

Memory, Trauma, and Identity in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

1. Sonali Rout 2. Dr. Mousumi Dash

1. Research Scholar

Dept. of Humanities and Social Sciences (English),
ITER, SOA, Deemed to be University, Bhubaneswar.

2. Associate professor

Dept. of Humanities and Social Sciences,
ITER, SOA, Deemed to be University, Bhubaneswar.

1. sonalirout80@gmail.com, 2. mousumidash@soa.ac.in

Abstract

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is a significant work of contemporary literature based on themes such as trauma, memory, and identity, illustrated through its unique narrative structure and intense poetic prose. The narrative follows an unsettling story of Yeong-Hye, a seemingly ordinary woman who abruptly decides to become a vegetarian after disturbing dreams. This innocent decision of hers leads her to alienation from her family and a growing sense of uneasiness with the violence inherent in consuming meat. *The Vegetarian* depicts trauma and its silencing via unveiling her violation of social and cultural norms and failing to recognise her moved identity. This article examines how trauma, memory, and identity are integral to the narrative and cultural context of the protagonists. The novel's traumatic episode depicts a relational construct whereby trauma emerges from her encounter as culturally and interpersonally aberrant behaviours or events. The narrative unfolds through the personal perspectives of her husband, brother-in-law, and sister, rather than giving Yeong-Hye direct control over the narrative. Delineation from the first narrator about the trauma, memory, and personal identities central to the story proves that the trauma remains potentially central in exposing the perpetrator's reality from radical disorder to illness. The story involves violating Yeong-Hye's body autonomy after she opts to become a vegetarian. The novel's poetic style makes its emotional depth even deeper. The haunting yet captivating atmosphere of the novel reinforces the idea that trauma is challenging to articulate and results in an unstable sense of identity. Han Kang's blend of exquisite language and Narrative Fragmentation evokes a grave contemplation on the fragility of the ego when confronted with trauma and societal repression. This paper examines how Han Kang's work uses silence, shifting viewpoints, and narrative fragmentation to illustrate the conflict between memory and identity, eventually implying that pain transcends the boundaries of traditional narrative.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Identity, Poetic Prose, Narrative Fragmentation, Silence.

Introduction

Han Kang is a South Korean writer who gained international recognition for her book *The Vegetarian*, for which she received the International Booker Prize in 2016 (Perez, 2016). She was born in 1970 in Gwangju, South Korea and has captured the world's attention through her literary prowess with one of the most thought-captivating styles. In 2024, she received the Nobel Prize in Literature from the Swedish Academy for “intense poetic prose that confronts historical traumas and exposes the fragility of human life,” further elevating her standing in contemporary international literature. Shifting between identity, trauma, and sociocultural frameworks, to the body itself, which many find disturbing yet alluring. Her works typically psychologize and emotionally contemplate alienating several characters deeply to relational cases of human existence. *The Vegetarian*, published in year of 2007, overlooks turning events in life because of one woman's choice to stop eating meat, along with twisted relationships, rotund expectations with grave outcomes, and impact on psyche. Aside from *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang has other notable works, including *Human Acts* (2014), a novel reflecting on the revolution of hushed atrocity, 'the Gwangju Uprising', a striking and traumatic event. While it considers chronicling history, it also looks forward, yet still remembers the past, which triggered its fragments, while telling a tragic story. The narrative is deeply structured, combining cacophony to reveal the uprising and the connected calamity, showered with curses, memories, shadows, and empty voids. Alongside, survivors struggle through revolving suffering and enduring. Her novel *The White Book* (2017) is another of her celebrated works, blending memoir and fiction in a meditation on grief and loss. Han Kang's writing style is often described as sparse, lyrical, and haunting, with a focus on the internal lives of her characters. She has been praised for her ability to explore profound philosophical and emotional questions in her fiction.

