



The Semiotics of Meat in The Vegetarian: Cultural Reclassification and Disciplinary Biopolitics

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Abstract

The paper explores the semiotic dimensions of meat in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* through Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory. It analyzes meat as a complex sign functioning as an icon, index, and symbol in a culture saturated with structures of patriarchal control. It also discusses how women's voices are erased by the absent referent method and women's treatment by culture. Yeong Hye's refusal to consume meat is interpreted as her realization and rejection of the connotational violence and dominance associated with meat. It is an act of semiotic disruption in which vegetarianism challenges entrenched codes of gendered expectations, especially Confucian ideas of filial piety. Her being force-fed meat is seen as a nonsexual rape in addition to the multiple marital rapes she endures. This punishment and its aim to discipline are understood through Michel Foucault's concept of biopower that explains the regulation of diet and policing of bodily practices as instruments of control. The shifting significations of meat from sustenance to coercion and Yeong Hye's view of it from delicacy to inedible are traced. The paper argues that *The Vegetarian* interrogates the power dynamics inherent in cultural classifications of food made evident when their symbolism is considered. The study foregrounds the tensions between individual autonomy and

disciplinary power, situating her bodily resistance within broader discourses of agency and cultural inscription. It shows meat not merely as a motif of consumption but as a site of contested meaning where language, culture, and power intersect.

Keywords: semiotics, biopower, meat, vegetarianism, non-sexual rape

Literature Review

The symbolic and communicative dimensions of food have been a persistent concern in cultural theory. Fiddes in *Meat: A Natural Symbol* (1991) situates meat at the nexus of human dominance over nature and technological mastery, suggesting that dietary choices reflect broader ideological commitments to power and civilization. He draws the connection between meat and masculinity and observes a pattern in slang pertaining to women that compares them to animals or attributes to them adjectives typically associated with them. In *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault frames power as a network of biopolitical mechanisms that regulate bodies and behaviors under the guise of social norms, including food. This lens clarifies how *The Vegetarian* renders Yeong-hye's abstention from meat a corporeal dissent against patriarchal governance of the body. Similarly, Barthes in *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption* (2008) conceptualizes food as a semiotic system in which each item functions as a sign, encoding cultural meanings that articulate identity, social position, and collective ideology. He further discusses how food is not neutral but a container of all these meanings, enabling a study of this semiosis.

This intersects with Ahn's analysis of *The Vegetarian*, which interrogates whether Yeong-hye's abstention from meat constitutes an act of feminist resistance or an intensification of her subjugation, thereby revealing the ambivalence embedded in bodily autonomy within patriarchal contexts. It provides insights into the cultural nuances of South Korea and has an ecofeminist take that is informative. Adams' *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990) extends this critique by linking the

consumption of meat to the objectification of women through her theory of the "absent referent" that explains the invisibility of women's voices and perspectives from popular discourses by rendering their protests "consumable." Douglas, in *Deciphering a Meal* (1972), had proposed that meals themselves operate as structured codes, delineating boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and thereby reinforcing social hierarchies in a manner analogous to language. Together, these works provide a robust theoretical framework for examining the cross-cutting themes of food, power, gender, and communication in both textual and socio-cultural contexts. Current research works on *The Vegetarian* approach the novel primarily through ecofeminist frameworks or by treating gender as an isolated concern separate from a broader semiotic inquiry. They throw light on embodiment and environmentalism but do not engage with the process of meaning-making and following discourse that it is a part of.

Research Methodology

This paper's methodology is text-oriented, and it will employ theoretical texts to ground semiotic analysis based on Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotic model of the sign, rather than Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic structure. This emphasis allows for a more comprehensive view, as it has a detailed typology of sign modes, and Foucault's concept of biopower helps locate meat in the larger discourse of controlling bodies.

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007) narrates Yeong-hye's sudden decision to renounce meat and the personal, social, and institutional repercussions that follow. It is not merely a dietary choice for her but a reflection of the fundamental change in her willingness to flow with the cultural current. Similarly, the responses she receives are not only due to people's disagreement with her nutritional

or culinary preference but are attempts to force obedience and curb dissent. The story unfolds as a triptych narrated by her husband, her brother-in-law, and her sister. The absence of her own narrative makes a semiotic inquiry into the origin of her thoughts both challenging and necessary.

Yeong-hye's introduction by her husband in the beginning of the novel reveals that he chose his wife due to her exceptional mundanity. The reader realizes that to him, her likeability is defined by how convenient and adaptive she is towards his needs and routine. He describes her physical features in detail but does not focus on her intellect or idiosyncrasies, thereby reducing her to a functional, submissive body only. But he does the opposite when outlining her father, focusing on his bold tone and dominating nature. He appreciates both despite their differences, as he has a culturally ingrained opposing set of ideals for men and women. Semiotically, these opposing ideals function as culturally encoded signs that associate masculinity with authority, assertiveness, and dominance, while femininity is linked to compliance, passivity, and physical serviceability. His perception reduces both genders to fixed signifiers within a patriarchal code, where deviation from these symbolic roles threatens the coherence of the social order he inhabits. To impose docility on women, they are made invisible in all terms other than the physical and Carol J. Adams calls this method of erasure the "absent referent." Yeong-hye becomes an iconoclast when she makes a choice for herself that does not fit into the docile code, and this is perceived as being rogue by the narrators. It can be argued that despite her claims that her decision is prompted by violent dreams, she subconsciously interprets and disagrees with the structure that perceives her body as similar to meat, consumable for pleasure, and having no identity of her own.

