

# The Interconnections of Culture, Identity, and Environmental Consciousness in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

Sulistya Ningtyas<sup>1\*</sup>, Natasya Amanda Azzahra<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University, Indonesia

**Abstract.** This research examines the interconnections of culture, identity, and environmental consciousness depicted in Han Kang's novel, *The Vegetarian*. Specifically, it analyzes how the protagonist, Yeong-hye, navigates her changing sense of self and its impact on her ecological awareness. By applying an ecocriticism approach, particularly the theories of Irigaray and Marder on vegetal beings, this study explores the psychological and social transformations in Yeong-hye's life as she embraces the ideology of vegetarianism. It underscores the significant role that Korean culture plays in shaping one's sense of self and its relationship to environmental awareness. By investigating the intricate interplay of culture, identity, and environmental consciousness in contemporary literature, this study provides insights into the implications of this relationship on a global scale, particularly in light of growing environmental concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: [sulistya@live.undip.ac.id](mailto:sulistya@live.undip.ac.id)

## 1 Introduction

In recent times, numerous environmental issues have prompted a significant number of environmentalists to take action. They have engaged in various activities, including vandalism [1]. Property destruction, sabotaging industrial equipment, destroying genetically modified crops, and vandalising infrastructure related to environmentally harmful practices are some examples of their vandalism actions. Some environmental activists engage in vandalism to draw attention to the urgency of environmental issues and encourage others to take action against environmental damage.

However, such actions tend to create antipathy rather than sympathy in people's minds. Instead of generating understanding and support for the cause, it can provoke adverse reactions and opposition. Instead of using vandalism as an excuse to shelter under the word climate justice, various ways can raise public attention, such as public campaigns, the development of support networks, and artistic or creative action [1]. According to [1], groups that use a variety of tactics, support non-violence, and avoid harmful internal conflicts based on political positions are more likely to achieve their goals.

Furthermore, many authors have tried to raise awareness about the climate emergency through their literary works. One example is Edward Abby's 1975 novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Another is Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, where the protagonist, Yeong-hye, turns vegetarian after experiencing childhood trauma. This book explores Yeong-hye's views on nature and how cultural factors can influence a person's identity and affect the environment.

Although many previous studies analysed these issues, such as [2], [3], and [4], this research shows the interconnections of the cultural effect, human identity, and environmental consciousness within sustainable development.

The research method used in this study uses the contextual analysis method. The contextual analysis method identifies a literary work within its broader historical, social and cultural context [5]. The approach used in this research is ecocriticism, as it follows the theory put forth by Irigaray and Marder in their work, *The Vegetal Being*. According to Lawrence Buell, ecocriticism examines the connection between literature and the environment with a dedication to environmental action [6].

## 2 Result and Discussion

In this section, the analysis is established by explaining the cultural background of the novel. Then, it is followed by the observation of the protagonist's constructed identity. These two aspects, culture and identity, give effects on environmental consciousness revealed in the novel. By applying the theory of the vegetal being proposed by [7], this research shows how the anti-anthropocentric perspective works, how nature as a refuge is described within the story, and the natural presence in the vegetal world.

### 1.1 Culture and identity in *The Vegetarian*

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is set in modern-day South Korea. Even though the novel portrays contemporary urban life, the cultural impact of Confucianism is seen in various aspects of the narrative. Historically, this ideology was introduced by Confucius approximately around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. While Confucius is originally a Chinese philosopher, his teachings reached a large part of Asia, including Korea, in ancient times. Essentially, the ethical system of Confucianism plays an important role in shaping South Korean standards, social order, and personal connections. In the current era, this philosophical ideology has become fundamental life principles of South Korean society [8-9].

With the influence of Confucianism, hierarchical relationships have become one vital element in South Korean society [10]. Moreover, Confucius's teachings define distinct gender roles, building cultural expectations regarding the responsibilities of men and women in society. In *The Vegetarian*, the protagonist is not only expected to show respect to her parents but she is also demanded to follow every order her parents make for her. Even when she adheres to a different ideology than what her parents believe in, she is forced to abandon the ideology. Moreover, the status of her father as a veteran of the Vietnam War doubles the hierarchical gap between the daughter and the father. This proves that those of higher social status, such as elders or authority figures, hold power over their subordinates. The narrative explained by the protagonist's husband below indicates that the protagonist is not only mentally abused by her father but also physically.

He never tired of boasting about having received the Order of Military Merit for serving in Vietnam, and not only was his voice extremely loud, it was the voice of a man with strongly fixed ideas. *I myself, in*

*Vietnam...seven Vietcong...as his son-in-law, I was only too familiar with the beginning of his monologue. According to my wife, he had whipped her over the calves until she was eighteen years old. [11]*

The humiliation, however, not only comes from the protagonist's father. Mr Cheong, the protagonist's husband, fully upholds the patriarchal system in treating his wife. In his conceptual framework, women are regarded as objects deprived of the right to determine their life. As narrated by him, "[...] it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as mine had done" [11]. It demonstrates how patriarchal structures have an impact on the subjugation of individual aspirations, specifically women, who are perceived as mere objects in the male-dominated world.

Apart from those cultural norms, the novel also demonstrates particular social expectations in the South Korean community. In this regard, Confucianism takes part in setting the standards of etiquette within the people. The collective mindset of the people, thus, insists on proper behaviours in social interactions. These include bowing as a common gesture of respect, using honorifics in conversation, and using more polite language to older individuals or those of higher social class. Influenced by shared traditions and conventions, cultural expectations develop a framework for how individuals should act toward others. The excerpt below depicts the circumstance where the protagonist is expected to behave according to the established social norms.

