

Ecofeminist Perspectives on The Vegetarian: Exploration, Reconstruction, and Liberation of Female Self-Identity

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Abstract: This paper, grounded in ecofeminism, explores the processes of female self-identity exploration, reconstruction, and liberation as depicted in Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian*. It begins by analyzing the metaphorical connection between women and nature, uncovering the shared oppression faced by both under patriarchal systems and its underlying causes. Through the protagonist Yeong-hye's narrative, the paper examines the pathways of self-identity reconstruction achieved through resistance to societal norms and a return to nature. Finally, it discusses the ecological insights derived from Yeong-hye's journey of self-liberation, emphasizing that female emancipation entails not only individual resistance but also a profound reconsideration and reconstruction of the human-nature relationship. *The Vegetarian*, through Yeong-hye's transformation, demonstrates the literary praxis of ecofeminism and offers new perspectives and insights for contemporary gender studies.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Female Self-identity, *The Vegetarian*.

1. Introduction

(1) Research Background and Significance

The Vegetarian (Chaesikjuuija), a seminal work by South Korean author Han Kang, garnered critical acclaim upon winning both the 2016 Man Booker International Prize and the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature. The novel centers on the radical transformation of its protagonist, Yeong-hye, whose refusal to consume meat and subsequent rejection of human society—culminating in her delusional desire to become a tree—serves as a powerful allegory for the individual's struggle against societal norms, familial constraints, and gendered oppression. Through Yeong-hye's narrative, the text not only critiques the marginalization of women within patriarchal structures but also exposes the dual oppression of individual psyche and ecological systems under modernity's hegemony.

Ecofeminism, as a critical theoretical framework, links the subjugation of women to ecological exploitation, arguing that both originate from patriarchal and capitalist systems. By emphasizing the intrinsic connection between women and nature, ecofeminism advocates for the deconstruction of these oppressive systems to achieve dual liberation—ecological and gendered. An ecofeminist reading of *The Vegetarian* illuminates how Yeong-hye's actions, psychological evolution, and symbolic union with nature articulate a quest for self-identity, its reconfiguration, and ultimate emancipation. This study holds significant implications for contemporary discourses on female agency and sustainable ecological praxis.

(2) Research Questions and Objectives

Guided by ecofeminist theory, this paper examines Yeong-hye's identity transformation in *The Vegetarian* and its implications for ecological and gendered liberation. Specifically, it addresses the following questions:

How does Yeong-hye's rejection of meat symbolize her resistance to patriarchal society and traditional gender roles?

In what ways does her communion with nature facilitate the reclamation of self-identity?

How does her ultimate choice reflect female self-liberation

within an ecofeminist paradigm?

By interrogating these questions, this study aims to demonstrate how ecofeminist theory provides a lens to analyze identity transformation under systemic oppression, offering cultural insights for modern women's emancipation.

(3) Methodology and Structure

Employing close textual analysis and theoretical critique, this paper interprets the novel's characterization, narrative structure, and symbolic imagery to unravel the multidimensionality of female identity transformation. Ecofeminist tenets are juxtaposed with key plot developments to reveal the interplay between Yeong-hye's actions and ecofeminist emancipatory logic. The paper is structured as follows:

Section II delineates ecofeminism's theoretical foundations and analytical framework. Section III explores Yeong-hye's awakening and initial identity exploration amid oppression. Section IV analyzes her identity reconstruction through fusion with nature. Section V examines the cultural significance of her final act of self-liberation. Section VI discusses the text's cultural implications and limitations via ecofeminism. Section VII concludes with broader scholarly and societal reflections.

Through this framework, the study elucidates the layered meanings of identity transformation in *The Vegetarian* while assessing ecofeminism's applicability in literary studies and its contemporary relevance.

