SiRad: Pelita Wawasan
E-ISSN: 3090-5591| DOI: 10.64728/sirad.v2i3.art4 pp. 409-428

Relational Subjectivities in The *Vegetarian*: A Postsecular Ecofeminist Reading

Maryam Asim[1], Muhammad Rehan Sabir[2]* & Asma Aftab[3]

[1]Government College University Faisalabad, Pakistan
[2]Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Indonesia
[3]Government College University Faisalabad, Pakistan

Abstract

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2015) has attracted significant scholarly attention for its portrayal of a woman's radical rejection of patriarchal, social, and bodily norms. This paper offers a postsecular ecofeminist reading of *The Vegetarian* by moving beyond resistance-oriented interpretations of female agency. Through close textual analysis, the study examines Yeong-hye's vegetarianism, silence, bodily withdrawal, and vegetal transformation in relation to theories of agency and relational ethics. Drawing on Saba Mahmood's reconceptualization of agency, Carol J. Adams's ecofeminist critique of the interconnected oppression of women, animals, and nature, and Talal Asad's critique of secular intelligibility, the article advances a central argument: that the novel stages an irresolvable double movement between psychological pathology and ethical becoming, refusing to subordinate either possibility to the other. This argument is developed most fully through Yeong-hye's vegetal transformation, read here not as symbolic protest but as the precarious site where an emergent relational subjectivity, challenging anthropocentric assumptions about life, agency, and moral responsibility, is most acutely staged. The article contributes to Asian literary studies by showing how a postsecular ecofeminist framework illuminates the entanglement of bodily suffering, ethical aspiration, and nonhuman relationality in Han Kang's The Vegetarian, thereby expanding critical debates on agency beyond resistance-centered interpretations.

Keywords: Agency; Ecofeminism; Embodiment; Ethics; Pathology; Postsecularism; Relationality; Vegetarianism

Subjektivitas Relasional dalam The *Vegetarian*: Pembacaan Ekofeminis Pascasekular

Abstrak

Novel The Vegetarian (2015) karya Han Kang telah menarik perhatian akademis karena penggambarannya tentang penolakan radikal seorang perempuan terhadap norma patriarkal, sosial, dan tubuh. Artikel ini menawarkan pembacaan ekofeminis pascasekular terhadap The Vegetarian dengan melampaui penafsiran agensi perempuan yang berpusat pada perlawanan. Melalui pembacaan tekstual mendalam, penelitian ini mengkaji vegetarianisme, kebisuan, penarikan diri secara fisik, dan transformasi menjadi tumbuhan yang dialami Yeong-hye dalam kaitannya dengan teori agensi dan etika relasional. Dengan memanfaatkan rekonseptualisasi agensi oleh Saba Mahmood, kritik ekofeminis Carol J. Adams terhadap keterkaitan penindasan perempuan, hewan, dan alam, serta kritik Talal Asad terhadap kerangka pemahaman sekuler, artikel ini mengajukan argumen utama bahwa novel tersebut menampilkan gerak ganda yang tidak dapat diselesaikan antara patologi psikologis dan proses menjadi subjek etis, tanpa menundukkan salah satu kemungkinan pada yang lain. Argumen ini dikembangkan terutama melalui transformasi vegetal Yeong-hye, yang dibaca bukan sebagai protes simbolis, melainkan sebagai ruang rapuh tempat munculnya subjektivitas relasional yang mempertanyakan asumsi antroposentris tentang kehidupan, agensi, dan tanggung jawab moral. Artikel ini berkontribusi pada kajian sastra Asia dengan menunjukkan bahwa kerangka ekofeminis pascasekular dapat menerangi keterjalinan penderitaan tubuh, aspirasi etis, dan relasionalitas nonmanusia dalam The Vegetarian, sekaligus memperluas perdebatan kritis mengenai agensi melampaui penafsiran yang berpusat pada perlawanan.

Kata kunci: Agensi; Ekofeminisme; Etika; Kebertubuhan; Pascasekularisme; Patologi; Relasionalitas; Vegetarianisme

Contact: Muhammad Rehan Sabir | rehanzayer@gmail.com
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International **(CCBY-SA 4.0)** License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

Submitted: September 11, 2026	Accepted: October 6, 2026	Published: October 19, 2026

INTRODUCTION

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2015) has been widely discussed for its exploration of embodiment, violence, subjectivity, and the boundaries of human identity. Central to the novel is the ambiguity surrounding Yeong-hye's transformation, which resists straightforward psychological, social, and symbolic interpretation. What initially presents as a personal dietary decision progressively unfolds into a wholesale refusal of social expectations, linguistic norms, and the conventional forms of subjectivity those norms sustain. As the narrative progresses, this dietary refusal acquires wider ethical and existential significance. The transformation is initially linked to recurring dreams of violence; Yeong-hye recalls, for instance: "Blood in my mouth, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin" (Kang, 2015, p. 11), a motif that recurs throughout the novel. As her withdrawal intensifies, she increasingly associates eating meat with violence, declaring, "Your body smells of meat" (p. 12). Later, her withdrawal becomes increasingly radical, as her husband observes that she has stopped eating any kind of meat, fish included, living entirely on vegetables (p. 23), suggesting a growing estrangement from ordinary assumptions about bodily existence and human life.

Existing scholarship has frequently interpreted Yeong-hye through frameworks of trauma, psychological distress, feminist resistance, and bodily transgression. While these approaches have generated important insights, they often prioritize resistance, autonomy, or psychological explanation as primary frameworks for understanding her transformation. Less attention has been given to the possibility that silence, withdrawal, and non-participation may themselves carry ethical significance. The progressive transformation of Yeong-hye toward a vegetal mode of existence also challenges anthropocentric distinctions between human and nonhuman life. Such moments invite consideration of whether ethical subjectivity in the novel might be articulated through forms of withdrawal and relationality rather than exclusively through overt resistance.

This article argues that *The Vegetarian* presents Yeong-hye's transformation as an irresolvable double movement toward psychological disintegration and toward ethical becoming, neither of which the narrative allows to fully subsume the other. Rather than resolving this tension in favor of either pathology or resistance, the novel invites readers to consider whether forms of withdrawal, vulnerability, and nonhuman relationality may also acquire ethical significance. Drawing on Mahmood's reconceptualization of agency beyond oppositional politics (2005) and Adams's ecofeminist critique of the interconnected oppression of women, animals, and nature (2015), the article examines how Yeong-hye's vegetarianism, silence, bodily withdrawal, and vegetal identification complicate conventional distinctions. These include the distinctions between illness and ethical practice, resistance and submission, and human and nonhuman life. Ecofeminist, Deleuzian, and Derridean readings of the novel are well established (Casey, 2020; Kim, B. & Lee, 2025; Kim, M., 2020; Kim, W.-C., 2019; Lai, 2023). The article therefore contributes to Asian literary studies in two ways. First, it uses a postsecular framework to examine the criteria through which agency becomes intelligible in the first place: drawing on Asad's (2003) genealogical critique of secularism, it asks how familial, medical, and interpretive frameworks determine which forms of conduct count as meaningful and which are dismissed as irrational. Second, rather than adjudicating between ethical and pathological readings, it argues that the novel's form keeps both simultaneously operative, and it traces how this coexistence is sustained across Yeong-hye's refusal, silence, bodily deterioration, and vegetal identification. In doing so, the article complicates the conventional opposition between resistance and submission without presenting Yeong-hye as an ethical model.

