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The Female Body and Consumerism: An Ecofeminist Reading of the Vegetarian by Han Kang and the Edible Woman by Margaret Atwood

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ABSTRACT

This research paper studies the female body as a battleground in a consumerist culture. It highlights the intersection of female oppression, consumerism, and environmental exploitation through an ecofeminist lens. The paper proves how societal expectations and consumer culture objectify and commodify women's bodies. Focusing on Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman and Han Kang's The Vegetarian, this work aims to shed light on how the society dictates women's life and their choices. It also draws parallels between nature and women, and their exploitation. The essay will use an ecofeminist framework to argue that the control exerted over women's bodies and the exploitation of the natural world are both products of the same patriarchal and capitalist structures. It will explore how both novels challenge these structures and offer a vision of a future where women and nature are valued and respected.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Women Studies, Consumerism, Women and food, Vegetarianism

INTRODUCTION OF TEXTS

The Vegetarian by Han Kang is a haunting and unsettling story that explores the ramifications of a seemingly simple choice. The story opens with Yeong-Hye, an ordinary housewife in South Korea. Her life takes a dramatic turn when she is jolted awake by a disturbing dream involving violence and meat. This experience triggers a deep aversion to meat, and she abruptly decides to stop eating it altogether. This choice is more than just a dietary switch; it is a rebellion against the social norms and expectations placed upon her. The narrative unfolds through the eyes of three characters intricately connected to Yeong-Hye: her husband, her older sister, and her brother-in-law. Yeong-Hye's decision to become a vegetarian sets off a chain reaction. Her husband grows distant, her family views her with concern, and societal disapproval intensifies. She withdraws further, embracing a more plant-like existence. As the story progresses, her mental state deteriorates. Her family struggles to cope with her choices, and the pressure to conform intensifies. The narrative explores the devastating consequences of defying societal norms, particularly for women in a patriarchal society.

In Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, we meet Marian, a young woman grappling with her identity and societal expectations in 1960s Canada. Marian works at a marketing research firm, analysing surveys that often feel shallow and unfulfilling. She lives with her feminist roommate, Ainsley, whose views challenge Marian's own comfort zone. Her relationship with Peter, a lawyer, seems like a natural progression towards marriage – a seemingly predictable path most women are expected to follow. However, everything changes when Peter proposes. The moment Peter proposes, Marian experiences a

strange aversion to food. She starts with a simple dislike for cake, then a growing disgust towards meat, particularly when she imagines the animal's life being taken. This aversion becomes a physical manifestation of her inner turmoil. Food, throughout the novel, acts as a powerful metaphor. Meat becomes symbolic of being "consumed" by societal expectations and a suffocating relationship. As Marian's food aversion intensifies, so does her questioning of her life choices. She feels increasingly disconnected from Peter and the expectations surrounding marriage. The act of baking a grotesque, inedible wedding cake becomes a symbolic act of rebellion against the traditional path laid out for her.

THE RISE OF CONSUMER CULTURE

The Industrial Revolution led to mass production and the need to create demand for these new products. This coincided with the rise of mass media such as newspapers, magazines, and radio in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Advertisers saw a great opportunity to reach a wider audience, especially women. Prior to this, advertising was primarily directed at men, who were traditionally the financial decision-makers in households. However, advertisers recognized the growing financial power of women as housewives managing household budgets. Advertisements portrayed women as housewives, responsible for cleanliness, raising children and creating a perfect home environment. The products were positioned as tools to achieve these ideals. It also affected insecurity and desires for social acceptance, love and happiness.

“The human mind was the last thing to be commercialized but they’re doing a good job of it now..” (Atwood, 144)

Products were presented as solutions to achieve these emotional goals. Even owning certain brands or products was associated with higher social status. They created this idea of a "standard of beauty" and then released products to "solve problems". Products have focused less on fulfilment and more on profit. In recent years, feminist criticism of advertising and a counter movement promoting body positivity and conscious consumption has increased. Women are increasingly questioning the messages they receive and looking for ads that reflect their different needs and realities.

