
From Repression to Rejection: A Freudian Reading of Trauma and Vegetal Metamorphosis in Han Kang's The Vegetarian

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Article Received: 29/07/2025

Article Accepted: 31/08/2025

Published Online: 31/08/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.8.08.489

Abstract

This article offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, arguing that Yeong-hye's dramatic transformation from a repressed housewife to a plant-like creature is a manifestation of unresolved trauma. This research, which is mostly grounded in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, looks at Yeong-hye's journey as a movement from repression to rejection. It implies that her early vegetarianism and horrific dreams are signs of a long-standing trauma that was pushed into her unconscious. A psychotic break happens when this trauma recurs. Through the use of the tree's phallic imagery, force-feeding violence, and the "Mongolian mark," the research delves into the main conflicts of the novel. Yeong-hye's desire for vegetal metamorphosis is ultimately seen as a desperate psychological attempt at *Verwerfung*, a complete rejection of both the human predicament and her horrifying reality. This conduct is not only crazy; rather, it is an unconscious defence mechanism employed by a mentality that cannot cope with the suffering it has suffered. By examining this process, the study shows how the narrative uses physiological change to externalize internal psychological sentiments while telling a gripping tale of trauma, the unconscious, and the collapse of the human subject.

Keywords: Trauma, Repression, Psychoanalysis, *Verwerfung*, Metamorphosis

Introduction

In Han Kang's highly regarded novel *The Vegetarian* (2015), housewife Yeong-hye's routine life takes an unexpected turn when she suddenly stops eating meat following a string of intense, unsettling dreams. Her subsequent defiance of family and social norms, which escalated into self-starvation and a desire for vegetal metamorphosis, is frequently seen as a harsh indictment of patriarchal Korean culture or a bold act of female rebellion. In fact, the work has received praise for its examination of the coercive forces of tradition, the objectification of the body, and female autonomy. Nevertheless, these perspectives frequently skirt the edges of Yeong-hye's deep inner landscape, even while they provide insightful analysis of the novel's larger social aspects. There is still need for more research into

the specific processes that propel her drastic change, the hidden psychological forces at work within her. What precisely drives this drastic change, and how can we interpret the breakdown of her human identity from a psychological perspective?

Existing research has undoubtedly recognized how unnerving Yeong-hye's journey was. Critics often characterize her retreat as a spiral into "madness," "anorexia," or a "psychotic break," but it is less usual to find a thorough and methodical psychoanalytic framework that tracks the causes and development of her psychological condition. This paper aims to close this gap by providing a thorough Freudian psychoanalytic analysis of Yeong-hye's development. According to this theory, her seemingly incomprehensible actions stem from a deep-seated suppressed trauma that, when triggered, drives her through a sequence of psychological defenses that result in a drastic kind of rejection (*Verwerfung*).

The paper makes the case that Yeong-hye's drastic physical change is a Freudian defensive mechanism against a horrific reality that her psyche can no longer handle, progressing from psychological suppression to a last act of *Verwerfung*. The research mainly focuses on Sigmund Freud's fundamental beliefs about the unconscious, repression, the symptom, and especially the difference between repression and rejection (*foreclosure*) in order to dissect this argument. According to Freud's theory, traumatic events that are too intense for the conscious mind are forced into the unconscious but nonetheless have an impact, frequently resurfacing in the form of bodily symptoms or nightmares (Freud 147). A more extreme kind of protection known as *verwerfung* is the complete removal of a painful experience from the mind, resulting in a fundamental disconnection from reality. Applying these psychoanalytic ideas allows us to see Yeong-hye's acts as a desperate, if sad, mental survival tactic rather than just a superficial interpretation of "madness."

