

Becoming Other: The Crisis of Individuation in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

Sonali Raina¹, Dr Pardeep Kumar²

¹PhD Scholar, Department of English, University of Jammu
sonaliraina515@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Jammu

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Abstract— Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* presents Yeong-hye's refusal of meat as the beginning of a disturbance in identity. The decision follows violent dreams and develops into a rejection of familial authority, sexual possession, and the human body. This paper examines Yeong-hye's transformation through C. G. Jung's concepts of the unconscious, persona, shadow, and individuation. It argues that the novel represents not the completion of individuation but its crisis. The dreams bring repressed material into consciousness, while the body becomes the medium through which that material resists a socially imposed identity. The violence directed against Yeong-hye reveals that the Shadow cannot be located solely within the psyche; it is also projected through familial and social structures. Her identification with vegetal existence marks the point at which differentiation from the persona becomes a rejection of human subjectivity. The novel complicates Jungian individuation by presenting self-realization as an unresolved movement between resistance, fragmentation, and disappearance.



Keywords— dreams, individuation, persona, shadow, vegetal identity

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007) begins with an act that appears deceptively simple. Yeong-hye stops eating meat. Her husband, who introduces her as "completely unremarkable in every way" (Kang 3), initially treats the decision as an inconvenience rather than as evidence of a deeper psychological transformation. Yet vegetarianism soon develops into a comprehensive refusal of the identity through which Yeong-hye has previously been recognized. She withdraws from marital expectations, rejects familial authority, refuses sexual possession, and eventually attempts to renounce the conditions of human existence itself. What begins as a dietary decision consequently becomes a crisis of identity. The immediate source of this transformation is the dream. When asked why she has stopped eating meat, Yeong-hye responds with the apparently inadequate explanation, "I had a dream" (Kang 8). The statement is important because it places the unconscious before conscious reasoning. Her decision does not originate in an articulated ethical position or a rational programme. It emerges from an experience that she

encounters first through dreams and subsequently attempts to express through the body. The novel consequently establishes a relationship between dream, unconscious material, bodily refusal, and the disintegration of an established identity. Jungian psychology provides a particularly productive framework for examining this movement because Jung locates psychological development in the relationship between consciousness and the unconscious. His understanding of individuation differs from the idea of becoming an isolated or purely autonomous individual. It involves a confrontation with unconscious contents and a gradual differentiation of the personality from collective expectations. The process is therefore neither linear nor uncomplicated. The encounter with the unconscious may initially produce disturbance because it brings into consciousness material that the established personality has excluded.

Jung, in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1968), observes that "The meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one's own shadow"

(21). The formulation is especially relevant to Yeong-hye, whose first significant psychological encounter is an encounter with a version of herself that she does not recognize. Her dreams are populated by blood, animal flesh, violence, and an unfamiliar image of her own face. The experience destabilizes the identity represented by the apparently ordinary wife introduced at the beginning of the novel. The shadow, however, cannot simply be equated with Yeong-hye's violence or aggression. Its significance lies in the confrontation with what has been excluded from conscious identity. The novel does not present her movement as a successful completion of Jungian individuation. Rather, it represents a crisis of individuation. Yeong-hye's rejection of the persona creates an opening toward the unconscious, but the process does not culminate in psychic integration. The further she moves away from the identity imposed upon her, the more radically she rejects human subjectivity itself. The vegetal existence she imagines therefore represents both resistance and dissolution. The distinction is important because the persona is not simply a false identity that must be discarded. Jung describes it as a necessary means by which the individual relates to society. The problem emerges when the persona is mistaken for the entirety of the personality. Yeong-hye's initial characterization demonstrates precisely such a reduction. Her husband understands her almost entirely through the social role she performs. Her ordinariness is inseparable from her conformity to his expectations. She is satisfactory because she does not disturb the structure in which he has placed her. Her refusal of meat therefore disturbs more than domestic routine. It disturbs the identity through which she has been socially legible.