The Vegetarian (2007) was originally authored in the Korean language by Han Kang and translated to English by Deborah Smith in 2015. The original title is Chaesikjuuija (채식주의자), the direct translation is “a person who eats vegetables” or “eater of plants” (George & Dr. Sunitha V., 2020). It integrates different forms of trauma, memory, and identity within the psyche of its protagonist. It examines the aftermath of individual decisions and social pressure while revealing how every character grapples with their own strife and relationships in a turbulent setting. The narrative offers an opportunity for deep reflection on existence, one's life movements, and invites consideration about the impact one's actions have on self versus humanity. This situation explained how traumatic events from her past shaped her sense of self, influencing her present actions and interactions. The narrative's fragmented structure and shifting perspectives offer a unique window into the characters' internal struggles as they grapple with the legacy of their traumatic socio-cultural norms, which try to box them into rigid and predefined roles.

In *The Vegetarian*, the protagonist, Yeong-Hye, decides to stop eating meat, which sets off a series of unsettling events in her life. Her decision is rooted in past trauma, particularly a series of violent, disturbing dreams and her difficult childhood, marked by her oppressive family

dynamics and her repressed emotions. This decision to stop eating meat becomes symbolic of her rejection of societal norms, expectations, and the way her body and identity have been shaped by the control and abuse she has experienced. The novel unfolds through multiple perspectives, and each one delves deeper into how Yeong-Hye's past influences her present-day actions. First, the traumatised victim has become an outsider enclosed within herself. By saying that she wants to become a veggie, the protagonist evokes trauma of nonrecognition of her identity and autonomy. As reiterated in the title, the choice to transcend from an omnivore to a veggie constitutes implied violence and trauma because she opts to deprive herself of optimal nutrition by rejecting milk as well. In Korean society, the choice to become a vegetarian implies joining the extended community or fellowship. Instead of winning social acceptance or inclusion, the choice triggers her family's trauma. As the entire family seeks to tailor her actions to their expectations, she faces serious social rejection, whereby they fail to recognise her identity and the changes. Throughout the novel, it is found that the characters belong to a rigid society with strict anthropological views towards life, having participated in customs and cultures. The shifting narrative voices in the submissive highlight the gap between how trauma is experienced internally and how it's perceived externally.

Literature Review

For Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian*, a literature review would focus on analysing previously published work, reviews, and critiques done on the novel. It would also include reviews of its post-modern themes of trauma, identity, memory, horror or sociopsychological terror, and politics in which literature is situated. Central to *The Vegetarian* are the traumas chronicled over a lifetime by the characters; the protagonist Yeong-Hye undergoes profound personal transformation after adopting vegetarianism and ultimately veganism, which drastically reshapes events within her family circle (Lee 2019). Using interpersonal trauma concepts, the role of memory functions and processes can be delineated extensively to recount and make hypothetical childhood maltreatment and other stressful life experiences, as mentioned by Vishnu, in *Transcending the Human: Manifestations and Repercussions of Trauma in Han Kang's The Vegetarian* (2017). Kang's trauma narrative, often framed as a silent void containing deep suffering, is delicately revealed to be multilayered as told through voices of creators who occupy diverse social positions like her husband, brother-in-law and sister (Biti & Zigo 2021). As the novel progresses, the reader is exposed to the haunting presence of Yeong-Hye's past, which manifests in her recurring nightmares and her desire to escape the confines of her physical form, a process that the text describes as "becoming a plant" (Kim, 2019). This notion of "becoming plant," as discussed in the Deleuzian reading of the text, is a powerful metaphor for Yeong-Hye's attempt to transcend the limitations of her human identity and to seek refuge in a state of pure vegetability, free from the constraints of societal norms and expectations (Kim, 2019).

Trauma interrupts memory by creating fragmented and incomplete recall of past events. Such disruption often reveals itself in literature through non-chronological narratives or unreliable storytelling. Cathy Caruth (1995) states that trauma is "not fully known in the moment of its occurrence," meaning that it's remembered involuntarily and in fragments (Caruth, 1995).