That stare appalled everyone present. Did she not even recognize the situation for what it was? Was it possible that she hadn't grasped the status of the elegant middle-aged woman facing her? What shadowy recesses lurked in her mind, what secrets I'd never suspected? In that moment, she was utterly unknowable. [11]

At that moment, the protagonist's husband is invited to have dinner with his supervisor in a Korean-Chinese restaurant. They come along with their wives. As Yeong-hye shows her preference for not consuming meat, the supervisor's wife comments that she "[...] hate[s] to share a meal with someone who considers eating meat repulsive" [11]. Based on the cultural norms within South Korean society, Mr Cheong considered that his wife's behaviour is inappropriate, especially given the society's attention to

proper table manners. Even worse, he sees his wife as someone with lower social status compared to his supervisor's wife.

Growing up in such a morally upright society, Yeong-hye's character has been forged in a way that initially follows determined collective values. When she was young, she was an obedient daughter who reluctantly obeyed her parents' order to eat the family dog as a feast. The dog had previously attacked her, and there was a belief that consuming the dog's meat would heal the wound caused by the bite. Despite finding it inhumane, she ultimately complied with her parents' command to eat the dog meat.

Dreams of murder.

Murderer or murdered... hazy distinctions, boundaries wearing thin. Familiarity bleeds into strangeness, certainty becomes impossible. Only violence is vivid enough to stick. A sound, the elasticity of the instant when the metal struck the victim's head... the shadow that crumpled and fell gleams cold in the darkness. [11]

As the protagonist grows older, her identity as an obedient South Korean woman becomes disrupted by her childhood traumatic experiences that recur in her dreams. The nightmares about human cruelty lead her to make a radical step to adopt a vegetarian lifestyle. At that moment, the protagonist experiences an identity crisis that, eventually, she withdraws from the tackle of the symbolic orders.

## **1.2 Effects of culture and identity on environmental consciousness**

*The Vegetarian* narrates how haunting memories of childhood traumas trigger the protagonist's sensitivity to concern about her surrounding environment. She demonstrates her environmental awareness by submitting to the vegetarianism idea, a dietary practice that excludes meat or other animal products and prioritises plant-based foods [12]. Her zero consumption of meat develops into a more revolutionary idea than the non-consumption of egg, milk, and other animal by-products. This decision is regarded as a significant milestone considering that meat is one of the main menus in South Korean cuisine.

The protagonist's adherence to vegetarianism stems from her anti-anthropocentric perspective. As a counterargument to the anthropocentric

view, this view suggests that humans are not merely the centre of existence. According to [Irigaray and Marder], this view promotes respectful relationships with other elements that occupy the universe. The anti-anthropocentric perspective positions other living beings as equal to human beings, admitting the agency and subjectivity of every living organism.

“I thought trees stood up straight... I only found out just now. They actually stand with both arms in the earth, all of them. Look, look over there, aren't you surprised?” Yeong-hye sprang up and pointed to the window. “All of them, they're all standing on their heads.” [11]

The quotation above shows the protagonist's framework of thinking about other living beings, especially plants. She emphasises the subjectivity of plants in a way that sees plants not merely as objects, but also as vegetal beings that need to be respected [7]. By defining them as subjects, she believes that plants have the sensibility to respond to their surroundings. In addition, she also acknowledges the modes of communication of plants, as shown by the following excerpt:

While she waits for the doctor to come down from the consultation room, she turns to look at the zelkova tree that stands in the hospital's front garden. The tree is clearly very old, easily four hundred years. On bright days it would spread its countless branches and let the sunlight scintillate its leaves, seemingly communicating something to her. Today, a day sodden and stupefied with rain, it is reticent, and keeps its thoughts unspoken. [11]

The narration that depicts a moment when the protagonist's sister visits her sibling above highlights the agency of plants in terms of communication. Through her writing, the author personalised the plants as if they are able to deliver messages to their circumstances by the plant's behaviour. Spreading branches can be defined as the plants radiating energy that they receive by absorbing the sunlight. On the other hand, the plants are also deemed quiet on rainy days as if their thoughts are kept for themselves.

The protagonist's connection to nature represents strong bounds between humans and living entities. She believes that flower paintings made by her brother-in-law on her body stop her recurring nightmarish dreams. Further, she has a desire to transform into a tree, even to imitate the survival methods of trees: conducting photosynthesis to survive. She thinks that she does not need food anymore and that she can remain alive

by exposing her skin to the sunlight, breathing air, and watering her body. While the protagonist is described to take a controversial step that is judged to be insane, she demonstrates her deep concern for the environment.

When viewed through the lens of ecocriticism, it reveals that the author used the story as an allegory to critique human cruelty. In other words, from personal environmental consciousness, the novel functions as collective environmental consciousness to sway public opinions. In this case, the author employed the novel as a criticism of environmental degradation that is worsening across the world. Her writing activates public awareness related to the destruction of nature due to exploitation. Thus, the author indirectly calls for social change to make the world a better living place.

## 2 Conclusion

*The Vegetarian* by Han Kang explores the impact of culture and self-awareness on environmental consciousness. Yeong-hye, the protagonist, was deeply affected by the societal and cultural expectations in Korea, leading her to adopt a vegetarian lifestyle. This ultimately resulted in an identity crisis, causing her to question her existence and identify as a tree. Based on Irigaray's & Marder's perspectives, Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian indicates the anti-anthropocentrism concept of the agency and subjectivity of plants. Additionally, the novel serves as a representation of the detrimental impact of human actions on the natural world, perpetuated by societal norms and values. It is intended to raise awareness among the general public about environmental issues.

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