

FAILED METAMORPHOSIS, SELF-STARVATION AND THE INNOCENCE OF  
ANOREXIA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE VEGETARIAN

by  
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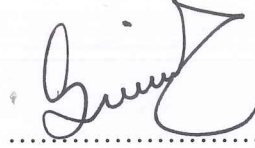
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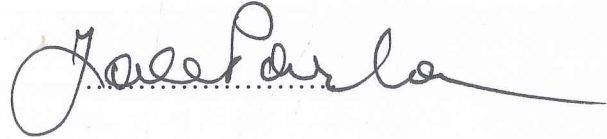
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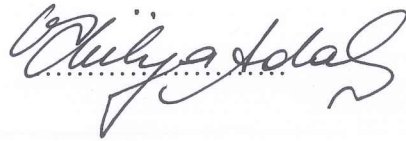
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## ABSTRACT

### FAILED METAMORPHOSIS, SELF STARVATION AND THE INNOCENCE OF ANOREXIA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE VEGETARIAN

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MA Thesis, January 2019

Thesis advisor: Prof. Sibel Irzik

**Keywords:** anorexia, anorexia nervosa, holy anorexia, vegetarian, metamorphosis

This thesis analyzes Han Kang's short novel *The Vegetarian* with a feminist, literary and medical discourse. As I discuss the element of corporeality of metamorphosis in the novel I determine that not only are almost-transformations in the novel are "failed metamorphosis" but also they are thematic charges of Ovidian executions. By doing a comparative reading of Herman Melville's "*Bartleby: the Scrivener*" I establish similar narrators and narrations to expand my observation of what makes Yeong-hye, the main character, extremely unique among narratives of anorexia. Discussing various feminist and medical approaches to anorexia, specifically to anorexia nervosa, I conclude that these do not completely fit Yeong-hye. I employ Rudolph Bell's *Holy Anorexia* to read Yeong-hye as a saint figure as I compare her to one of the saints Bell introduces, Catherine of Siena. In this thesis I suggest that Yeong-hye's unique anorexia makes her a saint figure because of her obsession with innocence and the post-human way of achieving it by admiring Kang's way of story-making.

## ÖZET

### BAŞARISIZ METAMORFOZ, KENDİNİ AÇ BIRAKMA VE ANOREKSİYANIN MASUMİYETİ: VEJETARYEN'İN ANALİZİ

CANSU KUTLUALP

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**Anahtar kelimeler:** anoreksiya, anoreksiya nervosa, vejetaryen, metamorfoz

Bu tez, Han Kang'ın kısa romanı Vejetaryen'i feminist, edebi ve tıbbi diskurları kullanarak analiz etmektedir. Romandaki metamorfozun bedenselliğini tartıştığımda, sadece romandaki dönüşülememişliği “başarısız metamorfozlar” olarak değil aynı zamanda Ovid'in yaratmış olduğu tematik metamorfozların yeniden doğuşu olduklarının da altını çizmekteyim. Herman Melville'in “Katip Bartleby”si ile karşılaştırmalı bir okuma yaparak ve benzer anlatıcıları-anlatım tekniklerini kullanmakta ve ana karakter Yeong-hye'yi anoreksiya anlatıları arasında son derece benzersiz kılan şeyin ne olduğuna dair gözlemlerimi öne sürmekteyim. Çeşitli feminist ve tıbbi anoreksiya yaklaşımlarını tartışırken, özellikle de anorexia nervosa için, bunların Yeong-hye'ye nasıl uymadığını anlatmaktayım ve Rudolph Bell'in Kutsal Anoreksiya ile tanıttığı azize hikayelerinden Sienalı Catherine ile Yeong-hye'yi karşılaştırmalı olarak okumaktayım. Bu tez, Yeong-hye'nin eşsiz anoreksiya hikayesinin masumiyet ile kurduğu ilişki yüzünden olduğunu anlatırken Kang'un kurgu tarzını övmekle birlikte masumiyetin Yeong-hye nazarında insanlık ötesi bir şey olabileceğinin de altını çizmektedir.

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## THE INTRODUCTION

Even though it was translated to English in 2016, *The Vegetarian* is actually one of the first works of Han Kang, originally published in 2007. The novel was inspired from a short story that Kang wrote in 1997 called “The Fruit of My Woman”, which was translated to English in 2016 as well, and published by Granta Literary Magazine.<sup>1</sup> It is reported in the translators note that Kang was inspired for Yeong-hye’s story by a line in Lee Sang’s poetry: “I believe that humans should be plants.” Despite the fact that *The Vegetarian* is still relatively new to the literary scene, albeit winning the Man Booker Prize, Kang’s work remains unexplored to literary criticism. Yeong-hye is “the vegetarian” that the referring to and she is the main focus of the story. However the novel follows three narrations that closely watch and sometimes interfere with “this vegetarian” that is not technically a vegetarian. In my analysis I try to scratch the surface of the complex embodiment of what Kang presents in this short novel with the discourses of metamorphosis, the crisis of the female body, innocence and anorexia nervosa.

In my first chapter I introduce the novel and the dynamics of the relationships in it while regarding them as thematic charges of Ovidian executions. As I discuss the physicality and the inherent corporeality of the act of metamorphosis I look at the “failed” nature of the metamorphoses in *The Vegetarian*. I introduce myths from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to critique the nature of the relationships in *The Vegetarian*. By inferring to the Ovidian myths of Daphne, Philomela and Proecne along with Andromeda and Perseus, I evaluate how Kang challenges the function of metamorphosis.

The questioning of metamorphosis in *The Vegetarian* enables the questioning of self-starvation as Yeong-hye starves herself because she is convinced that she will become a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://granta.com/the-fruit-of-my-woman/>



tree by doing so. On a literary scale between Herman Melville's *Bartleby: The Scrivener* and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Yeong-hye's story falls remarkably closer to Bartleby's story. In this chapter I observe that both Yeong-hye's and Bartleby's existence in the text is through their passive resistances and their respective anorexias but the way in which their existence is made possible is by the narration of their narrators. Bartleby is the scrivener because of the lawyer of Wall Street and Yeong-hye is deemed to be the "vegetarian" by the people around her, especially her husband. Their eating disorders just go to complement the "marginality" of their being. Along with deconstructing both narratives, in this chapter I get to look the similarities and the differences between the characters, the narrators and their anorexia's to further emphasize the unique case of Yeong-hye's anorexia nervosa.

In my final chapter I delve into a theoretical discussion surrounding anorexia and anorexia nervosa. By referring to the theories of Susie Orbach, Janis Hedwel Hunt, Susan Bordo and Joan Jacobs Brumberg I create a definition of anorexia as a self-imposed inability to take in food occasioned with the anxiety of one's own body image which is a discourse of the patriarchal and the masculine. Through this definition I look at the crisis of the female body and body as the feminine domain. As I combine both feminist and medical discourses to create a definition of anorexia I am able to criticize both practices in their lack of individualistic inclusivity, especially for Yeong-hye's unique case. Looking at Yeong-hye as an anorexia nervosa patient in the novel I discuss the ways in which how she is but also is not an anorexic. Her self-starvation and deteriorating state of both physical and mental health makes her an anorexia nervosa patient, however the fact that she is motivated by innocence requires a change in nomenclature. I employ Rudolph Bell's *Holy Anorexia* and his theorization of anorexia as involving "...a need to establish a sense of oneself, a contest of wills, a quest for autonomy..." (Bell, 8) There is a different goal in holy anorexia and it requires a different level of mobility and autonomy. Comparing Yeong-hye's motivation of ridding the body of guilt and achieving sin to Catherine of Siena's story in the book I look at anorexia as a kind of power in the familial context. I deconstruct holy anorexia to autonomy involving a struggle for power which is the case for most of the saints.

As I infer to various different schools of criticism, I am hoping that my thesis will

establish a kind of dialectic that merges mythological, medical and feminist terms and conceptualizations with a literary perspective, commentary and technique along with hopefully laying the groundwork for expanding studies of Han Kang and her remarkably impressive works.

**CHAPTER 1:**  
**THE FAILED METAMORPHOSIS**

*I am Vertical*

*But I would rather be horizontal.  
I am not a tree with my root in the soil  
Sucking up minerals and motherly love  
So that each march I may gleam into leaf,  
Nor am I the beauty of a garden bed  
Attracting my share of Ahs and spectacularly painted,  
Unknowing I must soon unpetal.  
Compared with me, a tree is immortal  
And a flower-head not tall, but more startling,  
And I want the one's longevity and the other's daring.*

*Tonight, in the infinitesimal light of the stars,  
The trees and flowers have been strewing their cool odors.  
I walk among them, but none of them are noticing.  
Sometimes I think that when I am sleeping  
I must most perfectly resemble them — —  
Thoughts gone dim.  
It is more natural to me, lying down.  
Then the sky and I are in open conversation,  
And I shall be useful when I lie down finally;  
The the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers have time for me.*

*Sylvia Plath The Collected Poems(1962).*

Metamorphosis signifies not just a complete and total transformation of form but brings with itself a complex web of new connections. Even though the act of metamorphosis requires a physical change, it also demands a break in the ordinary, the accustomed and the normal. The act of transformation is abrupt and sudden for all the parties involved in the transformation. Taking into account these different narratives and perspectives of the transformation it is clear that a transformation can take place because of a (supposed) sin,

a crime and/or a misdemeanor leading to a kind of disempowerment or (self)punishment which is physically actualized. Regardless of the underlying causes of the transformation, however the metamorphosis requires a victim and involves a process of victimization.

In his article in the *Cambridge Companion to Ovid* Andrew Feldherr talks about the different types of metamorphosis in the *Metamorphoses*, underlining the fact that even the physical aspect of the transformation may lead to different understandings. Feldherr references Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and asks what it is about the circumstances surrounding Gregor's condition that makes the readers question the nature of the metamorphosis. Should he be considered as just an insect, "a figure of speech" a symbol rather than taken as literal? (Feldherr, 163) Should the question be directed towards the reason of the alienation from the culture that caused the transformation? Feldherr says: "What we decide the image means matters less than the initial decision that it means something other than that one Gregor Samsa really did turn into an insect. After this move, the possibility of identifying with Samsa, seeing his condition as one that we somehow share, becomes much easier..." (Feldherr, 163) Willed or unwilling, fair or unjust, ethical or unethical the transformation is corporeal bound and it is this undeniably physical nature of the metamorphosis that may bring about emotional metamorphoses in different characters, like a change of heart or a maturation.

When comparing the element of corporeality in the myths Ovid recounts in the *Metamorphoses* to Lucretius's recount of them, Charles Segal, in his article "Ovid's Metamorphic Bodies: Art, Gender, and Violence in the *Metamorphoses*" says: "... Ovid views the body as vulnerable, penetrable, and porous... the *Metamorphoses* exults in the body's seemingly endless subjection to physical change and continually finds new metaphors and situations that intensify rather than ally anxiety..." (Segal, 10) It is clear that in Ovid the characters exist not as "individual narratives" but rather as plot twists, their attributes and trivial adjectives as the offspring of a god and/or as the center of attention of someone's gaze. When considering this relationship between the physical and the narrative Ovid's *Metamorphoses* stands out because of the kind of relationship between the body and the transformation itself. In a comparison with the modern take on this with the narration of the body and the self, Segal says: "The modern literary sensibility, confronted with a body, tends to elaborate a highly individualized life story, with all the paths of intensely personal details. In the *Metamorphoses*, however, it is not

the body that leads the narrator to the story, but the story that is forced to end in something that happens to the body...” (Segal, 14) In my analysis I will look into how Han Kang manages to deal with “transformations” in this Ovidian way in the *Vegetarian* through Yeong-hye’s story and how she chooses to (not) tell her story. I will underline that for Yeong-hye’s existence in the novel starts and ends unanticipatedly with her “body” as an extremely silenced individual. With Han Kang there is another layer to this corporeality: in the *Vegetarian* this physical aspect of the metamorphosis is so outrageously impossible. The *Vegetarian* is comprised of many transformations that are bound to fail physically, yet their failures are what set the story in motion and enable the transformation. I would like to discuss what I see as “failed metamorphoses” in the *Vegetarian* with their thematically charged Ovidian executions to reiterate what the function of metamorphosis is.

