

Power, Patriarchy and the Post-Human Subject: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* navigates elements of ecofeminism and patriarchal hegemony. Drawing upon insights from posthuman literary theory and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) of the text, this article critically analyzes the roles of sovereign (family) and disciplinary (institutional) in moulding the main protagonist Yeong-hye into a societally acceptable subject, and contends that her wish to transform into a plant is a manifestation of her desire to escape from these superstructures of power by becoming a post-human entity. Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is rejected by patriarchal and societal forces and efforts of the sovereign power of the family to 'correct' her remain unsuccessful. When this fails, she is submitted to the disciplinary power of the psychiatric facility to fix her vegetarianism which is considered an "abnormality" in the meat-loving culture of South Korea. Yeong-hye loses touch with reality and her post-human wish to turn into a plant becomes her final means to escape all human forms of discipline and punishment. Hence, Yeong-hye's rejection of meat is a rebellious anthropocentric decision that calls for a post-human resistance against human-created power structures.

Keywords: Foucault, Posthumanism, Sovereignty, Discipline, Punishment

Introduction

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is a three-part tale of a woman's radical departure from the human world into a phantasmal vegetal one. Yeong-hye, a traditional housewife, wakes up one day from gory nightmares of animal carnage and converts to vegetarianism. Underlying this simple decision is a desire to separate herself from the oppressive socio-cultural, familial, and patriarchal oppression. Despite being the protagonist, the reader only gets to hear about Yeong-hye's downward mental spiral and move toward an arboreal metamorphosis from her husband, brother-in-law, and sister, respectively. Yeong-hye's decision has catastrophic consequences leading to violence, family breakdown, and her eventual institutionalization in a mental health facility, showcasing exactly how fragile ordinary life really is. Beneath all this lies the question: what made Yeong-hye take such drastic measures? Why was the answer she sought found in the abandonment of the human world? These questions are rooted in the concept of power, that works in the form of complex processes around individuals, at all times to ensure "the body" is both disciplined and conformist. Therefore, this article analyzes how sovereign and disciplinary power, as discussed in

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*,¹ operate in *The Vegetarian*. To understand Yeong-hye's journey of self-abnegation and rediscovery it is essential to understand the forms of power that made her feel oppressed. One institution that plays a crucial role in regulating Yeong-hye's body is the family, so Foucault's work on the family will be considered. Hence, in addition to *Discipline and Punish*, the *History of Sexuality*,² and *Psychiatric Power*³ will also be used as primary texts. Foucault studied how historical changes in punishment came about through structures of dominance: power, knowledge, and the body. Particularly, it explores how punishment became a matter of everyday surveillance and discipline of normal people. While hospitals and mental health facilities are considered disciplinary bodies, Foucault claims that the family is a sovereign institution. Chloe Taylor elaborates that the family exercises sovereign power and has been "infiltrated by discipline"⁴ Discipline is, thus, something that has been absorbed by the family and rather than constituting the institution, only supplements it.

Although sovereign and disciplinary institutions operate separately, a collaborative relationship between the two is possible. The family works with the disciplinary institutions in a disciplinary society. This perspective will be studied in greater detail and applied to *The Vegetarian* to better understand how Yeong-hye's family exercised their power and attempted to regulate her body and behavior. Yeong-hye's increasingly strange decision can be interpreted as a response to the stifling omnipresence of power. Her vegetal transformation appears to be a form of rebellion. Therefore, the analysis of Parts Two and Three of the novel will explore her post-humanist escape from the Foucauldian world of power. In particular, this article explores how Yeong-hye's behavior is deemed to deviate from the sociocultural norms. How is sovereign power employed by her family to regulate said deviant behaviour, and what were the disciplinary practices used by the psychiatric facility to fix her abnormality? Finally, it will consider how Yeong-hye's transformation into a post-human subject was an act of defiance against the oppressive regimes of sovereign and disciplinary power. This article provides new ways of understanding the fictional world *The Vegetarian* operates in and how power unconsciously controls individuals while simultaneously making them complicit. It also seeks to add to the topic of post-human subjects in emerging contemporary literature.

Literature Review

The elements of feminism, sexuality, mental illness, power-play, and resistance are so intricately

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¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990).

³ Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, Volume I*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Macmillan, 2008), pp. 1973-1974.

