

COMMODIFICATION AND COMPLICITY: A READING OF THE PATRIARCHAL BARGAIN IN THE VEGETARIAN BY HAN KANG



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Abstract: *This study investigates how compliance can be a structurally rational reaction to the very patriarchy-capitalism that triggers resistance. Drawing on Deniz Kandiyoti's theory of Patriarchal Bargain—where women accept subordination in exchange for safety— and the Social Reproduction Theory articulated by Silvia Federici—which highlights the economic value of unpaid housework—this project achieves three main objectives. First, it explores how male characters exploit Yeong-hye for domestic, sexual and aesthetic value. Second, a concept of Matrilineal Complicity is introduced in order to describe an intergenerational practice where women who managed to make the deal with patriarchy become its structural enforcer. Third, it reinterprets Yeong-hye's self-starvation as a delicate economic strike rather than mental decline.*

Keywords: Patriarchal Bargain; Social Reproduction Theory, Matrilineal Complicity, South Korean feminist fiction, female complicity

1. Introduction

Confucianism has been a major influence on patriarchy in South Korea, with women traditionally occupying a subordinate status to men in a hierarchical family structure. Confucianism upholds filial piety, male primogeniture, and the three corners of obedience (to father, husband and son), relegating women to the private sphere and reducing their roles to that of wife and mother, whose roles include preserving family harmony and bearing male children (Kim, 2016). Despite the formal abandonment of the Confucian patriarchal system during the Japanese colonial era and the subsequent post-war modernization projects, the cultural

vestiges of patriarchy proved surprisingly persistent. The rapid industrialization and urbanization that transformed South Korea from an impoverished developing nation in the 1960s into a global economic powerhouse by the 1990s did not dismantle patriarchy; instead, the system adapted to survive. This deeply ingrained historical structure was fundamentally rebuilt under the weight of late-twentieth-century economic changes. Neoliberalism, especially after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, has accelerated the commodification of women's labor and reaffirmed traditional gender roles. Women were urged to participate in the workforce as an informalized and cheap labor, but they

continued to shoulder the primary responsibility for unpaid (re)productive duty, creating the so-called "double burden" or "second shift" (Cho, 2013).

The justification for this study comes from the ongoing and shifting dynamics of gender inequality in modern South Korea, in which patriarchal relations continue to shape women's lives despite the last 50 years of rapid economic growth and legislative change. South Korea continues to be one of the lowest-ranking countries in the OECD in terms of gender equality, with pronounced disparities in labor force participation, political decision-making, and the unequal distribution of unpaid care labor (OECD, 2023). In this context the research is timely and important. It responds to an urgent need to look beyond celebratory accounts of women's resistance that characterize much of the research on Korean women's literature. While many readings of *The Vegetarian* have highlighted the empowering nature of Yeong-hye's bodily revolt as an act of defiance, such approaches risk overlooking the nuanced and painful dynamics of compliance and complicity that define the lives of most women in patriarchal societies (Park, 2020).

1. How do the male characters shape the terms of the Patriarchal Bargain to reduce Yeong-hye to a domestic, sexual, and aesthetic commodity?
2. How do the mother and sister function as agents of *Matrilineal Complicity* in enforcing reproductive and behavioral codes?
3. How does Yeong-hye's starvation represent a unilateral economic withdrawal from the patriarchal contract rather than clinical madness?

2. Literature Review

Since the English translation, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* has received a variety of critical responses in ecofeminist and posthumanist, psychoanalytic and biopolitical, and Marxist-feminist traditions. These prevalent discourses provide valuable perspectives on Yeong-hye's radical transformation of the body, her silence, and her refusal to eat meat, but they all share the methodological problem of consistently focusing on the singular subject of analysis Yeong-hye. The overall domestic economy of the novel and the important role played by secondary female characters are therefore relatively unstudied. The political invisibility of compliant women in the home is reproduced indirectly in existing works by their almost exclusive focus on the so-called resistor-system dyad, that is, one woman who resists and a totalizing patriarchal system.

In her study *Becoming-Plant: Posthumanist Readings of Han Kang's The Vegetarian*, Samiksha Shrestha (2025) applies Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming to read Yeong-hye's progressive dehumanization as a becoming plant and a radical line of flight from patriarchal hierarchy. Stacy Alaimo (2010) uses her theory of trans-corporeality as an analytical tool to describe Yeong-hye's body as vulnerable and the insurgency of the body as an exchange of materials between humans and nature, which challenges capitalist conceptions of the autonomous body. Jane Bennett (2010) examines the concept of vibrant matter and thereby gives her character, Yeong-hye, more agency for action and tendency than that of a helpless victim of the devouring of the patriarchy. These readings are methodologically atomizing Yeong-hye, although they are theoretically rich. They fail to acknowledge

that by celebrating her transformation out of the home, they are also negating the process of domestic division of labor, compelling her sister In-hye and her mother to double their unpaid social reproduction and emotional labour.

