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Women resistance in han kang's the vegetarian

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Abstract. This thesis analyzes women's resistance in Han Kang's The Vegetarian using a feminist literary approach. This study applies the concepts of Carol J. Adams and Judith Butler to examine the protagonist, Yeong-hye. This research aims to identify the forms of resistance she performs, the causes that trigger her resistance, and the effects of her resistance as responded to by her surrounding environment. The research employs a qualitative descriptive method, supported by textual analysis of narrative events, dialogue, and character dynamics. The findings reveal that women's resistance appears in two primary forms. The first is the restoration of the absent referent, manifested through Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat, her rejection of domestic and sexual duties, her abandonment of the bra, and her aspiration to become a plant. The second is gender as phantasm, reflected in her family's perception of her as an existential threat that must be eliminated. Furthermore, the study concludes that the causes of her resistance include awareness of the absent referent, failed interpellation, and anti-gender ideology as an external trigger. Meanwhile, the effects of her resistance are shown through the disruption of patriarchal symbolism, punishment for gender deviance, and her position as the abject who ultimately finds freedom in her expulsion.

Keywords/Kata Kunci: **Feminism, Objectification, Patriarchal, Resistance, Violence**

INTRODUCTION/PENDAHULUAN

Women resistance is a term used to describe the ways in which women oppose and challenge patriarchal systems that control and limit their lives. Resistance is not limited to large-scale protest movements but also appears in everyday behaviors such as refusing social expectations, rejecting imposed roles, and asserting bodily autonomy. The feminist insight that the personal is political means that patriarchy functions as a system in which gender is used as a tool of power (Heberle, 2016). Any act of resistance by a woman, even in the most personal aspects of her life, carries political meaning. The concept of women resistance is also closely connected to how women experience their bodies under patriarchal culture. Women's bodies are constantly subjected to external judgment and regulation, which limits their sense of autonomy and self-ownership (Irvin, 2016). Thus, women resistance is not only political or structural but also deeply embodied. It is precisely through the body that many women first assert their refusal to comply. This process of resistance often begins when a woman develops an awareness of her own

oppression. Feminist thought introduced the idea of an awakening of consciousness: the moment when a woman stops seeing her suffering as a personal problem and begins to understand it as a product of a larger system (Gilbert & Gubar, 2021).

The Vegetarian (Kang, 2015) tells the story of Yeong-hye, a young married woman in Seoul who decides to stop eating meat after experiencing disturbing dreams filled with images of blood and raw meat. Her husband dismisses her behavior as irrational, but Yeong-hye's refusal escalates into broader acts of resistance: she rejects domestic duties, stops wearing a bra, and withdraws from sexual relations. When her father attempts to force meat into her mouth during a family gathering, she slits her wrist and is hospitalized. After her divorce, she withdraws further from society. Her brother-in-law becomes obsessed with a birthmark on her body and uses her for an art project, painting her naked body with flowers. By the end of the novel, Yeong-hye believes she is becoming a tree, refuses to eat entirely, and is force-fed through a nasal tube in a psychiatric facility. Based on this description, the present thesis aims to analyze women resistance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* using a feminist approach. The researcher focuses on three main aspects: the forms of women resistance showed by Yeong-hye, the causes that trigger her resistance, and the effects she receives from her surrounding environment because of her acts of resistance.

To address these issues, the research is guided by the following questions: (1) What are the forms of women resistance showed by Yeong-hye in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*? (2) What are the causes of Yeong-hye's resistance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*? (3) What are the effects of Yeong-hye's resistance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*? This study employs two complementary theoretical frameworks: Carol J. Adams's feminist vegetarian critical theory from *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (2024) and Judith Butler's theory of gender phantasm from *Who's Afraid of Gender* (2024). Adams's framework is primarily used to analyze the forms and causes of resistance through the concept of the absent referent, the mechanism by which language and culture erase the living animal from the concept of meat. The same logic applies to women, who are frequently described as pieces of meat and thus rendered absent as subjects (Adams, 2024:98). Resistance takes the form of restoring what has been made absent. When a woman refuses to eat meat, refuses to wear a bra, or withdraws from sexual relations, she is actively making the absent referent present again. Butler's framework is primarily used to analyze the social and institutional causes and effects through the concept of gender phantasm. Butler explains that gender has become a fearsome and destructive image that absorbs various social anxieties and condenses them into a single enemy (Butler, 2024:8). Those who refuse traditional gender roles are perceived as existential threats. A woman who resists patriarchal norms is not seen as an individual making personal choices but as a dangerous phantasm who must be eliminated.

