarchal violence, ranging from latent trauma to a non-human state. By categorizing her journey, this study distinguishes foundational ontological concepts from the specific metamorphosis observed within the narrative. In contrast to Freudian psychoanalysis which seeks to heal original identity, Malabou's framework acknowledges that extreme trauma creates total destruction. This approach examines the mechanical 'how' of Yeong-hye's identity shattering into a permanent and unpredictable ontological departure.

Phase 0: The Roots of Latent Trauma and Receptivity

An investigation into the deconstruction of Yeong-hye's subjectivity must begin long before her overt rejection of meat, particularly within the domestic realm of childhood trauma that shapes her fundamental ontological vulnerability. At this early stage, domestic violence institutionalized by her father's authority does not function as an isolated external incident, but rather as a coercive stimulus that radically shapes the subject's psychic capacity to receive form (receptivity). Through passive exposure to this systemic cruelty, the boundaries of Yeong-hye's autonomy were suppressed to an absolute minimum, forcing her to internalize patriarchal aggression as a latent component within her own structure. This manifestation of mechanical repression is vividly expressed in the following narrative flashback concerning the brutal execution of her pet during her childhood:

"I am nine years old."

"Once it has gone five laps, the dog is frothing at the mouth. Blood drips from its throat... At six laps, the dog vomits blackish-red blood... I stand stiffly upright and stare at those two glittering eyes. Seven laps... I look at the dog's four juddering legs... the blood and water in its dead eyes."

"...dog, and I did scoop up a mouthful for myself. No, in fact I ate an entire bowlful with rice... I remember the two eyes that had watched me, while the dog was made to run on, while he vomited blood mixed with froth, and how later they had seemed to appear, flickering, on the surface of the soup. But I don't care. I really didn't care." (K. Han, 2015).

Yeong-hye's state whilst witnessing the torture of the dog reflects what Malabou (2012a) refers to as "receptivity... the capacity to receive form." In this phase, Yeong-hye occupies the position of a wholly passive subject, possessing only the capacity to receive the form imposed by an external authority, in this case her father. Yeong-hye's inability to protest or flee whilst witnessing this violence indicates that her mental plasticity is being suppressed to accept violence as part of her identity structure. She lacks the agency to refuse, and is thus forced to absorb this brutal reality into herself. The statement "I really didn't care" does not indicate mental strength, but rather a form of submission or total surrender in which the subject suppresses her own reactions in order to survive under the pressure of an absolute patriarchal system. By being forcibly receptive, Yeong-hye allows herself to be "shaped" by trauma, which marks the beginning of her loss of control over herself in the future.

The internalisation of violence through the act of eating dog meat subsequently became embedded within Yeong-hye as "a reserve of dynamite hidden under the peachy skin of being" (Malabou, 2012a). Although Yeong-hye appears capable of continuing her life normally and maintaining her role as an obedient daughter, this trauma never truly disappears but settles as a latent destructive force. Malabou emphasises that destructive plasticity operates silently beneath the surface of an identity that appears stable and calm. This buried trauma creates a structural fragility in the foundations of Yeong-hye's existence, where the violence she endured in the past becomes a destructive energy that remains within her. Thus, this phase demonstrates that the subject's stability is merely a false calm, within which lies a potential for destruction that has been accumulating from an early point.

Phase 1: Domestic Objectification and the Illusion of Stability

As she enters adulthood and marriage, the absolute obedience expressed by Yeong-hye transforms into an existential camouflage, in which the domestic stability visible on the surface is merely a facade for a deeply entrenched state of oppression. Within the heteronormative space of marriage, Yeong-hye's subjectivity is systematically severed and reduced to nothing more than a tool for maintaining her husband's comfort. The construction of the "ideal wife" in this context does not refer to the fulfilment of an equal relationship, but rather to a process of identity purification that demands the total erasure of the woman's unique character and personal desires. This phenomenon of domestic objectification, which reduces the subject to a functional entity without identity, is clearly reflected through Mr. Cheong's biased perspective:

"Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way."

"The passive personality of this woman in whom I could detect neither freshness nor charm, or anything especially refined, suited me down to the ground." (K. Han, 2015)

In the early stages of adulthood, Yeong-hye's passive plasticity manifests itself through her complete adaptation to her role as a wife whom her husband, Mr Cheong, regards as unremarkable. For her husband, Yeong-hye's passive personality is actually a key asset, as she fulfills his expectations of a figure who lacks any troublesome allure. This domestic objectification begins with the erasure of Yeong-hye's personal character, whereby her worth is defined solely by how little she disrupts her husband's comfortable life.

"I sometimes told myself that even though the woman I was living with was a little odd, nothing particularly bad would come of it. I thought I could get by perfectly well just thinking of her as a stranger, or no, as a sister, or even a maid, someone who puts food on the table and keeps the house in good order." (K. Han, 2015).

The extreme compliance showed by Yeong-hye within the marriage reflects what Malabou (2012a) describes as "the passive nature of this plasticity... a resistance that is also a submission." Based on the above statements, Yeong-hye's silence is in fact a form of passive resistance. By surrendering all her agency and allowing herself to be regarded as a stranger or a servant, Yeong-hye is employing a self-defence strategy through the negation of identity. Malabou argues that subjects subjected to systematic pressure often develop a plasticity that serves only to bear the burden without offering any overt reaction. This total submission is Yeong-hye's way of maintaining the stability of her life, even though she must live in fragmented conditions.

"In keeping with my expectations, she made for a completely ordinary wife who went about things without any distasteful frivolousness." (K. Han, 2015).