Literature Review

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2015) has generated extensive scholarship on embodiment, subjectivity, violence, gender, and nonhuman relationality. Existing scholarship has frequently interpreted Yeong-hye through frameworks of feminist resistance, psychological distress, bodily transgression, and ecological critique (Casey, 2020; Kim, W.-C., 2019). Ecofeminist and poststructuralist scholars have examined the intersections of patriarchy, carnivorism, embodiment, and human–nonhuman relations (Adams, 2015; Plumwood, 2002). Nevertheless, forms of agency associated with withdrawal, self-restraint, ethical vulnerability, and non-oppositional action have received comparatively less sustained attention in relation to pathological readings and to the criteria of intelligibility that frame them. Similarly, relatively limited attention has been given to postsecular feminist approaches, particularly Mahmood's (2005) critique of liberal assumptions that link agency primarily to resistance and autonomy, and Asad's (2003) genealogical critique of secularism, which informs that critique. Rather than surveying these themes as separate critical concerns, the present review focuses on the points of disagreement that emerge across them, particularly debates concerning agency, pathology, and human–nonhuman relationality. By foregrounding these tensions, the review identifies a gap in scholarship concerning how these interpretive questions intersect within the novel and how they might be reconsidered through a postsecular ecofeminist framework.

Vegetarianism is a prevailing theme in the literature and is viewed as a direct defiance against the sexual politics of meat in patriarchal society. Building on the foundational work of Carol J. Adams (1990/2015), scholars suggest that the meat industry is strongly interconnected with masculine domination and the objectification of women. Here, women and animals are both turned into objects of consumption. The father and husband of Yeong-hye have frequently been interpreted as representative figures within these patriarchal structures (Panta & Adhikari, 2025).

Won-Chung Kim (2019) and Yi-Peng Lai (2023) draw on Derrida's (1991) concept of carno-phallogocentrism to argue that masculinity is structurally connected to the practices of speaking and eating meat. Abstention from meat is therefore more than a dietary choice; it constitutes a moral and ontological challenge to patriarchal hierarchies. While scholars generally agree that vegetarianism functions as a critique of patriarchal and carnivorous structures, they disagree about how that critique operates. Some understand vegetarianism primarily as political resistance, whereas others emphasize its ethical relation to violence, nonhuman life, and interspecies responsibility. Less attention has been given to how these interpretations depend upon different assumptions about agency itself, particularly whether ethical action must be expressed through recognizable forms of resistance.

Silence as Willed Agency

Another kind of ethical agency that is explored in the literature is the progressive language retreat of Yeong-hye. The main character's story is narrated primarily through the perspectives of her husband, brother-in-law, and sister. Lai (2023) reads this narrative structure as reflecting the active withdrawal of Yeong-hye from the logocentric world, the space of words and language through which patriarchal norms are perpetuated.

Interpretations of Yeong-hye's silence remain divided. Some scholars regard silence as a form of ethical agency that disrupts patriarchal and logocentric structures (Casey, 2020; Lai, 2023). Others emphasize the possibility that withdrawal from language signals psychological deterioration, social alienation, or communicative breakdown. The critical challenge lies in determining whether silence should be understood primarily as resistance, pathology, ethical self-formation, or some combination of these possibilities. Existing scholarship has not fully resolved this tension, which remains central to the novel's broader ambiguity. Moreover, silence is rarely examined in relation to the broader debates

surrounding vegetarian refusal and vegetal transformation, even though all three involve questions of agency, intelligibility, and withdrawal.

Scholars have also examined her progressive refusal of food through the interconnected frameworks of starvation, bodily discipline, and institutional control. Cornelia Macsiniuc (2017) and Won-Chung Kim (2019) argue that her family and psychiatric institutions attempt to discipline her body. Her refusal to eat, they contend, constitutes a radical claim of moral autonomy.

Becoming-Plant and Reconfiguration of Relationships

One of the most extensively discussed aspects of the novel is Yeong-hye's transformation into a plant. This ontological shift is referred to as becoming-plant, a concept Mijeong Kim (2020) develops from Deleuze, and it challenges the traditional limits of subjectivity and morality. Her aspiration to live on sunlight has been interpreted by some scholars as a challenge to anthropocentric understandings of life and subjectivity. Bongkeun Kim and Kunho Lee (2025) contextualize this transformation within an ecofeminist framework that foregrounds the relationality and interconnectedness of all forms of life. Rose Casey (2020) interprets Yeong-hye's willed arboreality as a feminist aesthetics of ethical protest in which renunciation of patriarchal domination turns into an ethical and relational expression. Mahmood's (2005) theorization of non-oppositional agency provides a framework through which vegetal transformation may be reconsidered beyond exclusively ecofeminist or Deleuzian approaches.

A significant point of disagreement emerges in discussions of vegetal transformation. Scholars such as Casey (2020) and Kim and Lee (2025) tend to interpret becoming-plant as an ethically productive challenge to anthropocentric forms of subjectivity. By contrast, Sands (2024) cautions against treating withdrawal or nonhuman identification as inherently redemptive, arguing that ethical responsibility cannot be separated entirely from human vulnerability and social engagement. This disagreement reveals an unresolved question within existing scholarship: does Yeong-hye's transformation represent ethical reorientation, psychological collapse, or an unstable coexistence of both? The present study approaches this disagreement not as a choice between competing explanations but as evidence of a broader interpretive problem. The critical question is not whether Yeong-hye's transformation is ethical or pathological, but how the novel sustains both possibilities simultaneously.

Alienation and Ethical Withdrawal

Scholarship on alienation and withdrawal similarly reflects competing assumptions about agency. Some critics interpret Yeong-hye's social isolation as evidence of exclusion, victimization, and psychological deterioration. Others understand withdrawal as ethically significant because it enables critical distance from dominant structures of violence and domination. These divergent interpretations reveal broader disagreements concerning whether agency requires participation in social life or whether ethical conduct may also emerge through forms of non-participation and refusal. Postsecular feminist theory makes this interpretation available. Mahmood (2005) argues, in the context of the Egyptian piety movement, that agency need not take the form of resistance to carry ethical weight, and Asad's (2003) critique of secular intelligibility helps explain why embodied or non-confrontational conduct is so often dismissed as meaningless. Such a framework allows embodied attentiveness and withdrawal to be considered as possible forms of moral engagement, without implying that they are ethically preferable.

Drawing on Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) account of care as attentiveness to nonhuman life, Yeong-hye's heightened sensitivity to taste, smell, and bodily feeling may be interpreted as an ethical rehearsal of relationality. In the process, she develops a bodily sensitivity to the plight of the animals and the interdependency of life that shows that moral responsibility can be developed not through linguistic or legal means but through perceptual and affective ones. Her recalibration of the senses is, therefore, a

postsecular ethical practice, where the moral responsibility is based on relational consciousness and mindfulness of the material and nonhuman world.

Critique of Anthropocentric Moral Frameworks

Discussions of anthropocentrism provide another area of convergence and disagreement within the scholarship. Many ecofeminist and posthumanist readings interpret Yeong-hye's identification with vegetal life as a challenge to human exceptionalism and hierarchical models of subjectivity. However, scholars differ regarding the implications of this challenge. Some regard vegetal identification as an expansion of ethical concern beyond the human, whereas others question whether such readings risk romanticizing withdrawal, vulnerability, or bodily self-destruction. Consequently, the ethical status of Yeong-hye's transformation remains contested rather than settled within existing criticism. This disagreement becomes particularly significant when questions of nonhuman relationality are considered alongside debates concerning agency and pathology.