*The Vegetarian* starts off with a “transformation” that sets the story in the first place: Mr. Cheong, whose first person narrative makes up only the first part of the novel, starts his story by saying: “Before my wife turned vegetarian, I’d always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way...” Yeong-hye, whom Mr. Cheong deems to be completely “unremarkable” decides to become a vegetarian<sup>2</sup> after waking up from a dream which is narrated not by Mr. Cheong, but through fragments of Yeong-hye’s stream of consciousness which are the only parts of the novel where her voice is heard. How can a change in diet, namely becoming a “vegetarian” be considered as a metamorphosis? For Yeong-hye, it is because for her becoming a vegetarian is not simply a dietary choice but a form of bodily resistance which will result in her stopping to eat altogether and wanting to become a tree. Her issue is not just with eating meat but with being a human being or even an animal which raises in itself questions about violence, innocence and being silenced and that resonates with the many narratives of women metamorphosing into trees in the *The Metamorphoses*, especially that of a woman who wants to transform into a tree

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<sup>2</sup> In the following chapter I discuss that Yeong-hye is technically not a vegetarian in great detail; she is briefly vegan before becoming anorexic. I also discuss the importance of being classified and recognized as a “vegetarian” because it is other people, especially her husband Mr. Cheong who calls her that. Yeong-hye does not define her self as vegetarian or vegan. The Korean vocabulary does not have a specification for veganism from vegetarianism. The word “vegan” may be used with its Korean enunciation as 뷔간 (*bwigan*). The word used for “vegetarian”, which is also the title of the novel, 채식주의자 (*chesikjuaeja*) literally means someone who doesn’t eat meat, someone who chooses what they eat as a herbivore. I believe this word has an interesting connotation since it is even more “defining” and even more discerning.

which is the story of Daphne in Book I.

For Mr. Cheong Yeong-hye is but one thing; his wife. He does not care about anything or anyone unless it is related to him in some immediate way. His indifference is expressed in his narrative quite frankly: “I resisted the temptation to indulge in introspection. This strange situation had nothing to do with me” (Kang, 19) In his head he goes through reasons for which Yeong-hye might have turned vegetarian, even though when asked she says that it is because of a dream. He senses that there is more to it, but he chooses not to pursue it: “...I was lost for words, though at the same time I was aware that choosing a vegetarian diet wasn’t quite so rare as it had been in the past. People turn vegetarian for all sorts of reasons: to try and alter their genetic predisposition toward certain allergies, for example, or else because it’s seen as more environmentally friendly not to eat meat... As far as I was concerned, the only reasonable grounds for altering one’s eating habits were the desire to lose weight, an attempt to alleviate certain physical ailments, being possessed by an evil spirit, or having your sleep disturbed by indigestion. In any other case, it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband’s wishes as mine had done...” (Kang, 14)

Mr. Cheong’s indifference remains unbothered until two moments in the story. As long as she is able to serve him according to “her duties” as his wife, he is willing to consider her “as a stranger, or no, as a sister, or even a maid, someone who puts food on the table and keeps the house in good order” (Kang, 30). It is only when on one instance that Yeong-hye goes to Mr. Cheong’s business-dinner with him without a bra and does not eat meat, and on another instance, when she states that she won’t sleep next to him, let one alone have sex with him, because he reeks of meat (due to his diet), that Mr. Cheong will take action: not to help Yeong-hye, but to intervene. His self-justified solution, since he is a man in his “prime” and since she failed to “satisfy his physical needs” for such a long time, is raping her. “So yes, one night when I returned home late and somewhat inebriated after a meal with colleagues, I grabbed hold of my wife and pushed her to the floor” (Kang, 30). He even reports that after this time it became easy for him to do it repeatedly, so in the course of events up until Yeong-hye is hospitalized for the first time at the end of the first chapter, she will be continuously raped by her husband.

The moment in which things get extremely physical is when Mr. Cheong alarms her family and they plan an intervention. One by one Yeong-hye's parents and sister try to force-feed her meat. Refusing all request for her to eat meat and stop acting silly, she is held down by her husband and brother upon her father's request. She resists by not parting her lips, but her father strikes her so hard that with his second slap he pushes the meat into her mouth: "Though In-hye sprang at him and held him by the waist, in the instant that the force of the slap had knocked my wife's mouth open he'd managed to jam the pork in. As soon as the strength in Yeong-hye's arms were visibly exhausted, my wife growled and spat out the meat. An animal cry of distress burst from her lips: 'GET AWAY!'" (Kang, 40). At this point in the novel it is apparent that Yeong-hye has to resist physically; as she spits out the meat she also grabs a knife and slits her wrist. And it is also apparent that this physical abuse, not just at the dinner but with her husband and through her whole life being physically abused by her father<sup>3</sup> and being verbally abused by her mother, is related to her becoming a "vegetarian". It is the equation of violence to eating meat at first and then eating altogether that makes her do what she is doing.

Even though Yeong-hye is silent for most of her story, dream-like narratives of her memories are the only times the reader gets to hear her voice and it is through these narratives that the readers get to witness her confrontation with violence. Especially the first, the second and the very last one of these fragmented narratives, make Yeong-hye's confrontation very conspicuous. The first narrative is more dream-like in narration and form; this short passage consists of short and abrupt sentences, ending suddenly, sometimes with no structure. This narrative might be the dream that Yeong-hye keeps referring to as the reason for her change in diet. It is a very vivid dream in which she sees herself as a murderer. She has blood all over her in a barn: "In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood. Chewing on something that felt so real, but couldn't

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<sup>3</sup> While reporting on his father-in-law Mr. Cheong says: "Shame and empathy just didn't suit him. He never tired of boasting about having received the Order of Military Merit for serving in Vietnam, and not only was his voice extremely loud, it was the voice of a man with strongly fixed ideas. I myself, in Vietnam...seven Vietcong...as his son-in-law, I was only too familiar with the beginning of his monologue. According to my wife, he had whipped her over the calves until she was eighteen years old..." (Kang, 29) Later on, in the last chapter of the novel her sister In-hye's account will report that she indeed took a lot of beatings and managed to keep it all in: "The eldest daughter, In-hye had been the one who took over from their exhausted mother and made a broth for her father to wash the liquor down, and so he'd always taken a certain care in his dealings with her. Only Yeong-hye, docile and naive, had been unable to deflect their father's temper or put up any form of resistance. Instead, she had merely absorbed all her suffering inside her, deep into the marrow of her bones" (Kang, 157).

have been, it couldn't" (Kang, 12). This scene refers to the scene end of the first chapter in which after she is hospitalized Mr. Cheong finds her near the fountain holding a dead bird, blood dripping down her mouth and clothes: "I prized open her clenched right hand. A bird, which had been crushed in her grip, tumbled to the bench. It was a small white-eye bird, with feathers missing here and there. Below tooth marks that looked to have been caused by a predator's bite, vivid red bloodstains were spreading" (Kang, 52). This dream narrative is a reference to that scene and also to some of the other ones in which she constantly dreams of violent and bloody scenes in which she is the predator. The actions and word choices are also similar to this first narrative in which she says, describing the "bite of a predator," "pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums..." (Kang, 12) It is with this scene that the readers get to realize the equation Yeong-hye is making as the predator, as the perpetuator of violence.

The second narrative is not a dream narrative but is a semi-stream of consciousness narrative<sup>4</sup>. She is addressing her husband because she starts by saying: "The morning before I had the dream, I was mincing frozen meat—remember? You got angry" (Kang, 19). This narrative goes further about what happened the morning before she had the dream, the first narrative, that made her become a vegetarian. In this narrative she reports something that the reader would never come to know because it would have been unpredictable if it had not been for her narration since these instances are never mentioned in the story told by Mr. Cheong. That morning she chipped the knife she was using to mince frozen meat and that small piece apparently dropped into the food she was making. She reflects about how even though Mr. Cheong fails to realize it and even asks why mincing the meat makes her squeamish, to continue living like this has actually been extremely hard for her: "If you knew how hard I've always worked to keep my nerves in check. Other people just get a bit flustered, but for me everything gets confused, speeds up. Quick, quicker" (Kang, 19). This narrative is also very important in the sense that it is the first narrative where the readers see Yeong-hye's reasoning and also catch a glimpse of the equation she is making. When Mr. Cheong confronts her about whether she realized that this piece of knife would have killed him if he ate it, she is surprised that this image didn't "agitate" her but "calmed" her (Kang, 19). As she realizes that she has become a

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<sup>4</sup> Even though the reader is not informed as to where or in which instances these narratives are constructed, their tone and narration can allow us to reach this conclusion. In this narrative the sentences are longer and better formed. Some of the other narratives are also formed in this manner.



part of the territory of violence, it is as if she starts making sense of everything violent that has been going around her: “Suddenly, everything around me began to slide away, as though pulled back on an ebbing tide. The dining table, you, all the kitchen furniture. I was alone, the only thing remaining in all of infinite space...” (Kang, 19) She says that it is at the dawn of the following day that she first has the bloody dream. (Kang, 19)

The last stream of consciousness narrative fits in to the timeline plot-wise because it is near the end of the chapter and it is when Yeong-hye is hospitalized after her suicide attempt. (She says that her wrist is fine and that “woman”, referring to her mother, are staring at her crying.) In this sequence the readers finally hear Yeong-hye’s reasoning behind not wearing a bra. She says that she doesn’t wear a bra because there is something in her chest that is suffocating her and no matter what she does, she can’t get rid of it. This is accordant with her previous narratives in which she says that she had a mask all her life and that it is now coming off; something has been bothering her all along. She says it is because she ate too much meat that all the bodies of the animals are lodged up in her chest: “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” (Kang, 49). Yeong-hye wants to be rid of this violence and guilt; in a way, what she wants to be is innocent. Not only is she fighting violence by not eating meat, but she also wants to achieve innocence by ending up not eating at all. The second and the third chapters, then, become mainly about Yeong-hye’s journey in which she tries to achieve ultimate innocence, which to her means transforming into a tree.

Failed as it maybe, Yeong-hye’s almost-metamorphosis is reminiscent of Daphne’s, which is the epitome of the struggle against violence. Apollo is full of lust, driven mad by Cupid’s arrow, which was shot because of Apollo’s arrogance in the first place. Daphne runs away, as if running away from a predator and her “freedom” comes as she metamorphoses into a tree. Not as the “virgin” or the “unwed” as Ovid situates her, but as a symbol of innocence, as the woman who is able to escape from the violence and the threat of rape, Daphne is what Yeong-hye wants to become.

A passage in Book X in the *Metamorphoses* extends the way in which metamorphosing into a tree is related to violence. In his translation of the *Metamorphoses* Charles Martin separates this part as “The Catalogue of Trees,” in which the narration mentions Apollo as the “poet born of heaven” (Ovid, 268). He is sitting at the edge of a hill and “summoning many shade trees to his presence” (Ovid, 268). Anyone who has metamorphosed into a tree is mentioned in the lines that follow. The “oak tree” is Baucis, “the laurel” is Daphne, “the lotus” is Dryope and so on. The metamorphosis following this narration is of Cyparissus who kills a stag sacred to Apollo and is “granted” a metamorphosis by Apollo and is transformed into a tree. This pause in the narration to “catalogue” the trees demonstrates how, when faced with violence, many have metamorphosed into a tree. In her article called “Metamorphosis and the aesthetics of loss: I. Mourning Daphne –The Apollo and Daphne paintings of Nicolas Poussin,” Adele Tutter underlines the importance of this catalogue of trees: “Why the need for this catalogue, this comprehensive reprisal? I contend that in the *Metamorphoses*, tales of transformation into trees ... are marked to “*signal grief*,” as containing unbearable, all too human realities of violence, pain, mortality and loss. These experiences may be made more bearable by escape into alternative, non-mortal form; apparently, Ovid felt they required even further neutralization (and, perhaps, recognition) by his tender, poeticized grouping” (Tutter, 429).