This domestic oppression results in Yeong-hye's identity being constantly shaped or 'formed' (Malabou, 2012a) solely according to Mr Cheong's wishes. In this context, Yeong-hye has no control over herself, as she is forced to continually meet the standards of an obedient wife. Malabou views this condition as the loss of one's ability to determine one's own identity due to external pressure. Mr Cheong cares only for Yeong-hye's physical presence to serve the household's needs, without regard for his wife's thoughts or feelings. Consequently, Yeong-hye's existence is erased as a human being and she is regarded merely as a part of the household function that supports her husband's comfort. This exacerbates Yeong-hye's condition of receptivity, which had previously been shaped by the patriarchal violence of her father. Thus, the oppression inflicted by her husband further reinforces the erasure of Yeong-hye's identity as a human being, creating a life of extremely fragile stability because her identity has been completely suppressed to fulfil the demands of that role.

Phase 2: The Ontological Accident and the Rupture of Identity

The illusion of domestic stability ultimately collapses completely when the subject experiences a traumatic breakdown that permanently severs the continuity of their history. This event functions as an "ontological accident"—a sudden psychological explosion triggered by repressed childhood trauma, which is suddenly reactivated through nightmares. These bloody dreams do more than simply act as a destructive force that detonates the subject's

psychological "dynamite reserve", resulting in a radical rupture that leaves no room for reconciliation with her past identity. Yeong-hye's sudden paralysis in the face of domestic reality, as well as her internal alienation from her own face and body, is depicted in the following narrative fragment:

"She was standing, motionless, in front of the fridge."

"..she was standing there so unnaturally still it was almost as if she were some kind of ghost."

"I had a dream." (K. Han, 2015).

The moment Yeong-hye stood frozen in front of the fridge in the early hours of the morning signalled the onset of a momentous event that would transform her entire life. Her husband's description of her standing motionless, like a ghost, suggests that the Yeong-hye who had hitherto been known as a dutiful wife had vanished, replaced by something alien. From Malabou's perspective, this is the beginning of the emergence of a new identity born from the destruction of the old one. That unnatural silence serves as physical evidence that the process of identity formation by her husband has come to an abrupt halt. She ceases to function as a domestic object and begins to become a subject no longer recognisable to her social environment.

"A long bamboo stick strung with great blood-red gashes of meat... there's no end to the meat, and no exit... blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin."

"But the fear. My clothes still wet with blood... In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood."

"Chewing on something that felt so real, but couldn't have been, it couldn't. My face, the look in my eyes...my face, undoubtedly, but never seen before... Familiar and yet not...that vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling." (K. Han, 2015).

The nightmare described above serves as an internal account of the mental breakdown Yeong-hye is experiencing. The image of raw, blood-soaked flesh reawakens memories of childhood trauma that had long lain dormant beneath the surface. Yeong-hye feels a sense of the uncanny upon seeing her own face in the dream, signalling that her former identity as an obedient daughter and wife has been shattered. The fear that arises in the dream ultimately ignites the reservoir of trauma she has long kept hidden. This results in the severing of Yeong-hye's emotional ties to her past, forcing a cold new identity to emerge.

The nightmare experienced by Yeong-hye is a tangible manifestation of what Malabou (2012a) refers to as 'the event'. This event occurs suddenly and unexpectedly, instantly shattering the entire structure of Yeong-hye's life, which had hitherto appeared stable. In this context, the dream serves as a trigger that ignites the "dynamite reserve" of childhood trauma that has long lain dormant beneath the surface of her consciousness. The explosion of this trauma causes a massive upheaval that not only disrupts her psychological state but also shatters the entire structure of her former identity as an obedient wife. With the explosion of this trauma, Yeong-hye undergoes a radical transformation that permanently alters her perspective on the body and the consumption of meat. This event demonstrates that the stability of a subject built upon oppression is always threatened by traumatic explosions capable of erasing one's former self in an instant.

This ontological accident creates what Malabou (2012a) refers to as a 'rupture; it breaks being at an unlocatable point'. This point of rupture occurs within Yeong-hye permanently and cannot be medically or logically traced by those around her. This event severs the continuity of Yeong-hye's life, where her history as an obedient woman suddenly comes to a complete halt. This rupture is not merely a temporary behavioural change, but a damage to the fundamental structure of her existence that makes it impossible for her to return to her former state. This explosive trauma has created an unbridgeable gap between who she once was and who she is now, marking the end of Yeong-hye's old identity forever.

"I had a dream... and that's why I don't eat meat."

"But what troubled me more was that she now seemed to be actively avoiding sex. In the past, she'd generally been willing to comply with my physical demands..." (K. Han, 2015).

The two quotations above are clear evidence of the 'radical departure of the self from the self' (Malabou, 2012a). Yeong-hye's transformation is not limited to her diet, but also extends to a total rejection of her husband's sexual demands. Whereas previously Yeong-hye had always been willing to satisfy Mr Cheong's physical needs as a form of passive compliance, she now actively withdraws. Malabou explains that in this state, the subject has abandoned her former identity, so that she no longer feels bound by the obligations that once defined her. The decision to abstain from meat and avoid sexual relations is Yeong-hye's way of asserting that the identity of the "ordinary wife" is dead. A new, unfamiliar figure emerges, one who no longer cares about domestic structures or the desires of the man who has long controlled her body.

Phase 3: The New Wounded and Systemic Objectification

Following the collapse of her former identity, the subject—now reborn as "The New Wounded" must face retaliatory aggression from social structures seeking to restore the patriarchal order through mechanisms of forced conformity. Yeong-hye's radical refusal to consume meat and her rejection of sexual demands within marriage are immediately deemed domestic deviance and a moral rebellion that threatens male authority. As a result, the subject becomes the target of physical violence legitimized by the family hierarchy, while simultaneously serving as an object of aesthetic-fetishistic commodification by the male gaze from the outside, which exploits her ontological void as a canvas for sexual fantasies. This multi-layered oppression, aimed at disciplining the subject's deconstructed body, is brutally depicted in the following interactions:

"In any other case, it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as mine had done."