Taken together, existing scholarship reveals recurring disagreements concerning three interconnected issues: the meaning of vegetarian refusal, the status of silence and withdrawal, and the significance of vegetal transformation. Critics remain divided over whether these phenomena should be understood primarily as forms of resistance, symptoms of psychological distress, ethical practices, or unstable combinations of these possibilities. Yet these debates are often addressed independently, with scholarship tending to focus on one dimension of Yeong-hye's transformation at a time. Table 1 synthesizes these recurring points of disagreement across the reviewed scholarship.

Table 1. Recurring Interpretive Disagreements in Scholarship on The Vegetarian

Interpretive Question	Position A	Position B	Unresolved Tension
Vegetarian refusal	Political resistance to patriarchal/carnivorous structures (Kim, W.-C., 2019; Lai, 2023)	Ethical relation to violence, nonhuman life, and interspecies responsibility (theoretical basis: Adams, 1990/2015)	Whether ethical action must take a recognizable form of resistance
Silence and withdrawal from speech	Ethical agency disrupting patriarchal/logocentric structures (Casey, 2020; Lai, 2023)	Sign of psychological deterioration, alienation, or communicative breakdown	Whether silence signals resistance, pathology, or ethical self-formation
Vegetal transformation ("becoming-plant")	Ethically productive challenge to anthropocentric subjectivity (Casey, 2020; Kim & Lee, 2025)	Risk of romanticizing withdrawal/self-destruction as redemptive (Sands, 2024)	Whether the transformation represents ethical reorientation, psychological collapse, or both
Alienation and social withdrawal	Enables critical distance from structures of violence and domination	Evidence of exclusion, victimization, psychological deterioration	Whether agency requires social participation or can emerge through non-participation

Note. Positions A and B represent recurring emphases within the reviewed scholarship rather than a strict binary; several sources engage both readings.

The present study argues that these questions cannot be fully understood in isolation because each concerns the broader problem of how agency is recognized and interpreted. Bringing Mahmood's

reconceptualization of agency and Asad's critique of secular intelligibility into dialogue with ecofeminist accounts of violence and interspecies relationality, the study examines how *The Vegetarian* sustains the tension between ethical aspiration and psychological vulnerability across multiple dimensions of Yeong-hye's transformation. In doing so, it redirects critical attention from the question of which interpretive category best describes Yeong-hye toward the prior question of how the novel unsettles the very categories through which her transformation has been read.

Theoretical Framework

The present study brings ecofeminist and postsecular feminist perspectives into dialogue to examine how *The Vegetarian* represents ethical subjectivity beyond conventional models of autonomy and resistance. Although Adams, Mahmood, and Asad work within distinct intellectual traditions and address different theoretical problems, their frameworks converge in challenging the assumption that ethical action must be grounded in individual autonomy, rational self-determination, or publicly visible forms of resistance. Rather than synthesizing these theorists into a unified argument, the present framework draws on the specific contribution of each to examine the relationship between embodiment, agency, and moral responsibility in Han Kang's novel.

Adams's feminist-vegetarian ethics is primarily concerned with the interconnected structures linking patriarchy, species hierarchy, and violence toward nonhuman life. Mahmood's work addresses a different problem: the tendency of liberal feminist frameworks to recognize agency only when it appears as resistance to power. Asad's intervention operates at a broader epistemological level by questioning secular assumptions that privilege particular understandings of rationality, autonomy, and political visibility. Taken together, these perspectives provide complementary rather than identical analytical tools for examining forms of ethical action that may not conform to dominant liberal models of subjectivity.

The term "postsecular," as used in this study, does not refer to a return to religious belief, to the decline of secularism as a social formation, or to a claim that the novel is organized around religion. It designates a critical orientation that interrogates the normative assumptions embedded in secular-liberal modernity, particularly those that treat rational autonomy, communicative transparency, and publicly legible resistance as the measures of meaningful agency. The term is borrowed from debates in which it carries different emphases. Habermas (2008) uses "postsecular" to describe societies that must adjust to the continued public presence of religious communities, and he proposes a complementary learning process in which secular and religious citizens take seriously what the other contributes. Casanova (1994), although not a theorist of the postsecular as such, challenges the assumption that modernity requires the privatization of religion and documents its re-entry into public life, thereby unsettling the view that secular reason alone defines the public sphere. Braidotti (2008) brings this debate into feminist theory, where she argues for a postsecular turn that questions the secular-humanist foundations of much feminist thought. The present study does not apply these positions directly. It retains from them one shared insight: that the secular is not a neutral standpoint, and that what it recognizes as rational, ethical, or intelligible is historically produced. That insight is developed here through Asad (2003) and Mahmood (2005) and is detached from questions of religious belief.

The relevance of a postsecular framework to *The Vegetarian* lies not in the presence of explicit religious belief but in the novel's sustained challenge to secular assumptions about intelligible agency. Throughout the narrative, Yeong-hye's actions are repeatedly judged according to frameworks that privilege rational self-interest, bodily preservation, communicative transparency, and socially recognizable forms of choice. Her refusal of meat, withdrawal from speech, rejection of bodily maintenance, and eventual identification with vegetal life become difficult to interpret because they do not conform to these assumptions. Asad's work is central to this framework not as a postsecular theorist in the strict sense but

as a genealogical critic of secularism. His analysis of how secular modernity produces categories of the rational and irrational, the intelligible and the pathological, is directly applicable to the institutional and familial responses Yeong-hye encounters. A postsecular approach therefore shifts attention from the question of whether Yeong-hye is resisting power to the question of how dominant frameworks determine which forms of ethical conduct are recognizable as meaningful and which are dismissed as irrational, pathological, or unintelligible.

This is the analytical work the postsecular orientation performs, and it differs from what the other approaches contribute independently. Ecofeminism accounts for the ethical content of Yeong-hye's refusal, namely its connection of violence against animals to the domination of women. Posthumanist and Deleuzian readings account for the destabilization of the human–nonhuman boundary in her vegetal identification. Non-liberal theories of agency supply a vocabulary for action that is not oppositional, but they do not by themselves explain why such action goes unrecognized within particular institutions. None of these approaches is designed to address a prior question: why the same conduct is read as illness by the husband and the psychiatric institution, as protest by some critics, and as ethical aspiration by others, and what standards of intelligibility make each reading available. The postsecular orientation addresses that question by treating rational self-interest, bodily preservation, and communicative transparency as historically produced criteria rather than neutral measures. It therefore operates at the level of interpretation itself, and this is what allows the study to hold ethical and pathological readings together instead of choosing between them.

As introduced above, Adams's *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (2015) provides the ecofeminist foundation for analysing ethical relationality in the novel, particularly through its account of the interrelatedness of human and nonhuman life. Adams demonstrates that the objectification of women and nonhuman animals is structurally connected within both patriarchal and anthropocentric systems. Adams's framework highlights that ethical responsibility is both relational and embodied, extending beyond human social relations to include nonhuman life and ecological systems. This perspective is complemented by Plumwood's (1993) critique of anthropocentrism, which emphasizes the importance of recognising interdependence and relationality between human and nonhuman life in ethical thought. Warren (2000) similarly argues that care-based and relational ethics challenge hierarchical human-centered paradigms, thereby providing a basis for understanding moral agency as responsive and relational rather than exclusively autonomous or oppositional. Recent literary applications of decolonial ecofeminist frameworks similarly demonstrate how narratives entangling bodily autonomy with ecological justice can unsettle anthropocentric assumptions embedded in dominant cultural and pedagogical discourses (Candraningrum et al., 2025). This relational orientation is extended by Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), whose account of care as attentiveness to human and nonhuman entanglements informs the analysis of Yeong-hye's responsiveness to suffering. Her sensory and affective engagement with the world is treated here as an ethically meaningful practice rather than merely a psychological symptom.