⁴ Chloë Taylor, "Foucault and Familial Power", *Hypatia*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2012), p. 203.

woven throughout the text that it is almost impossible to study one in isolation. Jharna Choudhary takes a semi-medical approach to discuss the role of psychiatric institutions in categorizing Yeong-hye's 'strange illness.' At the text's core is the portrayal of familial and societal desire to discipline Yeong-hye's body. Choudhary notes, "there is an urgency in this world to completely shape and discipline Yeong-hye's body, once she transgresses the 'standard' of being an ideal woman."⁵ This discipline takes on the form of bodily oppression (marital rape, sexual abuse, and physical violence), which is a sociocultural response that medical institutions overlook in the text. Thus, "the linearity and organization of the medical institutions which wants to cure the sudden anorexia of Yeong-hye overlooks the cultural dominations and the aspect of toxic masculinity in her life, of which she has been a forced consumer."⁶

Yeong-hye's rebellious decision to eschew meat is met with strong rejection by her family and society. Cornelia Macsiniuc investigates the source of this rejection and looks at the link between food choices and "the articulation of gender relations and the power structure in a family environment."⁷ Sunakshi Srivastava also takes a gender-focused approach and states, "meat is a masculine food and meat eating a male activity."⁸ Men's 'traditional role' as hunters has been a culturally celebrated image that feeds the narrative of male dominance in society. So, Yeong-Hye's decision to completely give up on meat symbolizes her abandoning the dominant, "masculinized and animalized"⁹ ideology. It is not simply a rejection of a certain type of food; it is the rejection of the oppressive social reality which will mean disturbance and discord. Thus, the individual who has exhibited deviant behavior must first be disciplined, and their bodies regulated so they return to socially ordained 'normalness' or fear alienation from society.

Looking at the asylum from a Foucauldian lens, it is a place in which the "normalizing function of the family is replicated,"¹⁰ but also where power is exercised through the way of medical mastery. However, as Jharna Chaudhury notes, a more comprehensive view of Yeong-hye's experience could be derived from a consideration of how discipline is administered by the institution of family as well. The family is the first source of socialization and forms the basis for an individual's foundation. Therefore, it is the family to whom it falls to correct any behavior deemed unacceptable. Yeong-hye's behavior is seen by her family as deviant and "rejection of a longstanding tradition and threat to the homeostasis of the group."¹¹

In discussions of Yeong-hye's deviance or self-destruction (as a form of rebellion against patriarchy), the ecofeminist perspective of *The Vegetarian* cannot be overlooked. Ecofeminist research is crucial in understanding how power and oppression were resisted and subverted in the

⁵ Jharna Choudhury, "The Struggle with Disease Taxonomy in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*", *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2020), p. 2.

⁶ Choudhury, "The Struggle with Disease Taxonomy in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*", p. 3.

⁷ Cornelia Macsiniuc, "Normalising the Anorexic Body: Violence and Madness in *The Vegetarian*, by Han Kang", *Meridian Critic*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2017), p. 103.

⁸ Sonakshi Srivastava, "The (E)strange Case of Han Kang's *Vegetarian* and Her Discontents", *Estrangement and Reconciliation*, vol. 28 (2020), p. 113.

⁹ Srivastava, "The (E)strange Case of Han Kang's *Vegetarian* and Her Discontents", p. 114.

¹⁰ Srivastava, "The (E)strange Case of Han Kang's *Vegetarian* and Her Discontents", p. 115.

¹¹ Srivastava, "The (E)strange Case of Han Kang's *Vegetarian* and Her Discontents", p. 113.

novel. Ecofeminism states that there is a close relationship between female oppression and the oppression of nature: “the aspect of exploitation, harmful practices that exploit the environment and social structures that oppress women among other groups have an overlap, and that is what is called ecofeminism.”¹² After analyzing patriarchy and nature together, ecofeminists believe a reshaping of male-centric relations would mean an overturning of both female oppression and ecological domination. Yeong-Hye’s efforts to become a plant express a desire to be free of “man’s colonization of nature and women’s body.”¹³ By turning vegetarian, she withdraws from patriarchal objectification and retreats to the interconnected world of both women and nature.

Parallel to ecofeminist theory is the post-humanist analysis of Kang’s *The Vegetarian*. Thomas deciphers Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism and nightmares as having an anti-humanist stance that criticises not only sexism but speciesism as well. She identifies with the butchered animals and herself “feels like a piece of meat, butchered and consumed by her egoistic husband.”¹⁴ Her dissociation from the real world and her desire to become a post-human subject is a result of her rejection of humanity and the human body, both of which have been dictated by masculine ideology. In a similar vein, Magdalena Zolkos analyzes Yeong-hye’s metamorphosis through Luce Irigaray’s ‘plant philosophy’. She takes the post-humanist transformation as a positive account, claiming that “helps to narrate a more affirmative and hopeful story of radical fidelity and the possibility of escape.”¹⁵

This article analyzes how the modes of power discussed in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, especially sovereign and disciplinary power, operate in *The Vegetarian*. Furthermore, since the family as an institution plays an important role in the attempted regulation of Yeong-hye’s body, Foucault’s theoretical discussions on the family will be considered. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault studied punishment throughout the ages and how it is changing to become more effective yet subtle at the same time. He identified three fundamentals of this structure of domination: power, knowledge, and the body. Of these three, the concepts of power and the body are of greatest relevance to our argument. In the time of the sovereign ruler, punishment was a spectacle. In the classical age all “crime signified an attack on the sovereign, since the law represented and embodied his will.”¹⁶ Hence why the punishment had to be a spectacle; it had to be a ritual display and an assertion of power and thus had to be carried out with “the pomp and fastidiousness of public ceremony.”¹⁷ However, soon disciplinary practices evolved to include surveillance which became the mechanism to keep individuals in check. This article explores both sovereign and disciplinary power in *The Vegetarian*.

