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Forbidden Desires and the Transgressive Gaze in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is a searing exploration of female agency, societal oppression, and the fracturing of identity. This article examines the interconnected themes of forbidden desires and the violating gaze, primarily through the character of the brother-in-law, In-hye, and his artistic obsession with Yeong-hye. It argues that the novel meticulously dissects how the male gaze, when imbued with transgressive desires, transforms Yeong-hye's body into an object of consumption, both artistic and sexual, and thereby stripping her of her autonomy. Furthermore, the analysis will explore how Yeong-hye's own burgeoning, albeit often unconscious, forbidden desires – her yearning for an inhuman existence – intersect with and are distorted by this intrusive gaze, ultimately highlighting the profound violence inherent in the inability to truly see and respect another's subjective reality. The article concludes that *The Vegetarian* serves as a powerful critique of the objectification of the female body and the destructive consequences of desires that transgress ethical and human boundaries.

Keywords – Trauma, Rebellion, Alienation, Psychological breakdown, Gender roles, Escapism, Nature, Art, Individuality, Male gaze, Resistance, Body politics, Objectification

Introduction

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* plunges readers into the disturbing yet mesmerizing world of Yeong-hye, a seemingly ordinary woman whose sudden rejection of meat triggers a radical transformation, unravelling her family and her sense of self. While the novel is widely lauded for its exploration of female rebellion and societal pressures, a more unsettling undercurrent lies in its depiction of forbidden desires and the pervasive, transgressive gaze that follows Yeong-hye's every move. This article focuses on how these elements coalesce, particularly through the figure of the brother-in-law, In-hye, whose artistic and sexual fixation on Yeong-hye serves as a central lens through which the novel critiques objectification, violation, and the profound disconnection between individuals.

The Male Gaze as an Objectifying Act

From the moment Yeong-hye's vegetarianism sets her apart, her body becomes a site of intense scrutiny. However, it is In-hye's gaze that epitomizes transgression. Unlike the husband's bewildered disgust or the father's violent anger, In-hye's interest is cloaked in artistic pretense and a deeply unsettling erotic fascination. His "discovery" of the "Mongolian Mark" on Yeong-hye's buttocks—a birthmark she herself is barely aware of—marks the literal and metaphorical unveiling of her body to a gaze that seeks to possess and redefine her.

This is not merely an appreciative artistic gaze; it is inherently unethical because it disregards Yeong-hye's personhood. In-hye's desire is for an *image* of Yeong-hye, one that aligns with his own repressed erotic fantasies and artistic ambitions. He sees her not as a suffering woman, but as a muse, a canvas upon which his forbidden desires can be projected. The act of painting flowers on her naked body and engaging in the sexual act that follows is a culmination of this transgressive gaze, a perverse "collaboration" where Yeong-hye is less a participant and more a medium for his own psychological release. Her agency is utterly absent, replaced by his imposition.

The Intersection of Forbidden Desires: In-hye's and Yeong-hye's

The novel cleverly intertwines In-hye's forbidden desires with Yeong-hye's own thriving, though often unconscious, yearnings. In-hye's desire is primarily sexual and artistic, pushing boundaries of marital fidelity and artistic ethics. He confesses to his wife, "I was attracted to her... not her as a person, but her body," a chilling admission that underscores the objectifying nature of his gaze. His desire is for the 'other,' the 'forbidden,' a rebellion against the mundanity of his own life and a projection onto Yeong-hye of a primal, untamed sensuality he perceives in her.

Conversely, Yeong-hye's forbidden desires are of a radically different nature: a profound yearning to transcend her human form, to become one with nature, a tree. This desire, while seemingly asexual, takes on a visceral, almost erotic quality in her mind, manifest in her dreams of lush foliage and her physically demanding handstands that mimic roots growing into the earth. When In-hye paints the flowers on her body, he inadvertently taps into this deeply personal and forbidden desire of hers, but he misinterprets and exploits it for his own gratification. He seeks to capture *his* vision of her transformation, not to understand *her* experience of it. The "Mongolian Mark," a symbol of her intrinsic otherness and perhaps her past trauma, becomes the focal point for both their disparate, yet converging, forbidden desires.

The Violence of the Gaze and the Erosion of Autonomy

The transgressive gaze in *The Vegetarian* is inextricably linked to violence. It is a violence that precedes physical acts, lying in the psychological assault of being constantly observed, judged, and consumed by others' expectations and desires. Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat is initially met with confusion, then anger, and finally, a dehumanizing objectification by her family and In-hye. Her body, once an unremarkable vessel, becomes a battleground for others' anxieties and desires.

In-hye's artistic project, rather than being an act of empathy or understanding, becomes an extension of this violence. His gaze, saturated with forbidden desire, strips Yeong-hye of her subjective reality. She is seen as a canvas, a fetish, a manifestation of his own unfulfilled urges. This culminates in the sexual act, a shocking portrayal of a consensual violation where Yeong-hye, by this point severely weakened and alienated, offers no resistance. This moment

underscores how a persistent, transgressive gaze, fuelled by forbidden desires, can erode an individual's autonomy to the point where they become utterly vulnerable to exploitation.