Jung's account of the unconscious provides a basis for understanding why the disturbance begins with dreams. He describes dreams as "...involuntary, spontaneous products of the unconscious psyche..." (Jung 48). Their importance in *The Vegetarian* lies precisely in their resistance to conscious intention. Yeong-hye does not consciously construct the imagery that confronts her. She receives it. Her later actions can be understood as responses to an unconscious experience that consciousness cannot simply dismiss. The dream itself is saturated with violence. She recalls the bodies of animals and the sensation of having participated in their destruction. The imagery becomes more disturbing because it does not allow her to occupy a simple position outside violence. She is both observer and participant. The dream consequently disrupts the distinction between innocent consumer and violent act. The contradiction captures the psychological significance of the dream. The figure is Yeong-hye, yet it is a Yeong-hye whom her conscious identity does not recognize. Jung's

formulation that "The meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one's own shadow" (Jung 21) becomes particularly applicable here. The shadow appears not as an external monster but as an unfamiliar dimension of the self. This encounter does not immediately produce understanding. Instead, it produces rejection. Yeong-hye throws away the meat in the refrigerator and announces that she will no longer eat it. The action constitutes an attempt to give material form to an experience that has appeared symbolically in the dream. What had been represented through blood and flesh becomes a conscious dietary prohibition. The psychological significance of vegetarianism therefore exceeds the question of food. Meat becomes associated with the violent materiality that the dream has made visible. Yeong-hye's rejection of meat is consequently an attempt to separate herself from what the dream has revealed. Yet the separation is external rather than integrative. She does not enter into a sustained dialogue with the unconscious content. She reorganizes her life around its rejection. The distinction is central to the novel's relation to individuation. Differentiation from the persona is necessary, but differentiation alone does not constitute individuation. The unconscious contents must become part of a larger psychic relation. Yeong-hye's transformation instead moves toward increasingly absolute forms of negation. The family confrontation makes this problem more visible. Once Yeong-hye refuses meat, her decision becomes a challenge to familial authority. Her father attempts to force food into her mouth, turning eating into an act of coercion. The body that refuses consumption becomes the body upon which authority is exercised. What is described as an attempt to restore normality consequently reveals the violence underlying the family's conception of normal behaviour. This episode also complicates the location of the shadow. The violence cannot be attributed exclusively to Yeong-hye's unconscious. Her family demonstrates its own capacity for aggression, but that aggression is justified through the language of discipline, responsibility, and familial duty. Yeong-hye becomes the person upon whom disorder is projected because her refusal threatens the collective identity of the family. The shadow can therefore be understood at two interconnected levels. At the personal level, Yeong-hye encounters disturbing aspects of herself through her dreams and at the collective level, her refusal exposes forms of violence that the social environment prefers to regard as legitimate or necessary. Jung's observation that the collective unconscious is "sheer objectivity, as wide as the world and open to all the world" (Jung 22) is significant in this context. The unconscious is not sealed within an isolated individual. The novel repeatedly demonstrates the interaction between individual psychic disturbance and collective structures. This

relationship becomes particularly evident through projection. Yeong-hye's husband interprets her refusal as irrationality; her father interprets it as disobedience; her brother-in-law later interprets her body through his aesthetic and sexual imagination. In each case, another character attempts to give Yeong-hye a meaning that will make her comprehensible within an existing framework.

The second part of the novel intensifies this problem. The brother-in-law's fascination with the Mongolian mark transforms Yeong-hye's body into an artistic object. Flowers painted on her body appear to offer a language different from that of the family, but the artistic gaze remains another form of projection. He does not encounter Yeong-hye without mediation. He transforms her into the embodiment of his own aesthetic fantasy. The distinction between external domination and artistic projection is important. The brother-in-law's fascination appears less coercive than the father's violence, yet it similarly denies Yeong-hye complete subjectivity. Her body becomes meaningful because another person gives it meaning. She moves from being a wife within one person's narrative to being an aesthetic object within another's. This process demonstrates why the rejection of the persona cannot by itself produce an autonomous self. Yeong-hye escapes one externally constructed identity only to become the object of other projections. The novel consequently depicts identity as relational and unstable rather than as something that can simply be recovered by removing social expectations. Susan Rowland's approach to Jungian literary criticism is useful here because it emphasizes the interpretive relationship between literary form and psychological concepts. Her discussion explicitly connects signs, symbols, close reading as active imagination with Jungian literary criticism. The formulation is important because it prevents the novel from being reduced to a catalogue of Jungian archetypes. The movement from meat to flowers to plants constitutes a symbolic development. Meat initially represents the animal body and the violence of consumption, and the flowers painted upon Yeong-hye's body transform her into an aesthetic image. Vegetal existence subsequently becomes an identity that she claims for herself. The progression is therefore not accidental. The vegetal emerges as an alternative to the human body as it has been experienced through consumption, sexuality, possession, and violence. The plant becomes especially significant in the final section of the novel. Yeong-hye increasingly understands herself not as a human being who has adopted a particular diet but as a being who should no longer participate in animal existence. She tells her sister, "I'm not an animal anymore" (Kang 153). She continues, "I don't need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight" (Kang 154). These statements demonstrate that

the transformation has reached a new stage. The initial refusal of meat was directed toward a particular practice. The later refusal is directed toward the biological condition of animal life. Yeong-hye no longer wishes merely to avoid consuming animals. She imagines herself as belonging to another order of existence.

