

Nevada State College

The Trees Will Free Me:

Women Connect with Nature in Literature to Resist Male Dominance and Violence in the  
Patriarchy

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how women are challenging the patriarchal issues prevalent in the man v nature literature genre by using nature in their writing to create a new feminist theme and genre of woman alongside nature. In using an ecofeminist lens, I argue the behavior seen in man controlling nature frequently in literature can be representative of the patriarchy and behavior women face when it comes to dominant men, as nature is often represented as mother nature. As this genre continues to be written and popularized, women writers are finding ways to input themselves in the nature genre by utilizing their connection with the earth in their literature, therefore changing the extractive relationship with nature into an alliance-based relationship with nature. Specifically for women in South Korea, where they may not be able to physically resist the patriarchy by marching for equal rights or fighting against men, women are turning to nature in their literature to resist these behaviors. This essay continues to then analyze how Korean fiction writer Kang Han and her novel *The Vegetarian* exemplify how women in restrictive countries like Korea can turn to their connection with nature in their literature to motivate themselves and resist the violence of male domination. Thus, showing women in restrictive countries that they can connect with nature not only to input themselves in a genre that often leaves them out, but also gives them an outlet of resistance by utilizing this connection to find control over themselves and their bodies. In doing so, *The Vegetarian* re-writes this masculine genre of writing and create a new feminist hero that challenges masculine violence, dominance, and the conquering of land and woman, representing women and inspiring them to gain control of their bodies and connect with their nature roots.

**Key Words:** Feminist, Masculine Tropes, Patriarchy and Women, Man v Nature, Women and Nature, Ecocriticism, *The Vegetarian*, Women's Resistance

## You Can't Control Me, The Trees Will Free Me:

### Women Connect with Nature in Literature to Resist Male Dominance and Violence in the Patriarchy

Growing up as a little girl, I had always found myself playing outside in my backyard. My friends and I often found ourselves playing in the creek or picking pieces of grass to braid together and put in our hair or on our hands. As I grew older, we found that we also enjoyed pretending that we were stranded in nature and had to figure out ways to survive or explore. This led to us creating bow and arrows from the snake grass in my mom's front yard or sharpening sticks to run around and chase each other. I had always found myself not only enjoying nature and the adventures that I could have in it, but also finding moments of peace as I laid in the grass whenever I was upset. I always loved reading literature that included nature because of this connection that I had with it, but I slowly learned that this little girl and even my adult self wasn't in these stories. I read pieces where men often defeated this nature no matter what or at least had the mindset they could. This man was dominant, masculine, and always won by conquering the nature around him. I could never see myself in that position, as nature brought peace to me, and I had never wanted to hurt it to gain something. I found that a lot of women too had this connection but were unable to write about it, as adventurers and heroes were seen as men and the stories were seen as masculine, therefore leaving out a lot of women's writing about nature and women's experiences alongside nature.

A lot of nature writing is told from the man's perspective, as the man is what creates adventure, and the man is who becomes the hero. The adventurer and the hero all contained masculine traits such as a dominating mindset, overpowering strength, and a violence towards land and animals. Traits that other women and I often cannot connect with or feel represented by.

This genre of man versus nature is one that continues to be written by and for this all-masculine man, leaving an entire genre to be written only by men, or at least only recognized by men. This genre created a hypermasculine hero who can defeat anything and everything, even something as natural as land. When reading this literature through a feminist lens, one may question what exactly this can mean for women, as nature is often represented as mother nature. This mother or woman that nature often represents leads us to question if these behaviors that men are showing when conquering land can reflect the behaviors that women have also faced with the hypermasculine man.

As nature is represented by a mother or by a woman, women are finding that they can utilize this connection that they have with nature to challenge some of those behaviors that the hypermasculine man may portray even in his relationships with women. As the hero is what men often look up to, masculinity is defined by these conquering and dominating traits, making most men reflect those traits even outside of their literature. Women want to use this connection that they feel with nature and the alliance that they have with nature to regain control over themselves and challenge these dominating and conquering traits that men tend to portray. In literature, women find that nature allows them to feel freer and more in control, and they are using this relationship with nature to reflect that control and liberty in their own personal lives. In countries where women may not be able to resist as strongly and physically as other countries, meaning they can't resist as freely as western women, this connection to nature allows them to resist in a quiet way through their literature. As nature resists humankind through existing without us instead of around us, women find themselves able to do the same and challenge the idea that they must exist around men.