Mahmood's intervention is particularly relevant because Yeong-hye's transformation repeatedly challenges interpretive models that equate agency with resistance, autonomy, or self-assertion. In *Politics of Piety* (2005), Mahmood develops her account of non-oppositional agency through ethnographic analysis of women participating in the Egyptian Islamic piety movement, where practices of self-discipline, bodily comportment, and docility function as modes of ethical self-cultivation rather than as signs of subjection. It is important to acknowledge that transposing this framework from a specific religious and ethnographic context to a fictional Korean character's psychological and bodily transformation involves a significant conceptual distance. Mahmood's original argument is embedded in a particular tradition of Islamic ethical practice and cannot be applied wholesale to a secular literary text.

However, the analytical value of her framework lies not in its specific content but in its structural contribution: the demonstration that agency cannot be identified exclusively through acts of resistance and that disciplined, non-confrontational, and embodied conduct may also constitute meaningful moral practice. This structural insight, that the absence of overt opposition does not indicate the absence of agency, can be extended to the forms of refusal, silence, and withdrawal that characterize Yeong-hye's transformation. The application, however, must remain attentive to the differences between Mahmood's ethnographic subjects and Han Kang's fictional protagonist, and three disanalogies are especially important. First, Mahmood's subjects cultivate virtues through practices that belong to a shared and articulated tradition, whereas Yeong-hye acts outside any communal tradition of discipline. Second, Mahmood's account rests on her subjects' own testimony about their practices, whereas the novel gives only fragmentary and mediated access to Yeong-hye's motives. Third, Yeong-hye's vegetarian refusal is openly disruptive of family norms, so a non-oppositional frame can illuminate her silence and passivity but cannot exhaust her refusal of meat. Mahmood's concepts are therefore employed as heuristic tools rather than as explanatory models or direct analogies. They direct attention to forms of conduct that resistance-centered frameworks overlook, without assuming either that the absence of overt resistance indicates passivity or that Yeong-hye's conduct amounts to the ethical self-cultivation Mahmood documents.

Asad's critique of secularism provides a complementary perspective by examining how particular forms of conduct become legible as rational or irrational within modern social institutions. In *Formations of the Secular* (2003), Asad argues that the secular is not a neutral category but a historically specific formation that shapes what counts as acceptable moral reasoning and intelligible subjectivity. This perspective is especially useful for reading *The Vegetarian* because Yeong-hye's transformation is repeatedly interpreted through medical, familial, and social discourses that classify her behavior as abnormal, disordered, or incomprehensible. The present study extends his genealogical approach as an interpretive lens, using it to ask how such judgments are produced and why alternative forms of ethical orientation become difficult to recognize within dominant frameworks of interpretation.

The significance of combining these perspectives lies in their capacity to address different dimensions of the novel's central ambiguity. Adams helps explain Yeong-hye's growing ethical orientation toward nonhuman life and her rejection of practices associated with domination and consumption. Mahmood provides a framework for analysing forms of agency expressed through withdrawal, discipline, and ethical self-transformation rather than through resistance alone. Asad helps explain why these practices are repeatedly interpreted as irrational or pathological by the institutions and individuals surrounding her. Together, these perspectives make it possible to analyse not only Yeong-hye's actions but also the interpretive frameworks through which those actions are understood, contested, and misrecognized.

The framework therefore operates at three interconnected analytical levels. At the ethical level, Adams illuminates questions of violence, consumption, and interspecies relationality. At the level of subject formation, Mahmood provides a vocabulary for examining agency that emerges through embodied practice rather than overt opposition. At the epistemological level, Asad helps explain why certain forms of conduct become recognizable as meaningful while others are reduced to pathology or irrationality. This multi-layered approach is particularly appropriate for *The Vegetarian*. The novel is concerned not only with what Yeong-hye does but also with how others interpret, regulate, and pathologize those actions. Table 2 summarizes these three interconnected analytical levels and their respective contributions to the analysis.

Table 2. Theoretical Framework: Analytical Levels and Their Application to The Vegetarian

Theorist	Core Concept	Analytical Level	Application to The Vegetarian
Carol J. Adams (1990/2015)	Feminist-vegetarian ethics; the "absent referent"	Ethical	Illuminates violence, consumption, and interspecies relationality; explains Yeong-hye's refusal of consumption as rejection of the interconnected domination of women and nonhuman animals
Saba Mahmood (2005)	Non-oppositional agency; ethical self-formation cultivation through discipline	Subject	Provides a vocabulary for agency expressed through withdrawal, silence, and embodied practice rather than overt resistance
Talal Asad (2003)	Critique of secular intelligibility	Epistemological	Explains why Yeong-hye's conduct is repeatedly read as irrational or pathological within familial, medical, and social frameworks

Note. The three levels are treated as complementary rather than hierarchical; the novel's ambiguity is sustained precisely because all three levels remain simultaneously operative rather than resolving into one.

The title's concept of relational subjectivity designates a mode of subject formation in which the self is constituted through exposure to, dependence on, and responsiveness to others, human and nonhuman, and not through self-contained autonomy. It differs from relational ethics, which concerns the obligations arising from such relations (Plumwood, 1993; Warren, 2000; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Relational ethics describes what is owed within relations, whereas relational subjectivity describes how the subject is formed and unformed through them. In the analysis, the term names the way Yeong-hye's vegetal identification, her bodily vulnerability, and her effect on In-hye can be read as expressions of a position within a network of dependence and exposure rather than as acts of an autonomous self. It does not claim that Yeong-hye attains a stable or desirable subjectivity: the novel stages relational subjectivity as emergent, precarious, and at times indistinguishable from dissolution.

Two further theoretical resources are used in a supplementary capacity. They are not additional levels of the framework, and they are introduced only where the primary framework requires a more precise account of the body or of institutional power. Butler's (2004, 2009) work on precariousness and precarity supplies a vocabulary for bodily vulnerability as a condition of relational exposure: the body's susceptibility to injury and dependence is constitutive rather than incidental, and the degree to which that exposure is recognized, protected, or neglected is politically distributed. Foucault's (1977) account of disciplinary power and normalization is used in the analysis of the hospital scenes to examine how institutional practices regulate bodies according to norms of biological and social functionality. Both are employed as interpretive lenses for specific scenes, and neither is presented as an explanation of the novel as a whole. Their use is also bounded by the study's central commitment. Butler's emphasis on vulnerability is used to ask what Yeong-hye's physical deterioration discloses about the norms she refuses, not to treat deterioration as ethically desirable. Foucault's emphasis on normalisation is used to examine institutional power without presuming that every medical intervention is merely coercive. On this basis, Yeong-hye's physical deterioration can be read as operating simultaneously as a pathological symptom and as a site at which the violence of the surrounding norms becomes visible.