Because recollection is so convoluted, there is an erosion of integrated identity development, which makes consolidating a coherent self difficult. In other words, characters may struggle reconciling their perception of the present self with the lived experience from the past. Take, for instance, Yeong-Hye's character in *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, who claims that stopping meat consumption stems from her decision to partake in a bizarre dream which triggers memory loss involving her identity. Her refusal to consume meat can be viewed as an attempt to gain control over deeply rooted trauma, whilst also verbally attempting to disengage from trying to make sense out of it. Caruth's theoretical concept, stating trauma as a 'repetition' arises supports this view. An original incident occurs but cannot be fully assimilated into memory (Caruth, 1995). Memory serves not only as preservation but reconstruction of events via narrative interpretation according to Paul Ricoeur (2004). For instance, in *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-Hye's transformation into a passive, almost "vegetable-like" state can be read as an expression of how trauma renders her unable to reconcile her past experiences with her current identity. Her actions, such as her refusal to eat meat, might be interpreted as attempts to exert control over her identity, but the trauma she carries remains a source of deep fragmentation.

Sigmund Freud (1917) argued that traumatic memories are often repressed because they are too painful to be consciously acknowledged. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-Hye's inexplicable refusal to eat meat can be understood as a manifestation of repressed memories. Her rejection of meat, something that is culturally significant in her society, represents a symbolic rejection of the violence she associates with her past. This aligns with Freud's theory of how repressed trauma can affect one's identity, leading to a distorted or fragmented sense of self. In *The Vegetarian*, the narrative structure mirrors Yeong-Hye's fragmented sense of self. The novel is told through different perspectives, each offering a partial view of Yeong-Hye's life and the trauma she experiences. This fragmented narrative reflects the difficulty of capturing the full complexity of trauma and its impact on identity. In the works of postcolonial authors like Toni Morrison (1992) in *Beloved*, the traumatic memories of slavery are passed down through generations, affecting both personal and collective identities. Similarly, *The Vegetarian* can be interpreted as a personal narrative that illustrates how Yeong-Hye's trauma is deeply influenced by the expectations and pressures exerted by her family and society. These external forces play a significant role in shaping her identity, often leading to internal conflicts that are not easily reconciled. The struggle between her desires and the demands of those around her highlights the complexities of her character and the profound impact of both familial and societal norms on individual identity. Through Yeong-Hye's journey, the novel explores the intricate relationships between personal trauma, societal expectations, and self-discovery.

Trauma, Memory, and Identity

Trauma comes from a Greek word (τραύμα) meaning "wound", originally referring to physical injuries, but nowadays trauma includes psychological and emotional wounds as well. Trauma remains a complex psychological ailment resulting from deeply distressing or disturbing sequences or events that can rupture the victim's sense of stability and make it hard to equip the mechanisms for coping. In Han Kang's "*The Vegetarian*," the inner trauma experienced by the protagonist, Yeong-Hye, is deeply rooted in her aversion to eating meat, which stems from

recurring dreams of animal slaughter, representing a subconscious rejection of violence and a desire to distance herself from societal norms that normalize it; her refusal to eat meat is seen as a form of rebellion against the oppressive societal expectations and patriarchal structures she faces, leading to significant isolation and mistreatment from her family and community, further exacerbating her psychological distress. The novel suggests that Yeong-Hye's dreams of animal slaughter may be linked to deeper, possibly repressed trauma that she is unable to articulate fully.

Etymologically, "Memory" comes from the Latin word *Memoria*, which means "the faculty of remembering". The word *Memoria* was used in Western classical rhetoric to refer to aspects of memory. In Han Kang's "The Vegetarian," memory plays a crucial role as the protagonist, Yeong-Hye, is deeply affected by repressed memories of trauma, particularly related to violence and the consumption of meat, which manifests in her decision to become a vegetarian and her subsequent descent into a state of near madness; these memories are often fragmented and alluded to through dreamlike imagery, further highlighting the psychological impact of her past experiences. Yeong-Hye's sudden refusal to eat meat is triggered by a disturbing dream filled with violent imagery of animal slaughter, which can be interpreted as a subconscious surfacing of repressed memories of trauma.