After conducting a thorough and systematic search of the academic literature and undergraduate thesis collections available at the Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, the researcher found no existing thesis within this faculty that specifically addresses the topic of women resistance in Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian*. The search was carried out by examining the faculty's library catalogue, reviewing the archives of previous undergraduate theses, and consulting with faculty librarians to ensure that no relevant study had been overlooked. Based on this search, no previous research has been conducted on the forms, causes, and effects of women resistance in the novel using the theoretical frameworks proposed in this thesis, namely Adams's feminist vegetarian critical theory and Butler's concept of gender phantasm. Given these results,

this thesis represents the first time the topic of women resistance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is discussed as an undergraduate thesis at the Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya. This research is therefore expected to serve as an initial contribution to the study of women resistance within the faculty.

In accordance with the statement of the problem, this thesis has three aims: (1) to identify the forms of women resistance that Yeong-hye shows throughout the novel, (2) to identify the causes that trigger Yeong-hye's resistance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, and (3) to examine the effects that Yeong-hye receives from her surrounding environment because of her resistance. Theoretically, this thesis is expected to enrich the reader's understanding of feminist literary theory, particularly in relation to concepts of bodily autonomy, patriarchal violence, and women resistance. Practically, this thesis can serve as a reference for students and researchers interested in feminist literary analysis and contemporary literature that addresses gender, power, and resistance.

LITERATURE REVIEW/ TINJAUAN PUSTAKA

The topic of women resistance is a central concern of feminist literary criticism in this study. Early feminist theories, particularly those emerging from first-wave and second-wave feminism, focused on legal inequalities, political representation, and structural oppression, leaving little room for examining how women actively resist patriarchal control through everyday acts of defiance (Heberle, 2016). Over time, feminist inquiry began to shift its focus, paying more attention to how patriarchal power operates not only through laws and institutions but also through cultural norms, language, and the regulation of women's bodies (Walby, 2015). One relevant approach to understanding this research, oriented toward women's agency and resistance, is Carol J. Adams's feminist vegetarian critical theory and Judith Butler's theory of gender phantasm. Although these frameworks were originally developed to analyze the objectification of women and animals and the social construction of gender respectively, they can also be applied to literary characters whose acts of refusal, bodily autonomy, and rejection of social norms reflect real processes of patriarchal resistance (Adams, 2024; Butler, 2024). Adams argued that the absent referent is the mechanism by which language erases the living animal from meat and women from patriarchal discourse, reducing both to objects for consumption. Resistance, therefore, takes the form of restoring what has been made absent (Adams, 2024). Butler argued that gender has become a fearsome phantasm in contemporary political discourse, and those who refuse traditional gender roles are perceived as existential threats that must be eliminated (Butler, 2024).

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is a novel that embodies the experiences of a woman resisting patriarchal control through her refusal to eat meat, reject domestic and sexual duties, and ultimately aspire to become a plant. These experiences lend themselves to examination not only as fiction but as accessible material through feminist literary analysis. This study focuses on Yeong-hye's experiences as narrated in Kang's novel *The Vegetarian*. Rather than conducting a purely linguistic or textual analysis, this study takes a broader feminist approach. It focuses on how Yeong-hye frames her acts of resistance through her own narrative: how she understands her position within her family and marriage, how she confronts patriarchal violence and objectification, and how she constructs meaning through her refusal to conform to social norms. By examining dialogue, narrative descriptions, and key events in the text, this study seeks to explore the representation of

women resistance as revealed through the forms, causes, and effects of resistance in a psychologically and politically grounded feminist narrative.

METHOD/METODE

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design as the primary research method, aiming to explore and analyze data in depth based on information obtained from the research subject. This design focuses on understanding meaning and context rather than numerical data, allowing researchers to identify patterns, themes, and categories in detail and systematically (Creswell, 2023). The feminist literary approach applied in this design is used to analyze the behavior, thoughts, actions, and motives of the main character through the lens of feminist theoretical frameworks. In this context, Carol J. Adams's feminist vegetarian critical theory (2024) and Judith Butler's theory of gender phantasm (2024) serve as the primary frameworks for examining the forms, causes, and effects of women resistance.