THE CONSUMPTION OF FLESH: WOMEN AND MEAT

Beliefs about the "ideal" woman have varied throughout history and across cultures. The symbolic association of flesh and women's bodies may reflect these changing ideals. Some religions and cultural practices promote vegetarianism or certain dietary restrictions. Examining these traditions can provide additional context for understanding literary symbolism. A woman's choice to become a vegetarian in a meat-eating culture may carry additional weight, signifying a deeper spiritual or ethical rebellion. The ability to buy and consume meat can be a sign of social status.

“The imprint left on her mind by the long famished body that had seemed in the darkness to consist of nothing but sharp crags and angles, the memory of its painfully defined almost skeletal ribcage, a pattern of ridges like a washboard, was fading as rapidly as any other transient impression on a soft surface.” (Atwood, 260)

Historically, women have often been excluded from the processes of food production and breeding, where they usually dominate. A woman's aversion to meat can be seen as a challenge to this power dynamic and a restoration of the connection between food and the body.

“Yells and howls, threaded together layer upon layer, are enmeshed to form that lump. Because of meat. I ate too much meat. The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there. Blood and flesh, all those

butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny, and though the physical remnants were excreted, their lives still stick stubbornly to my insides." (Han, 47)

The presentation and consumption of meat in the novel corresponds to how women are often objectified in a patriarchal society. Their bodies are controlled and consumed for the pleasure of others. Meat, often a product of male desire, becomes a symbol of the male gaze. Yeong-Hye's vegetarianism can be seen as a rejection of this objectification. She refuses to see her as a commodity and defies the way women's bodies are presented and desired in a patriarchal society. The physical act of consuming meat can trigger feelings of disgust in some women. This disgust can be a way of rejecting the animalistic or "unclean" aspects associated with the female body by patriarchal norms. By refusing to eat meat, Marian asserts control over her body and resists the societal forces that want to define her. It is a symbolic act of taking back agency and rejecting the idea of being passively consumed.

NATURE AS REFUGE AND RESISTANCE

The modern world, with its emphasis on consumerism and conformity, can be stifling for women. Nature provides a refuge from the manufactured environments we navigate daily, a place of simplicity and authenticity. Here, women are not bombarded with airbrushed images and societal expectations of beauty. Instead, they can experience the raw beauty of the natural world, a world that values resilience, strength, and the intricate balance of ecosystems. In the natural world, value is not found by outward appearances or material possessions, but by the strength to survive, the ability to adapt, and the interconnectedness of all living things.

"This afternoon held that special quality of mournful emptiness I've connected with late Sunday afternoons ever since childhood: the feeling of having nothing to do." (Atwood, 94)

This connection to nature can be a powerful source of empowerment, reminding women of their own inner strength and resilience in the face of societal pressures.

In contrast to the sterile, plastic world in which Marian lives and works with Peter, nature provides a connection to the senses. She experiences the texture of bark and leaves, the chirping of birds, and the earthy scent of the forest floor. This awakening of her senses allows her to reconnect with a reality beyond the superficiality of consumer culture. The connection with nature can be seen as a reconnection between Marian and the feminine archetype, Mother Earth. This connection gives them a sense of power and autonomy that their relationships with men and the corporate world don't have.

"The rest of the park was plain grass, which had turned yellow; it crackled underfoot. This day was going to be like the one before, windless and oppressive. The sky was cloudless but not clear: the air hung heavily, like invisible steam, so that the colours and outlines of objects in the distance were blurred." (Atwood, 47)

Nature's indifference to human suffering can be a harsh truth, but it can also be a catalyst for growth. Marian's encounter with the dead crow forces her to confront her own mortality and the limitations of the human experience. This can be a necessary step to break free from societal constraints and find her own path. Atwood's use of literary references, such as the myth of Persephone, can add depth to Marian's connection with nature. Persephone's journey between the underworld and the world above can be seen as a parallel to Marian's own descent and potential for rebirth. The disconnect Marian feels from her body due to her aversion to food is also addressed by nature. Touching leaves, smelling flowers, and feeling the wind can reconnect her with her physical experience, grounding her in the present moment.

