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## The Body as Archive: Somatic Trauma, Postmemory, and Irrepresentable Violence in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang articulates the psychological and embodied consequences of trauma through its protagonist, Yeong-hye, whose abrupt refusal to eat meat serves as both a personal act of resistance and a manifestation of unresolved psychological wounds. Drawing on foundational and contemporary trauma studies, feminist theory, postcolonial criticism, and affect theory, this study analyzes how the novel presents trauma as an experience that resists coherence, manifesting through fragmented memory, bodily withdrawal, and intergenerational transmission of suffering. The paper explores how Han Kang's lyrical yet disjointed prose reflects the destabilizing effects of traumatic memory—not only for Yeong-hye but also for her family members, whose recollections are marked by denial, shame, and repression. Employing the theoretical concept of the irrepresentability of traumatic experience as articulated by Cathy Caruth, and extending this framework through Judith Butler's theory of precarious life, Sara Ahmed's affective economies of shame, and Marianne Hirsch's postmemory, this paper argues that *The Vegetarian* is not merely a case study in individual pathology but a structural critique of patriarchal, familial, and national systems that produce, sustain, and silence traumatized subjects. Through this lens, *The Vegetarian* emerges as a powerful contribution to trauma studies, interrogating how violent personal and collective histories linger in the psyche, disrupt identity, and challenge the boundaries of empathy and understanding within familial and social structures.

**Index Terms** - Trauma studies, fragmented memory, postmemory, intergenerational violence, somatic trauma, feminist theory, Han Kang, Korean literature, affect theory, precarious life.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, world literature has increasingly engaged with aftermath of violence in ways that challenge Western-centric trauma paradigms. Han Kang's "The Vegetarian" occupies an especially significant position in this transnational conversation. It is a remarkable psychological novel in which trauma, repression, and the haunting afterlife of violence coalesce into a story of bodily renunciation and gradual self-erasure. Through the protagonist, Yeong-hye, whose decision to become vegetarian is both a personal resistance and an expression of psychic torment, Han Kang crafts a narrative where trauma resists meaning and wholeness, instead manifesting as fragmentation, withdrawal, and generational transmission of suffering. This paper argues that Han Kang's formal choices, perspectival narration, dreamwork sequences, and somatic imagery, are not merely stylistic but structurally enact the epistemological and ethical failure that allow trauma to persist across bodies and generations. This paper employs trauma theory—particularly concepts articulated by Cathy Caruth, who contends the traumatic event is "unclaimed experience" that "returns belatedly" and "resists simple integration into consciousness or narrative" (Caruth 4-9), to consider how Han Kang's prose, structure, and psychological portraiture express the irreducible and often unspeakable nature of traumatic experience.

### II. TRAUMA THEORY

Trauma theory's foundational premise, as outlined by Caruth, Anne Whitehead, and Dominick LaCapra, is that trauma surpasses individual pathology and concerns the textual irrepresentability of psychic wounds. It "defies language" (Caruth 5), appearing in narrative as gaps, dissociation, repetition, and delayed expression. Caruth links such irreducibility to Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, or belatedness (Caruth, Trauma 3), while literary critics observe trauma's tendency to collapse time, identity, and referential stability (Whitehead 3-4). It is important to note, however, that the Caruth-Whitehead paradigm has been productively critiqued for its Eurocentric assumptions: scholars such as Stef Craps and Michael Rothberg argue that this model privileges a particular post-Holocaust template of trauma that may not capture the 'slow violence' (Nixon 2), environmental dispossession, or culturally specific mourning practices that characterize non-Western traumatic experience.

Recent neurobiological models (van der Kolk 21) foreground the role of the body and sensory memory in trauma, supporting interpretations of trauma's embodied residue in fiction. Van der Kolk's concept of the body as archive-where traumatic experience is stored somatically rather than symbolically is especially productive for reading Yeong-hye's vegetal transformation. In postcolonial and feminist contexts, trauma's articulation also involves collective, gendered, and intergenerational dynamics (Craps 45), relevant in Han Kang's novel. This paper also draws on Judith Butler's theory of 'precarious life' to illuminate how Yeong-hye's body is rendered disposable by the interlocking forces of patriarchy, familial authority, and medical power (Butler 20). Sara Ahmed's theorization of shame as a collective, circulating affect (Ahmed 103) further enriches an account of how Yeong-hye's refusal generates shame in others and how that shame is violently redirected onto her body.