¹² Rincy Chandran and Geetha R. Pai, “The Flowering of Human Consciousness: An Ecofeminist Reading of Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* and *The Fruit of My Woman*”, *International Journal of English and Literature*, vol. 7, no. 4 (2017), p. 21.

¹³ Chandran and Pai, “The Flowering of Human Consciousness”, p. 21.

¹⁴ Thomas, “Unveiling the Posthumanist Strands in the Novel *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang”, p. 13.

¹⁵ Magdalena Zolkos, “Bereft of Interiority: Motifs of Vegetal Transformation, Escape and Fecundity in Luce Irigaray’s Plant Philosophy and Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*?”, *SubStance*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2019), p. 117.

¹⁶ David Garland, “Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*: An Exposition and Critique”, *American Bar Foundation Research Journal*, vol. 11, no. 4 (1986), p. 854.

¹⁷ Garland, “Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*: An Exposition and Critique,” p. 854.

Foucault looks at the family and states that in sovereign institutions power is individualized and centered at the top. Everyone who is not at the top in this institution is subservient to the sovereign. It also lacks anonymity and was traditionally patriarchal. The power of “patriarchs over their family members lacks the anonymity of the panoptic system,”¹⁸ the structure of the sovereign institution is opposite to those that utilize disciplinary power, however, a collaboration between the two is possible. The family continues to work with the disciplinary institutions in the disciplinary society. For instance, it is the family who is responsible for submitting deviant or mentally ill members to disciplinary institutions. This perspective will be studied in more detail and be applied to *The Vegetarian* to better understand how Yeong-hye’s family exercised their power and attempted to regulate her body and behavior.

Therefore, Foucault’s debates on psychiatry will be considered as it is both relevant and central to the subjectification of the protagonist in the novel. Roberts investigates how power exists and is exercised in modern mental health facilities. She takes Foucault’s accounts on power and knowledge and looks at the processes that are employed in these facilities to make individuals into “subjects” and make them adopt “psychiatric identities.” Most importantly, she takes the concept of the ‘panopticon’ and elaborates on how it compares to the contemporary asylum. It is panoptic power, she states, that “enabled the emergence of ‘human sciences’ including ‘psychology, psychiatry, pedagogy, criminology’ and so on.”¹⁹ Part Three of *The Vegetarian* centers on Yeong-hye’s time in a mental health facility and will be studied in light of this in addition to post-humanism.

An overview of the existing literature review has highlighted a consistency in themes of feminism, ecofeminism, and deviance. Synthesis of all the relevant research above enables the identification of any research gaps. While the idea of women's powerlessness has been studied under ideological constructs, not enough emphasis has been given to the structures of power that make it possible. Therefore, this article looks at how sovereign power (exercised by the family) and disciplinary power (exercised by institutions) keep women subjugated. Furthermore, it acknowledges the need for more research on the post-humanist elements in the novel. It aims to bridge this gap by analyzing Yeong-hye's escape from humanity as an expression of her desire to be free from forms of power being forced on her.

Patriarchy, Family, and Sovereignty: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

The Vegetarian is a tale of transformation, rebellion, and sexuality. Yeong-hye’s sudden decision to convert to vegetarianism leads to a chain of events that reveals the fragile and oppressive bonds between the people we consider family. At its core, Kang’s novel is about power. Power operates and is exercised in many different ways, not only to keep Yeong-hye’s body supervised but also to regulate her abnormal behavior. The power-play that operates in Yeong-hye’s family can be

¹⁸ Taylor, “Foucault and Familial Power”, p. 204.

¹⁹ Marc Roberts, “The Production of the Psychiatric Subject: Power, Knowledge, and Michel Foucault”, *Nursing Philosophy*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2005), p. 35.

considered in the context of the larger-scale male-dominated society of South Korea which dictates absolute obedience to men – the sovereign- of the family. Part one of the novel focuses on seeing how familial patriarchal power operates with supplementary disciplinary power to correct Yeong-hye's deviance.

Part Two, the “Mongolian Mark,” shows the abuse of power by Yeong-hye's brother-in-law who fetishizes her abnormal behavior and sexually abuses her. After repeated counts of psychological, physical, and sexual violence, Yeong-hye's mental condition worsens. In Part Three, she is professionally diagnosed with schizophrenia and an eating disorder. Her sister, In-hye, has her institutionalized in a mental health facility. Her time in the mental hospital is where institutional power is exercised on her through both surveillance and disciplinary measures in order to correct what they consider to be an abnormality. Although the novel revolves around Yeong-hye, the reader barely hears from her or gets insight into her thought process. It feels as if her voice is purposefully withheld. As her mental deterioration progresses, she moves into a post-understanding and post-language state which completely separates her from a world where there is an omnipresence of power. Simultaneously, she increasingly begins to identify with plant life. The only time there is an insight into her mind is when she provides jarring, fragmented recollections of her violent, gory dreams. These dreams, as she calls them, but may better be termed as nightmares, are what trigger her to give up meat and all animal-related products.