Biopolitical and psychoanalytic critiques shift emphasis to the female body, which is inscribed with institutional power and psychic disturbance. In Foucauldian theory, the family, the medical establishment, and the state use normalizing regimes to compel Yeong-hye's deviant body to return to a productive gendered body (Michel Foucault 1975, 1976). Julia Kristeva's (1982) idea of abjection is applied to explain how patriarchy's consumption of meat is abject, and how Yeong-hye's consumption of meat makes her an abject figure threatening social boundaries. Writing in *Mad Studies*, Chloe Taylor (2018) claims that Yeong-hye's madness is not a psychiatric disorder, but instead a rational response to a sick social order that is medicalizing refusal to prevent productive capitalism. However, these approaches keep the power binary model of patriarchy and the resistant individual. They have all accomplished the aim of exposing institutional violence, but they simultaneously position women around them as passive vessels or as the second victims of biopolitical control.

The Marxist-feminist analyses provide materialist readings by connecting Yeong-hye's body with capitalist production, post-war modernization, and colonial histories. Karl Marx's (1867) theory of commodity fetishism is adapted in the aim of showing that the female body is devoid of any intrinsic value and is monetized, made use of and owned by the males of the species. To demonstrate that Yeong-hye's decision to reject meat is a form of active rejection of consumerist

culture, Fredric Jameson's (1991) concept of the cultural logic of late capitalism is applied. Seung-hee Moon's (2005) research on militarized modernity in South Korea reveals the military roles given to men by post-war nation-building, and the state's biological reproduction role for women, as the Father brags about his meat eating. A key paradox is that Marxist-feminists have theorized the process of commodification at the macro-political level, while overlooking the household as a micro-political and local financial space. They have not yet broken up the family in order to study the recruitment of other women to support this commodity order. In-hye's caring duties are not calculated or accounted for, and the mother's acquiescence is explained as a conditioning of her culture instead of a planned economic decision.

3. Research Methodology:

The study has a qualitative, text-based approach and is based on a materialist-feminist critical reading of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (translated by Deborah Smith). The analysis is built by combining the concepts of Patriarchal Bargain (Deniz Kandiyoti), with Social Reproduction Theory (Silvia Federici) and systematically analyses the novel through three structural aspects: male value extraction, female Matrilineal Complicity and bodily economic withdrawal.

4. Textual Analysis:

4.1 Bargaining for Admission: Male Figures as Bargainers

The opening paragraph of the novel is one of the most critical in modern feminist literature, not for what it obscures but what it says explicitly, openly and unconsciously. Mr. Cheong's narration of his marriage to Yeong-hye describes the Patriarchal

Bargain not as a concealed structural backroom deal but as a transactional and thoroughly rational economic level plan.

"Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way" (Han, 2015, p. 5)

These lines are not, as some ecofeminist arguments suggest, simply symptoms of Mr. Cheong's personal ineptitude or misogyny. The word unremarkable is not an insult but rather a description. Mr. Cheong chooses Yeong-hye because she will not destabilize the intricate economy of his life. The aesthetic characterization - the yellow complexion, the shy demeanor, the simple shoes is achieved not in derision, but with an evaluative neutrality common to the assessment of the suitability of a commodity for use. Furthermore, Mr. Cheong's narration incorporates the catalogue of Yeong-hye's utility by pointing to what he would have found inconvenient. He admits that he would have been interrupted by a female who was "pretty, intelligent, strikingly sensual, the daughters of rich families" (Han, 2015, p. 5). This price list is by no means arbitrary. It is the exact definition of what he demands of the female partner in the bargain he struck: not prettiness, not intellect, not sensuality, just malleability and the absence of any solely reciprocal return. Yeong-hye's worth, according to Mr. Cheong's coordinates, is wholly defined by negative attributes: what she doesn't have or claim.

The father, as architect of the novel's characters, is the one who most explicitly sets the behaving compliance of Yeong-hye and abuses her most directly to impose it, and is for this reason the site of the Patriarchal Bargain most clearly understood

as a bargain by coercion. Yeong-hye is enacted in the register of patriarchal honor - a register in which female compliance is not only personally beneficial but also ideologically essential, forming the public dimension of masculine power within the family and the greater social sphere. The father is militarized. He has "received the Order of Military Merit for serving in Vietnam" (Han, 2015, p.25), and the narrative draws many consistent connections between his patriarchal violence and militarized training. Mr. Cheong recalls whipping Yeong-hye "over the calves until she was eighteen years old" (Han, 2015, p. 25) - a detail that sets Yeong-hye's entire formative period as a moment of frequent discipline, her limbs subject to the father's disciplinary power as a routine matter. Kandiyoti (1988) describes the way in classic patriarchal systems female compliance isn't demanded but insisted upon through the legacy of a lifetime of repression. The father's whipping is not disciplinary exception. It is the training of a female flesh into compliance to the bargain - the body that bears the imprint of the bargain before she is old enough to understand it.