The subsequent sections of this paper methodically dissects this psychoanalytic development. To begin, there is an analysis of Yeong-hye's frequent nightmares and her newfound dislike of meat as the resurgence of suppressed symptoms of an unrecognized prior trauma. The brutality she endures, the symbolism of the "Mongolian mark," and the phallic imagery of the tree are all the main topics of the second analysis, which will look at how her body becomes into a battlefield for symbolic disintegration. The study concludes by seeing Yeong-hye's last vegetable transformation as a profound act of *Verwerfung*, a total psychological rejection of a traumatized world that causes her human being to drastically disintegrate. This Freudian perspective makes *The Vegetarian* a terrifying examination of the psyche's last-ditch efforts to flee the intolerable weight of violence and memory, as well as a critique of patriarchal domination.

Research Questions

The specific questions the work aims to address are as follows: According to Freudian theory, how do Yeong-hye's nightmares and dislike of meat function as symptomatic expressions of repressed trauma? How does the intensification of her internal psychological pain manifest itself through the symbolic conflict that her physical body becomes? What does this imply about the psyche's frantic survival mechanisms, and how

can her last vegetal metamorphosis be seen as a radical act of Verwerfung, a total mental rejection of horrific reality?

Literature Review

The Vegetarian explores female agency and systemic oppression while offering a powerful critique of patriarchy. According to readings, Yeong-hye's metamorphosis is often framed as a feminist protest, a critique of Korean cultural norms (Bhabha, 2002), a post humanist liberation (Braidotti, 2013), or even a parallel to Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, since the mechanisms they employ both deal with ideas of food and blood as something that "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4). Despite the richness of these interpretations, a thorough and methodical Freudian psychoanalytic investigation of the specific processes of Yeong-hye's psyche, notably the shift from repression to rejection (Verwerfung) in reaction to trauma, is still lacking. By providing a fresh psychoanalytic perspective, this essay situates itself within this critical discourse and shows how an in-depth analysis of Freudian ideas reveals the deep internal forces underlying Yeong-hye's physical and psychological transformation, making a unique contribution to comprehending the sophisticated depiction of trauma and the human condition in the novel.

The Return of the Repressed: Nightmares and the Carnal Body

From a Freudian perspective, the first stage of Yeong-hye's dramatic metamorphosis in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is characterized by a sequence of disturbing incidents that might be interpreted as the resurgence of the suppressed. This section makes the case that her abrupt, visceral dislike of meat and the gory dreams that preceded it are not coincidental events, but rather highly symptomatic expressions of an unrecognized and internalized trauma that was ejected from her conscious consciousness. Before these changes, her husband carefully presents Yeong-hye as "completely unremarkable in every way" (Han, 2015, p. 3), a supposedly calm person without strong feelings or wants. However, psychoanalysis can interpret this "unremarkable" existence as a state of profound psychological quiet that is sustained by the effective use of repression, a defence mechanism in which "the essence of repression consists simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious" (Freud, 1957, p. 147). According to Freud's theory, however, what is suppressed does not just disappear; it keeps applying pressure and looks for symbolic ways to manifest itself from the unconscious.

The main sign of this suppressed mental material intruding into Yeong-hye's everyday existence is her abrupt decision to give up meat, which was brought on by terrifying dreams. Her husband gives a confused account of her actions at the beginning of the book, pointing out how disruptive her act of throwing out all the meat from their refrigerator was to their traditional way of life. "I had a dream" is her only explanation, which is ambiguous yet powerful (Han, 2015, p. 5). Crucially important is the substance of this dream, which was subsequently partially disclosed through fragmentary memories and other people's interpretations. "It was a dream in which I was a beast, its face covered in blood" (Han, 2015, p. 5) describes the horrifying picture of primordial savagery. There is a lot of Freudian meaning in this picture. Dreams are sometimes seen in psychoanalytic theory as the "royal road to the unconscious," a covert way to satisfy suppressed desires, or a symbolic way to

process unresolved conflicts (Freud, 1900, p. 608). A deep-seated association with an act of violence, a blurring of victim and offender, is suggested by Yeong-hye's identification with a blood-covered beast, which has been extremely upsetting to her mental health. The beast, which alludes to a traumatic internalization of anger, is not only seen; it is her.

