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Decoding Madness and the Sisterly Bond in the Novel *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract:
Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007; trans. 2015) has sparked extensive critical discussion regarding its portrayal of madness, autonomy, gendered violence, and bodily refusal. While much scholarship has focused on Yeong-hye's "madness" and her symbolic vegetality, fewer studies have examined the ethical relation between Yeong-hye and her sister, In-hye, as the novel's central axis for interrogating the politics of sanity and social coercion. This paper argues that the sisters function as ethical mirrors whose divergent responses to patriarchal domination, withdrawal versus endurance, illuminate the constructed and gendered nature of sanity in contemporary Korean society. Through a framework combining Michel Foucault's discourse of madness, feminist care ethics (Gilligan, Tronto, Kittay), and medical anthropology's critique of psychiatric authority (Kleinman, Scheper-Hughes), this study reads Yeong-hye's bodily refusal as a form of ethical dissent and In-hye's sanity as a fragile social performance sustained by systems of violence. Ultimately, the novel reveals not a binary between sanity and madness but the structural conditions that produce both.

Keywords: vegetarianism, autonomy, madness, gendered violence, sisterly bond, care.

INTRODUCTION

Since the English translation of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* received the Man Booker International Prize in 2016, critics have been fascinated by Yeong-hye's abrupt refusal to eat meat, the violent reactions it incites, and the novel's disquieting blend of trauma, eroticism, and ecological poetics. Yet, while Yeong-hye's transformation into a plant-like being has drawn the bulk of scholarly attention, the emotional and ethical relationship between Yeong-hye and her sister In-hye remains an underexamined but essential interpretive key. The novel offers only fleeting moments in which Yeong-hye's own perspective is audible; her consciousness exists largely "in fragments – like leaves scattered across a courtyard" (Kang 43). Instead, the narrative is filtered through others who attempt to diagnose, possess, correct, or aestheticize her. This epistemic displacement centers the ethical question: *Who has the authority to interpret another's body and mind?* And what does it mean for women to witness each other's suffering within patriarchal structures that restrict their agency? This paper argues that the sisters' divergent paths reveal the gendered construction of sanity: Yeong-hye's "madness" emerges as a refusal of patriarchal and anthropocentric violence, while In-hye's "sanity" functions as a performance of compliance necessary for social survival. Through the lens of Foucault, feminist care ethics, and medical anthropology, this study situates the sisters' relationship as the novel's central ethical terrain, a site where the limits of care, responsibility, and resistance unfold.

Theoretical framework

1. Foucault and the Social Construction of Madness

Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation* (1961) argues that madness is not an objective medical category but a socially produced label, created to isolate bodies that disrupt normative behaviour. For Foucault, madness is "the other face" of modern rationality, it's the necessary contrast and its suppressed

truth (Foucault 26). Institutions of confinement, diagnosis, and cure serve as disciplinary regimes that sculpt social order. Applied to *The Vegetarian*, Foucault's theory clarifies how Yeong-hye's vegetarianism becomes pathologised. Her refusal to consume meat, an act with ethical, political, and personal dimensions, is immediately reinterpreted as madness, not because of inherent irrationality but because it disrupts patriarchal expectations of daughter, wife, and citizen. Her father's attempt to force-feed her meat at a family gathering exemplifies Foucault's notion of "the punitive function of the medical gaze" (Foucault 144). Yeong-hye's body becomes a battlefield upon which social norms exert control.

2. Feminist Care Ethics: Gendered Responsibility and the Ethics of Witnessing

Feminist care theorists such as Carol Gilligan, Joan Tronto, and Eva Kittay argue that caregiving, often imposed on women, is simultaneously a moral practice and a site of structural oppression. Care is relational, emotional, and embodied, yet in patriarchal societies it becomes a tool of exploitation. Tronto defines care as "a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world" (Tronto 103). But this supposed moral good becomes ethically ambiguous when social structures dictate who must care and who may receive care. In-hye exemplifies the gendered caregiver, compelled to "endure everything" (Kang 147). Her sanity is constructed through fulfilling these normative expectations: managing business finances, raising a child, tending to a mentally ill sister, and absorbing marital betrayal. Feminist care ethics allows us to see how this "sanity" is not a neutral state but a socially rewarded performance of resilience and self-erasure.

3. Medical Anthropology: The Violence of Psychiatric Authority

Medical anthropologists such as Arthur Kleinman and Nancy Scheper-Hughes emphasize that psychiatric diagnoses reflect cultural values and political structures. Scheper-Hughes describes institutional medicine as a site where "everyday violence" is normalized through practices framed as care (Scheper-Hughes 13). Yeong-hye's hospitalization demonstrates this dynamic. She is subjected to forced feeding, surveillance, medication, and restraint; all justified as therapeutic measures. Kleinman argues that such institutional authority "transforms moral suffering into medical disorder" (Kleinman 65). Yeong-hye's trauma, refusal, and ethical dissent become pathologized as schizophrenia. The institution becomes a mechanism for enforcing normative corporeality: eat, stand, speak, obey. Her refusal to do so positions her outside the category of the human itself, a point Yeong-hye makes explicit when she tells In-hye, "I don't think I belong in this world anymore" (Kang 179).