The escape to the non-mortal is the escape from the human condition; metamorphosis allows to “exist” against violence in a completely non-violent form and the narrator of the *Metamorphoses* combines these transformations to show the dichotomy of the said metamorphoses in its two poles: one side committing the violence and the crime and the other choosing a non-violent existence in which innocence could be attained. Even though her transformation failed in the sense that she actually couldn’t become a tree, the reasons why she wanted to metamorphose was what made the break from the ordinary and the mundane possible.

The story of Apollo and Daphne is not relevant to the *Vegetarian* just from Daphne’s perspective but also from Apollo’s. Just like the artist in the *Vegetarian*, Apollo transforms into an image of the poet, an artist, by total objectification and self-gratification. In the second chapter of the *Vegetarian*, the narrative follows Yeong-hye’s

brother-in-law, who is a video artist, and his struggle with his art. As the story continues, it will become apparent that the struggle is not just with his art, but with himself and with his life. It is interesting that this character remains nameless in the story and the only way he is “referred” to is by his relationship to the sisters. It is as if his existence depends on the sisters. It has been two years since he created his last work and he is unable to work on anything but an image he has in mind that he thinks is not appropriate: “the image of a man and woman, their bodies made brilliant with painted flowers, having sex against a background of unutterable silence” (Kang, 95). The reason why he thinks this is inappropriate is because all the sketches he does about this scene feature his sister-in-law Yeong-hye. This obsession comes from his hearing from In-hye that Yeong-hye still has her Mongolian mark, which is a mark that newborn babies have on their buttocks for a certain amount of time and fades away after puberty. This Mongolian mark is but a simple yet important proclamation; Yeong-hye, who struggles with the ultimate innocence throughout the novel has a mark that only babies have. Just like Apollo, the artist of this novel, who remains nameless, is obsessed with corrupting, conquering this purity. He becomes obsessed with the Mongolian Mark and the moment he hears about it he is inspired: “In precisely that moment he was struck by the image of a blue flower on a woman’s buttocks, its petals opening outwards. In his mind, the fact that his sister-in-law still had a Mongolian mark on her buttocks became inexplicably bound up with the image of men and women having sex, their naked bodies completely covered with painted flowers. The causality linking these two things was so clear, so obvious, as to be somehow beyond comprehension, and thus it became etched to his mind”(Kang, 59). He finds himself desiring Yeong-hye so much that he imagines himself as the man in his drawings having sex with Yeong-hye, and feels that there is no way he would be able to continue his life if this image in him didn’t become a reality.

He is entirely caught up in his vision, and even though his is probably the only narrative in the novel that is able to register Yeong-hye’s shift as she goes through her journey, he acts only to gratify his impulse to make the image in his mind a reality. There are many instances in this chapter where the impression he gets from Yeong-hye is much more accurate than anyone else’s: “She might well be called ugly in comparison with his wife, but to him she radiated energy, like a tree that grows in the wilderness, denuded and solitary” (Kang 64). When Yeong-hye comes over to the studio to be painted with flowers, he thinks: “Her voice had no weight to it, like feathers...It was the quiet tone of a person

who didn't belong anywhere, someone who had passed into a border area between states of being" (Kang, 71). Maybe that is the exact reason why he is captivated by Yeong-hye; however, all he will end up doing is hurt Yeong-hye even further, as when he sees that Yeong-hye likes the flowers drawn upon her. At this stage the boundary between the reality and the depression is blurry for Yeong-hye. When she refuses to have sex with him, he asks whether she would be willing to do it if the flowers were drawn on him, and he takes her silence as a yes. When he goes back to her apartment with the flowers drawn all over him he will satisfy himself first and then remember to set up the equipment to film which is a very "Apolloesque" thing to do. And it is only at this stage that he remembers that Yeong-hye wants, or rather needs, to be able to see the flowers. Yeong-hye shouts "Stop" and cries during and after sex and asks whether the "dreams" would stop now however he is barely conscious at the time. Apollo's lament to Daphne to "given in" to him is based on Apollo and Apollo alone: it is a lament of gratification in which he announces himself as a god and hence deserves to "rape" this young water nymph.

In the *Metamorphoses* Book I, when Apollo sees Daphne, he envisions her a certain way. As Apollo announces his love he even tirades the "beauty" of Daphne and at one point he even refines Daphne's image when he says "... He gazes on her hair without adornment:/ 'What if it were done up a bit?' he asks/ and gazes on her eyes, as bright as stars..." (Martin, 1. 686-688) What gives the Apollo its "poetic material" is the objectification of Daphne. This objectification of Daphne turns her into a metaphor, an image in the poet's mind. As Apollo metamorphoses into a poet Daphne becomes a thing as a natural entity. Her metamorphosed self as the tree is not Daphne anymore, but the object on the other side of a gaze. The Daphne reader looks at does not have a voice; just as a "true" object she loses her personal voice. The moment of total objectification is probably the end of the Daphne narrative which goes: "Laurel shook her branches and seemed to nod her summit in assent..." (Martin, 1.782-783) Daphne becomes a memory and is the object of the gaze, because it "seems" that she nodded from the viewpoint of the artist.

The idea of the artist falling in love with their "creation" reminds another tragic myth from the *Metamorphoses* which is Pygmalion's love for his statue in Book X. However the resemblance in this thematic charge does not go beyond the fact that there is indeed an artist here that is infatuated with his own work of art. Pygmalion sculpts the statue and then falls in love with it but the artist of the *Vegetarian* "molds" Yeong-hye to the

“visions” he is having, especially after hearing that she still has her Mongolian mark.<sup>5</sup> Being infatuated with a vision; a kind of vision that resembles a narrative created by an objectifying gaze however, bids the story of Andromeda and Perseus in Book IV. From the moment Perseus sees Andromeda he treats her as a statue and the object, as Segal says: “Completely and helplessly exposed to his vision, Andromeda is the inverse of Pygmalion’s beloved, a living body made into a statue-like spectacle for a male viewer...” (Segal, 19) Andromeda’s voice, on the other hand, is not heard much and especially after being freed she will only be mentioned at the wedding. The following episode which ends the fourth book is where Perseus emerges as a story-teller, kind of like an artist figure, and tells the story of how he beheaded Medusa. The dual-metaphor here is intriguing, Perseus frees Andromeda from the chains only to marry her which says so much about the “freeing” in the first place. Perseus even says: “...These chains don’t do you justice/ the only chains that you should wear are those/ that ardent lovers put on in their passion” (Martin, IV. 928-930) Ovid's clever use of the motif of chains here goes to show that will never be free of “chains” be them actual or metaphorical. In this sense the silenced Andromeda of the *Metamorphoses* reminds the silenced Yeong-hye of the *Vegetarian*; even after her divorce and the struggle she has with her preliminary stages of anorexia in the second chapter, she will be “chained” and viewed again as an object of the male gaze, this time by an artist. I have discussed above that the artist of the *Vegetarian* is aware of the precarious state Yeong-hye is in, both mentally and physically. However the moment he places Yeong-hye in the center of his artistic visions, he chains her to be the object of his fantasies. Just as Perseus’ choice of “defense”, which enables the epic way of his existence in the myths, is turning his enemies into statues with the attached head of Medusa on his shield; the artist is misled further into his fantasies because he assumes it might also be what Yeong-hye wants as she enjoys the flowers drawn on her body. Perseus frees Andromeda from the chains by metaphorically bonding her and he actually causes his enemies to transform into stone statues with his shield. It is curious that what the artist paints on Yeong-hye are vivid flowers, something she potentially longs to transform into, and it is the fulfillment of his fantasy that ends up causing even more harm

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<sup>5</sup> “In his mind, the fact that his sister-in-law still had a Mongolian mark on her buttocks became inexplicably bound up with the image of men and women having sex, their naked bodies completely covered with painted flowers. The causality linking these two things was so clear, so obvious, as to be somehow beyond comprehension, and thus it became etched into his mind. Though her face was missing, the woman in his sketch was undoubtedly his sister-in-law. No, it had to be her. He’d imagined what her naked body must look like and began to draw, finishing it off with a dot like a small blue petal in the middle of her buttocks, and he’d got an erection... And so who was the faceless man with his arms around her neck, looking as if he were attempting to throttle her, who was thrusting himself into her? He knew that it was himself...” (Kang, 60)

to Yeong-hye as she is raped and hospitalized again.

One of the characters whose story is kept under the wraps up until the third chapter is In-hye, and it is through this chapter that the metamorphosis Yeong-hye enables for In-hye takes place. From the first point the reader meets In-hye, she and Yeong-hye are always in unison in their comparison by other people. Mr. Cheong mentions how she is very unlike Yeong-hye as in more “charming” and “normal,” and as for In-hye’s husband, she is colder and more static than Yeong-hye. It is not until In-hye’s narration appears that an in-depth perspective about what it was that pushed Yeong-hye along with In-hye into this metamorphosis emerges.

By the third chapter Yeong-hye is hospitalized and re-hospitalized as her situation keeps deteriorating since she refuses to eat and is convinced that she only needs water to survive. In-hye, who feels extremely responsible for Yeong-hye, not only visits her in the hospital ward she is staying, but brings her fruits and vegetables she likes and pays for her hospital fees. These trips, along with everything that is changing in In-hye’s life, after her husband’s disappearance and her parents not getting involved with Yeong-hye after her divorce goes through, lead In-hye to start questioning everything about her relationship with Yeong-hye. In the beginning of the last chapter it is apparent that she is indignant and in denial: “Might it be okay, after all, for Yeong-hye to live like this indefinitely? Here, where she didn’t have to speak if she didn’t want to, didn’t have to eat meat if the thought repulsed her? Couldn’t the two of them get along just fine with these occasional visits?” (Kang, 129). Yeong-hye has destroyed the flawed and extremely silenced but violent nature of things in the family and it is impossible to go back to the status quo; the reason why In-hye is sad about this is not the financial side of things but because this situation has surfaced what she has been repressing, what she chose not to deal with and denied until the very end. Her visits to her sister reminded her of all the things she buried deep down.

The first inclination she has is to question the day their family tried to make Yeong-hye eat meat. It was the moment when everyone’s lives changed irreversibly; everything that was once not talked about became inevitable realities: “She’d stood and watched, stiff as a ramrod, while Yeong-hye howled like an animal and spat out the meat, then picked up the fruit knife and slit her own wrist. Wasn’t there something she could have done to

prevent it? Again and again, doubts raced through her mind. Was there really nothing she could have done to stop their father's hand that day?...The lives of all the people around her had tumbled down like a house of cards —was there really nothing else she could have done?" (Kang, 136).

However she also blames Yeong-hye, as she keeps validating the reasons for what she did. If only she kept quiet, if only she didn't let herself go against a dream she had, if only she didn't escape from the hospital: "Even as a child, In-hye had possessed the innate strength of character necessary to make one's own way in life. as a daughter, as an older sister, as a wife and as a mother, as the owner of a shop, even as an underground passenger on the briefest of journeys, she had always done her best. Through the sheer inertia of a life lived in this way, she would have been able to conquer everything, even time. If only Yeong-hye hadn't suddenly disappeared last March. If only she hadn't been discovered in the forest that rainy night. If only all of her symptoms hadn't suddenly got worse" (Kang, 139). At this point Yeong-hye is seriously ill because she refuses medication and insists on not eating. Doctors suggest a discharge from the hospital. However, In-hye is overwhelmed. Even though she seemed caring and concerned, which she was, she is also bothered by what Yeong-hye makes her feel:"Though the ostensible reason for her not wanting Yeong-hye to be discharged, the reason that she gave the doctor, was this worry about a possible relapse, now she was able to admit to herself what had really been going on. She was no longer able to cope with all that her sister reminded her of. She'd been unable to forgive her for soaring alone over a boundary she herself could never bring herself to cross, unable to forgive that magnificent irresponsibility that had enabled Yeong-hye to shuck off social constraints and leave her behind, still a prisoner. And before Yeong-hye had broken those bars, she'd never even known they were there."(Kang, 175) She is aware of the fact that Yeong-hye is "justified" in reacting the way she is; however, she is mad that Yeong-hye has shut down completely, that she is "magnificently irresponsible" in giving in to these feelings.