It seems that a very upsetting childhood memory involving her father is the source of this pain. Despite being repressed at first, the recollection subtly contributes to her severe meat sensitivity. Later, her family casually describes how her father "picked up a heavy stone and smashed its head in" after becoming angry at their childhood dog's barking (Han, 2015, p. 28). For a young Yeong-hye, the detailed description of the dog "writhing in agony" and the "pool of frothing blood" (Han, 2015, p. 28) evokes a visceral dread. This traumatic occurrence, which was characterized by excessive violence and the victim's helplessness, fits Freud's theory that trauma is an overpowering experience that the ego suppresses because it cannot comprehend it effectively. It is possible to interpret her later dislike of meat—particularly her disgust at the taste and smell of cooked flesh—as a psychosomatic defense, a physical rejection of the "carnal" environment that represents this unresolved violence. Meat intake, a deeply rooted cultural habit and a symbol of conventionality in Korea, becomes intolerable because it conjures up the suppressed picture of violence.

The patriarchal systems and the innate brutality of the individuals around Yeong-hye are intricately linked to the "carnal world" in *The Vegetarian*, which goes beyond dietary choices. Mr. Cheong, her spouse, is the perfect example of this sexual life. He is a man with traditional tastes and basic wants who is very concerned with keeping up appearances and managing his home life. He is repulsed by Yeong-hye's vegetarianism because it upends his tidy, "meat-eating" lifestyle, in which his wife is supposed to be a submissive supplier of food and sex. Her rejection is "incomprehensible" and "self-centred" to him (Han, 2015, p. 23), indicating his total incapacity to understand any interior reality that differs from his patriarchal ideals. He then brutally tries to regain control over a body that is sliding away from him by sexually assaulting her, which is a terrible example of this patriarchal aggressiveness. This serves as more evidence that her refusal to consume meat is a rejection of the power and brutality that are ingrained in her marriage's "carnal" realm.

Her father further symbolizes the violent part of this carnal, patriarchal environment. A character of unrelenting power and casual harshness, his reaction to Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is sheer wrath. He brutally tries to push pork into her mouth during the forced feeding scenario, which is a terrifying recreation of the dog's terrible demise (Han, 2015, pp. 43-44). In this case, the flesh itself turns into a tool of aggression and patriarchal authority. Yeong-hye's physical dislike of the meat turns into a last-ditch effort to fight the re-imposed trauma, demonstrating that her body is not just rejecting food but also the aggressive and power-based society it stands for. She made the ultimate somatic symptom by slicing her wrist with a fruit knife right after the occurrence. This was a desperate attempt to escape the limits of a body that had become a site of terrible traumatic recollection and to externalize

the internal suffering. This illustrates the extent to which the suppressed past has influenced her present and necessitated a more drastic reaction.

Yeong-hye's dreams and subsequent vegetarianism are not coincidental occurrences. The reappearance of the suppressed is symbolized by these extremely important psychoanalytic signs. An unresolved trauma is indicated by the horrifying dream vision of the bloodied beast combined with the recollection of her father abusing the dog as a youngster. Her refusal to consume meat is a psychosomatic defence against the "carnal world" that represents this deeply ingrained cruelty, and it sets the stage for a growing internal struggle that will ultimately reshape her life.

Symbolic Disintegration: The Body as a Battleground

Yeong-hye's psychological pain intensifies with the first, symptomatic reappearance of the repressed, and her body becomes a battlefield where internal trauma materializes as exterior, symbolic fights. This chapter makes the case that the abuse she endured—specifically, the forced feeding episode and her brother-in-law's invasive creative endeavour—reflected her growing psychological breakdown on the inside. These behaviours push her closer to a complete detachment from reality since they are symbolic re-enactments of her suppressed trauma rather than isolated episodes. According to psychoanalytic theory, the psyche may turn to more extreme defences, frequently externalized through symbolic action or bodily manifestation, when suppression is unable to hold traumatic material.