### III. TRAUMA IN KOREAN LITERATURE AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The intersection of trauma and memory is especially potent within South Korean literature, where private sufferings often echo national and collective wounds. Han Kang's fiction fits this tradition, as critics have noted, whereby personal bodily resistance, refusing to eat, metamorphosing into vegetal life, signals both psychological disturbance and cultural dissent. South Korea's 'compressed modernity' (Chang 29)- a term denoting the rapid, sometimes violent transition from authoritarianism to industrial capitalism in the latter twentieth century, created a social formation in which personal and political trauma were systematically suppressed in favour of economic productivity and national image. Situating *The Vegetarian* within this broader authorial project illuminates Yeong-hye's refusal not merely as individual pathology but as a culturally resonant act of dissent.

### IV. YEONG-HYE'S RESISTANCE: THE IRREPRESENTABILITY OF TRAUMA

From the novel's outset, Yeong-hye is positioned through her husband's unsympathetic, objectifying gaze: "Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way ... her timid, sallow aspect told me all I needed to know" (Kang 14). Mr. Cheong's focalization immediately establishes the novel's central epistemological problem: the traumatized subject is legible to others only as absence, dullness, or deficiency. This is not merely a domestic failure of attention; it is, as Butler argues, the condition of those whose lives have been rendered 'ungrievable'-invisible to the calculus of social recognition (Butler 22). This detachment highlights not only marital alienation but the gendered inability to recognize another's interior life, a context ripe for the misreading, repression, and denial that define trauma's interpersonal fallout (Tal 7; LaCapra 65-67).

Her pivotal dream-never described in detail, always referenced obliquely-becomes the source of her refusal to eat meat: "I had a dream," she repeats, unable to explain further. The dream materializes thus: "I dreamed of a face ... It's different every time. Sometimes it feels very familiar, other times I'm sure I've never seen it before. There are times when it's all bloody ... and times when it looks like the face of a rotting corpse" (Kang 106). The face, endlessly mutable and horrifying, centers the novel's rendering of trauma as that which repeats, intrudes, and cannot be integrated or described; a narrative corollary of Caruth's "wound that cries out, that testifies ... to the impossibility of its utterance" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4). Freud's concept of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*)-the familiar rendered strange and threatening, is particularly apt here: the recurring face is simultaneously intimate and alien, suggesting that the traumatic kernel is imbricated within the very structures of Yeong-hye's family and domestic life (Freud 220).

Yeong-hye's trauma is somatic as much as psychic: "The face is inside my stomach. It rose up from inside my stomach. But I'm not scared anymore. There's nothing to be scared of now" (Kang 106). Her ordeal manifests in her flesh, a 'lump' in her chest, a bodily revulsion toward animal flesh, and ultimately, her sun-driven, plant-like existence "I don't need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight" (Kang 140). This is what van der Kolk identifies as the body's own 'language of distress,' deployed when verbal narrative has been foreclosed (van der Kolk 30). This literalization of trauma into somatic and vegetal forms closely parallels van der Kolk's assertion that "the body keeps the score" (21), especially when the wounds remain incommunicable in words.

### V. PATRIARCHAL VIOLENCE AND COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

Han Kang crafts a chillingly patriarchal environment where Yeong-hye's trauma is not isolated but perpetuated by family and social norms. Her husband is more concerned with his own inconvenience than her suffering, dismissing her actions as 'self-centered' and 'unreasonable,' labeling a simple act of dietary choice as insanity (Kang 20). The father, a Vietnam veteran who "whipped her over the calves until she was eighteen," instantiates transgenerational violence (34). The father's military background is significant: it links the domestic violence Yeong-hye endures to South Korea's implication in Cold War geopolitics and its own history of state-sanctioned violence-an arc scholars of Korean trauma studies have identified as central to understanding gendered suffering in Han Kang's fiction. The scene where the family restrains Yeong-hye and forces meat into her mouth literalizes patriarchal and familial oppression: "My wife growled and spat out the meat. An animal cry of distress burst from her lips" (Kang 44). This episode embodies what trauma theorists call repetition compulsion, the psychic re-enactment of violence in the absence of working through (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 11; LaCapra 141).