"I'd hoped things might stop there, but by now her body resembled nothing so much as the skeletal frame of an invalid..." (K. Han, 2015).

Within the context of marriage, Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat is viewed by Mr Cheong as a form of unreasonable stubbornness. To him, a wife who defies her husband's wishes is an anomaly that disrupts the order of his life. Objectification is evident here in how Mr Cheong is more concerned with Yeong-hye's obedience than with her health. He views Yeong-hye's increasingly emaciated body, resembling the frame of a sick person, merely as a

new burden, rather than as a sign of deep psychological suffering. Mr Cheong's focus remains on his role as a husband whose authority is being challenged by his wife's personal choices.

"Meat eating is a fundamental human instinct, which means vegetarianism goes against human nature, right? It just isn't natural."

"Look at yourself, now! Stop eating meat, and the world will devour you whole."

"But that her father, the Vietnam War hero, had actually struck his rebellious daughter in the face and physically forced a lump of meat into her mouth, that was something else." (K. Han, 2015).

On the other hand, Yeong-hye's extended family engages in more aggressive oppression, invoking moral justifications and human instinct. Her father, portrayed as a dominant war hero, uses physical violence to force Yeong-hye back to what he considers to be humanity's 'natural state'. The slapping and the forcing of meat into Yeong-hye's mouth are brutal attempts to 'repair' a subject deemed broken. In this context, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is seen as a threat to the family's reputation, thus justifying physical violence in order to restore Yeong-hye to the patriarchal social order.

"In his mind, the fact that his sister-in-law still had a Mongolian mark on her buttocks became inexplicably bound up with the image of men and women having sex... Though her face was missing, the woman in his sketch was undoubtedly his sister-in-law... He'd imagined what her naked body must look like... finishing it off with a dot like a small blue petal... he'd got an erection." (K. Han, 2015).

The objectification of Yeong-hye reaches new heights through the perspective of her brother-in-law, an artist obsessed with the birthmark (Mongolian spot) on Yeong-hye's body. Her brother-in-law does not see Yeong-hye as a family member undergoing an identity crisis, but rather as an aesthetic object that arouses his sexual desire. Through his obsession with the birthmark on Yeong-hye's body, he erases the subject's humanity by depicting her faceless, symbolically transforming the body into nothing more than a lifeless canvas. Within the framework of Malabou's theory, Yeong-hye's condition is a manifestation of the "form of its absence"—a new identity created precisely from the destruction of the old one.

The ontological gap or void within Yeong-hye is exploited by her brother-in-law as a perfect object, as she is deemed to no longer possess the agency to resist. This ontological void is conceptually derived from Catherine Malabou's theory of destructive plasticity, which defines this state as "new figures of the void or of identitarian abandonment" characterized by profound 'indifference' and 'coldness' (Malabou, 2012a). Because this trauma has emptied Yeong-hye's true self, her silent detachment is misinterpreted by her brother-in-law as total passivity. By painting floral motifs onto her body, he forcibly fills the void within Yeong-hye with male sexual fantasies. This demonstrates that Yeong-hye's attempt to disappear is, in reality, still commodified by the patriarchal structure as an object of sexual gratification.

Yeong-hye's response to these various pressures reflects this state of extreme detachment (Malabou, 2012a). She displays this emotional detachment even when subjected to physical violence by her father. Malabou explains that the figure of the 'new wounded' loses the ability to react emotionally due to the destruction of their mental structure. This indifference means that whilst Yeong-hye is physically present, psychologically she has completely detached herself from the norms of humanity that seek to force her back into compliance.

Yeong-hye's attitude of surrender without verbal resistance is a form of "defence mechanism... to organise its disappearance" (Malabou, 2012a). Rather than fighting back, she employs a strategy to "disappear" from the oppressive social structure. By allowing her body to be destroyed, she is in fact orchestrating her own erasure so that she can no longer be used as an object by her husband, father, or brother-in-law. Disappearing is the subject's final means of self-preservation when her identity is constantly forced by external forces to become something other than herself.

Final Phase: Inanimal and Destructive Plasticity

At its peak, the escalation of systemic violence that marginalizes the subject's verbal capacity forces Yeong-hye to launch her final defense strategy: orchestrating her total disappearance from the category of humanity. Within the psychiatric isolation ward, the physical devastation Yeong-hye experiences is no longer a sign of clinical defeat, but rather the ultimate manifestation of a destructive plasticity that annihilates the human form to give birth to an entirely new (inanimal) mode of subjectivity. By adopting vegetative logic and rejecting human language and nutrition—both of which are considered inherently violent—the subject succeeds in freeing herself from the jurisdiction of patriarchy. This victory of a radical escape toward non-human sovereignty is documented in the textual evidence below:

"On sunny days she would press herself up against the window, unbutton her hospital gown and bare her breasts to the sun... It was almost impossible to tell her apart from ordinary people, aside... from the fact that... she was at that point alarmingly thin." (K. Han, 2015).

Yeong-hye's condition in the hospital shows a process of "giving form through the annihilation of form" (Malabou, 2012a). By allowing her body to waste away drastically and exposing it to the sun, she is destroying her human form in order to forge a new identity. The extreme thinness of her body is not merely a clinical sign of anorexia, but a manifestation of destructive plasticity in which the subject sheds all her human attributes in order to mutate into something else. Through this self-destruction, Yeong-hye creates a distance that cannot be penetrated by the social system that previously controlled her body.

"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." (K. Han, 2015).