This analysis will be divided into two parts focusing on how power operates differently to create truths, discursive structures, and subjectivities. Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) will be applied throughout. In addition to studying the modes of power identified in the novel and how they are employed in the regulation of ‘the body,’ Yeong-hye's gradual transformation into a vegetal identity will be considered in light of Foucault's contributions to post-humanism and how her desire to transform is the only way to obtain absolute freedom. To understand why Yeong-hye's behavior is seen and treated as a monstrous act it is first necessary to understand how it violates the social norms of the society in which she lives. In sociological terms, social norms are “defined to mean any informal social convention”.²⁰ Foucault's ideas on what norms are shift but in his final lectures he defined it as “...a prescriptive, optimal model, that is, a positive idea of how a thing should be, at its best.”²¹ Thus, norms can be inferred as conventions that operate in the interest of society.

Firstly, it is necessary to identify the power structures of patriarchy and society that underlie the pretext of regulating Yeong-hye's “abnormality.” In the context of the novel, vegetarianism/veganism can be considered as going against the norm. This can be witnessed in the text that contains detailed descriptions of dishes containing meat (including seafood) and of women preparing it. However, since her conversion, it has been mentioned that Yeong-hye only consumes greens, rice, kimchi, and soup. Even in a restaurant setting, she is only able to eat “salad

²⁰ Mark Kelly, “What's in a Norm? Foucault's Conceptualisation and Genealogy of the Norm”, *Foucault Studies* (2019), p. 2.

²¹ Kelly, “What's in a Norm? Foucault's Conceptualisation and Genealogy of the Norm”, p. 10.

and kimchi, and a little bit of squash porridge,”²² at what was supposed to be a twelve-course meal. It goes to show how limited the vegetarian options are in a meat-centered country.

Looking at a smaller-scale, more domestic view, normalcy seems to be a necessity in Yeong-hye’s immediate family (her husband). It is treated with the importance of a norm. Her husband mentions her features as being in between, “Middling height; bobbed hair neither long nor short...that walk of hers neither fast nor slow, striding nor mincing.”²³ Her averageness comforts him and makes him secure in his own deficiencies. It also reassures him that his wife’s normality and moderation are an indication of stability (in his married life) and a denial of any possibility of abnormality or individuality. Therefore, his wife’s dietary changes disrupted their entire household.

Order, obedience, and normalcy are absolute requirements in Mr. Cheong’s (Yeong-hye’s husband) home. He says, “And so 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.”²⁴ His thoughts insinuate an intolerance for any disruption as it destabilizes the gendered discourse where men are dominant and unchallenged. Yeong-hye’s passivity makes her an ideal controlled body and grants him the order he wants while at the same time placating his self-created insecurities. Such control, especially over the individual body, is linked with authority and power. And, according to Foucault, where the question of power arises, there are going to be discursive structures and discourses. From what is analyzed so far it is evident that the resistance Yeong-hye faced from others after sharing her decision to turn vegetarian is not simply a matter of violating social norms, it is embedded deeper in the underlying patriarchal discourse.

Mr Cheong is an appropriate example as his views provide insight into the patriarchal gender ideology that exists and the discursive structures that sustain it. He has internalized the reigning dominant discourse and it can be witnessed in his thinking and actions. It is this discourse that is behind the animosity of vegetarianism in this novel. Sara Mills notes, “discourse also constructs certain events and sequences of events into narratives which are recognized by a particular culture as real or serious events.”²⁵ In this way, vegetarianism in South Korea, in relation to Kang’s book, is unacceptable if it is for reasons of personal preference. The sanctioned narratives within this discourse involve medical reasons, losing weight, or religious vows. Otherwise, it violates the cultural norms and as Mr Cheong puts it, “In any other case, it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband’s wishes as mine had done.”²⁶ Her transformation is rather an issue of disobedience to the patriarchal authority, and this is the real problem that underlies her conversion to vegetarianism.

²² Han Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, trans. Deborah Smith (London: Hogarth, 2016), p. 25.

²³ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 3.

²⁴ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 4.

²⁵ Sara Mills, “Discursive Structures”, *Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 54.

²⁶ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 14.

It is the abandonment of wifely duties that really irks Yeong-hye's husband. It is noted that "entry into discourse is seen to be inextricably linked to questions of authority and legitimacy."²⁷ Therefore, when she decides to give up her "wifely duties" it undermines the authority of her husband and destabilizes the order inside their home. He is at first somewhat tolerant, thinking that the change is something temporary. Rather than talking civilly to Yeong-hye about her abrupt, bizarre behavior he detaches herself from her and attempts to think of her in terms that do not entail a physical relationship with him, "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."²⁸ He also delays the categorization of her condition which is quickly starting to bear resemblance to an eating disorder given the considerable weight she has lost. This delayed taxonomy lets him believe that her obstinacy is merely disobedience – something akin to acting out – rather than a mental health condition which is another stigmatized topic or abnormality. Although, it can be said that being labeled 'disobedient' is also a categorization. Indeed, Foucault claims that "there is no intrinsic order to the world itself other than which we impose on it."²⁹ Given the heavily patriarchal background and the dominance of male authority, the order imposed in Yeong-hye's family (which operates as a microcosm of wider society) is to categorize her serious mental condition as defiance.