The Vegetarian repeatedly presents Yeong-hye's transformation through experiences of bodily deterioration, hallucination, institutionalization, and social alienation. Rather than dismissing these elements as merely symbolic or reducing the narrative entirely to psychiatric explanation, the present study approaches them as constitutive tensions within the novel itself. The postsecular dimension of the

framework is therefore not intended to spiritualize Yeong-hye's transformation or deny its pathological elements. Rather, it provides a critical vocabulary for examining forms of moral orientation that dominant secular frameworks of agency and rationality are structurally ill-equipped to recognize.

METHODS

This study employs close reading as its primary methodological approach to examine how representations of agency, embodiment, relationality, and nonhuman life are constructed within *The Vegetarian*. The analysis is based on Deborah Smith's English translation of the novel, which serves as the primary text examined in this study. Smith's translation is used because it is the version through which the novel has circulated most widely within Anglophone literary scholarship. The study is concerned with interpretive patterns in the translated text and does not compare it with the Korean original. This is a limitation as well as a delimitation, because several readings below depend on particular lexical and tonal choices, such as the husband's description of his wife as "unremarkable" and the characterization of Yeong-hye as "docile," and these are readings of Smith's English and not necessarily of the Korean wording. Since the article investigates literary representation and ethical meaning rather than authorial intention or reader reception, the analysis focuses on textual form, narrative structure, characterization, imagery, and recurring symbolic motifs.

The analysis focuses on four interconnected dimensions of Yeong-hye's transformation: (1) vegetarian refusal, (2) silence and withdrawal from social communication, (3) bodily vulnerability and institutional regulation, and (4) identification with vegetal life. These dimensions were selected because they recur throughout the narrative, organize major stages of Yeong-hye's transformation, and constitute the primary sites of scholarly disagreement concerning agency, pathology, embodiment, and human–nonhuman relations. Rather than examining isolated quotations, the study focuses on clusters of scenes in which these themes emerge through character interactions, narrative mediation, bodily imagery, and symbolic representation. Scenes were selected according to three criteria: (1) they mark a transition in the progression of Yeong-hye's transformation across the novel's three sections; (2) they show how the narrating character (husband, brother-in-law, or sister) interprets or regulates her conduct, so that the effects of narrative mediation remain visible; and (3) they bear directly on the disagreements summarised in Table 1. To limit interpretive selectivity, passages that resist the proposed reading, including those that support a pathological interpretation, are treated as evidence on equal terms and discussed in the analysis.

The interpretive procedure proceeds in two stages. First, close reading is used to identify patterns of representation across key scenes, with particular attention to narrative perspective, acts of refusal, bodily practices, recurring imagery, and the responses of other characters to Yeong-hye's transformation. Second, these textual observations are interpreted through the theoretical perspectives of Adams (1990/2015), Mahmood (2005), and Asad (2003). Adams's feminist-vegetarian ethics informs the analysis of violence, consumption, and human–nonhuman relations. Mahmood's reconceptualization of agency provides a framework for examining forms of action expressed through discipline, withdrawal, and embodied practice rather than overt resistance. Asad's critique of secular intelligibility is used to examine how particular forms of conduct become recognized as rational, meaningful, or pathological within familial, medical, and social frameworks. Butler (2004, 2009) and Foucault (1977) are drawn on selectively, as supplementary resources for the analysis of bodily vulnerability and institutional power respectively. The theoretical concepts are therefore employed as interpretive lenses through which recurring textual patterns are examined rather than as predetermined conclusions imposed upon the novel.

Rather than treating theory as a framework imposed upon the text, the analysis adopts a dialogic approach in which literary representation and theoretical concepts illuminate one another. Particular

attention is given to moments where the novel sustains tension between psychological suffering, ethical aspiration, and competing interpretations of agency. The objective is not to determine a definitive explanation for Yeong-hye's transformation but to examine how the narrative complicates conventional distinctions between illness and agency, resistance and submission, and human and nonhuman life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following analysis proceeds through four interconnected narrative developments: vegetarian refusal, withdrawal from speech, bodily deterioration, and vegetal identification. Rather than treating these developments as symbolic expressions of a single idea, the discussion examines how each emerges through specific scenes, narrative perspectives, and embodied experiences. The study does not seek to determine whether Yeong-hye's transformation should be understood primarily as ethical agency or psychological pathology. Rather, it examines how the novel sustains the tension between these interpretive possibilities and how that tension shapes questions of agency, embodiment, and relationality. Particular attention is given to how the novel's fragmented narrative structure complicates attempts to interpret Yeong-hye's transformation either as psychological illness or as ethical awakening.

Ethical Refusal and Embodied Agency

Even in the initial scenes, the novel situates Yeong-hye within a regime of invisibility and objectification. Her husband notes, "Before my wife became a vegetarian, I had always believed she was absolutely unremarkable in all senses of the word" (Kang, 2015, p. 5). This opening description establishes Yeong-hye's social position before her transformation. The husband's vocabulary—"unremarkable"—reduces her to a category of domestic normality rather than recognising her as an autonomous subject. The narration therefore reveals that her apparent conformity is already structured by a relationship in which she is observed, evaluated, and classified by others. Her later refusal of meat becomes disruptive not simply because of the dietary change itself, but because it interrupts the system of expectations through which her identity has previously been defined.

This framing echoes Adams's (2015) concept of the "absent referent" — the structural mechanism through which the actual living animal is made to disappear from consciousness in the act of meat consumption, just as the subjectivity of women is rendered invisible within patriarchal systems that reduce them to objects of use and exchange. The absent referent describes how both women and animals are simultaneously present as objects of consumption and absent as subjects with their own interests and vulnerabilities. Yeong-hye's refusal of meat may be read as a refusal to participate in this structure of simultaneous visibility and erasure. By declining to eat meat, she insists on the presence of the absent referent — on the reality of the animal whose suffering has been made invisible by the social and culinary conventions she is expected to uphold. Her vegetarianism is therefore not merely a dietary choice but a bodily insistence on the ethical significance of nonhuman life within a system designed to make that significance disappear.

Yeong-hye's refusal of meat thus operates at both the personal and structural levels: it withdraws her body from participation in a system of consumption that Adams's framework identifies as central to the interconnected domination of women and nonhuman animals. Her refusal may be read as an attempt to establish a form of relational responsibility toward nonhuman life while simultaneously challenging the objectifying norms that structure her domestic world. Her withdrawal illustrates Mahmood's argument that agency may emerge from within normative social conditions through disciplined, non-confrontational, and embodied ethical practice rather than through acts of direct opposition. This dynamic parallels other literary readings of feminine agency under patriarchal and religious constraint,

where rebellion emerges not through direct confrontation but through moments of will exercised within structures of subjugation (Sabir et al., 2024).

Yeong-hye's dreams are among the earliest signs of her transformation, linking bodily experience to an intensified awareness of violence and suffering. She recalls, in excruciating detail, "Dreams of my hands around someone's throat, throttling them, grabbing the swinging ends of their long hair and hacking it all off, sticking my finger into their slippery eyeball" (p. 27). These visceral experiences develop a relational sensitivity to suffering, which illustrates Adams's argument that ethical consciousness can emerge from an awareness of violence against nonhuman animals. This sensitivity is manifested in bodily refusal when Yeong-hye declines to eat meat, suggesting how non-discursive and sensorially-mediated practices may acquire ethical significance within the narrative.

The withdrawal by Yeong-hye soon spreads into food and socialization as well as language. In one scene, she reflects: "Suddenly, everything around me began to slide away, as though pulled back on an ebbing tide. The dining table, you, all the kitchen furniture. I was alone, the only thing remaining in all of infinite space" (p. 17). The passage can be read as dissociation or as withdrawal from the domestic order. It matters not as self-evident evidence of agency but because it shows her withdrawal taking forms that speech cannot express, which puts pressure on the assumption that ethical orientation must be articulated to count as meaningful.