Yeong-hye's dialogue above demonstrates that she has completely abandoned human logic and adopted the logic of a plant. By regarding her hands as roots and requiring water rather than food, Yeong-hye displays a radical departure from the human 'nature' that has long been imposed upon her. Malabou explains that a subject who has experienced severe trauma can create an entirely new identity as a means of surviving the destruction of their old identity. The choice to become a plant is Yeong-hye's final act of agency to assert that her former self has died and been replaced by an existence that no longer requires validation from the human world.

"I thought to myself: I do not know that woman. . . Whether human, animal or plant, she could not be called a 'person,'.. more like a mysterious being with qualities of both." (K. Han, 2015).

Yeong-hye's final condition reduces the subject to an 'inanimal' state (Malabou, 2012), a state in which life continues as a form devoid of human characteristics. Her husband's admission that he no longer recognises Yeong-hye, along with the observation that she is no longer a "person", validates that Yeong-hye's strategy to "organise her disappearance" has succeeded. She now stands on the threshold between species, a cold, unresponsive figure who has stepped outside the category of humanity. As a plant, Yeong-hye achieves a new stability of identity that is an existence free from objectification because she is no longer recognised as a human subject capable of being controlled.

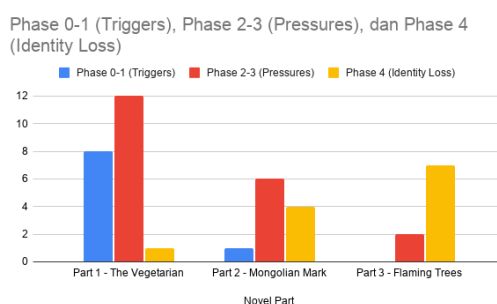


Figure 1. The Progression of Destructive Plasticity in The Vegetarian

According to the data in Figure 1, an escalation in the disintegration of Yeong-hye's identity was identified, which is systematically divided into three narrative sections within the novel. In Part 1 (The Vegetarian), the findings are dominated by Phases 0-1 and Phases 2-3, indicating that the conflict originates from traumatic triggers and systemic pressures from the family environment. Moving into Part 2 (Mongolian Mark), Phase 4 begins to emerge, showing that the destructive impact is becoming entrenched due to objectification. Reaching its climax in Part 3 (Flaming Trees), Phase 4 becomes the most dominant whilst the initial trigger codes disappear entirely; this proves that Yeong-hye's transformation has reached its final stage as a new subject (the new wounded) alongside the severity peaking at the end of the narrative.

Based on an analysis of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* through the lens of Catherine Malabou's theory of Destructive Plasticity, it can be concluded that Yeong-hye's transformation constitutes a radical escape from the systemic objectification that besieges her life. The accumulated childhood trauma and relentless patriarchal pressure from her husband, father, and brother-in-law function as a 'reserve of dynamite' that eventually explodes through a traumatic event in the form of a nightmare. This explosion triggers an ontological accident that shatters Yeong-hye's old identity as an obedient subject. Yeong-hye's condition shows a steadily worsening degradation as the intensity of the objectification she endures increases at each stage. Beginning with a passive rejection of meat as a response to her husband's domestic control, her condition deteriorates sharply into a suicide attempt after she suffers physical violence and "forced correction" at the hands of her father. At its peak, when her brother-in-law reduces her suffering to a mere sexual and artistic fetish, Yeong-hye loses all connection to her humanity.

This progressive destruction does not end in nothingness, but gives rise to the figure of the 'new wounded', characterised by indifference or extreme emotional detachment. Through a defence mechanism to organise her disappearance, Yeong-hye harnesses the power of destructive plasticity to annihilate her human form and mutate into a new identity resembling a plant. Tangible evidence of this subject's decomposition is evident in the final phase at the hospital, where she no longer recognises herself as human, refuses food, and insists that she is a tree that needs only water. Her husband's admission that he no longer recognises Yeong-hye as a 'person' validates that this strategy of self-erasure has succeeded. Ultimately, the inanimal condition experienced by Yeong-hye is a final form of agency; a success in escaping the category of humanity to achieve an identity sovereignty that can no longer be reached or harmed by any patriarchal authority.

Authorial Intent and the Socio-Political Context of Silence

The first section has examined the deconstruction of Yeong-hye's identity as an 'ontological accident' through the lens of Malabou's destructive plasticity. Whilst that section addressed how the subject's identity is mechanically shattered and mutated, this section will explore why Han Kang deliberately silences her subject's voice amidst this destruction. This transition from the shattering of the structure of selfhood to the loss of verbal sovereignty constitutes the author's strategy for building resistance through silence. By erasing Yeong-hye's voice, Han Kang creates an ontological void, it is a void in which the subject's existence becomes most tangible precisely when she refuses to participate in human language, which is regarded as an instrument of violence. Therefore, the following section will examine how this silence operates within the context of the author's intent and the oppressive socio-political pressures of Korea.

The Deliberate Erasure of Yeong-hye's Voice

Han Kang effectively strips Yeong-hye of her voice to position her as a passive object of perception, rather than a self-determining subject. By deliberately removing Yeong-hye's ability to speak for herself, the author forces the readers to witness how her existence is entirely constructed, interpreted, and often violated by the gaze of the other characters. This narrative absence serves as a profound technical strategy to illustrate how a subject who has been stripped of their agency becomes a canvas for the projections of others. This structural decision is deeply rooted in Han Kang's own early life trajectory and her primal, historical encounter with state-sanctioned violence, as she recalls from her childhood experience:

"I moved from Gwangju to Seoul in January 1980, at the age of nine with my family. It was just four months before the Gwangju uprising/massacre occurred. After a few years, there were photo books which were printed and circulated secretly to bear witness. I found one of the photo books on the bookshelf of my father, and it became sort of a defining experience in my life. [...] The photo book contained numerous dead faces with deep wounds and after reaching the end of the photo book, I thought to myself, 'Humans are scary'. I couldn't find a way to accept that I am one of these 'humans'." (Banana Writers, 2016)

This foundational existential devastation directly explains why Yeong-hye's narrative absence in this novel is a manifestation of Han Kang's profound critique of deeply rooted patriarchal and militaristic structures. This deliberate silencing of the subject's voice

demonstrates that, within a regime of strict discipline, there is indeed never any dialectical space for individuals who choose not to conform to prevailing norms of violence. Through Malabou's lens, this silencing confirms that the trauma experienced by Yeong-hye is not merely a personal psychological wound or an isolated individual mental health issue, but rather a form of trauma produced systemically by the regime. The destruction of Yeong-hye's identity is a direct result of the normalisation of violence and coercive control over women's bodies, which ultimately strips her of her verbal sovereignty.