2. Overview of Ecofeminist Theory

(1) Fundamental Conceptions of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism emerged in the early 1970s and underwent significant development in the 1990s as a sociopolitical theory and movement that seeks to integrate feminism with environmentalism. Its core premise posits an intrinsic connection between women's subordinate and oppressed status in modern families and society and the continuous deterioration of the natural ecological environment. This connection is ultimately caused by the severely unequal economic-social structures and cultural values produced or

driven by capitalist systems. [1] Contemporary ecofeminists tend to characterize today's world as dominated by capitalist patriarchy, where the Global South (developing countries), women and nature form a trinity of the subjugated "other". Ecofeminism represents a political and social movement that believes in certain relationships between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature. Ecofeminist theorists examine the interconnections between gender discrimination, control of nature, racism, speciesism and other forms of social inequality.

In 1974, French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne first proposed the term "ecofeminism" in her essay "Feminism or Death" when calling for women to participate in saving the planet, marking the beginning of Western ecofeminist theoretical research. She considered women's identification with nature as ecofeminism's primary content. D'Eaubonne combined ecological and feminist movements, committed to establishing new moral values and social structures opposed to all forms of discrimination. [2] By advocating an ethics of love, care and justice - particularly promoting social justice - she ultimately sought to replace hierarchical relational models with interdependence patterns.

The main tenets of ecofeminism include: 1) Women are closer to nature, while masculine ethics are fundamentally hostile toward nature. Women desire harmonious coexistence with nature, while men turn the world into a hunting ground opposed to nature. 2) Life on Earth forms an interconnected web without hierarchical distinctions. 3) A healthy, balanced ecosystem including humans and nonhumans should maintain diversified states. 4) The survival of species demonstrates the necessity to reconceptualize relationships between humans and nature (one's physical body and nonhuman nature). This challenges the nature-culture binary opposition theory. In summary, ecofeminism advocates reconstructing human society according to feminist principles and ecological principles.

(2) Analytical Framework of Female Self-Identity from an Ecofeminist Perspective

1) The Metaphorical Connection Between Women and Nature

Ecofeminism posits that women and nature have long been perceived as analogous entities within cultural, social, and linguistic frameworks, consistently linked together. This metaphorical connection manifests in the following aspects:

First, in cultural metaphors. Within traditional cultural narratives, women and nature are frequently positioned as dominated "Others". For instance, nature is often depicted as fertile, nurturing, and the origin of life, while women are viewed as symbols of reproduction and caregiving. This metaphorical connection reinforces the commonality between women and nature, yet simultaneously renders them objects of conquest and control within patriarchal societies. In "The Vegetarian", Yeong-hye's body is regarded by her family and society as a natural existence requiring "discipline," reflecting the shared oppression of female bodies and natural ecosystems. [3]

Second, in linguistic metaphorical constructs. Linguistic research demonstrates that vocabulary describing nature and women often carries similar symbolic meanings. For example, nature is referred to as "Mother Nature," while female bodies are analogized to "fields" or "soil," implying their potential for cultivation, utilization, and control. Such metaphors not only assign similar attributes to women and nature but also reinforce male dominance over them. In "The Vegetarian",

Yeong-hye's bodily fusion with plants constitutes a rebellion against this metaphorical structure. [4]

Third, in symbolic imagery within art and literature. In literary and artistic works, women and nature are frequently portrayed as an integrated whole through symbolic representations. Elements such as plants, land, and water sources are commonly employed to symbolize female vitality and oppressed states. In "The Vegetarian", Yeong-hye gradually renounces meat consumption and ultimately chooses to "assimilate" with plants, demonstrating women's renewed identification with natural ecology.

2) The Ecological Perspective on Identity Oppression and Liberation

Ecofeminism reveals that women's self-identity often suffers dual oppression: on one hand, the discipline and control at the gender level; on the other, the ecological destruction of natural resources and environment. [5]

From the perspective of gender-based discipline and control, the oppression of women and nature stems from the combined domination of patriarchy and capitalism. Patriarchy, grounded in gender, positions women as secondary and subordinate beings, while capitalism reinforces the joint oppression of women and nature through the exploitation of natural resources. [6] Within this framework, women are not only deprived of bodily autonomy but also compelled to submit to male-dominated social norms. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat leads her family and society to label her as "abnormal," precisely embodying this dual oppression.

