



Analysing the Spirit of Resistance in *The Vegetarian* with the Imagery of Meat and Vegetables

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Abstract

Korean writer Han Kang won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2024, and her work *The Vegetarian* has been widely circulated. The book consists of three parts: *The Vegetarian*, *The Birthmark*, and *The Tree Fire*. The protagonist, Yinghui, an otherwise docile and traditional wife who refuses to eat meat due to a nightmare, embarks on a game between women and the existing social system and discusses the reality of women's destiny. Yinghui's struggle to stop eating meat is a symbol of her resistance to the patriarchal social system and family environment, through which she tries to escape from the constraints of family and society and seeks inner freedom and peace. In this paper, we will start from the imagery of 'vegetarianism' and 'meat-eating' to analyse the resistance behaviors of women such as Yinghui and Renhui in the patriarchal society, the deeper meanings behind them, and in this way, we will clarify the connotation of women's spirit of resistance in Han's writings.

Keywords

'Meat'; 'Vegetarian'; Patriarchal Society; Resistance Spirit; Feminism

1. Introduction

In contemporary literature, the exploration of the individual spirit of resistance has always been an important theme. *The Vegetarian*, a masterpiece by Korean author Han Kang, profoundly reveals the conflicts and contradictions between identity, individual freedom, and social expectations through the unique experience of the main character, Yinghui. In this novel, the imagery of 'vegetarian' and 'meat' becomes an important thread running through the whole text, which not only represents different eating habits and lifestyles but also contains deep symbolic meaning and the spirit of resistance. This paper aims to analyze the spirit of resistance to the patriarchal social system in *The Vegetarian* from the imagery of 'vegetarian' and 'meat', and to explore how the female characters in the text challenge the traditional concepts and seek true self and freedom through their unique ways of resistance.

2. Analysis of Imagery in *The Vegetarian*

2.1 Symbolism of 'Meat'

2.1.1 Power and domination—the social discipline of women

Since ancient times, there have been many powers and 'meat' associated with the phenomenon, such as the 'Cao Gui War': 'meat-eaters despise, failed to far-fetched.' Meat eaters will refer to the supreme power, to describe their shortsightedness; in Morrison's novel 'Paradise', Mavis defies all odds to buy meat for her husband, Dovi tries to satisfy her husband's appetite, by buying meat, to meet the appetite by pleasing the male behavior, and to pray for the power of the 'shelter'. In the process of power implementation, food, as a cultural symbol, is transformed into a cultural

power strategy, which fully penetrates people's daily lives (Liu Bin, 2014). The most prominent symbol of 'meat' is the attribution of 'power' and 'domination'—the social nature of male power in a patriarchal society.

In the novel, the imagery of 'meat' is the medium linking women's labor and men's enjoyment, referring to the structural contradiction between men and women in family life, in which there is an inequality between what they give and what they receive (Hou Jiaqi, 2023). The nature of a patriarchal society, in which men are in charge. The meat-loving culture mentioned in *The Vegetarian* overlaps with the formation of private ownership, patriarchy, and a culture that emphasizes masculinity. This culture not only shapes men's position of authority but also intensifies women's marginalization and oppression, highlighting the skewed power and unequal status of men and women under patriarchy.

Patriarchal society is a male-centered social structure and practice system in which men dominate in the political, economic, legal, military, and domestic spheres, and women are at a disadvantage. The dominance of men in the political, economic, legal, military, and domestic spheres, and the inferior and submissive position of women ensures male dominance and oppression of women. In *The Vegetarian*, the center of power is undoubtedly male, such as Yinghui's husband, father, and brother. Their roles in the book are essentially the same, characterized as 'irritable', 'incompetent', and 'violent'. Cornell states, '*Although hegemonic masculinity is not statistically predominant and is practiced by only a minority of men, it has become the norm of masculinity and the basis of justification for domination over women and other minorities.*' (Wang Zheng & Zhang Ying, 2012). what men seek in a patriarchal system is to be a man who is recognized by the patriarchal culture (Cai Ling, 2018). The specific relationship between 'meat-eaters' and power in *The Vegetarian* will be explained in detail next.