As In-hye goes back and forth trying to decide on how to act, she starts seeing that the problem is much deeper. Even though at times she deems her sister irresponsible and careless for giving in, she also allows herself to feel the burden, the hefty weight of the violence she and Yeong-hye have been putting up with. In-hye starts questioning all the moments she witnessed, the moments in which she could have done something instead of

keeping quiet. She recounts all the times their father beat them, reporting that most of the time Yeong-hye suffered from the beatings. She keeps going back to the time the two sisters got lost and Yeong-hye suggested to run away and what would have happened if they did. Connecting it with the events that led up to Yeong-hye's hospitalization, her state of mind is inevitable, she blames herself: "Could I have prevented it? Could I have prevented those unimaginable things from sinking so deep inside of Yeong-hye and holding her in their grip? ... Had they run away from home that evening, as Yeong-hye had suggested, would it all have been different? At the family gathering that day, if she'd been more forceful when she grabbed their father's arm, before he struck Yeong-hye in the face, would it all have been different then?" (Kang, 158).

What could be considered as her "transformation" is actualized when in her final visit to Yeong-hye she learns that her sister needs to be transported to another hospital. Her organs are shutting down due to malnutrition and she is refusing treatment. Yeong-hye is not conscious and she cannot calm herself down; she does not want medication or anyone putting anything in her body. As the carers are trying to put in a tube for her to breathe Yeong-hye cannot keep still so the staff wants to forcibly tranquilize her. This is when In-hye, unlike all the other times she regrets she has not said anything, starts shouting and screaming: "'Don't!' In-hye screams, her voice drawn out like a wail. 'Stop it! Don't! Please don't!' She bites the arm of the carer holding her and throws herself forward again...'Stop it, for god's sake. Please stop...' In-hye grabs the wrist of the head nurse, the one who is holding the syringe with the tranquilizer, as Yeong-hye quietly convulses against her chest" (Kang, 176). As someone who has witnessed violence without being able to say anything, as someone who has been silenced, she is finally able to protect her sister and thus end her own suffering, which is quintessentially her "transformation".

The story of Yeong-hye, In-hye and her husband recalls a very tragic story in the *Metamorphoses*: the story of Philomela and Procne. The myth which is roughly about the rape of Philomela and the mutilation of her tongue by Tereus, and the vengeance the sisters plan afterward, has a strange connection to the characters in the *Vegetarian* aside from the obviously cataclysmic nature of the relationships. Philomela's story is indeed similar to Yeong-hye's in the sense that they both respond to a kind of violence that stems from the patriarchal and the familial. Elissa Marder in her article titled "Disarticulated Voices: Feminism and Philomela" talks about the importance of the part where Philomela



speaks after the rape and asks whether Tereus didn't care about the promises he made to her father (Martin, VI.768) or the divine law of marriage (Martin, VI.769). Marder underlines the fact that even with those last words Philomela calls the name of her father<sup>6</sup> and that the only language Philomela can speak is related to patriarchal law: "It is perhaps because the invocation of patriarchal law, the stability of place within the patriarchal law, is the only language that this tongue can speak. Philomela has been doubly silenced, first by the rapist who transgresses the father's law and then by the paternal law itself. Philomela's tongue speaks only the language of the law: the name of the father. While the horror of the rape violates the paternal order, the effects of the rape disclose the implicit violation by the paternal order" (Marder, 160). Marder supports her statement by stating that the way Philomela communicates the silence of her body is "a language that is no longer bound to the body" (Marder, 160). The sister's transformations are both reactions to violence; Yeong-hye's is about the (im)possibility of innocence and In-hye's is about silence against violence however, Yeong-hye responds through her body while In-hye's response is not bound to her body.

This myth recalls the relationships in the *Vegetarian* not just because Yeong-hye bears tragic resemblances to Philomela but also to Procne too, considering the mere fact that In-hye's husband raped Yeong-hye. In-hye does not seek revenge, however, which is the stark difference between her and Procne. Although it is true that what her husband does is what brings about In-hye's "metamorphosis," she starts questioning herself, which brings back everything that was ever pent-up about herself and her position in the family as a daughter but more importantly as a sister. Just like Procne, however, she understands this new "language" that her sister is speaking; in fact she has understood the language all along but was too docile to show any sign. Marder points to the importance of the Bacchus rites after Procne saves Philomela and decides to take revenge. According to Marder these rites blur the lines between the static, the real and the mundane to the mad and the ecstatic and they provide the medium for the sisters to unite and says that when

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<sup>6</sup> "In his mind, the fact that his sister-in-law still had a Mongolian mark on her buttocks became inexplicably bound up with the image of men and women having sex, their naked bodies completely covered with painted flowers. The causality linking these two things was so clear, so obvious, as to be somehow beyond comprehension, and thus it became etched into his mind. Though her face was missing, the woman in his sketch was undoubtedly his sister-in-law. No, it had to be her. He'd imagined what her naked body must look like and began to draw, finishing it off with a dot like a small blue petal in the middle of her buttocks, and he'd got an erection...And so who was the faceless man with his arms around her neck, looking as if he were attempting to throttle her, who was thrusting himself into her? He knew that it was himself..." (Kang, 60)

Procne understands Philomela she leaves the patriarchal tongue behind: “Like Philomela, Procne can no longer speak with the tongue. To refuse the language of the tongue is also to refuse to speak the tongue of the ‘name of the father’” (Marder, 161). For In-hye this is not until the very end of the novel in which she whispers to Yeong-hye, who lies unconscious in her hospital bed about the dreams she too is having: “She bows her head. But then, as though suddenly struck by something, she brings her mouth right up to Yeong-hye’s ear and carries on speaking, forming the words carefully, one by one. “I have dreams too, you know. Dreams...and I could let myself dissolve into them, let them take me over...but surely the dream isn’t all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don’t we?” (Kang, 182). This “sudden” moment is not just important for the completion of In-hye’s transformation; it is the acknowledgement Yeong-hye has been waiting for. She is not alone; In-hye is aware of the things she is going through too, it was a dream that started Yeong-hye’s metamorphosis in the first place. There is another dream about In-hye that creates a strange link to the myth after all which is directly about the physical aspect of the metamorphosis. One of the nights prior to In-hye’s last visit to the hospital she is unable to sleep and just as it gets suffocating she leaves her sleeping son in the house and walks out of the house steadily; walking towards the mountain. It is, to her astonishment the night Yeong-hye escapes from the hospital convinced that she was hearing someone calling her in the forest. Again to her astonishment it is the same night her son had a dream, a dream in which he saw his mother as a bird: “There was this photo of you, Mum, flying about in the wind. I was looking at the sky, okay, and there was a bird, and I heard it say, ‘I’m your mum.’ And these two hands came out of the bird’s body.”...She slipped a hand under his chin and tilted his head up. “Look, your mum’s right here. I haven’t changed into a white bird, you see?...You see, it was just a dream.”But was that really true? Right then, in the ambulance, she wasn’t sure. Had it really been just a dream, a mere coincidence?” (Kang, 181).

The metamorphosis is not in becoming the bird for In-hye but “not” becoming one. The fact that her son dreamt about In-hye as a bird flying around not only creates a peculiar link between the myth and the novel but also suggests how In-hye lingered in the lines of her own transformation. It is apparent that she easily could have become a “bird” leaving everything and everyone behind.

Joseph Solodow, in his book *The World of Ovid's Metamorphoses*, comments on the

nature of the metamorphoses in Ovid. He underlines the fact that there is indeed a “continuity” between what the person was and what they transformed into. However, there is no way to predict exactly what they will metamorphose to. (Solodow, 174) He asks what metamorphosis is and reaches the conclusion that it is a “clarification”: “It is a process by which characteristics of a person, essential or incidental, are given physical embodiments and so are rendered visible and manifest”. (Solodow, 174) It is this nature of Ovidian metamorphoses that enables to deepen the literal and the figurative transformation. What Han Kang manages to do with the *Vegetarian* is to make room for the prediction of a physical transformation that is bound to fail anyways. By pushing the limits of the literal transformation Kang allows room for prediction; it is clear by the end of the novel why Yeong-hye wants to become a tree or why In-hye is able to break free from her silence. Kang introduces the physical aspect of metamorphoses in a reversed way; even though the element of the physical is almost tangible they are not actualized. What Kang does is she “transforms” these metamorphoses into uncanny realities.

## CHAPTER 2:

### SELF-STARVATION:

#### A COMPARATIVE READING OF BARTLEBY AND YEONG-HYE

*“Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance. If the individual so resisted be of a not inhumane temper, and the resisting one perfectly harmless in his passivity; then, in the better moods of the former, he will endeavor charitably to construe to his imagination what proves impossible to be solved by his judgment. Even so, for the most part, I regarded Bartleby and his ways. Poor fellow!”*

*Herman Melville in Bartleby the Scrivener*

Unique as it is Yeong-hye’s failed metamorphosis reveals a lot not just for configuration of the transformation but about the underlying causes of metamorphosis one of which is triggered by self-starvation. It is because Yeong-hye gradually stops eating that what was discussed as “failed” metamorphosis happens. In that respect she follows her literary friends who before her have suffered from self-starvation which has led to some kind of transformation. On an imaginary literary “scale” of Herman Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener”, who starves himself however does not go through a physical transformation, to Kafka’s Gregor Samsa, whose aftermath of a physical metamorphosis is askesis, it is easy to read Yeong-hye’s narrative closer to that of Bartleby’s than Samsa’s.<sup>7</sup> In this

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<sup>7</sup> Kafka is enthralled by stories of self-starvation and anorexia. Besides *The Metamorphoses*, the short stories *The Hunger Artist* and *The Investigations of a Dog* contains self-starving characters. Many critics claim this is closely related with the fact that Kafka himself was an anorexic and that he actually died of anorexia in 1924. Branka Arsic in her article “The Experimental Ordinary: Deleuze on Eating and Anorexic Elegance” positions Kafka as a “hunger artist” and goes into the “elegance” of self-starvation. Deleuze and Guattari in their *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* discuss Kafka’s eating disorder to conclude that his entire literary corpus is a long “history of fasts”. (Deleuze, 20) The reason why Kafka’s works are not included in this analysis is because the hunger discussed in these passages is not “elegant” as Arsic puts it. For *The Metamorphosis* Gregor’s case is different because he goes through a physical transformation and it is the transformation that sets the anorexia in motion not the other way around. The idea of hunger as art, or self-

chapter I would like to discuss the ways in which Yeong-hye's narrative is similar to Bartleby's and state the stark difference of Yeong-hye which enables another reading of her narrative in my last chapter. By looking into the similarities of self-starvation narratives I am hoping to establish a base-line to discuss what sets Yeong-hye apart and why.

Yeong-hye's and Bartleby's stories are uncannily similar not just in their narration but also in their narrators. Both start their stories by marginalizing their "victims". Mr. Cheong, who is the narrator I am basing my analysis on, says that Yeong-hye has been the most "unremarkable" woman he had ever met until she became a vegetarian. (Kang, 3) For the lawyer Bartleby is the strangest scrivener he had ever met: "But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener of the strangest I ever saw or heard of..." (Melville, 3) These introductions are important not just because they will set the tone for the rest of the story but because they pave the way for the most significant similarity of both narrators which is their self-validation. They are the know-it-alls, the observers and the ones that make the ultimate deductions. Just as Mr. Cheong<sup>8</sup>, the lawyer of Wall Street starts off by stating that he is "an elderly man" and he has experienced quite a lot to bring about his deductions of Bartleby. He then gives an explanation for his character: "I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best. Hence, though I belong to a profession proverbially energetic and nervous, even to turbulence, at times, yet nothing of that sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace. I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds..." (Melville, 3)

The narrators situate themselves to underline the fact that whatever it was that Bartleby

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starvation as a different kind of sustenance is intriguing. However, when Yeong-hye is concerned, discussing her hunger as something other than its relation to innocence, and Yeong-hye's devotion to it would be taking away from the meaning between eating and existing that Yeong-hye seems to have formed.