Identity comes from the Latin words "**essentitas**" and "**identidem**", meaning repeated beingness is an extraction of views on the relationship between mind and body. In Han Kang's "The Vegetarian," the concept of identity is deeply explored through the protagonist, Yeong-Hye, who challenges societal expectations by refusing to eat meat, leading to a profound transformation where she actively seeks to redefine her own identity by detaching from societal norms and constructing a new self, often seen as a rejection of her prescribed female role within Korean society; her choice to become a vegetarian becomes a powerful symbol of resistance against imposed identities and a quest for personal autonomy. Despite Yeong-Hye claiming her veggie identity, others seek to deny her that personal autonomy. By refusing to behave and connect as anticipated, she risks embracing herself culturally and socially, thus eminent alienation within the family. Her identity becomes problematic because there is no reversibility. The trauma meets resistance when she increasingly authenticates vegetarians' values. This does not augur well with the family because the refusal to reverse is unintelligible. In search of normalcy, the husband assumes that he is stuck within the conventional marriage despite his wife's trauma, stating that her actions correspond to her enigmatic voices. The impact of trauma defeats the boundaries between public and private behaviours, as depicted by Yeong-Hye, because it compromises relationships with the family. Despite posthumanism encouraging humans to become vegetarians, one might argue that she embarked on an extremist choice; instead of exposure to infection and sexual intercourse, she preferred self-imposed starvation. By detaching herself from family ties and human existence, the sister creates a distant relationship whereby she continues eating vegetarian in the barn away from the family. The scene where Yeong-Hye's confrontation with the brother-in-law seems to echo the theme of identity.

Trauma and Narrative Voice

Trauma and narrative voice are closely related in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, and they play a significant role in the novel's exploration of identity, repression, and social pressures. Each of the three sections of the book—Part 1: *The Vegetarian*, Part 2: *Mongolian Mark*, and Part 3: *Flaming Trees* is told from the viewpoint of a distinct character, and each voice has a different way of describing and experiencing trauma (Kang, 2016). This novella demonstrates how our bodies respond in particular ways to a range of traumatic events under a variety of internal and external conditions, some of which may or may not be in line with social norms. For instance, Yeong-Hye's decision to stop eating meat and the way she treats her body upset her whole family. This seemingly small decision, however, spirals into a deeply traumatic experience for her and those around her, as our civilisation is driven by various power structures that forcibly adhere to the people not only in Korean society but everywhere in the parallel world. The trauma is not solely physical but also psychological and social, which critically raises questions about how to respond to certain experiences and which mechanisms to employ for dealing with such trauma.

Yeong-Hye's refusal to eat meat shows her rebellion against societal norms and her inner trauma. This trauma comes through in a modern poetic prose style. The struggle between individual identity and community is clearly shown through Yeong-Hye's haunting childhood memories and unsettling dreams, which lead her to reject meat. This rejection serves as a visible sign of her inner chaos and the psychological pain she is trying to cope with. The author uses Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness style to express a deeper sense of trauma. Her trauma connects to a silent, unresolved past that gradually unfolds as the story goes on, as described in Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. At the beginning of the novel, her complex identity, developed by her decision to reject meat and social conventions, is presented from a male point of view. From being unnoticed to becoming a prominent figure, she makes it obvious that she is an outsider. As her family becomes more perplexed and enraged over her behaviour, which is considered abnormal in Korean society. Yeong-Hye's trauma is both social and personal, and those around her, particularly the male characters like her father and husband, become uneasy and violent toward her. Yeong-Hye's deliberate choice to stop eating meat was her way of fighting the violent dreams and internal pain. It also shows her control over her own body, which is a source of trauma itself. In a way, her withdrawal from the outside world is a response to the patriarchal force. This choice makes her feel more disconnected from her own body. The novel reflects on her decision to become a plant, linking it to the violence against nature and the body. This transformation is deeply influenced by how her trauma manifests physically. *The Vegetarian* illustrates how trauma can affect both the mind and body for many people. Through its characters and their experiences, the story emphasises the complex relationship between the mind and body, highlighting how one's internal struggles can profoundly influence their physical well-being and their identity in a cultural context. This exploration encourages readers to examine the complex nature of trauma and its widespread effects on an individual's life, following Freud's trauma theory.