(1) The dominance of Yinghui's husband

According to Beauvoir, '*in the presence of women, even the most mediocre man sees himself as a demigod*'. This implies that a male-dominated culture has led to men developing a sense of superiority in the presence of women. *The Vegetarian* opens with Yinghui's husband as the first point of view on a series of 'confusing' behaviors: he wakes up in the middle of the night and finds Yinghui standing in front of the refrigerator, but he does not understand her behavior; he sees that other women usually wear bras, and even though he has no empathy with her and does not know if it is comfortable or not, he often feels ashamed of his wife's nudity; He remains a bystander at the dinner with the leaders and lets them all watch Yinghui's jokes. When his wife suddenly decides to become a vegetarian, although he is confused and puzzled, he sees it as a 'change' or 'stubbornness' on her part. The husband does not understand what she is really saying because when he calls her family to talk to them, they agree that it is Yinghui's fault and apologize to him. So the father, the husband, who has benefited from living in a patriarchal society for a long time, as well as the mother and sister, who are used to being oppressed, blame Yinghui for the problem.

This attitude of the husband actually reflects the ignorance and indifference of men in the face of female resistance. He treats Yinghui as a 'babysitter' who can create a relationship throughout the marriage, thus dominating Yinghui's behavior in the marriage and taking all the labor she undertakes as a matter of course. When he learns that Yinghui has become a vegetarian, he tries to restore 'normalcy' by forcing her to eat meat, which in itself is a form of control and oppression, reflecting the hegemonic mindset of men in power. Behind this seeming 'normalcy' lies a deeper problem of male power, because in the husband's mindset, patriarchy has been the mainstream of 'normalcy' for thousands of years, so how could anyone fail to adapt and choose to be a vegetarian? Through the perspective of Yinghui's husband, we can see the deep expression of male power in *The Vegetarian*. This power is not only reflected in the power relations in the family, but also in the ignorance, indifference, and hegemonic thinking of men towards women. This power phenomenon not only harms women's physical and mental health and free development but also exacerbates gender inequality and conflict in society, which is the fundamental reason why Yinghui resists 'meat-eating' and turns to 'vegetarianism'.

(2) Yinghui's father's dominance

Her father's influence at the center of power is fatal to Yinghui, both in her upbringing and in her married life. From a young age, Yinghui lived in a patriarchal dominant family, and her father's patriarchal and domestic violence behaviors have been etched in Yinghui's mind in a way that she cannot forget. When he learns that Yinghui has become a vegetarian, her father tries to regain control over Yinghui's body by controlling what she eats: '*Look at you, you're just so mad at me. You don't even listen to what I say, do you? If I tell you to eat, hurry up and eat!*' Unable to accept his daughter's disobedience to his wishes, he forces her to eat meat in a commanding and reproachful tone, trying to

assert his family status and dignity in this way; when Yinghui refuses the meat that her father feeds her, her father adds, *'How can you do this? You'll make me lose face like this!'* In his view, his daughter's behavior undermines his family status and dignity, and thus he feels angry and resentful. This quest for face also further reflects his vanity and sense of authority.

In addition to physical control, the father consolidates his position of authority through mental oppression. He often verbally insults and intimidates Yinghui in an attempt to destroy her self-esteem and self-confidence. The father thinks he is doing this for his daughter's good, but in reality, he is taking away her right to choose and her freedom. Behind his 'good intentions' is a distrust of his daughter and a desire to control her.

Looking into the nature of her father's behavior, it can be seen that he is deeply influenced by the traditional patriarchal ideology. Yinghui's father has absolute authority in the family and has a strong desire to control his wife and daughter. He believes that men should dominate the family and society, and women should obey men's arrangements and discipline. Through the image of Yinghui's father, we can deeply reflect on the phenomenon of male power. In patriarchal societies, men are often regarded as the masters of the family and leaders of the society, while women are regarded as the subordinates and tools of men. This unequal power relationship not only undermines women's rights and dignity but also hinders the progress and development of society.