<sup>8</sup> Mr. Cheong also has an extensive summary of his "middle-way" in life: "I've always inclined toward the middle course in life. At school I chose to boss around those who were two or three years my junior, and with whom I could act the ringleader, rather than take my chances with those my own age, and later I chose which college to apply to based on my chances of obtaining a scholarship large enough for my needs. Ultimately, I settled for a job where I would be provided with a decent monthly salary in return for diligently carrying out my allotted tasks, at a company whose small size meant they would value my unremarkable skills. And so, it was only natural that I would marry the most run-of-the-mill woman in the world. As for women who were pretty, intelligent, strikingly sensual, the daughters of rich families—they would only have served to disrupt my carefully ordered existence..." (Kang, 4)

or Yeong-hye did disrupted the perfect balance set up by the mediocrity of their own existence. It is intended that their introductions show how they have understood the world and conquered it. The lawyer of Wall Street provides long passages in the very beginning of the story in which he gives descriptions of the people in the office with nicknames instead of their own names.<sup>9</sup>

In this “peaceful” mediocre and fully mastered life of theirs both the lawyer and Mr. Cheong reveal the stark difference between before and after somethings start to go wrong. Both Yeong-hye and Bartleby are placed in a space of their own and things “seem” to be going well at first. The lawyer places Bartleby out of sight yet still close by so that Bartleby will be able to serve to his needs: “I placed his desk close up to a small side-window in that part of the room, a window which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain grimy back-yards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light. Within three feet of the panes was a wall, and the light came down from far above, between two lofty buildings, as from a very small opening in a dome. Still further to a satisfactory arrangement, I procured a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice. And thus, in a manner, privacy and society were conjoined...” (Melville, 9) Just as Yeong-hye has a room in the house which she seldomly leaves: “While I idled the afternoon away, TV remote in hand, she would shut herself up in her room. More than likely she would spend the time reading, which was practically her only hobby. For some unfathomable reason, reading was something she was able to really immerse herself in—reading books that looked so dull I couldn’t even bring myself to so much as take a look inside the covers. Only at mealtimes would she open the door and silently emerge to prepare the food...” (Kang, 5)

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<sup>9</sup> “Though concerning the self-indulgent habits of Turkey, I had my own private surmises, yet touching Nippers I was well persuaded that whatever might be his faults in other respects, he was, at least, a temperate young man. But indeed, nature herself seemed to have been his vintner, and at his birth charged him so thoroughly with an irritable, brandy-like disposition, that all subsequent potations were needless. When I consider how, amid the stillness of my chambers, Nippers would sometimes impatiently rise from his seat, and stooping over his table, spread his arms wide apart, seize the whole desk, and move it, and jerk it, with a grim, grinding motion on the floor, as if the table were a perverse voluntary agent, intent on thwarting and vexing him; I plainly perceive that for Nippers, brandy and water were altogether superfluous. It was fortunate for me that, owing to its peculiar cause—indigestion—the irritability and consequent nervousness of Nippers, were mainly observable in the morning, while in the afternoon he was comparatively mild. So that Turkey’s paroxysms only coming on about twelve o’clock, I never had to do with their eccentricities at one time. Their fits relieved each other like guards. When Nippers’ was on, Turkey’s was off; and vice versa. This was a good natural arrangement under the circumstances...” (Melville, 8) This passage goes to show not only the tone of which the lawyer talks about the people in the office, as the all-knowing god-like narrator, but also is an interesting perspective which I will discuss later on in this chapter. The most prominent way the lawyer seems to observe the other lawyers is through everyone’s eating habits. I will consider his comments on Bartleby’s eating habits and what they reveal about Bartleby’s anorexia later on.

Both stories kick off with disruptions to the narrator's peaceful balance; both of them are subjected to something they find unfathomable. For the lawyer this is the very famous phrase: "I would prefer not to." and for Mr. Cheong this is "I had a dream."<sup>10</sup> The instances in which both face these mantra-like sentences are substantial.<sup>11</sup> The lawyer is struck and is unable to say something at first. As the lawyer sees how composed Bartleby is he just unable to face with what he is saying.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, Mr. Cheong wakes up in the middle of the night to find his wife staring into the refrigerator with pieces of meat and meat containing dishes scattered about. Just like the lawyer he is unable to understand what Yeong-hye is saying however his account has a slight edge, due to the nature of their relationship, he concludes it by saying that he doesn't even want to reach to her with his words.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For Mr. Cheong there are multiple mantra like sentences that he doesn't understand or isn't able understand Yeong-hye like why she doesn't like to wear a bra. (He states that she doesn't even have "shapely breasts" for her to suit a no bra look (Kang, 5). He also does not understand her "vegetarianism" stating that the only reasons one should be a vegetarian is either to lose weight or because of indigestion. Otherwise it is "sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against the wishes of her husband" (Kang 14)

<sup>11</sup> In "Bartleby or the Formula" Deleuze summarizes what the phrase "prefer not to" signifies. Bartleby unsettles notions of self and subjectivity and unsettles questions of subjectivity. He undermines the established identities of the other characters around him especially the lawyer and he manages to do all these not through particular actions, different kinds of experiences and relationships he shares with others but basically by repeating phrase. (Deleuze, 69) Bartleby's presence in the story is to a large extent very linguistic. he mobilizes confusing, disturbing power of language with the prefer not to. constant repetition and each time it is uttered it does some work it construct and deconstruct things. the whole thing works not because of the individuality and particularities of Bartleby but because of the power of the formulation of self in a way to unsettle the way in which the "normal" language functions. Deleuze states that even though seemingly it is a very grammatical phrase, it is actually very ungrammatical and it doesn't obey the rules of "ordinary" language. It never becomes coupled with an object because it never addresses a particular question or order that is given to him. Because it works more by repetition than by meaning. In a sense it is an empty statement, it doesn't necessarily mean anything, which makes it the formula. (Deleuze, 71) For Yeong-hye a similar case could be made, the content of the dream is not very important, the fact that it was vile and it repeats to make things even more disturbing is important. And she doesn't have a single formula, however she uses the Deleuzian formula with her responses because she unsettles everyone around her, especially Mr. Cheong.

<sup>12</sup> "I sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying my stunned faculties. Immediately it occurred to me that my ears had deceived me, or Bartleby had entirely misunderstood my meaning. I repeated my request in the clearest tone I could assume. But in quite as clear a one came the previous reply, "I would prefer not to." "Prefer not to," echoed I, rising in high excitement, and crossing the room with a stride. "What do you mean? Are you moon-struck? I want you to help me compare this sheet here—take it," and I thrust it towards him. "I would prefer not to," said he. I looked at him steadfastly. His face was leanly composed; his gray eye dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises... I stood gazing at him awhile, as he went on with his own writing, and then reseated myself at my desk. This is very strange, thought I. What had one best do? But my business hurried me. I concluded to forget the matter for the present, reserving it for my future leisure..." (Melville, 10-11)

<sup>13</sup> "Why are you standing there like that? What's going on?" When I put my hand on her shoulder I was surprised by her complete lack of reaction. I had no doubt that I was in my right mind and all this was really happening; I had been fully conscious of everything I had done since emerging from the living room, asking her what she was doing, and moving toward her. She was the one standing there completely unresponsive, as though lost in her own world... "Hey!" Her profile swam toward me out of the darkness. I took in her eyes, bright but not feverish, as her lips slowly parted. "I had a dream." Her voice was surprisingly clear. "A dream?"

Against these acts of passive resistance the narrators seem to follow the same steps. First they recoil and as they are evaluating the situation they try to come with an explanation. They go through various stages of “acceptance” of this annoying situation. The lawyer decides to accept Bartleby’s presence and thinks that he is doing the “poor guy” a favor. Even though he thinks that she is selfish to act the way Yeong-hye does, Mr. Cheong also decides to see her as a sister, as someone he is stuck with.<sup>14</sup> This obviously has a limit and the narrators will not hold true to their initial decision to just acknowledge and “live” with them. Their frustration is evident, it is more evident in the lawyer’s case. After he discovers that Bartleby has been living in his office, he is infuriated. He feels threatened when he finds out that someone else has been living in a space where he had absolute authority. He says: “Indeed, it was his wonderful mildness chiefly, which not only disarmed me, but unmanned me, as it were. For I consider that one, for the time, is a sort of unmanned when he tranquilly permits his hired clerk to dictate to him, and order him away from his own premises...”(Melville, 16) For a man of reason who is obsessed with doing the rational and ethical thing this is a point where he starts acting irrational; his actions from this point on is more like attacking then simply acknowledgement or criticism. This is when he reiterates the priorly “acknowledged” enigma of “prefer not to” in front of Nippers which will violate Bartleby. It is when Nippers uses “prefer to” in front of Bartleby that transforms Bartleby’s existence for the rest of the story as his health deteriorates. For Yeong-hye this what is referred to as “unmanning” has much more brutal consequences. After the dinner with colleagues Mr. Cheong will completely lose sense of his acknowledgement for not only will he tell Yeong-hye’s parents, knowing that her abusive father will not tolerate her becoming a vegetarian but he will rape her constantly up until she is hospitalized after her suicide attempt. Both narrators in their self-validating narratives know how to manipulate people around them and bluntly do it to rectify and satisfy themselves. And both narrators act out of a threat to their masculinity, rendering

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What the hell are you talking about? Do you know what time it is?...If I stood perfectly still, held my breath and strained to listen, I was able to hear the faintest sound of breathing coming from where she lay. Yet it didn’t sound like the deep, regular breathing of someone who has fallen asleep. I could have reached out to her, and my hand would have encountered her warm skin. But for some reason I found myself unable to touch her. I didn’t even want to reach out to her with words...” (Kang, 9)

<sup>14</sup> “I sometimes told myself that even though the woman I was living with was a little odd, nothing particularly bad would come of it. I thought I could get by perfectly well just thinking of her as a stranger, or no, as a sister, or even a maid, someone who puts food on the table and keeps the house in good order...” (Kang, 30)



the opposing side as selfish and a nuisance for themselves. In fact they even take pride in knowing that their plan will work. The lawyer even says: “As I walked home in a pensive mood, my vanity got the better of my pity. I could not but highly plume myself on my masterly management in getting rid of Bartleby. Masterly I call it, and such it must appear to any dispassionate thinker...” (Melville, 22) Mr. Cheong calls Yeong-hye’s mother and sister and even considers calling her brother but stops thinking it would be taking things too far. (Kang, 28)

For the reader both reading experiences are scary because it follows the mind of the perpetrator. It is important to note the difference in these otherwise very similar narratives of self-obsessed narrators. The lawyer of Wall Street’s narrative is more explanatory and descriptive and the narrative shows his decision making and questioning process which is not directly evident in Mr. Cheong’s narration of Yeong-hye. The lawyer is uncannily aware of his self-validation. Quotes referenced above about Bartleby “unmanning” him or how the fact that pride about the plan he came up with, has taken over his utter disgust of Bartleby are mere examples of a text that is filled with such motives of actions. Unlike the merciless and cold perspective of Mr. Cheong the lawyer seems to pity Bartleby and even states that they are both “sons of Adm”. (Melville, 17) Obviously this does not take away from the obnoxiously self-justifying and smart aleck attitude both narrators have. It only goes further in questioning the sincerity of the lawyer; the way he seems to use some kind of morality over Bartleby only aids in misunderstanding him more. For example there is no evidence to support that Bartleby was blind; it is nothing more than a “deduction” made out of the pity of the lawyer. Mr. Cheong on the other hand, is not bound by “morality”. He validate himself well, even when he rapes Yeong-hye saying that he is a man in the prime of his life. (Kang, 30) At the end of his narrative Mr. Cheong is disgusted by Yeong-hye. He can’t stand to be in the same room with her after she is hospitalized. As Bartleby’s story ends with the lament “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!” (Melville, 34) Mr. Cheong’s ends with utter disgust; he can’t even stand being alone with Yeong-hye in the hospital ward.