Narrative Voice

The narrative structure of *The Vegetarian* is crucial to its exploration of trauma. Each of the three sections is told from the perspective of a different character, each providing a different lens through which the trauma is understood.

The first section is narrated by Yeong-Hye's husband, Mr Cheong, who is initially perplexed by her decision to stop eating meat. His narration reveals his limited understanding of Yeong-Hye's inner life and trauma.

"The very idea that there could be this other side to her, one where she selfishly did as she pleased, was astonishing, ... "Who would have thought she could be so unreasonable?" (Kang, 2016)

His voice is detached and often analytical, highlighting his inability to truly empathise with her emotional pain. His focus is more on her actions and how they affect him personally rather than the deeper reasons behind her choices. This perspective creates a sense of alienation and misunderstanding, reinforcing the trauma of being seen as an object rather than a subject with internal suffering. We see her father, too, petulantly demands, "How can you call yourself my daughter?" Throughout the novel, we see that the characters belong to a rigid society with strict anthropological views towards life, having shared customs and lifestyles.

The second section shifts to Yeong-Hye's brother-in-law, who becomes obsessed with her and her vegetarian body. His narrative is more surreal and sexualized, further complicating the depiction of Yeong-Hye's trauma.

"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 ... what she had renounced was the very life that her body represented.... the overwhelming inexpressibility of the scene beat against him like a wave breaking on the rocks" (Kang, 2016)

He attempts to understand her by focusing on her physicality, trying to interpret her rejection of societal norms as something that can be consumed or understood through his own desires. His narrative voice is marked by an unsettling fascination and an inability to grasp the true depth of her trauma, as he objectifies her in ways that only deepen her alienation.

The final section is told in the third person and focuses on Yeong-Hye's sister, In-hye, who is trying to make sense of her sister's behaviour and the impact it has had on their family. This section presents a more reflective and sympathetic view, as In-hye tries to piece together the broken parts of her sister's life and the trauma that led to her actions. It is here that the novel's deeper themes of repressed memories and the family's inability to truly communicate are more clearly revealed. The sister's perspective allows for a more comprehensive view of the situation, but it still underscores the distance between Yeong-Hye's inner world and the outside world.

The shifting narrative voices in *The Vegetarian* highlight the gap between how trauma is experienced internally and how it is perceived externally. Each character's perspective is limited by their own emotional and psychological lens, leading to misunderstandings and a sense of fragmentation. Yeong-Hye's trauma remains largely elusive throughout the novel, and the different voices can only provide partial glimpses into her inner world. This fragmentation of voice mirrors the fragmented nature of trauma itself, difficult to comprehend, isolate, or heal. The italicised portions of the novel provide a glimpse into Yeong-Hye's dreams, revealing that the thoughts behind these dreams hold more than mere interpretation.