The primary data source for this study is Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian*, translated by Deborah Smith and published by Portobello Books in 2015. This study specifically focuses on the main character, Yeong-hye, and analyzes all textual data relevant to her acts of resistance throughout the novel's narrative. The secondary data sources consist of books, journal articles, and other academic writings that support the analysis, including Adams's *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (2024), Butler's *Who's Afraid of Gender* (2024), and various journal articles about women resistance, patriarchy, and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*.

The researcher served as the primary instrument in this study, responsible for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data. According to Merriam and Grenier, a defining characteristic of all qualitative research designs is that "the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis" (Merriam & Grenier, 2019:5).

Data were collected through reading and note-taking techniques. The data collection procedure involves three main stages. First, the researcher reads the novel from beginning to end to understand the whole story. Second, the researcher identifies and groups relevant scenes and dialogues based on the three research questions. Third, the researcher interprets the categorized data using Adams's and Butler's theories.

The data analysis procedure consists of four steps. First, the researcher collects all data relevant to women resistance. Second, the researcher identifies and categorizes the relevant scenes based on the three research questions. Third, the categorized data is interpreted by connecting it to the theoretical frameworks of Adams and Butler. Fourth, the researcher draws a final conclusion regarding the study's findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION (HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN)

This section presents the analysis of women resistance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* based on the three research questions: the forms of women resistance shown by Yeong-hye, the causes that trigger her resistance, and the effects she receives from her surrounding environment. By applying the theoretical frameworks of Carol J. Adams and Judith Butler componentially, the data were examined to identify the narrative patterns and thematic representation of women resistance.

A. Forms of Women Resistance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

1. The Absent Referent as a Form of Women Resistance

The first form of women resistance depicted in the novel is the restoration of the absent referent, a concept from Carol J. Adams's feminist vegetarian critical theory. The absent referent describes the mechanism by which patriarchal culture erases the subjectivity of both women and animals through language and practices of consumption (Adams, 2024:98). In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat, her rejection of domestic and sexual duties, and her abandonment of socially prescribed clothing function as acts that restore the absent referent, forcing herself and those around her to confront what patriarchal culture has erased. This is evident when she empties her refrigerator of all meat products, stating "I threw the eggs out as well... And I've given up milk too" (Kang, 2015:9), and when she withdraws from sexual relations, explaining that her husband's body "smells of meat" (Kang, 2015:17). Through these acts, Yeong-hye makes visible the violence behind meat consumption and the objectification of her own body, challenging the structure of male dominance at the most intimate level of daily life. Her dream, in which she sees her own face reflected in a pool of blood, collapses the distinction between animal slaughter and self-recognition, forcing her to realize that she herself has been treated as an absent referent (Kang, 2015:12; Kim, 2019).

2. Gender as Phantasm as a Form of Women Resistance

The second form of women resistance depicted in the novel is the way the resisting subject is constructed as a gender phantasm by patriarchal society, drawing from Judith Butler's theory of gender as phantasm. Butler explains that gender has become a fearsome and destructive image that absorbs various social anxieties and condenses them into a single enemy (Butler, 2024:8). Those who refuse traditional gender roles are perceived as existential threats. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's refusal to conform to patriarchal norms provokes her family to perceive her as a phantasm that must be eliminated. At the family gathering, her father demands "If he tells you to eat, you eat!" (Kang, 2015:27), and when she refuses, he forces meat into her mouth while the family watches without intervening. By the end of the novel, Yeong-hye has been institutionalized and diagnosed with schizophrenia, yet she continues to resist by doing handstands and declaring "I'm not an animal anymore... All I need is sunlight" (Kang, 2015:87). The medical system pathologizes her resistance, but from the perspective of gender phantasm, this labeling is the system's way of taming its own fear of a woman who refuses to be controlled. As Butler argues, "the phantasm of gender is not merely a personal fantasy but a psychosocial phenomenon... that organizes desire and anxiety" (Butler, 2024:12), and Yeong-hye's persistence in her resistance demonstrates that the phantasm cannot be so easily eliminated.