In addition, the invisible 'victimiser' in 'Vegetarian' is analyzed as a meat-eating woman, a 'desperate' character who is powerless in a patriarchal society. Yinghui, as an activist, chooses to 'go vegetarian' to fight back in the 'meat-eating' mainstream society, while other women, as victims of patriarchy, do not know how to fight back and thus gradually become 'victimisers'. For example, Yinghui's mother, although she is a victim of the patriarchy, does not know how to fight back. For example, Yinghui's mother did not choose to get a divorce even though she was abused by her husband; she tried to feed Yinghui a piece of meat when she saw that Yinghui did not eat meat; she lied and told Yinghui that there was no meat in the black mutton soup she made without telling her that she had slit her wrists when she was in the hospital... These behaviors, which she thinks are good for Yinghui, do not take Yinghui's thoughts into consideration at all and do not respect her behavior as an independent individual who chooses not to eat meat. Even though her mother is a woman who has been oppressed by her husband for a long time under the patriarchal system, her behavior divides her from Yinghui, and Yinghui is left alone against all the 'meat-eaters'. The tragic fate of the women in *The Vegetarian* is mainly due to the compromise and submission to the patriarchal system, a social reality in which many women have to stand against 'vegetarianism' in order to maintain their precarious position.

2.1.2 Violence and cruelty - patriarchal oppression of women

In this section of *The Vegetarian*, the reason why Yinghui stopped eating meat is explained—a dream. Yinghui's dream is filled with blood-soaked raw meat and scenes of violence: *'I walked up and peeled back the straw curtain and walked in, and between me hundreds of huge, reddish pieces of meat hanging from long bamboo poles ... My hands and mouth were full of blood, for I had just eaten a piece of meat that had fallen to the ground while I was in the warehouse.'* In her dream, Yinghui, as a 'meat eater', looks at the bloody images in her dream and falls into infinite self-doubt and fear. This is not only a reflection of external violence, but also a reflection of her inner struggle and resistance. She tries to find relief and redemption in her dreams but fails every time. This inner struggle and resistance eventually lead to her mental breakdown and extreme behavior. Yinghui's dreams profoundly reveal the theme of violence and cruelty, which is directly related to the domestic violence she suffered during her childhood and her husband's oppression and indifference after marriage.

(1) Her father's violence and cruelty

Yinghui's father is a stubborn, irritable man who often lashes out over trivial matters and lacks patience and understanding for his family and those around him. Having fought in the Vietnam War, her father seems to have been deeply affected by the war, leaving him deeply traumatized. He often bragged about his war experiences, which became one of the root causes of his violent behavior. As a child, his father kills the dog that bit Yinghui's leg and cooks soaked rice, forcing Yinghui to eat it; when Yinghui refuses to eat meat and insists on a vegetarian diet, his father resorts to violence to force her to change. He slaps Yinghui and even orders his family to rack her and shove meat into her mouth. The father asserts his authority and status through violence and control. This double violence, physical and mental, not only harms Yinghui physically but also leaves an indelible trauma on her mind.

(2) Her husband's oppression and indifference

After marriage, Yinghui did not escape the shadow of domestic violence. Her husband lacked love and understanding and often treated her with indifference and detachment. Even after she decided to become a vegetarian, her husband failed to give her enough support and understanding and instead treated her as an alien. When communicating with his wife on a daily basis, the husband often used a demeaning and mocking tone with Yinghui, making her feel that she had no status or value in the family. Meanwhile, when the husband takes Yinghui to a company dinner, a furore erupts because Yinghui insists on not eating meat. The ridicule of the president's wife and the embarrassment of her husband make Yinghui feel pressure and discrimination from society, which further aggravates her mental pain. As her husband, instead of being her supporter and protector, he sneers from the sidelines and becomes an accomplice to violence and a pusher of oppression. His ignorant and indifferent hegemonic thinking further aggravates Yinghui's plight and suffering. This is also one of the reasons why Young-hwi becomes a vegetarian in a society where 'meat-eating' is the norm so that she finally pursues spiritual support - trees - to break free from the shackles of the flesh and return herself to a free body.