The brother-in-law makes the most complete appropriation of all. Mr. Cheong exploits Yeong-hye's labour. The Mongolian mark is extremely important in this economy. When the brother-in-law encounters it during the filming, he thinks that it "called to mind something ancient, something pre-evolutionary, or else perhaps a mark of photosynthesis ... it was more vegetal than sexual" (Han, 2015, p. 64). This is not an aesthetic appreciation. It is an appropriation that instrumentalizes Yeong-hye's posthuman journey and puts it to work in his art. Yeong-hye's aspiration to become plant-like, to withdraw from the human economy of consumption and exchange, is

here aestheticized and reincorporated into the economy of cultural and erotic commodity production of which she wants to escape.

4.2 Enforcers of the deal: Matrilineal Complicity

The family gathering scene is the densest textual expression of the theme of Matrilineal Complicity, and the mother's role is crucial. It is the mother - not the father - who begins to punish Yeong-hye's compliance. She serves the food herself - "stir-fried beef, sweet and sour pork, steamed chicken, and octopus noodles, arranging them on the table in front of my wife" (Han, 2015, p. 30)- and announces the opening offer of the meeting: "This whole vegetarian business stops right now" (Han, 2015, p. 30). The language is significant. The mother does not plead, or explain, or negotiate. She announces, in the voice of a woman with authority, rather than concern - the authority that Kandiyoti (1988) describes as the particular power that senior women in classic patriarchal systems gain over junior women in compensation for their own subordination to men. This is the mother's bargained dividend: the power to monitor the compliance of the young women whose defection undermines the system on which her social status is based.

The enforcement extends into the hospital scene that follows the family dinner's violence, in which the mother turns up, unseen by In-hye and her husband, with black goat broth to strengthen Yeong-hye, introduces a dimension of Matrilineal Complicity that has barely been discussed. "I was afraid that if In-hye and her husband found out they might try and stop me from coming." (Han, 2015, p. 37), she explains to Mr. Cheong. The mother's secret entrance is not the spontaneous outpouring of maternal

love that it seems. It is a carefully scripted act of domestic management of the bargain: she comes not to accept the violence done to Yeong-hye but to heal the body's productive site, to restore the daughter's commitment to the biological maintenance of the bargain. "Even the dead get their wishes obeyed, but you'd ignore your own mother's?" (Han, 2015, p. 38) she tells Yeong-hye, officiating the emotionality of mother's love as the administrative tool of the bargain's re-establishment. The coercion does not present itself as coercion; it comes in the cup of a mother who loves her daughter and whose love (within the structure of the bargain's mystification) is commensurable with the demand that she return to work.

In-hye's complicity at the family dinner is the most texturally accessible example of Matrilineal Complicity in Part One, and it is also the most analytically interesting for its structural indeterminacy. Before her father's physical beatings, it is In-hye who berates Yeong-hye: "You must eat, Yeong-hye. You'll have more energy if you do. Everyone needs a certain amount of energy while they're alive. Even priests who enter the temple don't take their austerities too far — they might be celibate, but they're still able to live active lives." (Han, 2015, p. 30). The discourse of energy and need, the imperative to eat as natural necessity rather than social contract, is the ideological mode in which the bargain speaks. In-hye does not say: eat because Father says so, eat because your husband says so, eat because of the family's reputation. She says: eat because you need energy to live: naturalizing the bargain's coercive demand as biological necessity. This is Matrilineal Complicity at its most advanced level: the enforcement of compliance through the idiom of care, which disguises the structural imperative of the enforcement as the emotional idiom of sisterly solicitude.

4.3 Violation of Contract: Starvation as Unilateral Retreat

Yeong-hye's withdrawal begins not with the vegetarianism. It begins before that, in the dream that provokes it, a dream whose imagery, translated into Yeong-hye's disjointed interiority in Part One, constitutes the novel's most exact description of what the Patriarchal Bargain has done to her body: "Dark woods. No people. The sharp-pointed leaves on the trees, my torn feet ... 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" (Han, 2015, p. 11). This is not a nightmare of food ethics or ecological depredation. It is a dream in which Yeong-hye is trapped - literally unable to leave a space that is suffused with the blood and meat of the violence that our culinary culture obscures.