The significance of the plant is therefore psychological as well as ecological. It represents an existence without appetite. It does not consume flesh, participate in sexual reproduction in the human sense, or depend upon the social structures that have defined Yeong-hye's life. The plant becomes an imagined alternative to the human subject. Yet the transformation also marks the point at which Yeong-hye's movement diverges most sharply from Jungian individuation. Jungian individuation requires an expanded relationship between consciousness and unconsciousness. Yeong-hye increasingly seeks the disappearance of consciousness itself. She tells In-hye, "Soon now, words and thoughts will all disappear" (Kang 154). The statement is decisive. Language and thought are among the principal means through which the human subject maintains a relationship with the world. Their disappearance therefore signifies more than withdrawal from society. It indicates the dissolution of the human subject as a conscious, reflective being. The process can be described through Jung's distinction between differentiation and integration. Yeong-hye successfully differentiates herself from the expectations of her husband and family. She refuses the persona that has defined her as an obedient wife and daughter. She confronts unconscious material through her dreams. But instead of integrating that material into a broader conception of self, she seeks an existence beyond the human structures in which integration would have to occur. Her transformation consequently represents a crisis rather than a completion of individuation. The distinction also complicates any interpretation of Yeong-hye's vegetarianism as uncomplicated liberation. Her refusal unquestionably disrupts structures of authority, but its eventual direction is destructive. The more completely she rejects the human world, the less capable she becomes of sustaining herself within it. Her resistance thus contains an internal contradiction: the rejection of violence requires the rejection of the bodily conditions through which she can continue to exist. The final section makes this contradiction explicit. When Yeong-hye asks, "Why, is it such a bad thing to die?" (Kang 157), the psychological trajectory that began with the dream reaches its most radical point. The original refusal of meat was an attempt to change how she lived. The later refusal of food questions whether human life itself should continue. Death therefore becomes the extreme consequence of the desire to become other. This trajectory is significant for the interpretation of the shadow. Jung

insists that confrontation with the shadow is a difficult but necessary stage in the encounter with the self. The shadow is "a tight passage, a narrow door..." (Jung 21). Yeong-hye enters this passage, but the novel does not depict her emerging into the boundless expanse that Jung associates with the experience beyond the narrow door. Instead, the passage becomes increasingly restrictive. The unconscious material is encountered, but it is not integrated.

The distinction can also be understood through Jung's conception of psychic wholeness. Individuation does not mean becoming socially compliant, nor does it mean destroying the ego. It involves a transformation in the relationship between the conscious personality and the unconscious. Yeong-hye's transformation instead progressively weakens the conscious personality itself. Her movement is therefore not toward a larger psychic whole but toward the abandonment of the human conditions of selfhood. In this respect, In-hye's role becomes particularly important. Unlike Yeong-hye, In-hye remains within the human world, but her encounter with her sister forces her to reconsider the assumptions that organize that world. She begins to recognize the violence embedded within ordinary life, including the expectations imposed upon women and the body. Her response differs from Yeong-hye's because she does not attempt to become non-human. She remains within contradiction. This distinction prevents the novel from establishing a simple opposition between the sisters. Yeong-hye represents radical withdrawal from human structures, whereas In-hye represents continued participation accompanied by an increasing awareness of their violence. Neither position is presented as an uncomplicated resolution. The contrast also illuminates the problem of individuation. The process requires the capacity to confront contradictions without resolving them prematurely. Yeong-hye's solution is increasingly absolute. Meat must disappear; appetite must disappear; language and thought must disappear; eventually, human existence itself becomes questionable. The desire for purity therefore becomes inseparable from the desire for disappearance. The plant is the clearest symbol of this desire. It is significant that Yeong-hye does not imagine herself becoming another kind of human being. She imagines herself becoming a plant. This distinction makes the transformation more radical than rebellion against patriarchy or domestic conformity. She is not asking to occupy a different social identity. She is attempting to leave the system of human identities altogether. The vegetal body consequently represents the limit of the Jungian model as it is dramatized by the novel. The unconscious has successfully disrupted the persona, but the resulting transformation does not create a more comprehensive self. It undermines the very distinction between self and other upon which a human

subject depends. Jung's observation that the encounter with the shadow is a necessary stage in coming to know oneself becomes ironic in the context of Yeong-hye's trajectory. She encounters herself as unfamiliar, but the result is not a more stable knowledge of who she is. Instead, the unfamiliar self gradually replaces the familiar one. The face in the dream that she does not recognize becomes the body that she eventually inhabits. The movement from recognition to estrangement is therefore central to the novel.