Man is the hunter; woman is his game.

The sleek and shining creature of the chase,

We hunt them for the beauty of their skins;

They love us for it, and we ride them down. (Tennyson)

Meat is clearly associated with masculinity, as historically it was obtained by hunting, which was an archetypal male rite, and the hunt was a property of the hunter to do as he pleased. The position of women parallels this, and on realizing this, consuming meat becomes a taboo, an almost cannibalistic act for her. She resists the annihilation of subjecthood that is forced on her by refusing to consume what appears like an alter ego to her. Though she does not see through her brother-in-law's tactic of making her the absent referent when he asks her to be a model for his video project by acting out his own fantasies in the name of art. He exploits her by using a flower pollination analogy to lure her into the act, and she gives in due to her obsession with naturalistic imagery. The desire to become a plant that she takes to a pathological extreme later on is not original but implanted in her by him. While meat acts as a sign throughout the novel, its mode differs, and an assessment of the same throws light on the cultural constructs that determine the nature of the relation between the sign and object as perceived by the interpreter.

In Peirce's framework an icon resembles the object and creates meaning through likeness rather than arbitrary associations. Meat is flesh without conscious identity; a cow can be a dairy or a pet and can have a distinct existence, but when it is called beef, it loses these things. Similarly, a woman seen only as flesh and bone for the convenience of man becomes an object signified by meat.

Whilst this vocabulary can be of edibility in general, the overwhelming majority of references relate women to meat in particular. A man might reckon her to be a tasty morsel, or delicious; he might fancy a nibble; or she might be sensually devoured. But ultimately what he is after is a bit of 'raw,'

'juicy,' or 'succulent' flesh to 'beef' in order to satisfy his sexual appetite, if he is 'hungry for love,' in the words of a recent popular song. (Fiddes 150)

In the rare parts where Yeong-hye explains her dreams, meat operates as an index indicating the presence of another abstract object as an index by existing, making obvious another fact that is necessary for it. She refuses to share physical intimacy with her husband, claiming that he smells of meat; even though he has had a bath, his sustenance, by extension, starts meaning that another animal has been killed to serve him. In this case the procuring of meat itself means the elimination of identity with bloodshed, so meat signifies violence, dominance, and control, women's rights and animal rights are often advocated together for this reason. Writer and activist Alice Walker linked them both in her advocacy because even though the oppressors are different, they are part of the same oppressive system. The medical materialism and environmental consciousness of meat acquisition are not the sole reasons for leaving meat. So meat is not only food but also material evidence of annihilation; it marks the moment a living subject was stripped of agency and reduced into consumable matter.

They come to me now more times than I can count. Dreams overlaid with dreams, a palimpsest of horror. Violent acts perpetrated by night. A hazy feeling I can't pin down...but remembered as blood-chillingly definite. (Kang 30)

Meat also becomes a symbol of control, and consuming it is thus acceptance of it. So Yeong-hye's rejection is not a food taboo category out of a patriarchal and capitalist logic that treats both animals and women as property. Her abstinence is not based on austerity or denial of pleasure for self-discipline, like the word typically implies. She clearly says that she will never eat meat in her life because she cannot erase the association that it has made. In semiotics, food, and meat in particular, functions as a potent signifier of cultural power relations, making its study essential to

understanding acts of resistance, for its inescapable link transforms abstractions into a definite symbolic severance. Reading meat through Peirce's triadic model reveals its layered semiotic potency: as an icon, it resembles the flesh it signifies; as an index, it bears a causal and historical trace of domination through the act of killing; and as a symbol, it is culturally coded as masculine power and authority. This multiplicity matters because it shows that meat's meaning is never neutral—its consumption reactivates all three sign functions simultaneously, making it both a sensory and ideological act. In *The Vegetarian*, this semiotic density amplifies the violence of its imposition, as the act of eating meat becomes a reiteration of social hierarchies and embodied control.

A pivotal scene in the novel is when Yeong-hye's father forces a piece of meat down her throat. He'd hit her so hard that the blood showed through the skin of her cheek.