"Look, sister, I'm doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands...they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly...yes, I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread them wide..." (Han, 106)

Nature's inherent imperfection, with cycles of growth and decay, can be a liberating force for her. It challenges the societal obsession with youth and perfection, allowing her to embrace the natural changes her body undergoes and the possibility of transformation. Nature can act as a bridge to the unconscious mind. Being in natural surroundings can allow memories, desires, or fears that have been repressed due to societal expectations to surface. Confronting these hidden aspects of her psyche can be a crucial step in personal growth. Water often appears in connection with her changing identity. Rivers can symbolize movement and the flow of change, while lakes or bodies of water can stand for introspection and emotional depths.

"Looking down, she became aware of the water, which was covered with a film of calcinous hard-water particles of dirt and soap, and of the body that was sitting in it, somehow no longer quite her own. All at once she was afraid that she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle." (Atwood, 221)

If Marian's disappearance signifies a mental breakdown, nature could be seen as a place where she loses control and succumbs to her anxieties. Conversely, it could be her embracing a more natural, primal state, shedding the societal constraints that have caused her distress.

"'I'm not an animal anymore, sister,' she said, first scanning the empty ward as if about to disclose a momentous secret. 'I don't need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight.'" (Han, 126)

For Yeong-Hye, her daily life is characterized by routine and a lack of sensory stimulation. Nature, with its sights, sounds, smells, and textures, offers a way to escape the monotony and reconnect with the physical world. Experiencing the sun on her skin, the feel of soil beneath her nails, or the taste of rainwater can reconnect Yeong-Hye with a more primal state of being, one that is often buried beneath the layers of societal expectations. Nature also shows the process of constant change – leaves falling and regrowing, flowers blooming and wilting. This can be seen as a metaphor for Yeong-Hye's own transformation, a reminder that change is inevitable and even necessary for growth. Connecting with nature can be seen as a way for Yeong-Hye to reconnect with a feminine archetype just like Marian. This connection offers a sense of power and self-sufficiency that is absent in her relationship with men and the corporate world. Spending time in nature is a form of emotional release for Yeong-Hye.

"The feeling that she had never really lived in this world caught her by surprise. It was a fact. She had never lived. Even as a child, as far back as she could remember, she had done nothing but endure." (Han, 132)

The vastness and indifference of the natural world can allow her to express anger, frustration, or grief without judgement, emotions that might be suppressed in social settings. The natural world becomes a source of metaphors for Yeong-Hye's internal struggles. Yeong-Hye's vegetarianism and increasing plant-like state challenge a human-centred view of the world. She recognizes the interconnectedness of all living things, questioning the right of humans to dominate and consume nature.

VEGETARIANISM: A SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE

In Korean culture, meat consumption is often associated with masculinity and virility. A woman's refusal to eat meat disrupts this association and challenges the power dynamics within a patriarchal family structure. Yeong-Hye's choice can be interpreted as a rebellion against the expectation that she should

prioritize her husband's desires and cater to his needs. Her act forces a re-evaluation of gender roles within the household and highlights the unequal distribution of power. Korean society often places a high value on women's nurturing and maternal roles. By refusing meat, she disassociates herself from the image of the self-sacrificing wife and mother. Her choice suggests a rejection of the expectation that she prioritize the needs of others over her own well-being and desires. This act becomes a form of self-discovery, allowing her to explore her identity outside the confines of traditional femininity. Vegetarianism can also be seen as a yearning for a simpler, more natural existence. In contrast to the processed and artificial world she inhabits, Yeong-Hye's connection to vegetables and plants represents a desire for purity and authenticity. This connection aligns with her increasingly withdrawn and introspective nature, suggesting a search for a deeper meaning beyond societal pressures.

Marian's aversion to processed food is a symbolic rejection of the societal pressures associated with female beauty and consumerism. Processed food, with its artificial ingredients and deceptive packaging, represents an inauthentic and superficial ideal of femininity. Her anxieties about consuming these products reveal a fear of being forced to conform to a manufactured image rather than embracing her genuine self. Atwood cleverly uses food imagery to highlight the commodification of women in a consumerist society. Processed food is mass-produced, marketed aggressively, and ultimately consumed. This parallels the way in which societal expectations attempt to mold women into a specific image, essentially turning them into products to be bought and sold. Marian's vegetarian leanings are a resistance against this commodification, a refusal to be defined solely by her physical attributes or her ability to conform to consumerist ideals. Atwood utilizes grotesque imagery, particularly in Marian's nightmares, to depict the anxieties associated with vegetarianism and the fear of losing control in a consumerist world. The shapeless, monstrous figure Marian encounters can be interpreted as a representation of the overwhelming and manipulative tactics of the consumer culture. Her aversion to certain foods becomes a way to regain control and establish boundaries against the forces that seek to consume her. Both Yeong-Hye and Marian utilize food choices as a way to resist societal pressures and expectations. Yeong-Hye's complete rejection of meat and Marian's growing aversion to processed food are acts of defiance. Vegetarianism serves as a catalyst for self-discovery in both novels.

ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Ecofeminism is a fascinating branch of thought that combines feminism and ecology. It argues that there is a fundamental connection between the way societies treat women and the way they treat the natural world. Both are seen as being subjected to domination and control by patriarchal forces. Ecofeminism critiques the idea that men are superior to women (patriarchy). It argues for a more egalitarian society where all genders are valued equally. It questions the anthropocentric view that places humans above all other living things. Ecofeminism emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life on Earth. It also promotes environmental responsibility and sustainability.

OBJECTIFICATION AND COMMODIFICATION

Nature is often seen as a resource to be exploited for economic gain. Forests are cleared for development, animals are raised for food, and natural resources are extracted with little regard for the environmental impact. Similarly, Yeong-Hye's body is seen as an object to be controlled by her husband. He expects her to fulfil traditional wifely roles and perform domestic duties.

"She's a good woman, he thought. The kind of woman whose goodness is oppressive." (Han, 59)
Society reinforces this view by emphasizing female beauty and submissiveness. The novel subtly hints at a history of violence against women. Yeong-Hye's sister, In-hye, becomes self-destructive after a traumatic experience, and Yeong-Hye herself sees the brutal slaughter of pigs. The violence inherent in the meat industry is a stark example of the violence inflicted upon nature. Forests are razed, ecosystems are disrupted, and countless animals are harmed in the name of human consumption. The needs and cries of nature are often ignored. Environmental warnings are downplayed, and the voices of those advocating for sustainability are marginalized. Yeong-Hye's voice is often unheard or disregarded. Her decision to become vegetarian is met with confusion and hostility.
"This was the body of a beautiful young woman, conventionally an object of desire, and yet it was a body from which all desire had been eliminated. But this was nothing so crass as carnal desire, not for her—rather, or so it seemed, what she had renounced was the very life that her body represented." (Han, 74)
Yeong-Hye's refusal to eat meat is a symbolic rejection of the systems of oppression that control both women and nature. By refusing to take part in the consumption of animal products, she challenges the societal norms that perpetuate violence. By rejecting meat, she seeks a state of purity, a separation from the systems of control that objectify and exploit. This can be seen as a desire to reconnect with a more natural and authentic way of being, one that is not defined by societal expectations. From a traditional perspective, her withdrawal can be seen as a descent into madness, a loss of selfhood.
"I couldn't think of her family without also recalling the smell of sizzling meat and burning garlic, the sound of shot glasses clinking and the women's noisy conversation emanating from the kitchen. All of them—especially my father-in-law—enjoyed yuk hwe, a kind of beef tartar. I'd seen my mother-in-law gut a live fish, and my wife and her sister were both perfectly competent when it came to hacking a chicken into pieces with a butcher's cleaver. I'd always liked my wife's earthy vitality, the way she would catch cockroaches by smacking them with the palm of her hand. She really had been the most ordinary woman in the world," (Han, 22)

SOCIETAL PRESSURES AND LIMITATIONS

The traditional family structure in the novel reinforces the oppression of women. Yeong-Hye's desires and needs are disregarded by her husband and family. This reflects the way nature's needs are often ignored for the sake of human progress and economic gain. The lack of understanding and support for Yeong-Hye's mental health struggles reflects how societal norms often pathologize those who challenge it. Her rebellion against societal expectations is seen as a form of mental illness, highlighting the difficulty of achieving liberation within a system that reinforces existing power structures. However, nature is also indifferent to human suffering.
"Every woman should have at least one baby... It's even more important than sex. It fulfills your deepest femininity." (Atwood, 43)
The harsh realities of the natural world – storms, predators, and the struggle for survival – can mirror the challenges Yeong-Hye faces within herself and in society. Nature does not offer a utopian escape, but rather a space of both beauty and danger. The novel raises questions about the ideal relationship between humans and nature.

LIBERATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

The novel goes beyond simply mentioning the connection. Kang weaves a tapestry of parallels. Both

Yeong-Hye and nature are objectified and controlled. Her body is expected to fulfil societal expectations, just as nature's resources are exploited for economic gain. The brutal act of slaughtering pigs becomes a metaphor for the violence inflicted upon both women and the natural world. Refusing to eat meat becomes more than just a dietary choice. It is a symbolic act of defiance against a system that controls and consumes. By rejecting meat, a product of animal exploitation, Yeong-Hye asserts her agency and challenges the societal expectations placed upon her as a woman. While nature offers solace and escape from societal pressures, it is not a utopia. The harsh realities of the natural world – storms, predators, and the struggle for survival – mirror the challenges Yeong-Hye faces within herself. This creates a sense of unease. Nature may offer refuge, but it also presents its own set of challenges, raising questions about the possibility of true liberation through nature alone. The ambiguity surrounding Yeong-Hye's fate keeps the ecofeminist themes alive. Is her withdrawal a descent into madness or a radical form of liberation by completely rejecting a system that exploits both women and nature? This open-endedness sparks discussion and encourages readers to consider the limitations of the status quo and the potential for a more balanced relationship between humans and the natural world. Atwood uses disturbing imagery to highlight the disconnect between societal expectations and women's authentic selves.

"There's nothing wrong with keeping quiet, after all, hadn't women traditionally been expected to be demure and restrained?" (Han, 25)

Marian's growing aversion to food, particularly the phallic imagery associated with the wedding cake, symbolizes her resistance to being consumed by a patriarchal and consumerist culture that defines women in limited ways. The artificiality of the cake becomes a symbol of the expectations placed upon her. Spending time in nature allows Marian to reconnect with her senses and instincts that have been suppressed by societal pressures. The natural world becomes a source of grounding and authenticity. This reconnection with nature becomes a catalyst for questioning societal norms and seeking a more authentic way of living, one that is not defined by the expectations of others. Marian's body becomes a battleground, reflecting the way the environment is exploited and controlled by corporations. Her anxieties about the artificiality and potential toxicity of the processed food she meets mirror anxieties about environmental destruction. They both are systems that prioritize profit over well-being.

Both novels go beyond simply saying the link between women's liberation and environmental sustainability. They raise awareness on multiple levels – personal, societal, and symbolic. They challenge readers to see how the oppression of one group is often linked to the exploitation of another. *The Vegetarian* challenges traditional gender roles and societal expectations for women, particularly within the patriarchal family structure. *The Edible Woman* critiques consumer culture and the way it reinforces limited roles for women. Both novels urge readers to consider a more sustainable and fair relationship with the environment.

"Quietly, she breathes in. The trees by the side of the road are blazing, green fire undulating like the rippling flanks of a massive animal, wild and savage. In-hye stares fiercely at the trees. As if waiting for an answer. As if protesting something. The look in her eyes is dark and insistent." (Han, 149)

The ambiguous endings of both novels leave room for interpretation and ongoing discussion. This open-endedness serves a purpose. It encourages readers to engage with the themes on a personal level, consider their own role in creating a more sustainable and liberating future, and perhaps even inspire action or further exploration of the issues raised. *The Vegetarian* has a strong internal focus, exploring Yeong-Hye's internal struggles and her personal connection with nature. The societal pressures she faces are more

implicit. *The Edible Woman* has a more outward focus, highlighting the societal pressures and consumer culture that Marian is rebelling against.

THE FEMALE BODY AS A BATTLEGROUND

Yeong-Hye's decision to stop eating meat goes beyond dietary choice. It is a symbolic act of defiance against the societal structures that control her life. Her body becomes a battleground as she rejects the traditional role of a wife and daughter-in-law. By refusing meat, a product associated with male desire and sustenance, she challenges the expectation that women fulfil domestic duties and satisfy male needs. Food becomes a tool of control. Her husband and family force-feed her, highlighting how women's bodies are often seen as objects to be managed and controlled. Her body is constantly objectified by the male characters in the novel. This reflects the silencing of women's voices and experiences within a patriarchal society. Her attempts to explain her decision to stop eating meat are met with confusion and hostility. Her voice is silenced, reflecting the way women's needs and desires are often disregarded.