Yeong-hye's rejection of meat and her affinity with nature can be interpreted as an ecological expression of resistance. In the novel, meat consumption symbolizes society's reverence for power and hierarchy, while her vegetarianism and gradual withdrawal from human society constitute a protest against gender roles and social conventions. This protest transcends mere individual behavior, instead representing a concrete manifestation of ecofeminist thought - rejecting patriarchal domination through a return to nature. [7]

In conclusion, the metaphorical connection between women and nature serves as both a symbol of oppression and a starting point for liberation. From an ecofeminist perspective, women's exploration of self-identity constitutes not only resistance to gender oppression but also rebellion against and reconstruction of natural ecology and cultural metaphors. [8] This analytical framework provides deeper insight into the behavioral logic of Yeong-hye in *The Vegetarian* and the text's profound revelation about female identity liberation.

3. The Exploration of Female Self-Identity in *The Vegetarian*

The Vegetarian centers on Yeong-hye's identity transformation, showcasing a woman's journey of self-discovery through her rejection of meat and gradual withdrawal from human society. [9] Viewed through an ecofeminist lens, this exploration constitutes not merely rebellion against traditional gender roles, but more profoundly reflects female awakening and self-actualization amidst ecological and social oppression.

(1) Meat Consumption and Social Power: The Metaphor of Gender Discipline

Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat initiates both the novel's

plot and her first act of defiance against social norms. Within the narrative, meat consumption transcends dietary habit to symbolize social power structures and gender discipline.

From an ecofeminist perspective, meat-eating in many cultures represents the conquest and control of nature - a logic that extends to gender power dynamics. When Yeong-hye's husband describes her as "just an ordinary wife," this ostensibly mundane remark encapsulates patriarchal definitions and limitations imposed on female identity. As a social practice, meat consumption becomes a marker of women's conformity to social norms and maintenance of domestic/social order. Yeong-hye's rejection of meat - including refusing to prepare meat dishes for her husband - challenges not just her spouse's dietary expectations but the entire family structure, metaphorically questioning gender power hierarchies.

This rejection stems from her nightmares of bloody animal slaughter, reflecting both her sensitivity to violence/oppression and marking the beginning of her identity crisis. Through this act, she awakens from the constraints of traditional gender roles, seeking to transcend external bodily discipline and pursue authentic selfhood.

(2) Female Bodily Alienation and Boundary Reconstruction

As Yeong-hye progressively escapes familial and social control, her physical relationships undergo transformation, reflecting both reclaimed bodily autonomy and reconnection with nature within ecofeminist frameworks.

Ecofeminism posits that female bodies are socially constructed as extensions of "nature" - sites for male power exertion. [10] In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's body becomes a contested terrain: her husband demands conventional wifely performance, her father forces meat consumption through violence, and familial interventions collectively reinforce patriarchal domination over female corporeality. Her growing alienation from social relationships signals redefined bodily autonomy - choosing solitude, ceasing communication, and ultimately renouncing the human food chain to "become a tree." This behavior constitutes both rebellion against external control and an attempted return to "natural state," blurring human-nature boundaries through botanical affinity to forge new identity coordinates.

(3) Reconnecting with Nature: New Pathways for Identity Exploration

Yeong-hye's identity quest progressively deepens her connection with nature, rejecting social norms not just dietarily but seeking spiritual unity with the natural world.

The recurring arboreal imagery - Yeong-hye's persistent fantasy of becoming a tree - carries profound symbolic significance. Her increasing botanical identification manifests through sunlight dependence and physical proximity to trees, which represent pure, desire-free existence in harmonious symbiosis with nature.[11] This arboreal aspiration reflects her desire to transcend socio-gender oppression for spiritual liberation. Moreover, nature facilitates her escape from social prescriptions. Her identity sheds wife/daughter labels, gaining new meaning through natural self-discovery. This fusion with nature constitutes radical rebellion against patriarchal-capitalist logic and fundamental redefinition of selfhood.