At the beginning, Yeong-hye is defined by others as ordinary. Her husband believes that her lack of distinctiveness makes her an ideal wife. The dream disrupts that ordinariness. The more she responds to it, the less recognizable she becomes to those around her. Her transformation is consequently a progressive withdrawal from the identity assigned to her. The novel's narrative structure reinforces this process. Yeong-hye's own voice is limited, while the principal narratives are mediated through her husband, her brother-in-law, and her sister. Her identity is repeatedly constructed by other consciousnesses. This narrative displacement is not incidental. It reinforces the central problem of subjectivity: the woman who most radically refuses externally imposed meaning is also the woman whose story is most frequently narrated by others. The result is a paradox. Yeong-hye attempts to escape objectification by refusing the identities imposed upon her, yet her body becomes increasingly available to interpretation. Her refusal itself becomes a spectacle. Her vegetarianism, nakedness, painted body, refusal of food, and identification with plants are all interpreted by others. Her body therefore remains the contested site between subjectivity and objectification. A Jungian reading does not resolve this contradiction. Instead, it makes visible the psychological structure through which it operates. The persona provides the social identity from which Yeong-hye attempts to separate. The Shadow appears through dreams and through the violence that her refusal exposes. Projection allows other characters to place their own psychic contents upon her body. Individuation provides the theoretical possibility of a movement toward greater psychic wholeness. The novel, however, interrupts that possibility by taking differentiation beyond integration. This is why *The Vegetarian* should not be read simply as a narrative of liberation. Yeong-hye's refusal exposes genuine violence, but the novel does not represent the alternative she constructs as stable or sustainable. Her vegetal identity is both a protest against human violence and a rejection of human subjectivity. The same movement that gives her resistance its radical force also produces her disappearance.

The final significance of the novel therefore lies in the tension between becoming oneself and becoming other. Yeong-hye's initial refusal can be understood as the

beginning of a process of psychological differentiation. Her dreams reveal an unconscious dimension that cannot be reconciled with her previous identity. Her body then becomes the medium through which the unconscious challenges the persona, but the process does not reach the integrative stage associated with individuation. Instead, the rejection of the persona becomes so absolute that the human subject itself becomes intolerable. The novel consequently presents individuation as an unresolved psychological problem. It asks what happens when the identity from which one must differentiate is inseparable from violence, and when the rejection of that identity offers no viable alternative form of selfhood. Yeong-hye's answer is to seek existence beyond the human. The plant becomes the final figure of that desire. Yet the plant cannot provide the integration that the human subject requires. It can only provide an imagined escape from the conditions that have made the human subject unbearable.

CONCLUSION

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* presents a transformation that begins with a dream and gradually becomes a rejection of the identity through which Yeong-hye has been socially understood. Her refusal of meat disrupts the persona constructed through marriage, family, and social expectation. The dreams bring unconscious material into consciousness, while the body becomes the principal medium through which that material resists the identity imposed upon her. Yeong-hye encounters an unfamiliar dimension of herself through the dreams, while those around her project their own fears, desires, and expectations onto her. Her body becomes the location at which these competing forces converge. She is simultaneously the subject who refuses definition and the object repeatedly defined by others. Yet the novel does not present this confrontation as a successful completion of individuation. Yeong-hye separates herself from the persona but does not arrive at an integrated alternative identity. Her movement toward vegetal existence instead represents a progressive withdrawal from human subjectivity. The plant therefore represents freedom from the structures of consumption and violence that Yeong-hye finds intolerable, but it also represents the disappearance of the subject who seeks freedom from them. Her transformation cannot consequently be understood as either uncomplicated liberation or simple psychological collapse. It occupies an unresolved space between resistance and dissolution. The novel's Jungian significance lies precisely in this unresolved movement. The encounter with the unconscious opens the possibility of transformation, but transformation does not necessarily culminate in wholeness. When the

established identity is experienced as oppressive, differentiation from it may become necessary, yet differentiation without integration can produce fragmentation. Yeong-hye's desire to become a plant marks the point at which the rejection of an imposed self becomes a rejection of the human self itself. *The Vegetarian* thus complicates the conventional trajectory of individuation. It does not present the discovery of an authentic self beneath social conditioning. Instead, it exposes the instability of selfhood when the structures through which identity has been produced become intolerable.

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