The ambiguity surrounding Yeong-hye's silence is intensified by the novel's narrative structure. Her story is largely mediated through the perspectives of her husband, brother-in-law, and sister In-hye rather than through sustained access to her own consciousness. As a result, readers encounter her primarily through acts of interpretation performed by others. The narrative therefore produces uncertainty at a formal level: the same behaviour may appear as illness, resistance, ethical conviction, or incomprehensibility depending on the observer. This structural limitation prevents any single explanatory framework from fully stabilizing the meaning of her transformation.

The narrative repeatedly withholds direct access to Yeong-hye's interiority, making it difficult to determine whether her silence represents deliberate withdrawal, psychological deterioration, or a combination of both. Rather than resolving this ambiguity, the novel sustains it, thereby challenging interpretive frameworks that equate agency exclusively with verbal self-expression. Mahmood (2005) contextualizes such disciplined non-responsiveness as agency in structural constraints, in which moral position is practiced through self-restraint instead of direct opposition. Asad (2003) adds to this argument by stating that ethical activity does not have to be publicly visible to be ethically important. Her silence therefore cannot be dismissed as mere passivity, but neither can it be confirmed as deliberate ethical withdrawal; within the narrative it remains equally open to being read as distress or incapacity. What this ambiguity does challenge is the expectation that agency must be articulated through speech, confrontation, or public visibility.

A related dimension of Yeong-hye's withdrawal involves changes in sensory perception. Rather than communicating ethical convictions through explicit argument, she increasingly responds to the world through bodily sensations, particularly taste, smell, and visceral reactions to meat and violence. Drawing on Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) account of care as an attentiveness to human and nonhuman relations, these moments may be interpreted as forms of embodied responsiveness rather than simply private psychological experiences. Yeong-hye's heightened sensitivity to suffering does not by itself establish an ethical position, but it suggests a growing awareness of interdependence and vulnerability that exceeds conventional moral discourse. From this perspective, the novel invites consideration of how ethical orientation might emerge through affective and sensory engagement with the material world rather than through explicit ethical reasoning alone.

Yeong-hye responds minimally when her sister challenges her: "'Uh … uhn …' Yeong-hye averts her head as though wanting to evade her sister's question, as though the last thing in the world she wants to do right now is to give her any kind of answer" (p. 137). The act of withholding speech can be interpreted as a form of moral positioning that refuses participation in forms of communication associated with familial and patriarchal authority. According to Asad (2003), moral agency is contextual and need not be publicly recognized or politically justified to carry ethical weight. From a postsecular perspective, Yeong-hye's conduct may be interpreted as an attempt to orient herself toward an alternative ethical relationship to violence, embodiment, and nonhuman life. She remains passive when subjected to physical coercion. As the narrative recalls: "Only Yeong-hye, docile and naive, had been unable to deflect their father's temper or put up any form of resistance" (p. 118). This passage highlights Adams's (1990/2015) argument that ethical relationality is grounded in an attentiveness to suffering and a refusal to participate in objectification. Such disciplined non-resistance is framed by Mahmood (2005) as a morally meaningful agency with social constraints. Yeong-hye's refusal to respond with violence invites consideration of how ethical action might be conceived as relational and embodied rather than exclusively oppositional.

The pressures of patriarchy in the text expose the limits of Yeong-hye's agency. Her father's command, "Grab her arms, quickly" (p. 32), followed by his own attempt to force meat into her mouth, dramatizes the coercive enforcement of meat-eating and bodily compliance. The violence of the scene lies not only in the command itself but also in the collective participation it demands. The imperative transforms a family meal into a disciplinary event in which bodily autonomy is suspended. The scene is particularly important because the family's response becomes increasingly coercive while Yeong-hye's refusal remains non-aggressive toward others. Her only violence is directed at herself, when she cuts her own wrist. The act can be read as the limit of a refusal with no other available form or as a sign of acute distress, and the novel does not decide between them. The contrast destabilizes assumptions that social order is maintained through reasoned persuasion; instead, the novel reveals how conformity is enforced through bodily control when verbal authority fails. These scenes illuminate the interconnected structures of masculinity, consumption, and domination that Adams's feminist-vegetarian framework identifies as central to the sexual politics of meat. Kim, W.-C. (2019) and Lai (2023) further analyse these structures through Derrida's concept of carno-phallogocentrism. Yeong-hye's refusal of meat and language therefore becomes a challenge to the structures that regulate both bodies and ethical choices, indicating the possibility of agency through non-discursive practice.

Nonhuman Relationality and Vegetal Becoming

The narrative further dramatizes Yeong-hye's moral transformation through her changing relation to food and vegetation. When she says, "I don't need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight" (p. 115), the novel marks a shift from bodily consumption toward an imagined mode of existence grounded in vegetal life. This statement cannot be reduced to symbolic declaration alone. At the level of the narrative, it accompanies increasing physical deterioration and social isolation. The desire for sunlight, therefore, functions in two directions simultaneously. On one level, it expresses a longing for a mode of existence no longer dependent upon consumption and violence. On another, it marks a growing separation from the material conditions necessary for human survival. The force of the passage derives from the coexistence of these meanings rather than from either one alone.

This identification with plants is developed more explicitly when she imagines that "leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands … they delve down into the earth" (p. 96). Together, these passages articulate a form of relational ethics that, as Plumwood (1993) argues, refuses anthropocentric mastery and instead foregrounds interdependence — a move consistent with her

ecofeminist critique of hierarchical models of nature. Mahmood's account of non-oppositional agency helps explain why such practices may be ethically significant even when they appear socially incomprehensible. Yet the novel does not present this transformation as an uncomplicated ethical achievement. Yeong-hye's identification with vegetal life is accompanied by physical decline, social isolation, and experiences that others interpret as hallucinatory. These elements complicate any attempt to read her solely as an ethical exemplar. This is precisely the concern raised by Sands (2024), who cautions against interpretations that romanticize withdrawal, nonhuman identification, or bodily self-destruction as inherently redemptive, arguing that ethical responsibility cannot be entirely disentangled from human vulnerability, social engagement, and the ongoing demands of material existence.

Sands's critique represents the strongest objection to ecofeminist readings that celebrate Yeong-hye's vegetal becoming as ethical achievement, and it cannot be dismissed. The present reading does not dispute that Yeong-hye's transformation involves genuine suffering, psychological deterioration, and a withdrawal from the conditions necessary for human survival. What a postsecular ecofeminist framework makes possible, however, is a reading that holds these elements together without resolving them into either pure pathology or pure ethical transcendence. The question Sands raises — whether withdrawal can be ethically meaningful — is not answered by the novel but is sustained as an open and constitutive tension throughout it. The novel's refusal to resolve this tension is itself its most significant ethical gesture: it compels readers to reckon with the limits of frameworks that can only recognize ethical agency when it conforms to norms of social participation, bodily self-preservation, and communicative transparency.