The sexual withdrawal is the point of maximum threat to Mr. Cheong. Yeong-hye "deliberately continued to avoid sleeping with me - she'd even taken to sleeping in trousers" (Han, 2015, p. 25). This is no passive evasion. It is a physical gesture of refusal, the physical marking of a refusal upon the body that the conjugal contract has produced as always available.

The bodily undressing that precedes the family meeting in this schema of withdrawal is a critically overlooked act. When Mr. Cheong returns home to find Yeong-hye standing bare to the waist in the corridor of their apartment, peeling potatoes in thin white cotton trousers, he does not desire her but panics he "stepped hastily inside and closed the door behind me; it was

a corridor apartment, and the last thing I needed was for someone to pass by and peek in." (Han, 2015, p. 26). The fear is understandable within the schema of the bargain: Yeong-hye's body, constituted as his social property by the bargain (to be dressed, covered, presented in accordance with his needs) is being withdrawn from that ownership and reclaimed by her.

The fourth stage, the refusal to eat, is the withdrawal's most extreme and irreversible. The earlier stages of the withdrawal involved rejecting particular forms of the bargain's currency: here, the refusal to eat targets the body itself: the means of production for the entire series of demands of the bargain.

The mode of withdrawal that is adopted by Yeong-hye is not merely a suicidal one: it is a mode of withdrawal that is paired with the repeated articulation of its alternative: the photosynthetic economy. Yeong-hye does not merely go on strike. She suggests a different economy, one order, not of the extraction of value from her body but of the passive receiving of light. The photosynthetic desire is first apparent in the hospital, where Yeong-hye is seen "trying to take her clothes off and expose herself to the sunlight" (Han, 2015, p. 65). This behavior, which is diagnosed at the hospital, is in the context of the withdrawal, entirely rational. Yeong-hye is proposing a different diet: one that does not require the provision of domestic services, of sexual services and of social propriety. She is trying to re-structure her body's metabolism for a diet that the patriarchal system cannot seize, cannot require and cannot punish.

The book's final scene of physical assault - in which Yeong-hye is carried fireman-style along the hospital corridor, her "twisting, struggling body" (Han, 2015, p. 130) strapped to the bed - with her

screaming "Leave me alone! Leave me alone!" and then finally, with heartbreaking clarity, "I don't like it! I don't like eating!" (Han, 2015, p. 130) - is structurally most explicit. Yeong-hye is not mad. She is proclaiming (as clearly as her emaciated state and weakening tongue will allow) the conditions of her refusal: not I cannot eat but "I...don't...like...eating!" (Han, 2015, p. 131) - not the incapacity of the body but the impossibility of the will, a will the system has tried, throughout the novel, to compel. That this is a statement she makes while physically constrained places it on a continuum of action with the father's force-feeding in their home: the same logic of structure, the same logic of coercive extraction, the same logic of the refusal by the system of the withdrawal.

5. Conclusion

This study combines the concepts of Deniz Kandiyoti's Patriarchal Bargain and Silvia Federici's Social Reproduction Theory to show that the main conflict of Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* is not about individual breakdowns, but about the transactional domestic economy that makes female resistance something that is necessary and catastrophic. The novel is a system of extraction that loops round and round the domestic, behavioural and aesthetic abilities of the female body in an increasingly totalising way. This idea of Matrilineal Complicity, then, shows that the background female characters such as the Mother and In-hye are not ideologically brainwashed but are disciplining the patriarchy because they have to: it is a rational intergenerational strategy that protects their own precarious structural survival. Thus, Yeong-hye's photosynthetic desires and her own self-starvation are a staged, one-sided economic strike against her being reduced to a means of production, and her institutionalization and her being fed is a biopolitical move to

rehabilitate a rebellious worker. Literarily-critically, this reading goes beyond the standard "resistor-system dyad" of literary criticism and offers a model for studying female compliance without the prospect of victim-blaming. The ending frame of the novel, which features In-hye in a stretcher in the ambulance, sharing a ride to the hospital with her skeletal sister, dead-eyed at a distant forest, serves as an unabridged account of the price paid for the deal: one woman's radical self-sacrifice and the other's gradual, invisible dissolution of her compliant life.

6. Recommendations:

The limitations of this study are that it focuses on *The Vegetarian* (Han, 2015) translated in English by Deborah Smith and only applies to this primary text. Future studies might be bilingual analysis of the original Korean text to explore nuances of the domestic language, or a combination of the materialist-economic and posthumanist/psychoanalytical readings. Further, if other feminist texts from East Asia could be tested for the conceptual generalizability of Matrilineal Complicity, such as Kim Jiyoun, *Born 1982* by Cho Nam-joo and *Who Ate Up All the Shinga* by Park Wan-suh, it would further validate the usefulness of the framework for analysing intergenerational patriarchal bargains.

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