Even though the exact details of her occupation is unknown Yeong-hye is also a kind of a scrivener. It is reported by Mr. Cheong that she fills the speeches bubbles in the comics from her computer. In a sense this is the first thing that connects her and Bartleby who are both “copyists”. Both are redeemed to be something by someone; their narrators are

who write their stories even though both are physical writers. For Bartleby being a scrivener is the reason why he exists in the law firm and thus, in a very simple sense, writing is his the *raison d'être* for the story. For Yeong-hye this is not writing but her “peculiar” vegetarianism which starts as veganism rather than vegetarianism, but turns into a life-threatening anorexia nervosa. Even from the very title of their stories it seems apparent that Bartleby is “the scrivener” and Yeong-hye is “the vegetarian”; these are what sets them apart from the rest of the characters and especially what marginalizes them for their narrators.

Another connection Bartleby and Yeong-hye have are their anorexias (anorexia nervosa to be exact).<sup>15</sup> Both of them deteriorate in health throughout their stories without the narrators grasping what is going on. As shown above both narrators are aware of the “bizarre” eating habits of the protagonists. The lawyer has closely examined the eating habits of the other inhabitants of the office, one of the first things he mentions about Bartleby is his eating of ginger nuts while making the connotation that gingers and Bartleby’s character disagree with each other.<sup>16</sup> It is interesting that he assumes a vegetarianism too. He thinks about health conditions of a diet consisting of ginger nuts. Mr. Cheong’s reaction is similar as he thinks about why someone would give up eating meat. These pretentious health concerns are also verbalized in the company dinner with Mr. Cheong’s colleagues. Suddenly everyone starts talking about how vegetarianism is unhealthy and senseless. Someone even points out how uncomfortable it is eating with a vegetarian because of a possible guilt trip.<sup>17</sup> The lawyer never confronts Bartleby for his eating probably because Bartleby’s anorexic evolution just adds to his peculiar being. Yeong-hye on the other hand is verbally and physically assaulted for her dietary choices

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<sup>15</sup> The third chapter of this thesis goes into anorexia nervosa, its definition and origin.

<sup>16</sup> “He lives, then, on ginger-nuts, thought I; never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian then; but no; he never eats even vegetables, he eats nothing but ginger-nuts. My mind then ran on in reveries concerning the probable effects upon the human constitution of living entirely on ginger-nuts. Ginger-nuts are so called because they contain ginger as one of their peculiar constituents, and the final flavoring one. Now what was ginger? A hot, spicy thing. Was Bartleby hot and spicy? Not at all. Ginger, then, had no effect upon Bartleby. Probably he preferred it should have none...” (Melville, 12)

<sup>17</sup> “Well, I must say, I’m glad I’ve still never sat down with a proper vegetarian. I’d hate to share a meal with someone who considers eating meat repulsive, just because that’s how they themselves personally feel...don’t you agree?”...“Imagine you were snatching up a wriggling baby octopus with your chopsticks and chomping it to death—and the woman across from you glared like you were some kind of animal. That must be how it feels to sit down and eat with a vegetarian...” (Kang, 24)

which is one of the main factors in her advancement in anorexia nervosa.

In her *Anorexic Affect: Disordered Eating and the Conative Body* Janis Ledwel Hunt raises an interesting question about Bartleby's anorexia. In questioning the validity of the information the readers have of Bartleby she says: "I could easily argue that Bartleby is an anorexic, but, again, such an appraisal would reproduce the attorney's representational logic. Bartleby is not. He acts. He starves. He prefers not to. He sticks. He stays. He attaches. He exhausts. He sits. He sleeps. He eats ginger-nuts (supposedly). He affects. He mobilizes the bodies around him..."(Hunt, 135) Hunt states that the only evidence given to support Bartleby's anorexia is provided by the lawyer which deems it incorrect: "These are textual moments where the process of encounter is abruptly seized by the espousal of a level of depth that disrupts the interplay of surfaces. Differently put, only by keeping Bartleby emptied of content (of psychological depth, of preference, of cumulative nourishment) can we affirm the operations of his anorexic affect (his dynamic immovability, his action-in-relation, his exhaustion, his linguistic invention, and the fasting speed of his transpositions)..." (Hunt, 137) To say that he is anorexic would be to hallow out Bartleby just as the lawyer does as the narrator of the story. What about his physical existence or his relationship with food? Hunt comments that the relationship Bartleby has with the food is his way of connecting to the organic presence of an office: "...reading Bartleby's eating and fasting behaviors as hermetically sealed from the rest of the office and world. On the contrary, I have argued that his acts surrounding food consumption can be read as a process of involvement with the organic and organized dyspeptic derangements of the office space..." (Hunt, 141) Even though the lawyer's "interference" and "intrusion" is apparent I disagree with Hunt on Bartleby's anorexia being made as an assumption concluded from the perspective of the lawyer. At first Bartleby appears as a character that doesn't eat much; the only mentions of food is the previous ginger-nut comment, a decline of a dinner invitation and some cheese that the lawyer finds upon going through Bartleby's desk. However the deterioration of Bartleby's health is undeniable. Not only does he stop writing or moving but he also stops eating. This goes for Yeong-hye too, even though there are short narratives in which her stream of consciousness is provided. The main reason given by Mr. Cheong's narration is because of her "vegetarianism". Even though it is because of equation of violence and eating that she suffers from anorexia it is still clear that she indeed has a problematic relationship with food, to say the least. It is also possible that the reader of *The Vegetarian*

gets to distance themselves more with the second and the their narration which are written in third person narration.

Hunt also mentions what Branka Arsic introduces in her *Passive Constitutions: 7 1/2 Times Bartleby*. According to Arsic what Melville achieves with the text is a kind of ontology which is “a being that is not doing...” (Arsic, 140). Arsic bases her argument on Bartleby’s passivity in the story, what the narrator calls “ghostly” presence.<sup>18</sup> His fast challenges everything about everyone around him. As Hunt says: “Bartleby instigates movement by remaining perfectly immovable. His fast yields a different version of speed. This is not capitalist speed tied to efficiency, but a version of momentum connected to affect. Bartleby’s fast transposes the temporal and spatial dimensions of production...” (Hunt, 132) This too is similar to Yeong-hye’s existence in the novel. In the previous chapter I talked about how Han Kang “fails” the metamorphosis and thus challenges the physicality of the transformation. In that sense Yeong-hye also challenges being. She too shows the cruelty, the selfishness of the obnoxiously self-justifying of the world around her by being totally marginalized in narration.

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<sup>18</sup> Both narrators actually mention how ghostly their subjects are. The lawyer says: “What shall I do? what ought I to do? what does conscience say I should do with this man, or rather ghost...” (Melville , 27) Mr. Cheong says: “Her face was turned away from me, and she was standing there so unnaturally still it was almost as if she were some kind of ghost, silently standing its ground...”(Kang, 7)

**CHAPTER 3:**  
**THE INNOCENCE OF ANOREXIA**  
**OR THE ANOREXIA OF INNOCENCE?**

In the previous chapter I have discussed how these characters are labeled by their narrators which limit their existence in the text. For Yeong-hye I mainly focused on the first chapter in the novel which is from the first person narration of her husband Mr. Cheong. In the third chapter which follows Yeong-hye's sister In-hye in third person narration there is a scene that shows Yeong-hye as she is admitted to hospital. A conversation In-hye has with the doctor reveals that Yeong-hye is recognized as an anorexia nervosa patient:

“I know I told you this last time, but fifteen to twenty percent of anorexia nervosa patients will starve to death. Even when they're down to nothing but skin and bone, the subject is still convinced that they've put on weight. There can be all manner of psychological factors at play; a power struggle with a domineering mother, for example...but Kim Yeong-hye's is one of those particular cases where the subject refuses to eat while suffering from schizophrenia. We were confident that her schizophrenia wasn't serious; there was honestly no way for us to predict that things would turn out the way they have. In cases where the subject is paranoid about being poisoned, they can usually be reasoned with. Or else the doctor can eat the food in front of them, let them see that it's fine. But we're still not sure exactly why it is that Kim Yeong-hye is refusing to eat, and none of the medicines we've given her seem to have had any effect.” (Kang, 141)

The first thing to note about this episode would be the difference between anorexia and

anorexia nervosa. Even though the doctor recognizes Yeong-hye as an anorexia nervosa patient he still says that “she is convinced she has put on weight”. Following Yeong-hye’s story in the novel it is evident that her anorexia is not caused because of a struggle with body image and/or fat. In my final chapter I would like to discuss anorexia and anorexia nervosa as they appear in *The Vegetarian* to determine the circumstances surrounding Yeong-hye’s anorexia nervosa. I would like to question whether anorexia is only related to a matter of weight/fat/body image. Defining what anorexia nervosa is and determining what eating means in this context, I would like question the relationship the female body has with anorexia. And finally, I will ask how are all these related to Yeong-hye’s unique case as what Rudolph Bell introduces as “holy anorexia”?

Anorexia, in basic terms, is an self-imposed inability to take in food occasioned with the anxiety of one’s own body image which is a discourse of the patriarchal and the masculine. This is truly the way in which Yeong-hye’s doctor is enunciating anorexia to be. Even though it is true further explanation is needed to be able grasp the obvious crisis of the female body. Why is it self imposed? Why is it about the female body? Why is it a discourse of the patriarchal ideal?

In her book *Anorexic Affect: Disordered Eating and the Conative Body* Janis Ledwel Hunt underlines the oversimplification of anorexia. She says: “...my contention is that disordered eating and living need not be mutually exclusive. Some anorexics sustain their practices throughout their lives, and vital living is often occasioned by these practices. So long as anorexia is only read as conditioned by lacking, hollowing, disembodiment, disappearing, shrinking, and disengaging, we will remain unable to follow some of its divergent impulses...”(Hunt, 3) She says that most metaphors associated with anorexia is “frigidity,” “lack”, “childishness”, “incapacity” but when considered with the actual “anorexic practices” the discord is undeniable: “But now weigh these against some anorexic practices, its expressions, its somatic and sensory events: fidgeting, shivering, hungering, desiring, hyper-kinetically moving, measuring, considering, touching, binging, purging, feeling, sensing, cooking, drinking, chewing, sucking, memorizing, interrogating, expending, exhausting, exploring. There exists a troubling discord between anorexia’s metaphoricity and many of its constitutive practices...”(Hunt,3) Anorexia is self-imposed as it is a construct, and internalized as it is indefatigably a product of the patriarchal ideals. Susie Orbach in *Hunger Strike: the Anorexic’s Struggle as a Metaphor*

*for our Age* says: “Anorexia is an attempted solution to being in a world form which at the most profound level one feels excluded, an into which one feels deeply unentitled to enter. It is an attempt to be adequate, good enough, pure enough, saintly enough, sufficiently unsullied to be included and not rejected. It is an attempt to represent and exemplify the values of that world and through such conformism and acceptance and safety. At the same time, it is an implicit attempt to rise above the considerations and commonplace values of that world and in a sense reject them from a position of temporary superiority. Anorexia, then, is a psychological bridging mechanism designed to provide some way into connecting with the world. This having been said, we need to confront the question as to why the anorectic woman feels herself to be so deeply unentitled, rejected, inadequate, bad, impure and sullied...” (Orbach, 84) It is more than the image of the body, it is more than hating fat and wanting to avoid it as much as it includes it all. Orbach uses the term “hunger strike” as it is political protest and a struggle for power for women. (Orbach, 96) Looking at how Orbach “de-medicalizes and de-pathologizes” the anorexic subject Hunt comments that anorexia is “...no longer a disease or a singular subject’s neurosis, anorexia is the return of the repressed, or the political stance of women railing against the ways their bodies have been coded as inhospitably feminine...” (Hunt,28) This obviously rests on the equation of female with the body: the body is the representation of the female and that is what makes anorexia “the return of the repressed” because it is their bodies that have been “coded as inhospitably feminine” (Hunt, 28) This, most critics argue, is because woman assumes and is forced to assume the role of the body. Susan Bordo in her book *Unbearable Weight* says that it is this role that “weighs woman down” by everything that indicates it. (Bordo,18) She says: “The cost of such projections to women is obvious. For if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, the body is the negative term, and if woman is the body, then women are that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death...” (Bordo, 18) Bordo states that as the man casts himself as the pure, “the One and the All”, the reasonable and the rational; woman becomes the body, the caretaker and the “limitations of the flesh” becomes “the province of the female”. (Bordo,18) Eating disorders in this light are the representations of the alienation and the objectification the female body goes through, anorexia being only just one of them. Anorexia allows the female to “reject” her own body and transform it to become de-feminized. Orbach says: “In her attempts to conform or reject contemporary ideals of femininity, she uses the

weapon so often directed against her. She speaks with her body.”(Orbach, 28) In that sense anorexia is both a position forced on women but also a protest against “...what it means (discursively, culturally, biologically, politically, and economically) to be a woman...” (Hunt, 26)