2.2 The Symbol of 'Vegetarianism'

According to Foucault, the body is on the one hand historical, i.e., as an objective thing, the body becomes a historical object involved in a certain political sphere, constantly marked, trained, and tormented by relations of power. Therefore, such a body is always subject to the discipline and constraints of power, and is constantly being controlled, transformed, and then normalized (Xie Qinghua & Chen Lv, 2024). *The Vegetarian*, on the other hand, is about breaking the torment of power in the form of Yinghui's control of her body to stop eating meat as a concrete form of resistance. Throughout the book, vegetarianism drives the development of Yinghui's relationship with people, such as Yinghui's divorce from her husband, Yinghui's incest with her brother-in-law, Yinghui's break with her father's family, Yinghui's snuggling with her sister, and her sister's understanding of her younger sister, and so on, and 'vegetarianism' becomes the thread of the story. Therefore, 'vegetarianism' represents the spontaneous behavior of women to break away from the control of male dominance in a patriarchal society.

Yinghui's transition from 'meat-eating' to 'vegetarianism' goes through a certain process, in which Yinghui gradually breaks free from the shackles of being 'controlled' by the patriarchal system: the first stage is the period of forced acceptance of male power. The first stage is a period of forced acceptance of male power when Yinghui is a good wife who can cook a delicious meat dish; the second stage is a period of self-doubt, when Yinghui begins to have nightmares full of raw meat and constantly reflects on herself, imposing on herself all the sins of meat-eating; the third stage is a period of actual rebellious behavior when Yinghui stops eating meat, throws all the meat in the house and finally refuses to eat; the last stage is a period in which she becomes willing only to bask in the sun, drink wine and be merry, and finally becomes a vegetarian. In the last stage, Yinghui becomes willing to sunbathe, drink water, and think of herself as a tree, truly fighting against the 'meat-eaters'. Through these four stages of Yinghui's change, we can understand that her extreme vegetarian behavior gradually achieves its purpose both physically and spiritually - challenging and resisting the rules, yearning for purity and nature, and pursuing self-identity and freedom.

2.2.1 Challenge and resistance to discipline

The point in time when Yinghui starts to be a vegetarian is when her husband keeps rushing Yinghui when he is in a hurry to go out to run an errand, causing her to accidentally cut her finger when she is preparing a roast in a panic, and the teeth of the knife are accidentally inserted into the meat, and her husband storms out and curses when he discovers the teeth of the knife in the meat, '*What if I had swallowed it? You almost killed me!*' In the early hours of the next morning, Yinghui saw for the first time in her dreams the pool of blood in the warehouse and the face reflected on it, which was the trigger for Yinghui to become a vegetarian. Yinghui's vegetarian choice is not a simple dietary preference, but rather the starting point of an inner revolt that she generates on her own initiative when she becomes concerned about the confinement of herself. For example, the book's depiction of Yinghui's mouth rapidly secreting saliva as she passes by a barbecue restaurant reveals that it is not that Yinghui does not want to eat meat, but rather that she actively refuses to do so. By refusing to eat meat, she expresses her dissatisfaction and rebellion against her family and society, an act that causes a furor among her family and society and becomes an important symbol of her rebellion. At the same time, Yinghui's vegetarian behavior also reflects her challenge to the male-dominated society and her rebellion against traditional gender roles. This choice of hers is, in a way, a challenge and

resistance to social precepts, demonstrating the trials and tribulations she must go through in her pursuit of self-identity and freedom.

2.2.2 The yearning for purity and nature

Dreams are a driving factor in the development of the novel's plot, creating a dichotomy between the characters' identities, which in turn creates a dichotomy between meat and veggies and propels the story to another level (Hou Xinran & KIM Chunja, 2024). More than once in the text, Yinghui depicts the bloody images of her dreams, in which her flesh-eating self becomes a 'murderer'. In her dreams, she kills people with a knife and eats bloody pieces of meat. down bloody chunks of meat, and other behaviors that caused her deep pain: '*I cut someone's neck with a knife in a dream, and since I didn't cut it in one stroke, I had to grab his hair and cut off the part that was attached to it... When awake, I would want to kill the pigeon that was hanging around in front of me, and I would want to strangle the neighbour's cat that I had kept for years.*' Yinghui experienced the process from being suppressed by her family and society to gradually awakening to the fact that she believed that meat-eating symbolized human violence, so Yinghui tried to feel the tranquility and beauty of nature by drawing a line with such violence and deprivation through vegetarianism, expressing her desire and pursuit of purity and nature.