A crucial turning point in the novel is the forced feeding scene in the first section, which is a violent and overt re-traumatization that causes Yeong-hye to go beyond the development of somatic symptoms. Her father, a patriarchal authority figure, views her vegetarianism as a grave insult and a betrayal of his family's reputation. He responds quickly, violently, and symbolically by trying to put a chunk of pig in her mouth. "He clamped his hand over her jaw, forced her mouth open, and crammed a piece of pork inside" (Han, 2015, p. 43) is how Han Kang portrays the fight in dramatic detail. This act, a horrifying re-enactment of his previous, equally heinous act of animal killing, is a flagrant attempt by patriarchy to regain complete control over her body and mind. Once a straightforward nutritional decision, the meat is now used as a tool of patriarchal control in an effort to forcefully reintegrate her into the "carnal world" that she has rejected. The deep internal tension is highlighted by Yeong-hye's visceral resistance, which she describes as "struggling, biting, spluttering" (Han, 2015, p. 43). However, the violation is complete, and her desperate act of slashing her wrist is a direct, visible embodiment of her emotional misery. This self-harming injury is a heart-breaking sign of a psychologically overburdened person, a frantic plea for escape from an intolerable reality that has become intimately tied to physical invasion.

Yeong-hye's body, which is becoming more and more delicate and foreign, serves as the backdrop for her brother-in-law's bizarre creative fixation while her normal existence falls apart. The second section, "Mongolian Mark," further complicates her trauma by allowing an examination of her body as a fetishized object through a change in narrative

viewpoint. The unsuccessful video artist brother-in-law obsesses over a "blue birthmark" (Han, 2015, p. 98) on her buttock, which he imaginatively refers to as her "Mongolian mark." For him, this tattoo evokes a forbidden longing by symbolizing a secret, exotic, and primordial part of her nature. He suggests a series of artworks in which he paints plants and flowers onto her nude body as a result of his passion. Her body is specifically envisioned by him as a "blank sheet of paper" (Han, 2015, p. 98) that is ready for his creative inscription. This seemingly harmless act of painting is actually a symbolic rehearsal of her trauma, in which her body is once more objectified, deprives her of her identity, and is reduced to a canvas for the projections and wishes of others. Her disembodiment under patriarchal domination is echoed by his gaze, which reduces her to an aesthetic form without any real empathy.

The symbolism of the tree, which functions with a profound dual nature, becomes evident in this environment. The brother-in-law views the images of trees and flowers he paints on Yeong-hye's body as components of his creative vision, a depiction of the beauty of nature. But his "art" stems from a highly dominating and sexualized drive. In this way, the tree becomes a phallic significance, signifying a kind of penetration and power that he aims to manipulate and channel via his artwork. He imagines himself as the one who allows her "to bloom," quietly claiming control over her metamorphosis. He uses her body to achieve his creative and sexual goals by projecting his own unmet wants and repressed fantasies onto her. This is an obvious case of displacement, as he projects his own inner turmoil and wants onto Yeong-hye's body.

On the other hand, Yeong-hye first sees the flowers and trees as a haven, a mental getaway from the violent reality of the corporeal world. Her perception of the painted flowers as a "soothing" presence that "quieted the bloody images of her dreams" (Han, 2015, p. 109) gives her comfort. This implies a psychological attempt at compression, in which the reassuring picture of flora is used to symbolize the complicated, traumatic experiences. But the brother-in-law's invasive impulses swiftly supplant this fledgling attachment to the vegetal, transforming her fledgling psychological retreat into yet another instance of objectification and assault. At the end of the day, his creative "vision" is a violent intrusion that deprives her of control over her own symbolic universe and pushes her farther into psychological disarray. Instead of providing her with freedom, the creative endeavour serves as yet another vehicle for her symbolic breakdown, resulting in a near total disengagement from social connection and an increased sense of identification with the non-human. Her last, drastic psychic resistance is finally made possible by this increasing outward breach of her physical and mental limits.