B. Causes of Women Resistance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

1. Awareness of the Absent Referent as a Cause of Women Resistance

The first cause that triggers Yeong-hye's resistance is her sudden awareness of the absent referent. Adams explains that the awareness of the absent referent occurs when a woman experiences a moment of moral awakening in which she realizes that what she is consuming is not merely food but a dead body (Adams, 2024:134). In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's awakening is triggered by a childhood memory of watching her father kill her pet dog and then eating it at a feast (Kang, 2015:29-30). This memory, combined with

violent dreams of blood and meat, forces her to confront the reality that she herself has been treated as a piece of meat to be consumed by her husband and patriarchal system. The dream in which she sees her own face reflected in a pool of blood collapses the distinction between animal slaughter and self-recognition, making her realize that she has been an absent referent in her own life (Kang, 2015:12; Kim, 2019). This awareness is further intensified when her father force-feeds her meat at a family gathering, an act that violates her bodily autonomy and makes her fully conscious of the violence embedded in consumption (Kang, 2015:28). As Adams argues, vegetarianism is an embodied political act through which women can reclaim agency over their bodies (Adams, 2024:248), and Yeong-hye's awareness of the absent referent becomes the moral foundation for her refusal to participate in the system of consumption any longer.

2. Failed Interpellation as a Cause of Women Resistance

The second cause that triggers and deepens Yeong-hye's resistance is failed interpellation, a concept from Judith Butler's theory of gender formation. Butler explains that interpellation is the process by which social norms address and constitute a subject, and when a woman fails to embody the gender expectations imposed upon her, this failure becomes the condition of possibility for resistance (Butler, 2024:15). In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's failed interpellation is evident when she refuses to perform the expected femininity of modesty, shame, and desirability. When her brother-in-law asks her to model naked, her only question is "Where?" (Kang, 2015:49), demonstrating her refusal to perform shame. When he first sees her naked, he observes that her body is "a body from which all desire had been eliminated" (Kang, 2015:52), meaning she does not desire to be desired or offer herself to the male gaze. During the filmed sexual encounter, she does not perform for the camera, refusing to moan, speak, or look at the camera (Kang, 2015:67). As Butler writes, "the gap between the perceived or lived body and prevailing social norms can never fully be closed" (Butler, 2024:152), and this incommensurability is precisely what makes agency and resistance possible. Yeong-hye's failed interpellation demonstrates that she cannot be fully interpellated because her body exceeds the categories that patriarchy tries to impose on it.

3. Anti-Gender Ideology as External Trigger as a Cause of Women Resistance

The third cause that triggers and intensifies Yeong-hye's resistance is the anti-gender ideology movement operating as an external trigger. Butler explains that the anti-gender ideology movement has spread globally, and families have been conditioned to see any deviation from traditional gender norms as an existential threat (Butler, 2024:12). This perception operates as a form of projection, where the family's own fear of change is externalized onto the woman who resists (Butler, 2024:194). In *The Vegetarian*, this is visible when Yeong-hye's family responds to her vegetarianism with shame rather than curiosity: "I can't have this. How can that child be so defiant? Oh, you must be ashamed of her!" (Kang, 2015:22). They see her refusal to eat meat as a rebellion against the natural order rather than a personal choice. When physical violence fails, the family turns to the medical system, where her resistance is pathologized as schizophrenia and anorexia. The doctors dismiss her explanation that she no longer needs food, only sunlight (Kang, 2015:87), hearing it as psychosis rather than a valid ethical stance. Ironically, as Butler argues, the aggressive response of the anti-gender movement often produces the very outcome it seeks to prevent (Butler, 2024:15). Yeong-hye's resistance does not end with

institutionalization; it continues and intensifies, demonstrating that the external trigger meant to suppress resistance actively strengthens it.

C. Effects of Women Resistance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

1. Disruption of Patriarchal Symbolism

The first effect of Yeong-hye's resistance is the disruption of patriarchal symbolism. According to Adams, meat eating functions as a daily ritual that re-inscribes male dominance, and the dinner table becomes a site where patriarchal power is performed and reinforced (Adams, 2024:89). When a woman refuses to eat meat, she disrupts this symbolic order. In *The Vegetarian*, this disruption is evident when Yeong-hye empties her refrigerator of all meat, causing her husband to react with outrage: "What the hell are you up to now?" (Kang, 2015:9). His anger reveals that her refusal is a challenge to his authority as the husband who expects to be served meat. Her refusal to wear a bra further disrupts patriarchal symbolism, as the bra functions as a marker of compliant femininity (Kang, 2015:19). The most radical disruption occurs when Yeong-hye does handstands in the hospital, explaining that trees "stand with both arms in the earth" (Kang, 2015:84-85), overturning the human-centered hierarchy that places men above women and consumption above life. Devi and Meera explain that in traditional Korean society, meat-eating is associated with masculinity, and when a woman refuses to eat meat, she challenges the very foundation of patriarchal authority (Devi & Meera, 2023).