"Nobody can help me. Nobody can save me. Nobody can make me breathe." (Han, 47)

Her withdrawal from society and her transition to a plant-like state can be interpreted as a descent into madness. The societal pressures she faces push her towards a loss of selfhood. This withdrawal can also be seen as a radical form of liberation. By rejecting societal norms and expectations, she reclaims control over her body. Her plant-like state can be seen as a connection with nature, a space outside of the control structures she looks to escape. The ambiguous ending leaves this interpretation open to discussion.

Atwood on the other hand uses grotesque imagery to depict Marian's growing aversion to food. The wedding cake, a symbol of societal expectations of marriage and female submissiveness, becomes repulsive to her. This highlights the disconnect between societal expectations and women's authentic selves. Her body rejects the artificiality of these expectations. The novel explores how processed and artificial food can be a tool for control. Marian's anxieties about the ingredients and potential toxicity of the food she meets mirror anxieties about environmental destruction. Both are ways in which the natural world is controlled and exploited. Marian's struggle to find food she feels comfortable eating reflects the limitations placed on women's choices. She is constantly bombarded with processed and artificial options, reflecting societal pressures to conform to specific beauty standards and roles.

"I had talked about a career, making it sound much less vague than it was in my own mind, and he told me later that it was my aura of independence and common sense he had liked: he saw me as the kind of girl who wouldn't try to take over his life." (Atwood, 63)

The men in the novel, particularly Peter, view her as an object to be consumed. Their focus on her body and eating habits reinforces the idea that women's bodies are not their own, but rather objects of male desire and control. Spending time in nature allows Marian to reconnect with her senses and instincts. This reconnection becomes a catalyst for questioning societal norms and looking for a more authentic way of living. Nature provides a space outside of the artificiality and control she experiences in society.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TOLL

The construction of female identity is rarely a straightforward process. In a world saturated with societal pressures and expectations, women often grapple with internal conflict, anxiety, and a sense of self-loss as they navigate the roles assigned to them. Through the compelling narratives of Yeong-Hye and Marian, both novels expose the ways in which societal norms can dismantle a woman's sense of self and propel her towards a desperate search for authenticity.

LOSS OF SELF AND DISSOCIATION

Yeong-Hye's refusal to eat meat is not merely dietary; it is a symbolic rejection of the societal scripts that define her identity. These scripts dictate what she should wear, how she should behave, and even what she should put into her body. By refusing meat, a product traditionally associated with male sustenance and desire, she disrupts the power dynamics within her patriarchal household. This act of defiance is not just about food; it is a rebellion against the entire system that seeks to control and define her.

"One time, just one more time, I want to shout. I want to throw myself through the pitch black window. Maybe that would finally get this lump out of my body. Yes, perhaps that might work." (Han, 47)

As she withdraws from societal norms, a sense of isolation and dissociation sets in. Her increasing detachment from her family and social obligations can be seen as a coping mechanism, a desperate attempt to escape the pressures that look to define her. This alienation culminates in a physical and psychological transformation, her metamorphosis into a plant-like state open to interpretations of madness or a radical form of dissociation from a world that does not recognize her authentic self.

"She took one more look around at the various objects inside the house. They did not belong to her. Just like her life had never belonged to her." (Han, 135)

The imagery surrounding Yeong-Hye's transformation is particularly evocative. As she becomes increasingly withdrawn, she spends more time lying on the floor, mimicking the posture of a plant. She develops a fascination with sunlight and water, suggesting a yearning for a more natural and elemental existence. This transformation can be interpreted as a descent into madness, a mental breakdown caused by the immense pressure she faces. However, it can also be seen as a symbolic escape, a way for Yeong-Hye to retreat from a world that refuses to accept her authentic self. In this sense, her plant-like state becomes a sanctuary, a space where she can finally exist outside the constraints of societal expectations.