This strategy of silencing is a point that Han Kang has consistently maintained in various public discourses over the past decade. Seven years after her initial statement, in an interview with The Booker Prizes (2023), she again emphasized variations of the same argument regarding how Yeong-hye was deliberately portrayed so that readers would see how she was "observed, hated, misunderstood, pitied, and objectified." This consistency also appears in other media such as The White Review (2016), which highlights the subject's determination to "stay away from the human race," as well as Deutsche Welle (2016), which explains that the absence of the voice is intended to allow readers to "follow the imagination on their own." This body of evidence spanning from 2016 to 2023 reinforces the validity that narrative absence is a vital instrument consciously designed by the author to demonstrate the subject's total alienation from the human race.

Although Han Kang systematically erases the voice from Yeong-hye, she still leaves room for a very limited degree of subjectivity through fragments of dreams. These monologues suggest that her human identity has not been completely obliterated, but has become fragmented and can only manifest in the private realm of the subconscious. In her interview with Deutsche Welle (2016), Han Kang explained that these fragments are the only moments in which Yeong-hye speaks for herself. In this context, dreams serve as the final sanctuary for a self-structure that has no more space to exist in a hostile reality. By confining Yeong-hye's voice to this dreamscape, Han Kang highlights a total disconnect between the internal self and the external world, showing that for the 'New Wounded' subject, communication is only possible in a space that cannot be colonized by the logic of society.

"She is a really determined and strong person... I didn't give her a voice. The only part she speaks herself is in the first section when she recounts her dream. Readers could taste the dream and then follow the imagination on their own." (Deutsche Welle, 2016).

Within Malabou's framework, the voice of Yeong-hye in this dream can be analyzed as the final residue of self-plasticity. Before fully mutating into the cold, emotionless New Wounded, the subject undergoes a transitional phase in which her old identity still attempts to process the violence through the unconscious. The bloody dreams experienced by Yeong-hye are not mere figments of the imagination, but rather the brain's plastic activity that is "dismantling" the old self-structure to form a new identity that is entirely foreign. The silence in the real world, which contrasts with the noise within the dreams, indicates that the process of Yeong-hye's identity destruction has reached its final stage, where communication is only possible in a private space that cannot be interfered with by external sociopolitical systems.

Therefore, the destructive plasticity occurring in Yeong-hye must be understood as a direct mechanical consequence of rigid and uncompromising social structures, rather than the mere result of a single, random traumatic event. Her transformation into a silent figure represents a radical response to a systemic environment that, from its very inception, was

designed to facilitate the subject's ontological destruction. From Malabou's perspective, this silencing creates an ontological void; as Yeong-hye no longer communicates using human logic, her identity becomes a void that is subsequently "inhabited" by the projections of bias, hatred, and misunderstanding from the characters around her. In a context that offers absolutely no discursive or existential space for the development of a healthy identity, the subject is forced to undergo a mutation into an 'inanimal'. By attaining this state of being that exists outside the boundaries of human classification, Yeong-hye successfully extracts herself from the reach of human logic, which she perceives as an inherently violent instrument of control.

This strategy of using dreams as the readers' only "entry point" is consistently found across the author's various discourses during her international publishing career. Han Kang mentions this role of dreams in three different sources: *The White Review* (2016), *The New York Times* (2016), and again in *Deutsche Welle* (2016). This consistency indicates that the restriction of Yeong-hye's voice solely to the realm of dreams is a highly deliberate technical choice. By imparting the "essence" of these dreams to the reader, Han Kang is actually highlighting an identity paradox: that Yeong-hye is most "human" when she is dreaming, and most "alien" when she is awake.

Silence as a Rejection of Human Violence

Yeong-hye's silence in this narrative is not merely the loss of the ability to speak, but a reflection of the author's unease regarding the harsh realities of human life. In her interview with *Literary Hub* (2016), Han Kang revealed that the writing of this novel was driven by her personal questions regarding "the possibility or impossibility of innocence in this world." Through the character of Yeong-hye, who chooses to become a plant, Han Kang explores an extreme attempt to free oneself from all forms of coercion. This specific subject of vegetative transformation as a possible escape from human cruelty marks a long journey in Han Kang's authorship, one that was initially spurred by concerns in Korean literature rooted in historical events:

"Her first novel, 'Black Year,' a mystery about a missing woman, was released in 1998. Around that time, she had the idea for a short story about a woman who becomes a plant, and who is lovingly tended by her husband. The concept was inspired partly by a line from the Korean poet Yi Sang, who wrote, 'I believe that humans should be plants.'" (The New York Times, 2016)

*"I wrote a short story, 'The Fruit of My Woman,' in 1997, where a woman literally turns into a plant. After several years I reworked this image in *The Vegetarian*, in a darker and fiercer way." (Literary Hub, 2016)*

By continuing to expand this particular writing journey, Han Kang demonstrates a protest against humanity's involvement in the cycle of violence against fellow living beings. The narrative strategy chosen by Han Kang reflects a highly radical authorial ethic, in which she consciously rejects the use of healing narratives or sentimental resolutions that readers typically expect in stories centred on suffering. By allowing Yeong-hye to remain in a state of extreme silence without showing any signs of psychological recovery, Han Kang is in fact practising an ethics of representation that values the permanence of the subject's shattered identity. She refuses to embellish permanent trauma into an inspirational story of healing,

because through the lens of destructive plasticity, the old self-structure has been utterly annihilated and cannot be restored to its original form. This rejection of the healing narrative affirms that Han Kang does not wish to betray the reality of Yeong-hye's destruction merely to provide moral satisfaction or a sense of comfort for the reader.