The novel portrays trauma as intimately linked to gendered power, submission, and shame. Yeong-hye is variously infantilized, sexualized, objectified, and pathologized, echoing clinical language ('anorexia nervosa,' 'schizophrenia') even as her unique suffering is never truly heard: "No one can understand me ... they just force me to take medication, and stab me with needles" (Kang 140). This is the medicalization of dissent: by converting psychic and political refusal into DSM-legible pathology, the psychiatric apparatus serves as an arm of patriarchal discipline. Michel Foucault's analysis of the clinic as a technology of normalization (*Discipline and Punish* 184) is directly applicable here, though it requires supplementation with feminist disability studies perspectives to account for the specifically gendered dimension of Yeong-hye's institutionalization. As Felman and Laub argue, trauma's irrepresentability is not just an individual burden but a social failure; the witness, 'unable to hear,' becomes complicit in the perpetuation of trauma (Felman and Laub 57).

## VI. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND FRAGMENTED MEMORY

Trauma's resistance to integration is mirrored by Han Kang's narrative structure and style. The novel is divided into three parts, none of which is narrated by Yeong-hye herself. Instead, her husband, brother-in-law, and sister each offer fraught, partial, and self-interested accounts. This perspectival structure is not merely a postmodern formal choice; it is an ethical argument. By withholding Yeong-hye's interiority, Han Kang refuses to grant the reader the comfort of empathic identification. We are instead positioned as witnesses to the act of misreading-compelled to recognise our own interpretive failures. This technique resonates with Kaplan's discussion of 'empty empathy' (Kaplan 93), in which audiences consume traumatic suffering without genuine ethical transformation. This perspectival fragmentation enacts the way trauma shatters the possibility of a unified narrative or stable self (Whitehead 81): "Yeong-hye was retreating from herself, becoming as distant to herself as she was to her sister. A forlorn face, behind a mask of composure" (Kang 119).

Han Kang's use of dreams, intrusive memories, and surreal bodily hallucinations further illustrates trauma's nonlinear temporality and resistance to closure: "I want to throw myself through the pitch-black window. Maybe that would finally get this lump out of my body" (Kang 51). These features-repetition, temporal distortion, bodily symptom-are characteristic of what Whitehead describes as trauma fiction, in which plot and selfhood are 'irreparably disrupted by a past that returns compulsively' (3). The novel's triptych structure itself enacts a kind of traumatic repetition: each section circles the same body, the same refused meal, the same silence, but from an increasingly estranged vantage point. The formal movement is centrifugal-the further we move from Yeong-hye, the less we know her, and the more we are made to feel the cost of that not-knowing.

## VII. BODILY WITHDRAWAL, VEGETAL TRANSFORMATION, AND AGENCY

As Yeong-hye withdraws from language, sexuality, and social life, her body undergoes a radical, plant-like transformation: "Her skin was a pale green. Her body lay prone in front of him, like a leaf that had just fallen from the branch, only barely begun to wither ... her whole body was covered evenly with that pale wash of green" (Kang 91). Here, Yeong-hye's dissolution of human markers is arguably both a symptom of trauma and a form of resistance-a final escape from a world structured by violence and denial, echoing the paradox of trauma's agency and abjection (Felman and Laub 73). The vegetal turn could be read as liberation (radical refusal of the human-animal hierarchy that licenses violence) or as the completion of trauma's work (the annihilation of subjectivity). Both readings must be held simultaneously.

Han Kang repeatedly invokes imagery of plant growth, photosynthesis, and earthy communion: "I'm not an animal anymore ... All I need is sunlight" (Kang 140), and "Look, sister, I'm doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands ..." (117). In ecocritical terms, Yeong-hye's vegetal turn can be read through what Stacy Alaimo calls 'transcorporeality'-the condition in which the human body is understood as continuous with, rather than bounded from, its material environment (Alaimo 2). Yeong-hye does not merely fantasize becoming a plant; she refuses the cultural-ideological partition between human and nonhuman life that underpins the patriarchal logic of her oppression. This form of escape may be read as a radical refusal- 'the power of her own renunciation' (Kang 84)-challenging trauma's narrative of total victimhood (Kristeva 4). Rosi Braidotti's posthumanist framework (*The Posthuman*, 2013) offers another productive lens: Yeong-hye's vegetal becoming embodies a posthuman refusal of the liberal humanist subject-the bounded, rational, productive self-demanded by Korean modernity.