“Dark woods. No people. The sharp-pointed leaves on the trees, my torn feet. This place, almost remembered, but I’m lost now. Frightened. Cold. Across the frozen ravine, a red barn-like building. Straw matting flapping limp across the door. Roll it up and I’m inside, it’s inside. A long bamboo stick strung with great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down. Try to push past, but the meat, there’s no end to the meat, and no exit. Blood in my mouth, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin.” (Kang, 2016)

The Vegetarian uses its narrative structure to emphasize the isolation and alienation that trauma brings. The characters' voices reflect their inability to fully understand Yeong-Hye's trauma, reinforcing the idea that trauma, especially when unspoken and repressed, often remains elusive and misunderstood. This narrative strategy highlights a broader theme regarding the limitations of communication. It illustrates how individuals, particularly women, are frequently seen only through their external actions or physical appearances, rather than being recognised as complex individuals with deep and often painful internal lives. The trauma in *The Vegetarian* is deeply tied to the narrative voices, which help to illuminate both the internal and external experiences of suffering. The shifting perspectives create a multi-dimensional portrayal of trauma, reinforcing the novel's themes of memory, trauma, identity, and the difficulty of truly understanding the pain of others.

Conclusion

The Vegetarian explores trauma and memory in ways other than Yeong-Hye's personal experiences. The silent suffering of a generation characterised by familial and political repression is reflected in Han Kang's use of trauma in this novella. Similar to how many South Koreans were forced to repress their actual feelings or desires during periods of political and societal repression, Yeong-Hye's self-imposed seclusion and rejection of meat can be seen as a symbolic act of rebellion against these familial and societal constraints. This might be understood as Kang's attempt to show a more common generational trauma that the people have experienced. Yeong-Hye's choice to give up food and physical nourishment becomes a sign of trauma that has been hidden. This illustrates Kang's way of highlighting a broader generational trauma faced by the populace. Yeong-Hye's decision to reject food and bodily sustenance symbolises repressed trauma. This psychological breakdown can reflect how trauma appears in ways that are not always clear or directly expressed. It connects with how people in societies marked by oppression, like South Korea's post-war culture, often keep their pain and suffering inside. The novel looks at how past trauma may influence and shape

individual and social identities through the characters' stories. Yeong-Hye's trauma, similar to that of many women in patriarchal societies, relates to the expectations placed on women's bodies, desires, and roles within the family and society. The *Vegetarian's* exploration of memory, trauma, and identity offers a strong and thoughtful reflection on the human condition. "With its fragmented narrative and focus on the internal struggles of its main character, the novel invites the reader to engage with the complex connections between the personal and the political, the individual and the collective, and how the past can still influence our present experiences" (Kim, 2019). Han Kang herself has talked about how trauma, especially repressed trauma, is a unifying theme of her work. In interviews, she has admitted that through writing, she can treat themes of human vulnerability, trauma, and emotional depth. To that extent, *The Vegetarian* is understood to be an expression of her working through the silences and repressions that tend to accompany personal and social trauma. The taboo on meat and Yeong-Hye's subsequent collapse is an expression of the subtleties of buried memories that Kang herself can identify within a more general and cultural sense. This emphasis on female trauma can be attributed to Han Kang's investigation into women's lives within South Korean culture, where the women have long suffered unyielding pressures to conform to rigid social roles. The silencing of women's voices and erasure of their trauma and personal history is a significant motif across Kang's larger oeuvre. Yeong-Hye's collapse and failure to articulate her trauma are interpreted as a metaphor for the larger silencing of women's pain and suffering in patriarchal society.

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* also captures the trauma of the narrative past, the challenge to narrate one's trauma, and the brokenness of identity. The novel is framed so that the trauma of Yeong-Hye is relayed through the perceptions of other characters, whose explanations are usually faulty, distorted, and partial. This is indicative of the way trauma, especially unarticulated trauma, cannot be completely narrated. The fractured narrative in *The Vegetarian* may also be read as an intentional move by Kang to echo the fractured nature of trauma itself and the way that it is actually experienced as isolated, discrete moments, not easily assembled into a coherent, linear tale. This reflects back on the larger problem of how trauma is commonly misunderstood or unsaid in society, so further entrenching the isolation of those who quietly endure. The fragmented narrative of the novel is a representation of the disjunctive quality of trauma and sheds light on the difficulty of knowing and speaking one's memory, particularly when that memory is tainted by pain and silence.

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