This transformation constitutes an ontological mutation within Catherine Malabou's framework. Yeong-hye is not depicted as changing naturally, but rather as undergoing a metamorphosis through the plasticity of destruction. Han Kang dismantles the character's human identity, which has grown weary of environmental pressures, to form a completely new identity. This resistance through silence indicates that Yeong-hye's old self-structure has been shattered and no longer operates within human logic. The choice to become a plant is positioned as a final strategy to achieve existential peace, where the subject's existence is no longer built upon the suffering of other beings and is freed from the burden of human cruelty.

The theme of "purity and the rejection of violence" is the topic Han Kang discusses most frequently when explaining her work, appearing in six different interview sources. In addition to Literary Hub (2016) and NPR (2016), the same point is also found in The White Review (2016), The New York Times (2016), Deutsche Welle (2016) and The Guardian (2016). The abundance of this data demonstrates that for Han Kang, the core of the technical decision to silence Yeong-hye is a profound moral protest against the harshness of the world.

When verbal ability has been completely lost, Han Kang positions Yeong-hye's body as the primary medium of communication to replace her voice. When this character no longer speaks, physical actions—particularly her radical refusal to consume meat—become the only remaining language of resistance as she elaborates:

"The body as the last refuge or the last determination..." (Literary Hub, 2016).

According to her statement, Han Kang systematically silences Yeong-hye and allows other characters to speak, make assumptions, and project their own prejudices onto Yeong-hye's position. This strategy effectively transforms Yeong-hye's physical body into a silent "text" that is read, interpreted, and even exploited by the outside world, replacing the function of verbal agency that has been ontologically lost. This highlights a tragic condition in which, for a subject whose "I" has completely collapsed, silence is no longer merely the absence of a voice, but the only condition of existence that is truly honest. When human language is regarded as an instrument of violence used to define and control individuals, the body that refuses to communicate becomes the last bastion of defence for the dignity that remains. Through this perspective, Yeong-hye's body is no longer merely a passive biological organism, but becomes the last bastion of the subject's sovereignty, refusing to submit to the norms and desires of those around her.

Yeong-hye's increasingly thin and weak physical condition is a visual manifestation of the "plasticity of destruction" in Malabou's thought. These extreme bodily changes are not presented as signs of suffering in the conventional medical sense, but rather as evidence of an ongoing transformation of the structure of existence. This process of "emptying" the body of its human attributes indicates that Yeong-hye's old identity has been completely shattered to make way for a new form of life considered purer. The body's refusal of sustenance serves as tangible proof that the subject prefers to endure physical destruction rather than resume functioning within a human social system and language perceived as oppressive. The use of the term "the body as the last refuge" is a crucial point that Han Kang reiterated in two different

sources: The Guardian (2016) and Literary Hub (2016). The repetition of this specific phrase regarding the body as the “last refuge” in various interview contexts underscores the author’s intent to demonstrate that physical autonomy is the final dignity an individual can uphold.

Hojuje and the Background of Systemic Control

Han Kang completed *The Vegetarian* between 2004 and 2007, a crucial transitional period during which the Hojuje system was being challenged in the Constitutional Court before it was finally abolished in 2008. As noted in Nam’s research (2010), this system constituted a legal framework that positioned women in a subordinate hierarchy under male authority. Han Kang’s firsthand experience of how these rules silenced the women of her generation serves as a tangible foundation for shaping the character of Yeong-hye. The figure of the Father in this narrative appears as a projection of the Hoju’s (head of the family) authority, who feels he has the moral right to break his daughter’s silence through violence. Interestingly, in The Booker Prizes (2023), Han Kang clarifies the novel’s stance on this social structure:

“I agree that the novel can be read as a parable against patriarchy. However, I do not think that this is unique to Korean society. There may be differences in degree, but wouldn’t it be universal?” (The Booker Prizes, 2023).

This statement demonstrates that for Han Kang, the roots of Korean patriarchy—such as the remnants of the Hojuje system—serve as a very obvious entry point for discussing the issue of human dignity on a broader scale. Through the close interconnection between Korea’s socio-political historical context and Yeong-hye’s personal suffering, it is clear that Han Kang views trauma not as a single spectacular event or an extraordinary incident that occurs suddenly. Rather, she dissects trauma as a condition of life that manifests through an oppressive everyday atmosphere (way of life). Life under the rigid rule of patriarchy, such as the Hojuje system, is understood as a form of structural trauma that is repetitive and erosive, slowly but surely eroding the humanity of the individual without the need for dramatic, catastrophic conflict. Within this framework, social normality, family hierarchy, and strict regulation of women’s bodies are positioned as legitimate sources of trauma, working silently to undermine the subject’s sense of self until it reaches a point of permanent collapse.