Through meat rejection, social withdrawal, and natural communion, Yeong-hye completes her identity exploration in *The Vegetarian*. Framed by ecofeminism, this journey embodies women's dual critique of gender oppression and

ecological destruction while revealing possibilities for individual liberation. [12] Her process simultaneously challenges traditional gender roles and metaphorically critiques modern ecological crises, offering profound literary insight into woman-nature relationships.

4. The Reconstruction of Female Self-Identity in *The Vegetarian*

In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye not only expresses dissatisfaction with social discipline through rebellious behavior, but more importantly, seeks to reconstruct her self-identity. The ecofeminist perspective reveals that this process of identity reconstruction is both an expression of personal awakening and a manifestation of women's potential to break free from traditional oppression.[13]

(1) From Passive Resistance to Active Choice: The Beginning of Identity Awakening

Yeong-hye's identity reconstruction begins with her resistance to established social norms, but as the story progresses, her behavior evolves from passive resistance to active choice, demonstrating her awakening self-awareness.[14]

In traditional culture, women are often defined as symbols of obedience, sacrifice, and selflessness - stereotypes that Yeong-hye completely subverts. She rejects the role of "virtuous wife and loving mother," actively distances herself from family ties, ignores her husband's needs entirely, and ultimately chooses to comply with her brother-in-law's request to dedicate herself to art. This behavior shatters the functional definition imposed on women by patriarchy and marks the beginning of her identity awakening.

The novel also illustrates her liberation from physical to spiritual control. Yeong-hye's family subjects her to multiple disciplinary measures - forced feeding, violence, and even institutionalization in a mental hospital by her sister - all attempting to restore her "normal" state. [15][16] Paradoxically, this external pressure only strengthens her rejection of social norms. She would rather endure physical suffering than submit to imposed conventions, persistently pursuing spiritual freedom.[17] [18]Through this liberation from physical and mental control, she gradually realizes the independence and autonomy of her self-identity.

(2) The Ecological Path to Identity Reconstruction

Yeong-hye's identity reconstruction manifests not only in rebellion against family and social norms, but more profoundly in her deepening connection with nature. In this process, core ecofeminist principles become the guiding force for her identity transformation.[19]

This is first evident in the isomorphic identification between nature and women. Yeong-hye's behavior increasingly merges with natural elements - from rejecting meat to imitating plant-like states - demonstrating her identification with nature. The characteristics of plants - peace, non-confrontation, and harmonious coexistence with the environment - become her aspirational qualities. [20] Ultimately, Yeong-hye chooses to shed the constraints of human society and reconstruct her identity in a plant-like state, completing the transformation from traditional gender identity to ecological identity.

Moreover, nature becomes Yeong-hye's sanctuary of liberation. Within the ecofeminist framework, nature represents not only oppression but also emancipation. [21][22]By embracing nature, Yeong-hye gradually discards

the various role pressures imposed by society, seeking a more authentic state of being. This transformation suggests that nature provides an important pathway for women to escape social oppression, with Yeong-hye's final "vegetal" choice representing the ultimate realization of this liberation.

However, Yeong-hye's identity reconstruction comes at significant cost - a painful reality that cannot be overlooked. Her chosen alienation from society is both a consequence of resisting oppression and evidence of society's inability to understand or accept her.[23]As she progressively withdraws from family, even abandoning human food and language, this symbolizes the social isolation she endures in pursuit of self-liberation.

Simultaneously, her pursuit of a natural state leads to food refusal and plant-like assimilation - behavior rich in literary symbolism yet implying physical self-destruction. Her progressively weakened body approaches a transcendent, barely-alive state, suggesting that identity reconstruction may require redefining life's essence and even abandoning traditional modes of existence.[24]

In conclusion, Yeong-hye's identity reconstruction represents both women's breakthrough from traditional gender roles and a redefinition of ecological identity. Through profound identification with nature, she escapes patriarchal discipline and seeks spiritual liberation. Yet this process entails costs of isolation and physical depletion, revealing the complexity of female identity reconstruction. Yeong-hye's story provides a profound literary case for ecofeminism while provoking reflection on the paths and costs of women's liberation.