The Final Act of Rejection: Verwerfung and Vegetal Metamorphosis

Yeong-hye's psychology turns to a more extreme and severe defensive mechanism as her psychological condition worsens and external transgressions persist, leading to a radical act of rejection, or Verwerfung. Here, Yeong-hye's ultimate descent into a vegetative state is a deep, if sad, psychotic act in which a terrible experience or reality is not just suppressed but entirely ejected from the brain. It is not just a case of psychological

breakdown or regression. She uses this complete rejection of her human life as her last, last resort to get away from a world full of intolerable trauma.

Yeong-hye's metamorphosis reaches its most dramatic and unnerving stage in the last section of the novel, "The Flaming Trees," which is told by her sister In-hye. She gets severely malnourished and completely refuses to eat. This is a significant departure from the carnal and symbolic systems that have caused her such suffering, moving from vegetarianism (a selective denial of food) to an utter rejection of human nutrition. She speaks more and more of her wish to merge with nature, to lose her human skin, and to take in energy straight from the sun. In-hye witnesses her sister's overwhelming need at a terrifying moment: "I'm not an animal anymore... Sunlight is all I need" (Han, 2015, p. 159). She later tells In-hye, "I thought I was a tree," after being made to drink a protein shake by medical workers. After all, I am not a tree, am I? Han (2015), page 165. This is a new world that her brain is frantically attempting to create, not merely a fantasy.

It's important to differentiate Freud's idea of repression from rejection (*Verwerfung*) in order to comprehend these phenomena. The ejection of a concept or feeling from awareness into the unconscious, where it remains active but disguised, is referred to as repression (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, p. 390). *Verwerfung*, on the other hand, which is frequently translated as "foreclosure" or "disavowal," denotes a more basic process. The subject totally expels a painful perception or concept from the symbolic order and, consequently, from psychic reality through this primordial process. A new, frequently irrational reality is created to fill the hole caused by the non-integration of a basic signifier into the unconscious, which causes a psychotic break (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, p. 165). Yeong-hye's mentality is no longer able to just suppress the pain of patriarchal aggression, which includes the dog's murder, the forced feeding, and the sexual assault. A new, internal universe where she is no longer human and immune to the abuses of the "carnal" world is instead created, rejecting the exact reality in which these traumas took place. Her belief in turning into a tree is a drastic psychological protection against an intolerable truth, not a hallucination.

In Yeong-hye's terminal state, the roots have very strong symbolic meaning. Her wish to "plant herself" and establish roots might be seen as an attempt to find a basic foundation beyond human existence, a link to an elemental life that offers security and release from the ongoing anguish she has endured as a human. In contrast to her flowing, violated human form, the roots represent a strong, unbreakable bond with the ground and a desire to be anchored in something timeless and uncompromising. The forced and shallow relationships she experienced in her patriarchal household, where her sense of self was continuously disrupted, stand in stark contrast to this primordial bond. Her desire to blend in with nature is a complete rejection of her history and a reimagining of herself as a creature unencumbered by the brutality and limitations of human civilization.

However, this "liberation" has a terrible price, underscoring the sad character of her emotional departure. Yeong-hye succeeds in escaping her painful human world, but at the price of her life, her relationships with others, and her sanity. The concluding scenes of the novel, which show In-hye pulling Yeong-hye's thin body through the hospital and her sister's disintegrated awareness, highlight the extreme physical devastation and loneliness that this drastic psychological defense involves. Although her metamorphosis is an act of great defiance, it is also a heartbreaking illustration of the unconscionable strains that forced her mind to do such a drastic, self-destructive, but completely defiant, effort of self-preservation. Thus, her vegetative transformation serves as a terrifying psychoanalytic case study of *Verwerfung*, illustrating the extent to which the human psyche would go in order to avoid an intolerably horrific reality.