Referring to Oh (2007) perspective on women’s resistance to the erasure of identity in family law, Yeong-hye’s transformation into a plant is a deliberately chosen characterization strategy to illustrate an escape from a human life path rife with brutality. By becoming a plant, Yeong-hye automatically steps outside the sociopolitical jurisdiction of humanity; she can no longer be controlled by Hojuje’s logic. This demonstrates that Han Kang constructs Yeong-hye not as a passive victim, but as a subject who redirects her existential path to preserve her autonomy. In this sense, becoming ‘non-human’ is a radical political act that nullifies the state and family’s power over the female body by leaving the human sphere altogether.

Therefore, Yeong-hye’s radical decision to shed her human identity and transform herself entirely into a plant must be understood as an existential act of extraction. It is a conscious act of completely severing herself from the entire network of human-social systems which she considers too oppressive to remain within. This extreme withdrawal is the only logical response to a systemic order that, from the outset, has designed mechanisms of destruction for the subject through various forms of bodily discipline. By extracting herself

from the jurisdiction of humanity and the violence-laden logic of human language, Yeong-hye seeks to attain a new form of freedom in which she can no longer be reached or harmed by the social laws that have oppressed her.

Within this framework, Han Kang demonstrates a profound historical sensibility in which trauma is repositioned not as a single, spectacular event but as an atmosphere or a persistent condition of life. Unlike traditional understandings of trauma, which typically require extraordinary incidents such as war or physical accidents, Yeong-hye's devastation is triggered by the repetitive erosion of dignity within a domestic space deemed normal. The cold husband and authoritarian father in this novel are not extraordinary villains but rather representations of a social normality that is, at its core, inherently traumatic for the subject.

Through Malabou's lens, it becomes clear that destructive plasticity here occurs through the accumulation of daily disciplinary regimes rather than through a single climactic event. This sensitivity to everyday violence enables Han Kang to challenge traditional narratives of healing, for if life itself is structured as a trauma, there is no pre-traumatic 'normal' state to which the subject can return. Thus, Yeong-hye's choice to remain silent and eventually transform into a plant becomes the only logical survival strategy in a world where what is deemed normal has become synonymous with destruction itself.

In conclusion, this pattern of resistance through silence is consistently found throughout the research data, culminating in Han Kang's statement in her The Nobel Prize (2024) regarding the concept of "staring and defying." This statement underscores that throughout her literary career, she has consistently created characters who use silence as an active act of staring back at the world. Furthermore, the characterization of Yeong-hye reflects a radical authorial ethic where Han Kang consciously rejects the conventional healing narrative. By allowing the subject to remain in a state of absolute silence and ontological destruction, Han Kang practices an ethics of representation that respects the permanence of trauma. An analysis of 13 interview transcripts from various media outlets demonstrates that Yeong-hye is not just a passive victim but a manifestation of Han Kang's vision that even amidst the most extreme destruction of identity, one can remain sovereign by refusing to submit to the language of violence that defines them. Yeong-hye's silence, ultimately, is a triumph of dignity or a final act of defiance against a life path and a social structure that demanded her total submission.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Yeong-hye's transformation in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* constitutes a form of radical existential escape from the systemic objectification that besieges her life. Through Catherine Malabou's theoretical framework of destructive plasticity, it is found that the destruction of Yeong-hye's identity is not the result of a single traumatic event, but rather the consequence of the accumulation of patriarchal pressures and the normalisation of domestic violence, which function as a "reserve of dynamite" within her psyche. This explosion of trauma triggers an "ontological accident" that not only shatters the subject's psyche but mechanically destroys Yeong-hye's former identity as a compliant individual, giving birth to a new identity as the "New Wounded", characterised by total emotional detachment and the loss of narrative capacity.

Furthermore, Han Kang's narrative strategy of systematically silencing Yeong-hye's voice is validated as a deliberate technical choice to emphasise the subject's alienation from the human race. By stripping Yeong-hye of her verbal sovereignty, Han Kang renders the character's body the primary medium of resistance, rejecting the violence-laden logic of humanity. The condition of becoming a plant or an animal at the end of the story is not merely a form of mental disorder, but a logical survival strategy (final agency) to escape the jurisdiction of humanity. In a broader context, uncovering this narrative silence helps readers and contemporary activists to recognise the internal manifestations of gender-based trauma. By revealing how structural oppression forces women into silence, this research fosters public empathy and highlights the urgency of dismantling patriarchal systems that deprive individuals of their autonomy.

By re-examining the nature of structural disruption, this study directly contributes to the field of literary trauma studies by demonstrating how narrative silence can function as an active space for existential defense, rather than merely passive victimization. This paradigm also enriches feminist literary criticism by revealing how systemic patriarchal violence destroys verbal sovereignty, thereby positioning the ever-changing body as the primary focus of political resistance against oppression. Furthermore, this analysis expands the scope of Malabou's work through a new application of the concept of "destructive plasticity" to Korean fiction, demonstrating that biological regression into a vegetative state is not a clinical defeat but rather a radical manifestation of the subject that creates an entirely new form of existence when human survival becomes impossible.

REFERENCES

- Banana Writers. (2016). *Interview Han Kang / Interview with Han Kang / Author The Vegetarian*. Banana Writers. <https://www.bananawriters.com/hankanginterview>
- Caruth, C. (2016). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. [https://www.google.com/books?hl=id&lr=&id=aPY0DQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Caruth,+C.+\(1996\).+Unclaimed+Experience:+Trauma,+Narrative,+and+History.+John+Hopkins+University+Press.&ots=OOBx17Z-gS&sig=lmXADsS_QMLmz7uEfMrpvOkMzyo](https://www.google.com/books?hl=id&lr=&id=aPY0DQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Caruth,+C.+(1996).+Unclaimed+Experience:+Trauma,+Narrative,+and+History.+John+Hopkins+University+Press.&ots=OOBx17Z-gS&sig=lmXADsS_QMLmz7uEfMrpvOkMzyo)
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), 297–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>
- Deutsche Welle. (2016). *Korea's Kafka? Interview with Man Booker winner Han Kang*. Deutsche Welle . <https://www.dw.com/en/koreas-kafka-man-booker-winner-han-kang-on-why-she-turns-a-woman-into-a-plant/a-19543017>
- Gupta, R. (2025). Trauma, Silence, And Psychological Fragmentation In Han Kang's The Vegetarian. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, 13(7), 2320–2882. www.ijcrt.org
- Han, K. (2015). *The Vegetarian*. Portobello Books.
- Han, Y. R., & Choi, H. Y. (2021). Risk factors affecting intimate partner violence occurrence in South Korea: Findings from the 2016 Domestic Violence Survey. *Journals.Plos.Org YR Han, HY Choi Plos One, 2021+journals.Plos.Org, 16(3 March)*. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0247916>