Things take a turn for the worse at Mr Cheong's company dinner. It is the first occasion in which Yeong-hye has to face judgment from people other than her family. When she reveals that she will not eat meat, one of the wives present comments, "Meat-eating is a fundamental human instinct, which means vegetarianism goes against human nature, right? It just isn't natural."³⁰ The abnormality of being vegetarian is immediately highlighted and attempts are made at disciplining through disdain. Mr Cheong tries to bring the situation back into the sanctioned narrative by giving a false medical reason for her conversion, yet Yeong-hye's silence on the subject makes it hard for them to believe it. They go on to say, "I'd hate to share a meal with someone who considers eating meat repulsive, just because that's how they personally feel ... don't you agree?"³¹ Here, "normalizing judgment is enacted through the micromanagement of behavior in areas of social life."³² This not only enables greater conformity but also enforces the norm.

While the family can be viewed as the microcosm of society, the company may be seen as a microcosm of the family with its entrenched notions of filial piety, and the boss functions as the symbolic patriarch."³³ Company dinners where spouses are invited are a way of strengthening this 'filial piety'. This atmosphere allows the wives to be freer with their criticism and discipline of Yeong-hye. Still, Yeong-hye is firm in her resistance and her impassiveness at such treatment makes everyone uncomfortable as their failure to shame her for her deviance destabilizes their

²⁷ Mills, "Discursive Structures", p. 51.

²⁸ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 30.

²⁹ Mills, "Discursive Structures", p. 4.

³⁰ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 23.

³¹ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 24.

³² Cressida J. Heyes, "Subjectivity and Power", in *Michel Foucault*, ed. Barry Smart (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 163.

³³ Srivastava, "The (E)strange Case of Han Kang's *Vegetarian* and Her Discontents", p. 116.

social reality. They are left bewildered and her husband notes, “In that moment, she was utterly unknowable.”³⁴ Shortly after the company dinner, Yeong-hye is subjected fully to the institution of the family. Foucault considers the family to be a sovereign institution whose power has lessened over time. In *Discipline and Punish*, he notes that the family exercises sovereign power but has advanced since the classical age, like other institutions (schools and military) to also use supplementary ways of disciplinary power, such as surveillance.³⁵

The exercising of sovereign power involves physical punishment and rewards, whereas disciplinary power is exercised through the use of knowledge and surveillance. The first measure Mr Cheong takes after the company dinner is to call Yeong-hye’s mother, sister, and father to tell them that she has given up meat. The first response by all three family members is an apology for Yeong-hye’s behavior. By acting against the norm and disobeying her husband she has shamed them and raised questions about her upbringing. Trying to understand her behavior or helping her does not cross their minds, as they do not regard it as an issue requiring any sort of familial or medical assistance. For them, there is only one reality and that is that she is an inconsiderate woman and a bad wife. Mills takes notes of Foucault’s thoughts on what he terms ‘truth’, “Truth, therefore, is something which societies have to work to produce, rather than something which appears in a transcendental way.”³⁶ From the instances discussed, submission to male authority is expected. The first cause of concern after Yeong-hye’s transformation is that the male figure should not be displeased. Both disciplinary and sovereign power upholds this custom. Therefore, in the given context, obedience to patriarchy can be taken as the ‘truth.’

Soon after, Mr Cheong reports to her to her father. Her father attempts to correct Yeong-hye’s behavior by scolding her harshly, however, she responds with complete and utter silence before putting the phone down and simply walking away. Silence in the face of discipline is her strongest form of resistance as it keeps her from being subjected to any normalizing identity categories. Disciplinary practices attempt to fix our identities for us. Resistance thus becomes a refusal to fit into those categories. Her silence prevents her from becoming a docile body as society wants her to. However, after the failure of her father over the phone, both men realize that socially sanctioned (scolding, contempt, and disdain) forms of regulating behavior do not work. Mr Cheong thinks a dressing down would better work as he recalls that Yeong-hye’s father had “whipped her over the calves until she was eighteen years old.”³⁷ As if this grants him some sort of leeway, he proceeds to sexually assault his wife. This furthers her mental deterioration for she increasingly starts to alienate herself from society. Rather than being unaware of the social norms or correct behavior, she is indifferent to it. One day when Mr Cheong comes home, he finds her peeling potatoes topless. On inquiring why, she gives the reason that it is hot. Although subtle, her gradual transformation into a plant-like body is visible here as after being violated repeatedly she stops seeing herself as a woman or a sexual object. In the discussion of family as a sovereign institution, Yeong-hye’s husband will not be taken as the sovereign figure. Instead, her father would be

³⁴ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 25.

³⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 209-210.

³⁶ Mills, “Discursive Structures”, p. 18.

³⁷ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 29.

considered the sovereign who even Mr Cheong refers to as a “patriarchal man”. Also, because “Sovereign power, Foucault explains, is either grounded in blood-right or blood-conquest”³⁸ which better fits her birth family.

For sovereign power, there is always an incident situated in the past that justifies the sovereign’s power, for example, a battle. This form of power relies on rituals that refer back to this precedent event of bloodshed for reaffirmation. From Yeong-hye’s fragmented dreams, another instance of dining is revealed when she was young. A dog who had bitten her had been tied behind her father’s vehicle and dragged till it died. It is given all the glory of the spectacle. Later, the dog’s meat is served, and “All the middle-aged men from the market alleyways came, everyone my father considered worth knowing” to the feast at their home.³⁹ The dinner in the present is reminiscent of the event detailed above. Much like the killing of the dog who bit his daughter, this gathering is another event in which Yeong-hye’s father will reaffirm his authority by disciplining his deviant daughter. He vocalizes the established truth by saying if he tells her to eat, she has to, “If he tells you to eat, you eat!”⁴⁰ When he was met with non-compliance, he tries to use the pretense of care, saying that he is doing it for her own good. When she states that she does not eat meat he immediately drops the act of worry and reveals the real discursive structures of obedience to masculine power by immediately slapping her hard enough to bruise.

Even that is not enough for the patriarch has been disrespected in his own home. He asks Mr Cheong and Yeong-hye’s brother to grab both her arms and hold her back. This is another reason why her father has been taken as the sovereign figure; “under sovereign power, individuality is located at the top, in the body of the sovereign, whereas those submitted to sovereign power are not individuated”.⁴¹ Here we have two subjected bodies – Yeong-hye and her husband and brother who are ordered to hold her back. The latter also defers to the hierarchal figure at the top and defer to him while she is forcefully made to comply. Her father abandons the chopsticks and resorts to the primal act of using his hands to pick up the meat. He attempts to put it into Yeong-hye’s mouth by parting “her lips with his strong fingers,”⁴² upon which he is met by resistance due to her clenched teeth. He slaps her again and finally manages to force it in. It is in many ways similar to how the condemned is punished under sovereign authority. With the backdrop of a family gathering, and members of the said family both participating and spectating in Yeong-hye’s punishment, we see her father punishing her directly for challenging his authority and thus reaffirming it at the same time. At this point, there is no interference from any other disciplinary institution. In this instance, “...the intervention of the sovereign is...a direct reply to the person who has offended him.”⁴³

³⁸ Taylor, “Foucault and Familial Power”, p. 203.

³⁹ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 42.

⁴⁰ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 38.

⁴¹ Taylor, “Foucault and Familial Power”, p. 203.

⁴² Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 40.

⁴³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 47-48

As soon as she is released, she lets out an “animal cry of distress”⁴⁴ and gets in a defensive position. It is a moment of transition for at this point Yeong-hye attempts to cut off her connection with humanity and grabs the knife to slash her wrists. Whether it was a suicide attempt or an act of purging through bloodletting is unclear for the reader never gets to her thoughts on this event. But it is an abandonment of all civility, discipline, and sanity for after this she has been hospitalized and later after she leaves her hospital room to sit naked in the garden, she is institutionalized in a psych ward for two years. By the end of Part One, Yeong-hye has suffered bodily violence multiple times. Consequently, she retreats into herself and is deemed severely ill. It is as if her slashing her wrist was akin to cutting off her ties to human life as from here onwards her wish to separate herself from the real world became apparent and the journey towards a plant body began.

The analysis of Part One revealed that the established truth in the fictional society of *The Vegetarian* is of patriarchy. Yeong-hye’s husband perceives her decision regarding her food choices as a personal affront and an act of noncompliance. Underlying her vegetarianism is a defiance of patriarchal authority. This deviance leads her to be initially subjected to the brutality and spectacle of sovereign power (primarily exerted by her patriarchal father). When this fails, resulting in the deterioration of her mental state, she is surrendered to the corrective capacity of disciplinary power.

From Human to Post-Human: “Mongolian Mark” and “The Flaming Trees”

Part Two and Part Three of the novel titled ‘Mongolian Mark’ and ‘The Flaming Trees’ respectively showcase Yeong-hye’s increasing delineation from social reality. Her behaviour surpasses the extremes of social acceptance when her brother-in-law engages in a dubious sexual relationship with her. In-hye, her sister has her permanently institutionalized after this. The multiple accounts of physical and sexual at the hands of her family are parallel with Yeong-hye’s desire to transform into a plant. Therefore, strands of post-humanism are woven with disciplinary actions in the novel and would be analyzed alongside.