Her breathing was ragged, and it seemed that her composure had finally been shattered. "Take hold of Yeong-hye's arms, both of you." "What?" "If she eats it once, she'll eat it again. It's preposterous; everyone eats meat!" (Kang 39)

She actively struggles against him but is overpowered, and her bodily autonomy is violated. His aim is to discipline her into obedience, and while others criticize the action later, no one defends her. The father does not regret it, as he sees her as an aberrant force defying the cultural order that makes meat consumption normal and gives him the position of the head of the family. Her withdrawal, self-harm, and refusal to engage with others mirror the trauma responses of sexual abuse survivors. The reflections and psychological ruptures that the event caused inevitably parallel rape, because the signifying structure is domination through forced entry into the body. Rape, in its broader definition, extends beyond sexual intercourse to encompass any act of violation in which something is taken or imposed upon a body through coercion and without consent. It collapses the

distinction between alimentary and sexual violation, exposing both as structurally homologous acts of biopolitical control. By weaponizing nourishment, the father enforces submission through the same semiotic logic that underpins sexual coercion—penetration of the body’s boundaries to inscribe dominance. It is fundamentally about the exertion of power, the erasure of autonomy, and the subjugation of the victim’s will to that of the aggressor. Here, the meat becomes the agent of violation—a symbolic weapon carrying patriarchal authority. It is not mere dietary imposition but coercive control that strips consumption of its neutrality to recast it as a ritual of subjugation, where the body becomes a site of displaying power.

If food is read as a code, its embedded meanings lie not just in biological consumption but in the structures of hierarchy, inclusion, and exclusion it reveals. As with sex, eating is never just about nourishment—it encodes transactions across social boundaries, reinforcing or resisting systems of control (Douglas 61).

Yeong-hye is made a subject thrice, each time under the assumed superiority and authority of others who seek to discipline her. First, her husband rapes her even after she clearly states she does not want to physically engage with him, acting on the self-imposed belief that intercourse is necessary in marriage and that refusal is unreasonable. Then, her father, joined by guests, force-feeds her in an attempt to “set her right,” guided by his own cultural convictions. Also, hitting her reveals the cultural convention that normalizes and forgives violence against women by infantilizing their intellect.

Men who batter women have often used the absence of meat as a pretext for violence against women. Women’s failure to serve meat is not the cause of the violence against them. Controlling men use it, like anything else, as an excuse for their violence. Yet because “real” men eat meat,

batterers have a cultural icon to draw upon as they deflect attention from their need to control.

(Adams 62-63)

This presumption that she is mentally unstable rather than an adult making a choice for herself reaches its peak when she is placed in an asylum and labelled mentally challenged. Even though the incriminating video was carefully orchestrated by her brothers-in-law, he is let off with a slap on the wrist while she is confined. Within the institution, she comes under the control of another “professional father.” The doctor does not need to persuade people to restrain her; he commands an entire staff to do so. Her dietary choice is treated as an anomaly, labelled abnormal without considering her reasons. This medicalization of dissent by the sovereign and the patriarch, in its microcosmic form, is a tactic of controlling life by prescribing how it should be lived. It is part of a larger biopower exercised on the citizens.

If the development of the great instruments of the state, as institutions of power, ensured the maintenance of production relations, the rudiments of anatomo- and bio-politics, created in the eighteenth century as techniques of power present at every level of the social body and utilized by very diverse institutions (the family and the army, schools and the police, individual medicine and the administration of collective bodies), operated in the sphere of economic processes, their development, and the forces working to sustain them. (Foucault 141)

In Foucauldian terms, biopower operates not only through the regulation of bodies on a mass scale but also through the micro-management of individual choices, including the most intimate ones, such as diet. To decide or override a person’s food preferences is to assert control over the body’s intake, rhythms, and pleasures, effectively disciplining life at its biological core. In *The Vegetarian*, this control over Yeong-hye’s refusal of meat is not merely nutritional interference but a symbolic

re-inscription of patriarchal authority, where meat itself functions as a semiotic vessel for power. The imposition of meat thus becomes both a literal exercise of biopower and a reiteration of the cultural code in which eating is bound to submission. In this sense, the regulation of her diet operates not merely as a matter of personal preference but as an exercise of biopower, wherein the intimate domain of consumption becomes a site of disciplinary control.

The semiotic weight of meat—as icon, index, and symbol of patriarchal domination—renders her refusal a direct challenge to this apparatus. Yet, the very structures she resists ensure that such refusal cannot exist in isolation from the violence it opposes, setting the stage for what Ahn identifies as her inescapable proximity to that violence.

Thus, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism can be understood as a complex struggle to transcend violence that stems from the fact that she never really has a safe distance from it to begin with. This existential proximity to violence is the reason that her attempts to purge her body of meat, which evolve into attempts to transform herself into a tree, are ultimately futile. (Ahn 281)

In *The Vegetarian*, meat emerges as a sign of remarkable semiotic density simultaneously an icon of flesh, an index of bodily subjugation, and a symbol of entrenched patriarchal and cultural authority. By tracing the shifting significations of meat in Yeong-hye's life, the novel exposes how a seemingly mundane act of consumption becomes enmeshed in systems of biopolitical control, where the state and the family alike regulate bodies through the politics of food. This reading situates Kang's work within a broader cultural and theoretical framework, illustrating how food is never neutral but always a carrier of meaning, encoded by histories of violence, domination, and resistance. The analysis of meat as a sign therefore extends beyond literary criticism into the interdisciplinary terrain of food humanities, revealing the cultural work that edibility, taste, and

refusal perform. To read meat in this way is to understand The Vegetarian not merely as a personal narrative of bodily rebellion, but as a text that interrogates the deep entanglement of sustenance, power, and identity in contemporary society.

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