5. The Liberation of Female Self-Identity in The Vegetarian

In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's liberation of self-identity serves as a central theme throughout the narrative. Through her rejection of social norms and pursuit of union with nature, she completes a metamorphosis from traditional constraints to spiritual freedom. [25] An ecofeminist perspective reveals the profound implications of this liberation: it constitutes not only a reexamination of women's position in patriarchal society but also a reconfiguration of the relationship between humanity and nature.

(1) The Core of Liberation: Breaking Free from Patriarchal Oppression

Yeong-hye's liberation primarily manifests as rebellion against patriarchal society, evident in her domestic life, social roles, and personal choices. First, she rejects the constraints of familial roles. The silence and endurance expected of women in marriage symbolize the normalization of patriarchal oppression. By refusing meat consumption and distancing herself from family, Yeong-hye actively subverts the sacrificial and submissive roles traditionally assigned to women in marriage. Her husband's confusion and anger towards her behavior reflect patriarchal anxiety towards women deviating from prescribed roles. Yeong-hye's liberation demonstrates that women can achieve self-awareness by rejecting imposed identities.

Second, Yeong-hye's resistance to social discipline achieves spiritual independence. Her father employs violence to force her to eat meat and "return to normal," while doctors attempt to discipline both her body and mind through medical discourse. [26] These actions epitomize society's regulation of female bodies. Yet Yeong-hye refuses to comply with these

coercive interventions, demonstrating complete rejection of patriarchal oppression. Through steadfast conviction, she attains spiritual autonomy, representing the first step toward liberation.

(2) The Path to Liberation: Union with Nature

Yeong-hye's liberation manifests not only as rebellion against social norms but also through her profound connection with nature as an alternative route to freedom. Her yearning for nature permeates the liberation process. Her fascination with sunlight and plants reflects a desire to escape social structures and return to a natural state. From an ecofeminist perspective, Yeong-hye's behavior symbolizes the restoration of harmony between humans and nature while simultaneously proposing a potential path for women's liberation from social constraints.

Gradually disengaging from human relationships, Yeong-hye forges deep emotional bonds with nature. In this process, nature serves not merely as refuge from social oppression but ultimately as the destination for spiritual emancipation. Her choices embody the ecofeminist emphasis on "nature as freedom" - by merging with nature, she escapes both patriarchal discipline and the pressures of modern society.

(3) The Outcome of Liberation: Spiritual Freedom and Reconstruction of Life's Meaning

Yeong-hye's liberation ultimately reaches its zenith in the spiritual realm, yet this emancipation coexists with the rupture of conventional life and existential costs, presenting profound paradoxes.

First, freedom emerges from oppression. Yeong-hye's liberation progresses gradually from initial resistance to ultimate integration with nature, systematically shedding the yoke of social norms. By asserting control over body and mind, she achieves complete awakening of self-consciousness and attains absolute spiritual freedom. Her uncompromising choices demonstrate formidable feminine will against social discipline.

Second, freedom contends with isolation. While Yeong-hye achieves spiritual liberation, this process entails loneliness and self-imposed exile. The dissolution of family ties and social alienation indicate that such emancipation demands isolation as its price.[27] Her ultimate abandonment of language and human society represents both pursuit of freedom and defiant response to social injustice.

Yeong-hye's final metamorphosis into a plant-like existence symbolizes both her absolute rejection of human society and the redefinition of life's meaning. No longer defined by social roles, she seeks higher existential purpose through natural being. This reconstruction of life embodies the central tenet of ecofeminism - achieving ultimate personal freedom through profound connection with nature.