Anorexia nervosa includes all of these definitions and arguments of body with a slight edge. Whereas in anorexia body image might be a deciding factor, anorexia nervosa usually “... manifests itself after an episode of sexual abuse or humiliation, can be seen as at least in part a defense against the "femaleness" of the body and a punishment of its desires...” (Bordo, 23) It is still against this internalized sense of masculine ideology however it is usually more episodic than anorexia. Joan Jacobs Brumberg in her *Fasting Girls: Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* defines anorexia nervosa as a kind of “perfectionism”: Anorexia nervosa appears to be a secular addiction to a new kind of perfectionism, one that links personal salvation to the achievement of an external body configuration rather than an internal spiritual state...” (Brumberg, 7) Using the word “perfectionism” I believe not only asserts a sense of totality and inescapability but also a sense of depletion. It is because of a failure in the “internal spiritual state” that the subject seeks to modify the “body”.

While discussing her “failed metamorphosis” in the first chapter, I looked at the underlying cause for Yeong-hye’s apparent anorexia nervosa. Through her fragmented dream like narratives in the first chapter, which are the few moments in the novel to hear her voice, and following the events leading unto her hospitalization her anorexia nervosa develops. This is because she is not an anorexic in the beginning of the novel. She starts looking at her own life differently with a dream which makes her a vegan, rather than a vegetarian. In her dream she becomes the predator, the one who perpetuates violence.<sup>19</sup> In the second narrative which is like a lament to Mr. Cheong or a stream of consciousness passage it becomes clear that the night she had the dream was of the day she served Mr.

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<sup>19</sup> This is referring to the very first narrative of Yeong-hye which is a summary of the dream that caused her veganism: “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...” “But the fear. My clothes still wet with blood. Hide, hide behind the trees. Crouch down, don’t let anybody see. My bloody hands. My bloody mouth. In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood. Chewing on something that felt so real, but couldn’t have been, it couldn’t. My face, the look in my eyes...my face, undoubtedly, but never seen before. Or no, not mine, but so familiar...nothing makes sense. Familiar and yet not...that vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling...” (Kang, 12)



Cheong with a dish only to find that a part of the knife was chopped into the food. As Mr. Cheong gets furious saying that he could have been dead she realizes that she is not agitated with this thought. It is, as I've discussed in the first chapter, this moment that sets things in motion. With the moment of almost feeling relief over Mr. Cheong's possible murder and the dream that follows it that night Yeong-hye sees her self as the perpetrator of violence.<sup>20</sup> She equates the violence she has been subjected to from her husband, from her family growing up to eating animal products; killing or torturing an animal for their bodies. Even though this is traumatic it doesn't lead to her anorexia nervosa. Her firm stand against eating or cooking meat or even sleeping with her husband because of his diet gets reactions firstly from her husband and his colleagues in the dinner they attend. Up until the moment she is raped by her husband, Yeong-hye has a vegan diet. It is after being continuously raped by Mr. Cheong and being force fed meat by her father and mother that triggers an anorexia nervosa response. Not only she attempts suicide with a kitchen knife after spatting out the meat but after she is hospitalized her mother tricks her into drinking some kind of a broth. She will spew it all up and have a break down. At the very end of Mr. Cheong's narration, following the drinking of the broth scene, she is discovered by the fountain, naked and clutching onto a dead bird. This scene signifies not only the equation she makes with eating animals to violence in the sense that she literally becomes the predator she has been dreaming of, but also a kind of equation that will reveal the unique way that shows her relationship with her body and to her existence as a human being. This moment demarcates her life before she had the dream quite clearly, for it is about coming face to face with the immorality of being; the guilt and the corruption of existing as a human being. In the next chapter Yeong-hye shows some improvement, after being separated from Mr. Cheong she starts eating again, her sister In-hye cooks for her. She is misled into what she believes as "salvation" and is raped by her brother-in-law. She thinks she can become the flowers that are drawn on her. As the third chapter begins Yeong-hye is yet again hospitalized where she stops eating altogether and is treated as a regular anorexia nervosa patient. However there is more to her story than anorexia

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<sup>20</sup> "If you knew how hard I've always worked to keep my nerves in check. Other people just get a bit flustered, but for me everything gets confused, speeds up. Quick, quicker. The hand holding the knife was working so quickly, I felt heat prickle the back of my neck. My hand, the chopping board, the meat, and then the knife, slicing cold into my finger... Why didn't this agitate me like it should have done? Instead, I became even calmer. A cool hand on my forehead. Suddenly, everything around me began to slide away, as though pulled back on an ebbing tide. The dining table, you, all the kitchen furniture. I was alone, the only thing remaining in all of infinite space. Dawn of the next day. The pool of blood in the barn... I first saw the face reflected there..." (Kang, 19)

nervosa. In this chapter Yeong-hye is convinced that her salvation and survival is in becoming a tree. As I have mentioned in my first chapter for her trees are very innocent; in terms of nutrition they only need water and sunlight. It is her obsession with ultimate innocence and her need to rid herself of the sin that she wants to metamorphose into a tree.<sup>21</sup>

Before looking further into the relationship between innocence and anorexia I would like to discuss anorexia and defeminization in *The Vegetarian*. As I have discussed above, anorexia entails a reading of the female body as a “protest” against the patriarchal ideology and its brutally physical consequences. As starvation wastes away the body, it also allows the body to dissolve into neutralization. It allows the female body to be able to disassociate itself from the “objectification”. Mr. Cheong’s narrative offers instances of close inspections to Yeong-hye’s image. The story starts off by stating how “unremarkable” she is, this includes her body: “To be frank, the first time I met her I wasn’t even attracted to her. Middling height; bobbed hair neither long nor short; jaundiced, sickly-looking skin; somewhat prominent cheekbones; her timid, sallow aspect told me all I needed to know...” (Kang, 3) As times passes and Yeong-hye grows thinner, Mr. Cheong demands that she wears make up when they are going out and is “reassured” when she does: “Were you really going to go out looking like this?” The two of us were reflected in the dressing table mirror. “Do your makeup again.” She gently shrugged off my hand, opened her compact and patted the powder puff over her face. The powder made her face somewhat blurry, covering it in motes. The rich coral lipstick she always used to wear, and without which her lips were ashen, went some way to alleviating her sickly pallor. I was reassured.” (Kang, 20) Yeong-hye is forced to wear make-up to reassure her “femininity” and her “health”. Mr. Cheong states that Yeong-hye also doesn’t like wearing a bra and even though he thought this was “arousing” at first, but he would have preferred she wear one. He says: “ It wasn’t as though she had shapely breasts which might suit the “no-bra look...” (Kang, 5) Later on in this paragraph Mr Cheong states that the reason why she didn’t like wearing a bra was because she thought they were constricting. (Kang, 5)

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<sup>21</sup> As Yeong-hye is speaking with her sister in the hospital. She says: “I need to water my body. I don’t need this kind of food, sister. I need water...” (Kang, 154)

Mr. Cheong's obnoxious attitude towards Yeong-hye goes to show the abuse against the female body that might have triggered her anorexia. However, Yeong-hye's dream narratives reveal something much more complex. In one of the dream-like stream of consciousness narrative she says: "Can only trust my breasts now. I like my breasts, nothing can be killed by them. Hand, foot, tongue, gaze, all weapons from which nothing is safe. But not my breasts. With my round breasts, I'm okay. Still okay. So why do they keep on shrinking? Not even round anymore. Why? Why am I changing like this?..." (Kang, 33) This is an interesting contrast to theorization of anorexia nervosa. Even though it is not her "intention" it is a fact that her body is getting smaller and thus her breasts are getting smaller. She doesn't like the fact that she is losing her breasts. In the last chapter of the novel where Yeong-hye is extremely malnourished in the hospital, she talks about a different dream that she had which prevailed her a new way of existence which allowed flowers to grow out of her crotch: "...I was in a dream, and I was standing on my head...leaves were growing from my body, and roots were sprouting from my hands...so I dug down into the earth. On and on...I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch, so I spread my legs; I spread them wide..." (Kang, 148) Yeong-hye does not deny her feminine body, in fact it is the only thing she accepts in her "human existence" because even in the metamorphosed body she desires, she wants it to be feminine. Then, is Yeong-hye able to re-feminize the defeminized?

In *The Haunted Flesh: Corporeal Feminism and the Politics of (Dis)Embodiment* Abigail Bray and Claire Colebrook discuss a similar duality of the domain of representation in eating disorders on female bodies. Talking about the feminist approach they state that even though each person is political and eating disorders can not be reduced to individual "pathology" they state that this recognition "...has led to the critique of a representational domain variously described as phallogocentric, phallogocentric, or patriarchal. On the other hand, there is a reluctance to locate women as passive victims in some point of innocence outside representation. Thus, the task for feminists has been conceived of as constructing autonomous women's representations, and this task has appealed to an articulation of the female body. The body is, then, considered as that which has been belied, distorted, and imagined by a masculine representational logic..." (Colebrook, 35) This is exactly Mr. Cheong's approach to Yeong-hye: as the "body". However, Colebrook and Bray also that the body has been positioned as what represents the feminine. What they suggest thus explains Yeong-hye's re-feminizing the

defeminized body: “In terms of eating disorders, this ambivalence surrounding representation might be cashed out as follows: the anorexic is the victim of representation, trapped in embodiment through stereotypical and alienating images but at the same time only representation can cure this malaise; only a realistic, non-repressive and less regulative form of representation will allow women to see themselves as autonomous subjects. (Colebrook, 35) Though it presents a more hopeful account it still doesn’t explain the need for Yeong-hye’s metamorphosis or the fact that Yeong-hye needs to transform her self. Why can’t she continue existing as a human being?

In all the approaches that I have directed to Yeong-hye she stood out because of her strong desire to metamorphose. In the first chapter where I had a chance to look at her narratives more closely I concluded that the reason why Yeong-hye wants to transform is because of her obsession and desperate infatuation with innocence. Once she equates the guilt she feels over eating / mincing animals to the violence she has been subjected to from her family and husband she is horrified. The moment where she finds the idea of her husband choking on a piece of razor soothing or agreeable she is horrified. As she constantly repeats that she wants to be a tree and that she is not an animal anymore: “Yeong-hye moved her emaciated face closer to her sister. “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...” (Kang, 154) In the second and the third chapter Yeong-hye starts to develop a different kind of existence for her; one in which she denies being human which is triggered and enabled by her anorexia nervosa. In *Holy Anorexia* Rudolph Bell states that differently from anorexia holy anorexia: “... involves a need to establish a sense of oneself, a contest of wills, a quest for autonomy...” (Bell, 8) There is a different goal in holy anorexia and it requires a different level of mobility and autonomy. Even though it is heavily infused with Christian ideology and religion; the level of guilt and the level of sin the holy anorexic feels requires a measure that is not of the ordinary which applies to Yeong-hye as well. Christian ecclesiastics rests on the idea that being human is a sin and no matter what one does there is no way to be rid of it, no matter how much one repents. Religion is not a part of Yeong-hye’s battle with guilt and innocence. She too, however, sees the impossibility of innocence as a human being. This different sense of spirituality is what makes the anorexia *holy* and not “religious”. Saints “dedicate” their bodies and souls that are in repentance regardless of the bodily needs or constraints. Bell defines this state as

“euphoric” because it takes over any other bodily primacy: “The feeling of euphoria as it is known in the ecstatic saints, for instance, does away with the need of eating...” (Bell, 12) This level of devotion clears away bodily needs that the constraints and the fatigue that malnutrition may bring to the state of “euphoria”.