2. Punishment for Gender Deviance

The second effect of Yeong-hye's resistance is the punishment she receives for her gender deviance. Butler explains that the anti-gender ideology movement treats any departure from traditional gender norms as an existential threat that must be eliminated (Butler, 2024:7-12). This punishment takes multiple forms: physical violence, forced hospitalization, and institutional control. In *The Vegetarian*, this punishment begins with her family, when her father slaps her and force-feeds her meat at a family gathering while the rest of the family watches without intervening (Kang, 2015:27-28). The punishment escalates when her husband abandons her, stating she will never be "normal" again (Kang, 2015:45). The most systematic punishment comes from the medical institution, where Yeong-hye is confined to a psychiatric ward and force-fed through a nasal tube. The hospital staff "grapple with her struggling form, forcing her down onto the bed. They bind her arms and legs" (Kang, 2015:97). As Butler argues, the medical system collaborates with the family and the state to discipline deviant bodies, punishing them under the guise of treatment (Butler, 2024:138). The feeding tube, tranquilizers, and straps binding her limbs are all forms of punishment disguised as care.

3. Becoming the Abject or Monster

The third effect of Yeong-hye's resistance is the transformation of the resisting subject into the abject or monster. Butler explains that phantasms are cast out, treated as monsters that must be destroyed (Butler, 2024:70). The woman who resists patriarchal norms is not seen as a fellow human being but as a threat to civilization itself. In *The Vegetarian*, the process of abjection begins when Yeong-hye's husband declares "I do not know that woman" (Kang, 2015:35), expelling her from the category of the familiar and the human. By the end of the novel, Yeong-hye has stopped speaking, withdrawn into herself, and refused to eat entirely. Her body has wasted away, and she is no longer recognizable as

the ordinary woman she once was. Yet she embraces this transformation, telling her sister "I'm not an animal anymore... All I need is sunlight" (Kang, 2015:87). As Butler argues, the woman who is accused of being a phantasm may eventually embrace that identity as a form of empowerment (Butler, 2024:17). In-hye, who has tried to be the good daughter and wife, admits she "had been unable to forgive her for soaring alone over a boundary she herself could never bring herself to cross" (Kang, 2015:89). Yeong-hye has become the abject, the monster, and precisely by becoming monstrous, she has escaped the prison that still holds In-hye captive. The novel ends with In-hye staring at the trees "as if waiting for an answer, as if protesting against something" (Kang, 2015:102), and the monster persists, having discovered freedom in her expulsion.

CONCLUSION/KESIMPULAN

This study analyzed women resistance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* using Carol J. Adams's feminist vegetarian critical theory and Judith Butler's theory of gender phantasm. The findings reveal that women resistance in the novel operates through two primary forms: the restoration of the absent referent, manifested through Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat, rejection of domestic and sexual duties, abandonment of the bra, and aspiration to become a plant; and gender as phantasm, reflected in her family's perception of her as an existential threat that must be eliminated.

The causes that trigger Yeong-hye's resistance are rooted in three factors: awareness of the absent referent, which awakens her to the violence of meat consumption and her own objectification; failed interpellation, or her inability to embody the gender expectations imposed upon her; and anti-gender ideology as an external trigger, where her family's violent responses intensify her resistance rather than suppress it. The effects of her resistance appear through disruption of patriarchal symbolism, punishment for gender deviance including physical violence and forced hospitalization, and becoming the abject or monster, where her expulsion from the human category paradoxically becomes her greatest act of freedom.

This study confirms that *The Vegetarian* portrays women resistance as a meaningful response to patriarchal violence rather than irrational behavior. Through Yeong-hye's transformation, the novel shows that even when resistance leads to expulsion and pathologization, the act of refusing patriarchal demands remains a powerful assertion of agency.

Based on the findings, future researchers are encouraged to further examine women resistance in contemporary literature using interdisciplinary approaches, particularly exploring the intersection of feminist theory with ecocriticism and posthumanism. Comparative studies between *The Vegetarian* and other works of Asian literature addressing women's agency are also recommended. For the Faculty of Cultural Sciences, this thesis serves as an initial contribution to the study of women resistance, and it is hoped that future undergraduate research will continue to explore feminist themes in contemporary world literature.

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