Beyond vegetarian refusal, Yeong-hye's transformation extends into a rejection of the foundational logic of the human subject itself — the self-contained, self-determining individual that both patriarchal society and anthropocentric moral frameworks presuppose. Her increasing merging with the plants may be read not only as psychological retreat but also as an ethical reorientation toward relational coexistence rather than control. The brother-in-law observes: "Whether human, animal, or plant, she could not be called a 'person', but then she wasn't exactly some feral creature either – more like a mysterious being with qualities of both" (p. 68). This observation is significant precisely because it registers how Yeong-hye's transformation unsettles the boundaries within which identity, agency, and morality are conventionally conceived. Her transformation can be interpreted as a movement away from ideals of autonomy, self-interest, and rational control toward a model of subjectivity grounded in vulnerability, dependence, and relational coexistence.

Pathology and Ethical Becoming: Framing the Tension

This movement resonates with Asad's critique of liberal humanism. Asad (2003) argues that modern secular conceptions of the self privilege rational autonomy over forms of ethical experience grounded in embodiment, affect, and relational dependency. The present reading extends that insight to ask how conceptions of the self that privilege rational autonomy may leave forms of ethical experience grounded in embodiment, affect, and relational dependency difficult to register. Yeong-hye's metamorphosis questions precisely these assumptions. Her refusal of food, language, and sociality is not simply a sign of ethical sensitivity but a mode of being that secular rational-choice frameworks cannot easily register. Family members, physicians, and other observers repeatedly read her actions as symptoms of sickness, in part because the frameworks available to them make any ethical dimension difficult to register. The medical and familial interpretations of Yeong-hye's transformation cannot be dismissed: the narrative foregrounds hallucination, bodily deterioration, self-starvation, and institutionalization. These elements create genuine textual pressure toward a pathological reading. However, reducing her experience exclusively to mental illness risks overlooking the ethical questions the novel persistently raises concerning violence, nonhuman life, and relational responsibility. A postsecular ecofeminist reading therefore does

not deny pathology; it shows why pathology alone cannot account for the novel's sustained ethical ambiguity.

The tension becomes most visible in the hospital scenes. Medical officials repeatedly attempt to return Yeong-hye to normative bodily existence, treating her as an object to be managed rather than as a moral subject. When the carer restrains her face and the doctor inserts the feeding tube (p. 131), the body is reduced to a biological mechanism that must be maintained regardless of consent. Foucault's (1977) account of disciplinary power is illuminating here: the psychiatric institution does not simply respond to Yeong-hye's deterioration but actively produces her as a subject of medical knowledge, classifying, monitoring, and correcting her body according to norms of biological and social functionality. The feeding tube, in this reading, is not a neutral medical intervention but a disciplinary instrument through which the institution reasserts the primacy of bodily maintenance and social conformity over Yeong-hye's own ethical orientation. Crucially, what the institution cannot accommodate is the possibility that her refusal may carry a form of moral significance that exceeds medical diagnosis. Foucault's framework therefore helps explain not only the mechanics of institutional control in these scenes but also why Yeong-hye's conduct is rendered unintelligible within them. The psychiatric apparatus is structurally oriented toward normalization rather than toward recognizing alternative ethical orientations.

At the same time, the novel does not simply dismiss pathology as a mistaken interpretation. Yeong-hye's physical deterioration and psychological suffering remain central to the narrative. Rather than adjudicating between these possibilities, the text holds them in irresolvable proximity — ethical conviction and bodily disintegration occupying the same narrative space without cancelling each other out. The present reading therefore resists the pull toward diagnostic resolution. To determine conclusively that Yeong-hye is either ethically awakened or psychologically ill would be to foreclose precisely the interpretive difficulty the novel works to sustain. The analysis instead attends to how the text places these possibilities in permanent adjacency, compelling readers to confront the limits of frameworks that can accommodate only one or the other.

Vulnerability, Relational Subjectivity, and Influence on Others

Yeong-hye's pain becomes significant not because the novel celebrates vulnerability, but because it exposes the violence embedded in patriarchal, familial, and anthropocentric structures. Butler's (2004) account of bodily vulnerability provides a useful conceptual resource here. For Butler, the body is not a self-contained entity but a site of relational exposure: its susceptibility to injury and dependence is constitutive of its condition rather than incidental to it. Yeong-hye's progressive physical deterioration can be read as staging this vulnerability in a way that those around her increasingly struggle to ignore, even as they respond to it in conflicting ways. Her emaciated body does not simply suffer; it may be read as making visible the violence embedded in the patriarchal and anthropocentric norms she has refused. This reading does not present deterioration as ethically desirable or as a chosen practice. It asks what the body's condition discloses, while the novel continues to register that condition as real suffering.

In this sense, Yeong-hye's bodily deterioration can be read not merely as a symptom but also as an instance of what Butler (2009) terms precarity, the unequal distribution of exposure to injury and neglect, which discloses the conditions of power that govern which bodies are sustained, which are corrected, and which are abandoned. Butler develops the concept for the politics of populations, and it is extended here, as an interpretive lens, to a fictional household and hospital. The hospital scenes illustrate precisely this dynamic. Medical authorities force-feed her and classify her refusal as pathological; institutional power responds to her vulnerability not by attending to its ethical significance but by attempting to restore bodily normalization. Her body, in its deterioration, becomes a contested site in

which the violence of dominant structures and the ethical force of her refusal are simultaneously inscribed.

In particular, Yeong-hye's recurring dream imagery of slaughter, dismemberment, and bodily destruction shows that vegetarian refusal is not merely dietary. The recurring images of blood and meat register a heightened awareness of violence. In Adams's terms, this awareness links the suffering of animals to the domination of women within the sexual politics of meat. Yeong-hye's refusal of consumption is therefore inseparable from a critique of species hierarchy and patriarchal violence. One of the most disturbing visions is “a long bamboo stick strung with great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down” (p. 12). Adams's ecofeminist framework helps illuminate how the imagery connects violence against animals with broader structures of domination operating within the novel.

This relational ethics is further reinforced throughout the novel by the symbolism of trees. Within the novel, trees function as recurring figures of endurance, interconnectedness, and nonviolence. In Yeong-hye's vision, she imagines herself living off the earth, feeding on sunlight rather than living organisms. As the narration observes of Yeong-hye, "deep in the woods covering the mountain slope, standing there stock-still and soaked with rain as if she herself was one of the glistening trees" (p. 94). This image expresses her longing to withdraw from the violence and exploitation structuring human society. Within Yeong-hye's imagination, vegetal life appears as an alternative to hierarchical models of domination and control, foregrounding interdependence rather than mastery. Yeong-hye identifies with vegetal life to try to envision an ethical connection to a world that refuses hierarchy of power.

Taken together, the refusal, silence, bodily vulnerability, and vegetal identification traced above show that agency in The Vegetarian cannot be reduced to rational autonomy, public opposition, or verbal expression. The novel instead imagines agency as relational and embodied, while still refusing to resolve the ambiguity between ethical becoming and psychological collapse. The closing section extends this argument through In-hye.

Confronted with her sister's suffering, In-hye is compelled to reckon with the violence and conformity embedded in ordinary social existence and, unlike the husband or the medical authorities, gradually abandons purely explanatory responses and begins to question assumptions about conformity and responsibility that she had previously left unexamined. The novel's final movement thus shifts attention from whether Yeong-hye's transformation is objectively valid to how it alters the moral perception of those around her. Its influence operates not through persuasion or argument but through the disruption of settled habits of judgment, so that agency may be understood to work not only through deliberate political action but also through the capacity to reorient others' moral perspectives.