The Mongolian Mark: A Symbol of Otherness and a Site of Projection

The "Mongolian Mark," medically known as congenital dermal melanocytosis, is a benign bluish or greyish birthmark commonly found on the lower back or buttocks of infants, particularly those of East Asian, Southeast Asian, African, and Indigenous American descent. In *The Vegetarian*, this seemingly innocuous physical detail becomes a potent symbol, laden with cultural and personal significance. For Yeong-hye, it is an unremarkable part of her body, something she barely registers until it is pointed out and fetishized by In-hye. Her lack of awareness highlights her detachment from her own physical self, a state that becomes increasingly pronounced as the novel progresses. In-hye's discovery of this mark is the catalyst for his artistic project and his subsequent transgressive acts, turning a natural bodily feature into an exoticized, almost primitive, marker of difference that fuels his forbidden desire for the "other."

Beyond its medical explanation, the "Mongolian Mark" carries diverse cultural meanings across different societies, often intertwined with myths and spiritual beliefs. In many East Asian cultures, including Korean folklore, the spot is sometimes associated with a divine touch, believed to be the mark left by a deity or spirit (like Samshin Halmi in Korea) who "slapped" the baby to urge it into existence or to bestow a blessing. This rich tapestry of cultural interpretation adds another layer to In-hye's obsession. For him, the mark transforms Yeong-hye into something ancient, mystical, and fundamentally non-Western, further justifying his exoticizing gaze. He projects onto her not just his personal forbidden desires, but also a colonialist fantasy of the "other," seeing her as an untamed, natural entity ripe for artistic appropriation and sexual conquest, divorced from her modern Korean identity.

The Inability to See: A Metaphor for Societal Blindness

The novel's exploration of the transgressive gaze extends beyond individual pathology to critique a broader societal blindness. Each character who interacts with Yeong-hye – her husband, her father, even her sister In-hye initially – fails to truly *see* her. They interpret her actions through their own established frameworks of normalcy, morality, and expectation. Her vegetarianism is not seen as a profound internal shift, but as an inconvenience, a challenge to

authority, or a symptom of mental illness. This collective inability to genuinely perceive Yeong-hye as a subject with her own internal logic creates the fertile ground upon which In-hye's transgressive gaze can flourish.

This societal blindness becomes particularly stark in the asylum, where Yeong-hye is reduced to a medical case study. Her unique form of resistance and her longing for transformation are met with conventional diagnoses and coercive treatments. The medical gaze, while ostensibly scientific, becomes another form of objectification, refusing to acknowledge the spiritual or existential dimensions of her suffering. It mirrors In-hye's gaze in its fundamental inability to connect with Yeong-hye's subjective experience, thus perpetuating the violence of her isolation and her eventual, irreversible retreat from the human world.

The Lingering Echoes of the Gaze: Aftermath and Legacy

Even after Yeong-hye's most extreme acts of resistance and withdrawal, the echoes of the transgressive gaze persist. Her sister, In-hye, while trying to understand and protect her, still struggles to fully comprehend the depths of Yeong-hye's internal world. In-hye's attempts to "save" her sister are often tinged with her own anxieties and desires for a return to a familiar, stable reality, rather than a full acceptance of Yeong-hye's radical transformation. This subtle perpetuation of a gaze that seeks to normalize or "fix" Yeong-hye, rather than simply witness her, highlights the pervasive nature of societal expectations and the difficulty of truly escaping its grip.

Furthermore, In-hye, the brother-in-law, is shown to suffer the psychological repercussions of his own transgressive acts. His artistic ambition and forbidden desires leave him unfulfilled and deeply disturbed, demonstrating that the act of objectification and violation inflicts damage not only on the victim but also on the perpetrator. The novel subtly suggests that unchecked desire, coupled with an intrusive gaze, ultimately leads to a moral and psychological degradation for all involved, leaving a lingering stain on the lives it touches.

Ultimately, *The Vegetarian* does not offer easy answers or resolutions. Yeong-hye's final state, a being deeply merged with the natural world, can be seen as both a tragic consequence of the transgressive gazes she endured and a radical triumph of self-reclamation. Her journey, catalyzed by forbidden desires and exacerbated by the pervasive violation of her autonomy, forces the reader to confront uncomfortable truths about human nature, societal control, and the

profound, often destructive, power of how we choose to see—or fail to see—one another.

Conclusion

The Vegetarian stands as a chilling testament to the destructive power of forbidden desires when coupled with a transgressive gaze. Han Kang meticulously unpacks how the male gaze, as embodied by In-hye, objectifies, fetishizes, and ultimately violates Yeong-hye, transforming her private struggles into a public spectacle for his own gratification. Yeong-hye's own forbidden desires for an inhuman existence, while radically different, are tragically co-opted and distorted by this intrusive gaze, preventing any genuine connection or understanding. The novel serves as a powerful and disturbing critique of the societal pressures that can lead to such profound disconnections and the devastating consequences of seeing another human being not as a subjective individual, but as an object for one's own desires, no matter how forbidden or perverse.

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