## VIII. TRAUMA'S AFTERLIFE AND INTERGENERATIONAL ECHOES

The novel's final section shifts to In-hye, Yeong-hye's sister, who is left to bear witness and perhaps inherit-the burden of trauma. In-hye's reflections unearth the childhood roots of suffering: "Only Yeong-hye, docile and naive, had been unable to deflect their father's temper or put up any form of resistance. Instead, she had merely absorbed all her suffering inside her, deep into the marrow of her bones" (Kang 143). Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory,' we see how Yeong-hye's fate is both singular and an echo of generational violence. Hirsch defines postmemory as 'the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before' (Hirsch 106). In-hye's position is precisely this: she did not directly experience her father's violence in the same way, yet it structures her perception, her guilt, and her bodily exhaustion. In-hye's own exhaustion, guilt, and longing are symptomatic of trauma's vicarious transmission ("It really is like caring for a baby" [Kang 138]), suggesting that what Yeong-hye could not resolve is silently passed along (Hirsch 106).

In-hye's status as a 'secondary witness' in Felman and Laub's sense (57-58)-a witness who is both inside and outside the trauma, who can neither fully testify nor fully disengage. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's concept of the 'crypt' and 'transgenerational haunting' (Abraham and Torok 130)-the idea that unprocessed parental trauma is encrypted within the child's psyche and resurfaces as inexplicable symptoms-would map precisely onto In-hye's dynamic and add a psychoanalytic dimension distinct from, though complementary to, Caruth's framework.

## IX. THE LIMITS OF EMPATHY AND THE ETHICS OF WITNESS

Han Kang withholds direct access to Yeong-hye's consciousness, instead forcing readers to encounter her psychic wounds through the distorted lenses of others. This narrative choice foregrounds the difficulties of witnessing traumatic suffering, and the ease with which violence can be ignored, misread, or aestheticized (Kaplan 93). The brother-in-law's sexual objectification, projected artistic fantasies, and ultimate shame exemplify how trauma invites further exploitation. His desire to paint Yeong-hye's body-to render her suffering aesthetically pleasurable-is a version of what Sontag calls the aestheticization of pain, which transforms the spectacle of suffering into a commodity (Sontag 76). The painted flowers on her body simultaneously beautify and further violate her; his 'artistic' project is continuous with, rather than distinct from, the patriarchal violence she has already endured.

Han Kang's final act is not to resolve trauma, but to insist on its afterlife: "Why, is it such a bad thing to die?" (Kang 142). Unhealed, unassimilated, and unnamed, trauma's residue endures-halting, unresolved, yet speaking through the body, the family, and the ravaged earth. This irresolution is the novel's most radical formal gesture. In resisting catharsis, Han Kang declines the Western therapeutic model of trauma narrative-in which the wound is eventually made speakable and the self-reconstituted. Instead, she insists that some traumas are irreducibly opaque; some wounds are legible only as silence, refusal, and bodily dissolution. This is the ethical challenge the novel poses to readers: not to solve Yeong-hye's suffering, but to be changed by their encounter with its unresolvability.

## X. CONCLUSION

By way of trauma theory, *The Vegetarian* emerges as not merely a story of an individual's psychological decline but an experimental meditation on trauma's irreducible complexity-its fragmentation, its somatic inscription, its resistance to narrative, and its social amplification through gender and kinship. Han Kang's disjointed prose and layered perspectives instantiate what Caruth calls "the truth of trauma ... that can only be realized in its indirectness, a certainty without knowledge" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 6). In Yeong-hye's haunted, vegetal silence, we confront the limits of understanding and the ethical demand to listen to that which can neither be spoken nor healed. This paper has argued that the novel's significance lies not in its representation of traumatic content per se, but in its formal enactment of the conditions that make trauma both irrepresentable and politically consequential. In this sense, *The Vegetarian* is not only a contribution to trauma studies but to a broader project of rethinking the ethics and politics of literary form itself.

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