In literary and cultural studies, posthumanism is more of a philosophical question. Post-humanism is “‘post’ to the concept of the human and to the historical occurrence of humanism, both base...on hierarchal social constructs and human-centric assumptions”.⁴⁵ It also challenges speciesism and states that post-humanism is also concerned with overcoming the idea of human superiority over other species. Instead, it offers a “reconciliation of existence”⁴⁶ by eradicating the boundaries between nature and culture. The following analysis would take the definition of posthumanism as transcending the notion of the ‘human’, discarding hierarchies, and adopting a non-human identity. The seeds for Yeong-hye’s non-human, vegetal transformation are sown in Part Two when she allows her brother-in-law to paint flowers on her body and act for him in his borderline pornographic film. She only agrees to touch the other artist and later her brother-in-law

⁴⁴ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 40.

⁴⁵ Francesca Ferrando, “Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations”, *Existenz*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2013), p. 29.

⁴⁶ Ferrando, “Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms”, p. 29.

if they both have flowers painted on them as well. As for herself, she refuses to wash the painted flowers off claiming that they stop her violent, bloody dreams. It is as if she realizes the only way to separate herself from speciesism where human beings rank at the top and butcher animals in cruel ways; and to detach herself from the life where she herself exists as a butchered, suppressed body is the adoption of an alternate way of living. The identification of her vegetal sexuality is her first step towards her metamorphosis. However, Yeong-hye's desire to free herself from the power-play in society is manipulated by her brother-in-law. He uses her unstable state to exert power on her body through patriarchal abuse. In the end, the body that caused her "endless anguish and night terrors"⁴⁷ was used by the artist as a vessel to express sexual desire and to perform mere human activities. This act served as a catalyst in her radical decision to give up living as a human.

After In-hye finds out about this incident she has her sister admitted into a mental hospital in a rural area surrounded by a vast forest. Here Yeong-hye is subjected to a number of disciplinary practices following the failure of sovereign power in regulating her behaviour. The hospital is in many ways similar to a panopticon which in contrast to the brutal nature of sovereign power is "...a more efficient, effective and productive form of power."⁴⁸ The panopticon has become the basis of the modern, disciplinary society and has contributed to the knowledge of different scientific fields, such as psychiatry. It is one of the ways in which humans are made subject to control and power. The hospital Yeong-hye is admitted to resembles a prison (another example of a panopticon). In-hye notes "The wards on the first and third floors have iron bars over the windows."⁴⁹

When In-hye came to have her sister admitted their belongings were thoroughly checked, down to the undergarments they had packed. She also notices that the corridor to the third floor where her sister resides is locked and can only be opened by a nurse and is locked immediately after, "The nurse closes the door quickly behind him, inserts the key and locks it".⁵⁰ They also check to see if Yeong-hye has swallowed her pills or not. Such levels of "client observations ... ongoing assessments ... ongoing risk assessments, regular ward reviews and so on, can all be understood as examples of panopticism."⁵¹ From a Foucauldian standpoint, such surveillance can be seen as a way to make the subject constantly and consciously visible. The power operated in a disciplinary system, or a panopticon like a psych ward, is 'deindividualized'. This is because the abnormal patient may be monitored by a number of people ranging from psychiatrists, nurses, and therapists to family members. Indeed, in addition to her sister, Yeong-hye is also monitored by another patient in exchange for monetary benefits.

The aim of all this is to render the patient into believing his identity to be that of a "psychiatric subject." It is to make the individual think of himself as a threat to the established discourse whose resistance must be overcome. In this manner, "a human being is made subject to

⁴⁷ Thomas, "Unveiling the Posthumanist Strands in the Novel *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang", p. 73.

⁴⁸ Marc Roberts, "The Production of the Psychiatric Subject: Power, Knowledge, and Michel Foucault", *Nursing Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2005), p. 34.

⁴⁹ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 134.

⁵⁰ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 145.

⁵¹ Roberts, "The Production of the Psychiatric Subject: Power, Knowledge, and Michel Foucault", p. 36.

control and dependence” and “tied to a specific identity through a conscience...a central feature of this process is, for Foucault, power.”⁵² However, Yeong-hye does not respond to any of the disciplinary actions and instead, after an initial bout of recovery, her mental condition worsens according to the doctor in charge. During her institutionalization, Yeong-hye runs away one day and is later found in the forest in the rain standing under a giant tree.⁵³ From this moment forward, it seemed that she sought to completely abandon her humanity. Is this a form of resistance or an alternate way of living in a world managed completely through power play? Foucault does not deny the possibility of resistance despite having discussed the omnipresence of power in a disciplinary society. Instead, he states that “if there is no resistance, there would be no power relations”.⁵⁴ But it seems as if the sort of defiance he discusses here is the kind that will end up being controlled and regulated by disciplinary institutions and subsequently reaffirm their necessity and power. Perhaps the answer to a true form of resistance may lie in post-humanism.