6. Ecofeminist Revelations on Female Self-Identity Liberation in The Vegetarian

The Vegetarian profoundly demonstrates the significance of ecofeminism in female self-identity liberation through Yeong-hye's transformative journey. Ecofeminism not only addresses women's liberation from social oppression but also emphasizes the resonant relationship between nature and female destiny. Yeong-hye's metamorphosis reveals the rich implications of this concept, offering crucial insights for understanding ecofeminist theory.

(1) Re-examining the Female-Nature Relationship

Within patriarchal societies, women and nature are consistently relegated to the status of “Other,” forcibly subjected to male-dominated power structures and social norms. Through Yeong-hye’s narrative, *The Vegetarian* exposes this dual oppression, revealing how patriarchy simultaneously exploits both female bodies and natural resources. Yeong-hye’s choice to return to nature as means of escaping social discipline compels us to reconsider the profound connection between women and the natural world.

Yeong-hye’s withdrawal from society and ultimate fusion with nature demonstrates nature’s crucial role in female liberation. From an ecofeminist perspective, nature serves not merely as an instrument for resisting social oppression but more fundamentally as the very resource for spiritual emancipation. By achieving symbiosis with nature, Yeong-hye rediscovers existential meaning, offering contemporary readers a paradigm for self-reconstruction through natural communion.

(2) Multidimensional Pathways to Self-Identity Liberation

Yeong-hye’s liberation process reveals that female self-identity exploration and reconstruction follows neither singular nor linear trajectories, but rather embodies complexity and multiplicity.

First, her liberation evolves progressively from physical to spiritual realms. Bodily resistance-manifested through food refusal-constitutes initial defiance against discipline, while her pursuit of vegetal existence marks deeper spiritual emancipation. This progression underscores that authentic female liberation requires both external structural transcendence and internal spiritual reconciliation.

Furthermore, while Yeong-hye ultimately achieves individual spiritual freedom, this comes at the cost of severe isolation and alienation. This paradox suggests that personal liberation must ultimately converge with collective emancipation to realize genuine gender equality in society.

Significantly, Yeong-hye’s liberation transcends gender discourse to offer metaphorical critique of modern ecological crises. The novel parallels industrialized society’s exploitation of natural resources with its oppression of marginalized groups. *The Vegetarian* reminds us that female liberation and ecological preservation constitute inseparable dual objectives. Only by establishing harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature can true female emancipation be realized.

7. Conclusion

Through an ecofeminist reading of “*The Vegetarian*”, we can clearly trace the tripartite process of female self-identity exploration, reconstruction, and liberation. The novel not only exposes the multidimensional oppression women face in patriarchal societies but also profoundly illuminates the metaphorical connections between women and nature, along with their implications for female identity formation.

First, the narrative reveals multidimensional pathways to female liberation. Yeong-hye’s journey demonstrates liberation as a multi-layered process - from rebellion against familial and social discipline, through deep integration with nature, to ultimate reconstruction of life’s meaning. This progression suggests that female emancipation requires both resistance to external oppression and the pursuit of inner harmony and spiritual freedom. Second, the work provides vital literary case studies for ecofeminist theory. Yeong-hye’s transcendental connection with nature ultimately enables her to break through conventional gender roles. This compels us to re-examine contemporary gender issues and ecological

crises through an ecofeminist lens, recognizing how the shared destiny of women and nature represents both the roots of oppression and potential avenues for liberation. Finally, the novel offers crucial societal warnings. Yeong-hye’s physical depletion and isolation in the ending underscore the complex costs of liberation, while her ultimate “ecological metamorphosis” delivers a powerful critique: unless humanity fundamentally reconsiders its relationship with nature, we risk irreversible ecological catastrophe. Through its female perspective, Yeong-hye’s story provides profound ecological insights for modern civilization.

Ultimately, “*The Vegetarian*” transcends being merely literary fiction to become both an ecofeminist manifesto and an urgent call for ecological-gender consciousness in our era of intersecting crises.

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