- Korea JoongAng Daily. (2025, April 24). *1 in 3 women a victim of relationship abuse, Gender Ministry survey finds*. <https://www.koreajoongangdaily.com/korea/1-in-3-women-a-victim-of-relationship-abuse-gender-ministry-survey-finds/12171388>
- LaCapra, D. (2014). *Writing history, writing trauma*. [https://www.google.com/books?hl=id&lr=&id=VeQRBAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=LaCapra,+D.+\(2001\).+Writing+History,+Writing+Trauma.+Johns+Hopkins+University+Press.&ots=kiTGBDIK5I&sig=8hU5DGjbxBcIZxp057ZmWUzS2-4](https://www.google.com/books?hl=id&lr=&id=VeQRBAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=LaCapra,+D.+(2001).+Writing+History,+Writing+Trauma.+Johns+Hopkins+University+Press.&ots=kiTGBDIK5I&sig=8hU5DGjbxBcIZxp057ZmWUzS2-4)
- Lee, J., & Jeong, E. (2021). The 4B movement: envisioning a feminist future with/in a non-reproductive future in Korea. *Taylor & Francis/ Lee, E Jeong/ Journal of Gender Studies, 2021•Taylor & Francis, 30*(5), 633–644. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1929097>
- Li, S., & Gu, Y. (2025). What is '6B4T' in China? New wave of radical digital feminism on Douban. *Journal of Gender Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2025.2521682>
- Literary Hub. (2016). *Literary Hub » Han Kang on Violence, Beauty, and the (Im)possibility of Innocence*. Literary Hub. <https://lithub.com/han-kang-on-violence-beauty-and-the-impossibility-of-innocence/>
- Malabou, C. (2012a). *Ontology of the accident: An essay on destructive plasticity*. Polity Press. <https://philpapers.org/rec/MALOOT-2>
- Malabou, C. (2012b). *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*. Fordham University Press.
- Mundhe, J. S., & Tripathi, I. A. (2025). Beyond The Platter: Unpacking Trauma, Resistance, and Healing in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *The Voice of Creative Research, 7*(2), 77–84. <https://doi.org/10.53032/TVCR/2025.V7N2.10>
- Nam, S. (2010). The Women's Movement and the Transformation of the Family Law in South Korea. Interactions Between Local, National and Global Structures. *European Journal of East Asian Studies, 9*(1), 67–86. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156805810X517670>
- NPR. (2016). *Don't Be Fooled, "The Vegetarian" Serves Up Appetites For Fear*: NPR. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2016/02/13/466648890/dont-be-fooled-the-vegetarian-serves-up-appetites-for-fright>
- Oh, J. (2007). Women's Political Participation and the Change of Family Law: A Case Study of the Abolition Process of Family Head System (the Hojuje) in Korea: A Case. *E-Asianwomen.Org/ OhAsian Women, 2007•e-Asianwomen.Org*. <https://doi.org/10.14431/AW.2007.06.23.2.97>
- Pain, R. (2022). Collective trauma? Isolating and commoning gender-based violence. *Gender, Place & Culture, 29*(12), 1788–1809. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2021.1975103>
- The Booker Prizes. (2023). *Han Kang interview: "I never imagined The Vegetarian would find so many readers" | The Booker Prizes*. <https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/han-kang-interview-i-never-imagined-the-vegetarian-would-find-so-many>
- The Guardian. (2016). *Han Kang: 'Writing about a massacre was a struggle. I'm a person who feels pain when you throw meat on a fire' | Books | The Guardian*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/05/han-kang-interview-writing-massacre>

- The New York Times. (2016). *'The Vegetarian,' a Surreal South Korean Novel - The New York Times*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/03/books/the-vegetarian-a-surreal-south-korean-novel.html>
- The Nobel Prize. (2024). *Han Kang – Nobel Prize lecture - NobelPrize.org*. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2024/han/lecture/>
- The White Review. (2016). *Interview with Han Kang - The White Review*. The White Review. <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-han-kang/>
- Trimarco, P. (2023). The Extremities of Literature: Traumatic Memory in Two Novels by Kazuo Ishiguro. *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*, 13(13), 195–209. <https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.13.11>
- Tyrer, B. (2016). 2Trauma without a subject: On Malabou, psychoanalysis and Amour. *Psychoanalysis and the Unrepresentable*, 38–56. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315666655-11>
- UN Women. (2015). *A Framework to underpin action to prevent violence against women / UN Women – Headquarters*. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/11/prevention-framework>
- Wu, Z. (2024). *A Multi-Case Study of Gender Conversations on Chinese Social Media: Confusion, Aggression, and Stigmatization*. <https://doi.org/10.17615/8CGQ-EV08>
- Yansori, A. (2018). *The Concept of Trauma in Lacanian Psychoanalysis - Psychoanalýza dnes*. Psychoanalýza Dnes. <https://psychoanalyzadnes.cz/2018/02/19/the-concept-of-trauma-in-lacanian-psychoanalysis/>