Conclusion

As a Freudian defensive mechanism against a painful reality that her brain can no longer handle, this study has suggested that Yeong-hye's drastic physical metamorphosis in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* represents a transition from psychological suppression to a final, catastrophic act of rejection (*Verwerfung*). This study has attempted to shed light on the deep internal factors underlying Yeong-hye's physical and psychological transformation by methodically using a psychoanalytic framework. It goes beyond superficial interpretations of "madness" to reveal a desperate mental survival tactic.

First, our study showed how Yeong-hye's seeming abrupt conversion to vegetarianism—which was preceded by horrific, violent nightmares—represents the resurgence of the suppressed. Intertwined with the horrific childhood memory of her father's vicious murder of the family dog (Han, 2015, p. 28), the visceral dream of being a "beast, its face covered in blood" (Han, 2015, p. 5) exposed a deeply internalized trauma that her calm, unremarkable existence had previously been able to keep at bay through repression (Freud, 1957, p. 147). She literally rejected the "carnal world" that represented the violence and hostility present in her patriarchal upbringing, turning her dislike of meat into a psychosomatic illness.

After that, we looked at how Yeong-hye's body became a battlefield for symbolic breakdown. Her father planned the violent forced feeding episode, which was a patriarchal attempt to re-traumatize her and forcefully reintegrate her into a system she was struggling to leave (Han, 2015, p. 43). At the same time, she was further objectified by her brother-in-law's twisted artistic fixation with her "Mongolian mark" (Han, 2015, p. 98) and the symbolic painting of flowers and trees on her nude body. Although this act was aesthetically pleasing on the surface, it was also a symbolic repetition of her trauma, reflecting her growing emotional disarray as her fledgling relationship with the vegetal world was once more damaged through fetishisation. These increasing outside attacks on her independence drove her mental state closer to the brink.

The study concluded by claiming that Yeong-hye's last vegetative transformation is a drastic act of rejection (*Verwerfung*). *Verwerfung* entails the total ejection of a painful

perception from psychic reality, resulting in a psychotic break and the creation of a new, frequently delusional, reality, in contrast to repression, which just forces traumatic material into the unconscious (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, p. 165). Yeong-hye's statements, such as "I'm not an animal anymore... All I need is sunlight" (Han, 2015, p. 159) and her desire for "roots," are interpreted as the desperate construction of a new, non-human identity, a calculated rejection of a human reality full of intolerable suffering and violence, rather than as simple delusions. Her total abstinence from food and her wish to abandon her human body symbolize the psyche's last, drastic resort to get away from the crippling weight of memory and interpersonal transgression.

The broader importance of this psychoanalytic reading goes beyond a single literary study. It emphasizes how literature may eloquently capture the profound and frequently disastrous effects of trauma on the human psyche, especially when such trauma goes unrecognized and is exacerbated by social forces. As a result, *The Vegetarian* offers a powerful illustration of the limitations of psychological flight. *Verwerfung* gives Yeong-hye a drastic kind of subjective freedom from her horrific reality, but this "liberation" comes at the terrible expense of her sanity and, eventually, her life. The story effectively demonstrates how strong psychological barriers can result in physical death and terrible isolation in the outside world, even when they provide an emotional escape. From a Freudian perspective, Han Kang's novel is a terrifying and perceptive examination of the psyche's last resorts in the face of intolerable circumstances, acting as a sobering reminder of the thin lines separating trauma, sanity, and self.

This study presents interesting directions for further investigation. We may gain a deeper grasp of how trauma is portrayed in a variety of storylines by applying this Freudian framework to other modern literary works that contain somatic symptoms or drastic alterations. Future research might also examine how universal processes interact with particular historical and societal traumas by conducting cross-cultural assessments of mental defensive mechanisms like *Verwerfung*. The ethical and existential ramifications of such drastic psychological escapes as well as the complex boundaries of the human subject when faced with intolerable reality are examined in this book, which also encourages interdisciplinary discussion between literary psychoanalysis, trauma studies, and philosophy.

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