Analysis

Yeong-hye's Refusal as Ethical Dissent

Yeong-hye's decision "not to eat meat anymore" (Kang 13) triggers the novel's trajectory. Although described as the result of a dream involving blood and slaughter, her refusal functions beyond personal trauma. Scholars such as Deborah Smith and Jae-kyung Lee argue that Yeong-hye's vegetarianism symbolises a rejection of Korea's militarized, patriarchal culture (Lee 222). Her refusal disrupts the domestic order, challenges gendered culinary roles, and unsettles expectations of wifely obedience. A Foucauldian reading suggests that her refusal is a form of counter-conduct: an embodied resistance to biopolitical authority. Her body becomes a site of revolt, a refusal to participate in cycles of consumption and violence. In rejecting meat, she rejects a broader cultural logic of domination, one that extends to animals, women, and the socially marginalized. But this ethical act is misread by all around her. Her husband interprets it as an inconvenience, her father as disobedience, her brother-in-law as erotic opportunity, and the doctors as delusion. Yeong-hye's silence and withdrawal amplify the interpretive vacuum into which others project narratives of madness, desire, and pathology.

Aesthetic Violence and the Male Gaze

The second chapter, "Mongolian Mark," explores how Yeong-hye's abjection attracts predatory attention. Her brother-in-law, an artist, becomes fixated on her birthmark and her "unearthly calm" (Kang 93). His desire to paint flowers on her body and film her in sexual tableaux is framed as artistic transcendence but functions as aesthetic exploitation. His gaze, like the institution's, objectifies her. Critic Jinah Kim argues that the artist "fetishizes Yeong-hye's fragility, mistaking vulnerability for availability" (Kim 74). He treats her not as a subject but as an instrument for his own aesthetic fantasies. This form of violence is subtle but profound. Yeong-hye's consent is ambiguous; her passivity is exploited rather than respected. Her refusal to participate fully in his desire threatens him, revealing how fragile the male artist's authority is. In-hye's discovery of the video is the emotional climax. The scene exposes the intersection of gender, desire, and objectification: Yeong-hye's body, always vulnerable, becomes the battleground for others' fantasies, from patriarchal control to artistic domination.

In-hye's Sanity as a Structured Submission

Perhaps the novel's most ethically complex character, In-hye embodies social compliance. She is responsible, reliable, and resilient. She has the qualities praised as sanity within patriarchal society. Yet this sanity masks profound suffering. From childhood, she survived the same abusive father as Yeong-hye. Yet while Yeong-hye dissociates, In-hye internalizes the necessity to cope: "I had to keep going. There was no one else" (Kang 147). Her sanity is built upon years of emotional suppression. Feminist care ethics help us understand the moral cost of this endurance. In-hye's caregiving is demanded, not chosen. Society positions her as a stabiliser of family chaos: mother, worker, caretaker, and emotional buffer.

But the novel's final section reveals how brittle this sanity is. In-hye begins to break: "Sometimes I feel I'm the one who's sick" (Kang 173). Her emotional collapse signifies the psychological toll of being the responsible one in a world that provides her no care in return. In-hye is thus not the opposite of Yeong-hye but her ethical double, a mirror revealing two pathways women take under patriarchal pressure: withdrawal or endurance, madness or submission, refusal or compliance.

Sisterhood As Ethical Witnessing

The sisters' relationship is the novel's emotional heart. Unlike their parents, husbands, or doctors, In-hye attempts to understand Yeong-hye without imposing interpretation. When she visits Yeong-hye in the institution, she offers a moment of ethical presence that feminist theorists call "attentive witnessing" (Kittay 82). In-hye does not fully understand Yeong-hye's vegetality, but she listens. She refuses to dismiss her sister's interiority. This act distinguishes care from control: she seeks to be with Yeong-hye rather than over her. Yet she cannot save her. In-hye is trapped in her own structural limitations: economic precarity, single motherhood, emotional exhaustion, and lack of institutional power. Their final scene, in which In-hye lies beside her sister in the ambulance, cradling her as if in a womb, symbolizes a return to a pre-traumatic intimacy. It is a fleeting connection between two women crushed by systems larger than themselves, yet still bound by care, recognition, and grief.

Conclusion

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* dismantles normative categories of sanity, madness, and care. Through Yeong-hye's refusal and In-hye's endurance, the novel reveals how violently women's bodies are managed, interpreted, and disciplined. A Foucauldian reading exposes madness as a category used to suppress noncompliant bodies. Feminist care ethics illuminate the moral labour demanded of women. Medical anthropology exposes the coercive power of psychiatric institutions. Ultimately, the novel suggests that neither sister is sane or insane; instead, both inhabit different forms of suffering produced by patriarchal, medical, and cultural structures. Their relationship invites us to rethink care not as an obligation but as ethical witnessing, the attempt, however imperfect, to recognize the humanity of another.

Sanity, the novel insists, *is not the absence of suffering but the capacity to endure a world built upon it.* Madness, in turn, may not be a pathology but a refusal to endure the unacceptable.

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