Bell also points out that it was the patriarchal and the phallogocentric mindset that establish to women to pursue anorexic-sainthood: “Certainly holy women set upon a path of rigorous austerity, encouraged to this course by the very same patriarchy that then successfully ordered them to turn back. Once they did, starvation steadily amplified symptoms which these anorexics and their confessors, friends, and families and followers came to understand as signs of heavenly favor...” (Bell, 14) The reason and the cause for anorexia, then, needs to re-affirm the sainthood too. The holy anorexic is able to take the suppression of bodily needs and transform it to an escape for a different existence.

Yeong-hye’s persistence on innocence makes her a saint-figure. Underlining the fact that for her innocence could be achieved by ridding the body of sins allows her to be read as a saint figure. Catherine of Siena is one of the saints Rudolph Bell introduces in his book and her account is somewhat similar to Yeong-hye’s. He constructs her life story by relying on different biographies written about Catherine, translation of her journals and letters exchanged by her. (Bell, 193) Catherine Benincasa lived in the beginning of 14th century in Siena, Italy. She was a living legend and many scribes were ordered by the Church to follow her around to write her story. This is because not only did she not eat anything but she barely drank water and rigorously practiced religion through self-flagellation.<sup>22</sup> She was very articulate in her devotion to God and her reasoning behind not eating was clear. She writes to a friend in her letter about why she thinks even sustainable eating is gluttonous and thus a sin: “I might eat. And I say to you, my Father, and I say it to you in the sight of God, that in every possible way I could, I always forced myself once or twice a day to take food; and I prayed continually and I pray to God and will pray, that he will grace me in this matter of eating so that I may live like other creatures, if this is his will, because mine is there. I say to you that many times, when I

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<sup>22</sup> The shame and guilt she has over her body is to extremes. It is reported that once when she tending to the ill she was disgusted by the smell of one of the patient’s pus. She immediately gathered in a cup and drank it, as a representation of the repentance of bodily sensations. (Bell, 25)

did what I could, then I look[ed] into myself to understand my infirmity, and [the goodness of] God who by a most singular mercy allowed me to correct the vice of gluttony....” (Bell, 23) Her behavior was considered scandalous in the eyes of Church, she was often thought to be possessed by the devil. And even when she was accepted for her devotion in holiness she was still ordered by the church to eat.<sup>23</sup>

Just like Yeong-hye, Catherine’s extreme behaviors were something that was not to be reconciled or inquired but something to be disciplined. Catherine rarely slept, nearly 30 minutes in two days which she did so on a wooden plank. Her family made her sleep in her brother’s room so that she could be constantly monitored. They insisted she slept on a bed and ate her food. She secretly put a plank under where her own side of the bed and waited until her mother or brother went to sleep to get up to either pray or self-flagellate. Raymond of Capua’s account of her that Bell refers to states that Catherine had built a “mental fortress” and didn’t let anyone or anything in. (Bell, 42) Bell concludes that for Catherine what set everything in motion was not only the opposition she was facing but also the fact that Catherine wanted to gain power in something that no one would be able to deny; a kind of power that was holy in nature. She did gain a power in a sense that was yet again affirmed by the one causing it; it is reported that when Catherine’s father, Giacomo, was on his death bed Catherine prayed with him so that he would not suffer in purgatory and go straight to heaven. (Bell, 47) Bell reports that she prayed to have his sins as a pain in her own body: “In exchange for her father's immediate place in heaven she would take on the burden of his just punishments right here on earth. This God granted, and at Giacomo's death in August 1368 Catherine received both the consolation of a vision showing him among the celestial beings and a sharp pain in her hip. The ache remained with her "continually" until the moment of her own death...” (Bell, 47) Catherine has repelled her own body and through her holy anorexia used it as a constant reminder to her sinful existence. With this bodily ache she has reversed the power- duality and literally internalized (incorporated) the authority which happened to be re-affirmation of the prior struggle.

Unlike Yeong-hye it is unclear to pinpoint the underlying causes of Catherine’s holy

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<sup>23</sup> The shame and guilt she has over her body is to extremes. It is reported that once when she tending to the ill she was disgusted by the smell of one of the patient’s pus. She immediately gathered in a cup and drank it, as a representation of the repentance of bodily sensations. (Bell, 25)

anorexia. Both are apparently in a familial context and due to a need to discipline the female body. Yeong-hye's trigger was an equation between eating and violence, especially the violence she has been subjected to. She wants to be rid of the violence by achieving the ultimate innocence of existence. For Catherine the trigger is unknown; maybe the death of her sister, the way she was treated in the family or the fact that her family tried to marry her off<sup>24</sup> might all have been triggers. She devoted her self to God and this devotion meant that her anorexia was more political than Yeong-hye's and involved more of a struggle for power.

Looking at Yeong-hye through "the perfectionism of anorexia nervosa" as Brumberg uses it and the "autonomy" she fails to achieve when read as a saint-figure uplifts the whole narrative of *The Vegetarian*. From start to finish the reader sees Yeong-hye as she is misunderstood and harshly judged. In the first chapter she is "the vegetarian" who is acting childish by not eating animal products. In the second chapter she is the object of the artist and even though the brother-in-law whose name remains a mystery, as I have explained in the previous chapters, recognizes her fragile mental state he still objectifies her and rapes her to satisfy his own obsession. In the third chapter she is the patient and her anorexia nervosa is misconstrued. No one is able to understand the violence she has been subjected to, and the ones who know about it either didn't care (like Mr. Cheong and Yeong-hye's brother-in-law) or couldn't find the power in themselves to do something about it (like In-hye). However when read as a saint-figure Yeong-hye becomes the figure who has faced the terror of human violence and realized that innocence lies somewhere post-human. This is also in relation to the obsession the artist has with Yeong-hye. It is not her body he is obsessed with but the Mongolian mark which is a very direct symbol for innocence and purity since it is a mark children have until they are a certain age. Kang manages to put a symbol of innocence as the object of desire whilst portraying Yeong-hye's undeniable devotion to innocence. Even though it is this mark, this physical symbol of innocence that seems to have intrigued the artist, it is not the element of innocence that intrigues him nor the the relationship Yeong-hye has with innocence. Everyone in the novel including her sister is oblivious to Yeong-hye's quest of "salvation".

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<sup>24</sup> Bell reports that her oldest sister and Catherine had a close relationship and when she died Catherine was devastated. She blamed herself and thought that the death of her sister was her punishment. Her family on the other hand didn't want their business to be seperated so they wanted her to marry her late sister's husband and made arrangements. (Bell, 39)

In an interview she gives to the Guardian, Han Kang says that Yeong-hye represents “the (im)possibility” of innocence and that is why at the end of the novel even when she is at her worst condition Yeong-hye doesn’t die.<sup>25</sup> The end of the novel in that sense summarizes the human condition well. Yeong-hye continues to live in a state which keeps getting worse, as her body can’t get the nourishments it needs (and her metamorphoses has “failed” as she has not metamorphosed into a tree). Her anorexia, be it holy or anorexia nervosa, embodies the kind of politics that keeps confirming itself with its own truths. However, as the representer of innocence, and in a sense salvation, she doesn’t die either.

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-han-kang/>



## CONCLUSION:

In the translators note for “The Fruit of My Woman” Deborah Smith, who has translated Kang’s *The Vegetarian* along with *Human Acts* and *The White Book* says: “These metamorphoses are more akin to Kafka than Ovid in their allegorical relations with society...” (Smith, Granta Online) Smith is mostly referring to the metamorphosis in “The Fruit of My Woman” which is the story that Kang wrote before she wrote *The Vegetarian*. The story is reported to be the inspiration behind the novel. In this story there is a metamorphosis that is actualized; the narrators wife gradually transforms into a plant. Similarly to *The Vegetarian*, in the story the narrator is again the husband, however the husband here is not the monster that is Mr. Cheong. The man and his wife, who both remain nameless through-out the story, have a much more amiable relationship and it is the husband that takes care of the plant-woman in her metamorphosed state. In that sense, I agree with Smith that the metamorphosis here is more Kafkaesque than Ovidian. Since in Ovid the metamorphosed subjects don’t have a narrative existence and in this story the woman’s narration starts after she metamorphoses it is true that she is more like Samsa than any Ovidian myth. However recognizing the “failed metamorphoses” with their Ovidian undertones *The Vegetarian* allows a kind of literary analysis that is not only based on whether the transformation takes place but when it doesn’t how the meaning shifts to create a unique metamorphosis narrative. As Andrew Feldherr when discussing the nature of the Ovidian metamorphosis in his article “Metamorphosis in the *Metamorphoses*” in the *Cambridge Companion to Ovid* states: “Each individual metamorphosis opens up possibilities for contrasting responses: humour, terror, allegorization, even boredom.... On the other hand, the changing implications of metamorphosis among the many kinds of literary discourse in which it occurs make it a

narrative element that invites contrasting readings and opens out interpretative possibilities. Ovid himself participates in this process by introducing multiple points of view on transformation itself as well as raising questions about the generic status of his work. Thus metamorphosis continually compels readers to refigure their relationship to the text, their understanding of the narratives it contains, and ultimately how it functions as a literary representation...” (Feldherr, 165) The way Kang is able to alter this by “failing” the core element of an Ovidian metamorphosis which is the actual transformation and still revoke the Ovidian executions of the myths from the *Metamorphoses* reveals only one of the many layers *The Vegetarian* has about the body and literature.

This short novel questions what it means to be human if one is aware of what it means and takes to be human. The violence, guilt and sin can not be separated from existing as a human being. Yeong-hye realizes that and longs for another existence. Being a tree means not consuming any other being be it a plant or an animal but it also means to coexist in a peaceful manner. In one of the episodes in the hospital Yeong-hye reveals to her sister that all of the trees live peacefully as “brothers and sisters”. (Kang, 144) Considering her relationship with her sister In-hye this makes sense; her relationship with her sister is the least problematic one among all the other relationships in the novel.

In this “ideal “metamorphosed reality that Yeong-hye offers the solution is female. I was able to discuss the complexity in which Kang looks at the female bodily crisis. It is the female identification with the body and the feminine as the corporeal that adds to the equation Yeong-hye makes about violence. As I have discussed both the medical and feminist approaches to anorexia I have observed that all rest on the comparison of the body and the feminine. The subjectification of the female body and the violence imposed on women contributes to hating the body which is the self, being obsessed with the body image and/or simply taking up space: women will try to de-feminize their bodies. Yeong-hye is a victim of rape and violence. These explanations apply to her case too, however as she “fails” to become a tree she is able to create an alternative existence where being is feminine. She says she wants to become a tree so that life could expand and spread from her crotch.(Kang, 148) In the beginning the novel in one of her stream of conciseness narratives Yeong-hye says she could only trust her breasts and asks why her breasts keep getting smaller and her features keep changing. (Kang, 33) Through her account of

Yeong-hye Han Kang is able to re-feminize the de-feminized.

During this research one of the things that surprised me was the lack of literary criticism of Kang and her marvelous works. This gave me some freedom in my observations and claims to the text, however also widened the horizons of this analysis much further than I originally intended it to. There are so many questions left to ask not just *The Vegetarian* but also to other works of Kang as well. Considering the fact that there still remains untranslated works of her I am hoping that this research will lay the groundwork for the theorization and recognition of the masterful works of art that are Han Kang's novels.

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