INTERNALIZED PATRIARCHY AND GUILT

Yeong-Hye's first struggle lies in the conflict between her authentic self and the internalized patriarchal expectations imposed upon her. From an early age, she has been conditioned to believe that her primary role is to serve her husband and family. This conditioning manifests in a deep-seated desire to please them, even at the expense of her own desires and well-being. The novel explores the complex psychological impact of this internalized patriarchy.

DUALITY AND CONFLICTING DESIRES

Yeong-Hye experiences a constant internal struggle between her desire to be a "good wife" and her yearning for autonomy and self-expression. These conflicting desires create a sense of dissonance within her, leading to anxiety and confusion. On one hand, she wants to fulfil the expectations placed upon her by her family and society. She tries to cook elaborate meals for her husband and in-laws, despite her growing hatred to meat. On the other hand, she feels a deep sense of unease and inauthenticity when conforming to these roles. This duality fuels her internal conflict and contributes to her eventual breakdown.

THE BURDEN OF UNMET EXPECTATIONS

The pressure to conform to societal expectations of femininity creates a heavy burden on Yeong-Hye. She feels a constant sense of inadequacy and guilt when she fails to live up to these expectations. For example, her inability to conceive a child adds another layer of pressure and reinforces the societal view of her

primary purpose as a wife. This burden of unmet expectations contributes to her feelings of isolation and her sense of self-dissolution.

THE FEAR OF DISAPPROVAL AND SHAME

The societal conditioning Yeong-Hye has undergone instils a deep fear of disapproval and shame. The thought of disappointing her family or being ostracized by society for her unconventional choices is a source of immense anxiety for her. This fear further restricts her ability to express her authentic self and reinforces the internalized patriarchal structures that govern her behaviour.

STRUGGLE FOR AUTONOMY

Marian's central act of defiance lies in her growing aversion to food. This is not simply a matter of taste; it is a symbolic rejection of the expectations placed upon her. The processed, artificial food she meets is the societal pressures she feels compelled to conform to. Food in the novel symbolizes not just sustenance but also commodification. Marian becomes increasingly aware of how women are packaged and marketed like products in a consumerist society. Her aversion to food reflects a fear of being consumed by this system, of being reduced to an object to be bought and sold. Her resistance through food choices is a way of asserting control over her own body and identity. Food also carries the weight of domesticity. The expectation for women to cook and nurture is a societal norm Marian resists. Her disinterest in elaborate meals and the discomfort she feels in the kitchen symbolize her rejection of the traditional housewife role.

“For an instant she felt them, their identities, almost their substance, pass over her head like a wave. At some time she would be — or no, already she was like that too; she was one of them, her body the same, identical, merged with that other flesh that choked the air in the flowered room with its sweet organic scent; she felt suffocated by this thick sargasso-sea of femininity.” (Atwood, 169)

Her evolving eating habits, while initially causing anxiety, become a catalyst for liberation. By questioning her relationship with food, she begins to question other aspects of her life and the expectations imposed upon her. This self-reflection becomes a crucial step in her journey towards autonomy. Her anxieties extend beyond food to encompass the broader consumerist culture. The constant barrage of advertising and societal pressure to keep up with trends creates a sense of unease and disillusionment. She recognizes the manipulative tactics used in advertising to create desires and insecurities. This awareness makes her question the very basis of her preferences, causing a disconnect between what society dictates she should want and what she truly desires. The consumerist mindset even infiltrates her relationship with Peter. He represents a life of comfort and security; a life she initially sees as desirable. However, as her anxieties grow, she begins to perceive him as another product she is expected to consume, rather than a partner in a genuine connection. Her rejection of the consumerist lifestyle highlights her desire to forge her own path. She is no longer willing to conform to societal expectations or live a life dictated by trends and advertisements. Her fight for autonomy comes at a cost. Challenging societal norms creates significant internal conflict and psychological burdens. This anxiety manifests in her increasingly dissociative behaviour, like having difficulty remembering events or feeling alienated from her own body.

“...she was afraid of losing her shape, spreading out, not being able to contain herself any longer, beginning (that would be worst of all) to talk a lot, to tell everybody, to cry.” (Atwood, 221)

Her recurring nightmare of a shapeless, monstrous figure can be interpreted as a representation of the societal forces that threaten to consume her individuality. Questioning societal expectations and her own choices creates a sense of self-doubt in Marian. She struggles with feelings of inadequacy and a fear of

not living up to the standards set by family, friends, and society. Her unconventional choices alienate her from those closest to her. Peter and her colleagues do not understand her anxieties, causing a rift in her relationships. This isolation intensifies her sense of vulnerability and loneliness in her fight for independence.