The analysis demonstrates that the novel's ambiguity is sustained not by abstract philosophical questions alone but through specific narrative strategies, bodily experiences, and interpersonal encounters. By repeatedly placing moral aspiration alongside bodily disintegration, *The Vegetarian* refuses to settle into a single explanatory register, compelling readers to confront the limits of frameworks that can recognize only resistance or only pathology.

The study's limitations point to specific work it leaves open. Because the analysis rests on Smith's English translation, readings that turn on particular words, such as the husband's "unremarkable" and the narration of Yeong-hye as "docile," are readings of the translated text; a line-by-line comparison with the Korean could test whether the vocabulary of ordinariness and docility is as pronounced in the original. As an interpretive method, close reading yields a textually supported account and not a verifiable one, and the scenes were selected for their bearing on the four dimensions. The theoretical frameworks also emerged in contexts different from the novel's: Mahmood's in the Egyptian piety movement, Butler's and Foucault's in European and North American settings. They are used here as heuristic lenses, and the study

makes no claims about Korean medical, familial, or social institutions beyond what the fictional world presents; testing the framework against Korean psychiatric and family scholarship would show where it holds and where it fails.

Finally, the study analyzes the text and not its reception. Since the novel appeared first in Korean (2007) and then in English (2015), comparing its Korean and Anglophone critical receptions could show whether the split between pathological and ethical readings tracks differences in interpretive community. The framework could also be tested on a Korean novel that likewise narrates a woman's withdrawal through family members, such as Shin Kyung-sook's *Please Look After Mom* (2008), to ask whether sustained ambiguity is peculiar to Han Kang's form or characteristic of this narrative strategy.

CONCLUSION

The Vegetarian presents a sustained challenge to dominant frameworks of agency, subjectivity, and ethical responsibility. This article has argued that the novel stages Yeong-hye's transformation as a double movement toward psychological disintegration and toward ethical becoming, and that it allows neither to subsume the other. Drawing on Adams (1990/2015), Mahmood (2005), and Asad (2003), the analysis has examined how ethical subjectivity may be conceptualized beyond rational autonomy, deliberate resistance, and anthropocentric moral frameworks. At the ethical level, Adams's framework illuminates how Yeong-hye's refusal of consumption connects the domination of women to that of nonhuman animals. At the level of subject formation, Mahmood's reconceptualization of agency offers a vocabulary for considering how withdrawal and embodied practice may carry moral significance independent of overt resistance, without presupposing that Yeong-hye's conduct amounts to ethical self-cultivation. At the epistemological level, Asad's critique of secular intelligibility offers a lens for understanding why her conduct is so readily classified as pathological, even as the novel gives that classification real textual support.

The analytical payoff lies in this combination. Ecofeminist and posthumanist readings have shown that Yeong-hye's transformation can be read as ethically meaningful. The postsecular orientation adds an account of why that meaning is so difficult to recognize within familial, medical, and interpretive frameworks, while the novel's mediated narration and its pairing of aspiration with bodily disintegration explain why readings of illness, protest, and ethical aspiration each find support in the text. The critical question therefore shifts from which category best describes Yeong-hye to how the novel keeps these categories in play.

Relational subjectivity, as defined above, names what is at stake: a subject formed through exposure and dependence, whose emergence in the novel is precarious and at times indistinguishable from dissolution. The novel neither offers Yeong-hye as a model of ethical subjectivity nor presents self-denial or deterioration as ethically desirable. Its significance lies in exposing the limits of resistance-centered, anthropocentric, and secular understandings of agency, and in showing how withdrawal, vulnerability, and nonhuman relationality can be read as ethically charged without being treated as redemptive. More broadly, the study suggests that a postsecular ecofeminist lens may be productive for other texts in which bodily suffering, ethical orientation, and nonhuman life are not clearly separable. The limitations noted above indicate where this suggestion should be tested: in the Korean original, in Korean institutional scholarship, and in comparative readings.

Acknowledgment

The authors sincerely thank Dr. Dewi Candraningrum for her valuable comments and constructive feedback. The authors also gratefully acknowledge the anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors have no financial, professional, or personal relationships that could have influenced the research, analysis, interpretation, or presentation of the findings reported in this study.

Funding Statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

REFERENCES

Adams, C. J. (2015). *The sexual politics of meat: A feminist-vegetarian critical theory* (25th anniversary ed.). Bloomsbury. (Original work published 1990).

Asad, T. (2003). *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity*. Stanford University Press.

Braidotti, R. (2008). In spite of the times: The postsecular turn in feminism. *Theory, Culture & Society, 25*(6), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408095542

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. Verso.

Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* Verso.

Candraningrum, D., Setyabudi, T., Wulandari, F. D., Prastiwi, Y., Daouda, M., & Sabir, M. R. (2025). Digitizing dissent in fiction: Intan Paramaditha's gendered narratives and planetary health. In *Proceedings of the International Seminar of Languages, Arts and Literature Education (ISLALE 2025)* (pp. 157–178). Atlantis Press. https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-501-0_17

Casanova, J. (1994). *Public religions in the modern world*. University of Chicago Press.

Casey, R. (2020). Willed arboreality: Feminist worldmaking in Han Kang's The Vegetarian. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, 62*(3), 347–360. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1841725

Derrida, J. (1991). "Eating well," or the calculation of the subject: An interview with Jacques Derrida. In E. Cadava, P. Connor, & J.-L. Nancy (Eds.), *Who comes after the subject?* (pp. 96–119). Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Pantheon Books.

Habermas, J. (2008). *Between naturalism and religion: Philosophical essays* (C. Cronin, Trans.). Polity Press.

Kang, H. (2015). *The vegetarian* (D. Smith, Trans.). Hogarth. (Original work published 2007).

Kim, B., & Lee, K. (2025). Exploring Han Kang's The Vegetarian as a text for ecofeminism and sustainability in liberal arts education. *Environmental Education Research, 31*(9), 1769–1782. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2025.2458722

Kim, M. (2020). A Deleuzian reading of "becoming plant" in Han Kang's writing: "The Fruit of My Woman" and The Vegetarian. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, 61*(3), 327–340. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1713716

Kim, W.-C. (2019). Eating and suffering in Han Kang's The Vegetarian. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, 21*(5). https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3390

Lai, Y.-P. (2023). Blooming against meat: Silence, starvation, and arboreal subjectivity in Han Kang's The Vegetarian. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, 64*(5), 831–842. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2022.2106819

Macsiniuc, C. (2017). Normalising the anorexic body. Violence and madness in The Vegetarian, by Han Kang. *Meridian Critic, 29*(2), 103–118.

Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton University Press.

Panta, S., & Adhikari, T. P. (2025). Exploration of male views and patriarchal in Han Kang's The Vegetarian: Masculinity and the gaze. *NPRC Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 2*(5), 33–41. https://doi.org/10.3126/nprcjmr.v2i5.79671

Plumwood, V. (1993). *Feminism and the mastery of nature*. Routledge.

Plumwood, V. (2002). *Environmental culture: The ecological crisis of reason*. Routledge.

Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. University of Minnesota Press.

Sabir, M. R., Irshad, A., Khan, M. J., & Nawaz, M. H. (2024). *Gendered spirits: Reclaiming militarism and feminine agency in Aboulela's River Spirit*. Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14251694

Sands, D. (2024). Interrogating "feeling politics": Animal and vegetal empathy in Han Kang's The Vegetarian. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, 65*(2), 324–334. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2023.2187690

Warren, K. (2000). *Ecofeminist philosophy: A Western perspective on what it is and why it matters*. Rowman & Littlefield.

This page intentionally left blank.