Fraser points out the possibility of Foucault pre-supposing “some alternate, post-humanist normative standpoint.”⁵⁵ Yeong-hye’s vegetal metamorphosis is a perfect example of this. Giving up the violence of the human species, she begins to identify more with nature. She crouches down in the sunlight as if photosynthesizing and does handstands on the ground explaining that she saw roots sprouting from her hands in a dream. As if these acts enhance her vegetality, she begins rejecting all food, not just meat, and asks for only water, “I need to water my body. I don’t need this kind of food, sister. I need water”⁵⁶. The doctor confirms that the medical treatments aren’t working, possibly alluding that this is a decision made by herself to die and truly merge with the earth. While her ‘transformation’ is progressing, In-hye recalls how in their youth Yeong-hye had to bear the brunt of their father’s violence. From a very young age, she was exposed to the processes of social domination which sought to make her the very product their sovereign father wanted. Yeong-hye “can no longer entertain the idea of sovereign subjectivity”⁵⁷ and by separating herself from the ideologies and truths that supposedly make human beings ‘human’ she frees herself from both sovereign and disciplinary power structures in society. Eventually, she moves into a post-language state after telling her sister, “Soon now, words and thoughts will all disappear”.⁵⁸ Foucault hints towards a post-humanist age in which the focus will be on the ‘body,’ particularly a body that “involve[s] a retreat from anti-foundationalism and a turn towards a new metaphysics”⁵⁹ exactly as Yeong-hye does is the way to live a life of freedom.

The most visible sign of Yeong-hye’s post-human condition is perhaps not her persistence to transform into a plant but rather the clarity that her struggle generates in In-hye. After all, the goal of anthropomorphic post-humanism is to dissolve the differences between man and nature

⁵² Roberts, “The Production of the Psychiatric Subject: Power, Knowledge, and Michel Foucault”, p. 34.

⁵³ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 139.

⁵⁴ Roberts, “The Production of the Psychiatric Subject: Power, Knowledge, and Michel Foucault”, p. 39.

⁵⁵ Nancy Fraser, “Foucault’s Body-Language: A Post-Humanist Political Rhetoric?”, *Salmagundi*, vol. 61 (1983), p. 56.

⁵⁶ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 148.

⁵⁷ Thomas, “Unveiling the Posthumanist Strands in the Novel *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang”, p. 77.

⁵⁸ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 154.

⁵⁹ Fraser, “Foucault’s Body-Language: A Post-Humanist Political Rhetoric?”, p. 61.

and to become one with the numerous kinds of life forms. Watching her sister's attempt to do exactly that reveals the levels of societal oppression to In-hye. This is seen in her envy, "She'd been unable to forgive her for soaring alone over a boundary she herself could never bring herself to cross, unable to forgive that magnificent irresponsibility that had enabled Yeong-hye to shuck off social constraints and leave her behind, still a prisoner".⁶⁰ Towards the end of the novel, she realizes how one is unable to do anything with their body even though it belongs wholly to you. The body instead is the area upon which all the control and discipline is exercised. Having understood this, In-hye is propelled towards her own post-humanist awareness as "...complete post-humanism, coincides, with the annihilation of all the boundaries that make a 'human' a human being".⁶¹ *The Vegetarian* ends on an ambiguous note, with In-hye looking at the passing trees from the ambulance with an insistent look. Perhaps she too decided to shirk off the discourses that conditioned her all her life and follow the path her sister took.

Paying attention to Foucault's concept of panopticism, the analysis looks at the disciplinary practices in the psychiatric ward and found them to be oppressive and restrictive. The nature of these measures only fueled Yeong-hye's yearning to free herself from the forms of power that subdued her. Foucault acknowledges that where there is power, there is resistance. The answer to successful resistance was found in becoming a post-human subject (the plant species) as that meant that she had cut off the ties that tied her to the values and norms of the society she lived in. It meant freedom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article found that Yeong-hye's behaviour being deemed "abnormal" had less to do with her dietary choices and more to do with the embedded patriarchal discourses in society. Her supposedly deviant body was submitted to sovereign and disciplinary forces to be fixed and in order to maintain the 'truth' of patriarchy. Sovereign power with its anachronistic modes of discipline was found unfit in the regulation of the body as not only did it strengthen the ferocity of Yeong-hye's rebellion, but it also worsened her condition. Following this failure, her family submitted her to a mental health facility where modern disciplinary measures took over. Elements of panopticism like surveillance, barred rooms, and routine checkups were enforced in the psych ward. This only added to the sense of restrictiveness and suppression felt by the protagonist, causing her to become detached from human society and the control it exerts over her. Her arboreal desires manifested as an escape impulse. She eventually gives up food and language to facilitate her transition into a post-human subject – the plant species – and tries to sustain herself only on sunlight. Her desire is an expression of her resistance and will to be free.

⁶⁰ Kang, *The Vegetarian: A Novel*, p. 143.

⁶¹ Luca Valera, "Posthumanism: Beyond Humanism?", *Institute of Scientific and Technological Practice* (2014), p. 483.