Yeong-Hye's initial act of defiance is a seemingly simple one – refusing to eat meat. However, this act becomes a potent symbol of her resistance against the societal scripts that define her life. Meat consumption, particularly within a patriarchal family structure, is associated with male sustenance and desire. By rejecting it, she disrupts the power dynamics within her household and challenges the expectations placed upon her as a wife and daughter-in-law. Her decision goes beyond mere dietary preference. It represents a rejection of the entire system that seeks to control her. This system dictates everything from what she eats to how she behaves, leaving no space for her own desires or identity. Refusing meat becomes a way for her to reclaim a small piece of autonomy, a starting point in her struggle for self-determination comes at a significant cost.

Her family and society view her choice as bizarre and disruptive. This leads to a growing sense of isolation as she withdraws from social obligations and family meals. As societal pressure intensifies, Yeong-Hye retreats further into herself. Her increasing detachment can be seen as a coping mechanism, a desperate attempt to escape the pressures that seek to define her. However, this isolation also fuels a sense of dissociation from the world around her. Her struggle for autonomy becomes a physical battleground inscribed on her body. Her refusal to eat meat leads to weakness and illness, highlighting the vulnerability inherent in her rebellion. Furthermore, the societal attempts to force-feed her become a violation of her bodily autonomy, further reinforcing the power struggle at play. The novel's ending leaves open to interpretation the true nature of her transformation into a plant-like state. On one hand, it can be seen as a descent into madness, a mental breakdown caused by the immense pressure she faces. However, it can also be interpreted as a radical form of dissociation or a symbolic escape. In this sense, her plant-like state might represent a sanctuary, a space where she can finally exist outside the constraints of societal expectations and reclaim control over her own body. Yeong-Hye's struggle is not just against external forces; it's also a battle against the internalized patriarchal conditioning that has shaped her sense of self. Throughout the novel, she grapples with the conflicting desires to be a "good wife" and to express her authentic self.

From an early age, she has been conditioned to believe that her primary role is to serve her husband and family. This internalization leads to a constant sense of inadequacy and guilt when she fails to live up to these expectations. Her inability to conceive a child adds another layer of pressure, reinforcing the societal view of her as a wife defined by her reproductive potential. She experiences a constant internal conflict between fulfilling expectations and her yearning for autonomy. On one hand, she attempts to be the ideal wife by cooking elaborate meals despite her aversion to meat. On the other hand, she feels a deep sense of unease and inauthenticity when conforming to these roles. This constant duality fuels her internal conflict and contributes to her eventual breakdown. The societal conditioning Yeong-Hye has undergone instils a deep fear of disapproval and shame. The thought of disappointing her family or being ostracized by society for her unconventional choices is a source of immense anxiety for her. This fear further restricts her ability to express her authentic self and reinforces the internalized patriarchal structures that govern her behaviour.

CONCLUSION

Both Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* offer compelling explorations of the interconnectedness of women's liberation and environmental sustainability through an ecofeminist lens. Despite their contrasting approaches, they leave a lasting impact on the reader, prompting reflection and potential action. Both novels depict the objectification and control of women and nature by patriarchal systems. They challenge readers to see how the exploitation of one is linked to the exploitation of the other. One delves deeper into Yeong-Hye's internal struggles and her symbolic connection with nature, while another has a more outward focus, depicting the societal pressures and consumer culture that Marian confronts. While both novels raise awareness, *The Edible Woman* offers a glimmer of hope for change through Marian's journey. *The Vegetarian* leaves Yeong-Hye's fate uncertain, creating a more unsettling yet impactful exploration of the challenges of achieving liberation within a system of oppression. Both novels use open-ended conclusions, leaving room for interpretation and ongoing discussion. They serve as powerful call to action for both women's liberation and environmental sustainability. They urge readers to envision a future where these two struggles are no longer separate, but rather two sides of the same coin, working towards a more just and ecologically sound world.

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