2.2.3 Self-identification and pursuit of freedom

Yinghui's choice of vegetarianism is not motivated by health or environmental considerations but is a symbol of her inner resistance and self-identity. By refusing to consume meat, she expresses her challenge to traditional eating habits and social norms, and at the same time tries to find and confirm her own identity and the meaning of her existence in this way.

At a later stage, Yinghui even rejects her 'human' identity and fantasizes about herself as a tree, rooted in the soil, absorbing sunlight and water, to express her desire for freedom and nature. This fantasy embodies her deepest desire and pursuit and is also an important way of her self-identification. This extreme identity transformation reflects her struggle and exploration in the process of finding her self-identity. In this process, she gets rid of the roles and identities given to her by society and begins to search for the meaning of her own existence, which also makes her realize her inner pursuit more clearly.

3. The Significance of Women's Resistance in Han Jiang's Writing

Korea is a capitalist country deeply influenced by Confucianism. Under the influence of traditional Confucian concepts, Korea used to engage in all production activities with the family as a unit, and women could only survive by relying on the family (Park Ki-nam, 2012). Traditional gender roles largely determine the status of Korean women in the family, with in-laws and husbands having greater control over working mothers' responsibility for caring for their parents (Li Lianbo & Wang Geunson, 2023). In the 1980s, feminist consciousness was widely discussed and became an evolving trend of thought. In such an environment, Han Kang breaks down a series of traditional perceptions such as the inferiority of men and the role of women as wives and mothers, and makes feminist consciousness mature as Korean women's participation in the economic and political spheres continues to expand. This is also able to reflect Han Kang's critique and revolt against the phenomenon that women do not have a separate class in the feminist community, the antithesis of the patriarchal and patriarchal, and that as laborers they are enslaved (Simone de Beauvoir, 2011); and as bourgeoisie, they are parasitic. Thus, in *The Vegetarian*, she divides 'vegetarian' and 'meat-eater' into two factions to demonstrate the dichotomy between male power and feminism under patriarchy, thereby revealing the plight of women, and using her own power to trigger social reflection and promote social change.

'Vegetarianism seems to change women only, but it does not dismantle the male dominance in patriarchal society. Young-hye's resistance as an individual does not shake the position of meat-eaters as the center of power, which makes everyone think that Young-hye's behavior is strange, but Young-hye's resistance makes her sister In-hye gradually understand, which is also a continuation of the resistance. Han Kang mentions more than once in *Vegetarian*, 'It's becoming more and more popular to be vegetarian.' Vegetarianism here does not only represent an individual's pursuit of vegetarianism but also shows that the resistance of the general public continues to manifest itself in vegetarianism. Young-hui's story is not only an individual tragedy, but also a tragedy for the whole society. It makes people realize the pain and struggle that women go through in their pursuit of freedom and liberation. Han Jiang's women's resistance is not only a dissatisfaction and protest against the present situation but also an expectation and call for the future. Her works inspire people's fighting spirit and courage and promote social change and progress.

Through continuous endeavour and struggle, people believe that a better and fairer society awaits them in the future, triggering deep reflection on social reality and expectations for change.

In today's world, many propositions such as gender equality and the community of human destiny are increasingly accepted by more and more people, while women's issues have become an inescapable issue in our study of contemporary society (Zhu Qing, 2021). Therefore, the depiction of the tragic fate of women such as Young-hye and In-hye in *The Vegetarian* can cause the masses to reflect deeply on the phenomenon of men in power and endeavour to break gender stereotypes and power inequality. Women's choices and rights should be respected in life, their needs and feelings should be paid attention to, and a social environment of equality, harmony, and tolerance should be created together.

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