An example of this connection to nature that allows women to resist the patriarchy can be seen in the novel *The Vegetarian* by Korean author Kang Han. This novel specifically allowed not only Han to resist patriarchy as a writer, but also allowed her to utilize the connection her characters had with nature to inspire other women to also connect with nature and exert agency over their bodies and lives as women. As this story is set in South Korea, it was important to address how this novel gave women a way to take back control and resist the male dominance they were facing in a country where they can't physically resist man or physically resist a patriarchal government, as laws are put in place around their bodies and actions, which specifics will be discussed further in this essay. Most of the issues and critiques on the man versus literature is a very western take on the genre. A lot of the stories and heroic figures are also very western, so the analysis needs to be more specific as it relates to the countries where women may not be able to critique this genre and its issues in the ways that western feminism may be able to.

Specifically in *The Vegetarian*, the main character Yeong-hye chooses to resist by becoming vegan, though her cultural diet includes a lot of red meat. Throughout the story, we also see her embody this nature as she finds peace in flowers and eventually wants to become a tree. This resistance through nature allowed her to gain back control over her own body even just by using nature to dictate her own diet. Thus, showing women they too can do the same in these restrictive countries where they may feel they have no control over themselves. This influence is carried on not only between the sisters in the novel, but also from writer to reader. This way of nature writing created a new hero, a hero who can coexist with nature, a hero who creates an alliance and embodies nature without conquering and extracting it.

Thus, this new hero rewrites the man versus nature genre and created a new one of human and nature, as the literature no longer sees nature as a threat or antagonist to defeat. In

this new genre, women are able to write about regaining power and control in their life and literature, rewriting this once masculine genre and hero.

## **Literature Review**

When reading the man v nature genre of literature, it is important to understand the feminist lens, as most researchers use this lens to address issues in the genre that are derived from the patriarchy. In recent research, most writers address how this genre often leaves out women, as nature writing was deemed a masculine genre. Because of this issue, most research covers the restrictions on women's writing and how women's writing about nature is just as good as men without the same credit and attention. This theme is where the novel *The Vegetarian* comes in, as it addresses how women can use nature without defeating or controlling it in the ways men have, thus using the nature but creating a connection with it. These studies highlight how women's writing about nature goes beyond writing about it and challenge this masculine dominant genre, as they are using it in their writing the same ways men have used nature in their writing but without conquering the land.

*Man versus Nature: Restrictions on Women.* Two critiques on this perspective are the issues with the masculine hero that only represents men and the issues with the violence of conquering and preying that only men could understand or feel represented by. Both critiques include how these issues create a genre that leaves out women writers. Research by Richard Phillips, a university professor who specializes in earth studies, shows that most stories written about nature have to do with adventure. Phillips writes about how these adventures tend to be masculine and told from the masculine perspective. Phillips writes that adventure itself is, "... in general, a 'masculinist' narrative" (591). This research highlights how most of the nature narratives that depict adventure and heroic actions are meant to be told from men and for men, as it drives the masculine hero

and creates an even more masculine figure. This leads the reader to define masculinity as a man with the traits who provokes and conquers danger. Phillips then writes, “[t]he adventurer’s manhood is constructed, naturalized and normalized in and through the setting” (598). This research not only addresses how nature writing is for and by men, leaving out women and their perspectives on nature, but also sets up the frame that maintains these restrictions. This frame being that adventures in nature due to its uncertainty itself is masculine and nature writing itself is masculine, as the adventures are written to develop and ensure manhood and masculinity through the writing. This creates all masculine hero that overcomes nature in the literature genre we often see, man v nature.

This masculine hero and perspective on nature writing is what led to the critique specifically about the genre of man versus nature. The masculine hero that dominates nature and is violent towards nature has women often feeling left out of the genre and not being able to feel as credited with their writing and with their relationship to nature. This is what leads to research that critiques this genre, specifically the masculine hero. Feminist critic Ursula K. Le Guin challenges and critiques this masculine and dominant hero in her article “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction.” Le Guin challenges the masculine hero by giving a different perspective on how we first survived as people. Le Guin argues that being this violent hero who is killing animals and dominating nature is not how we stayed alive, but “what we actually did to stay alive, and that was gather seeds, roots, sprouts, shoots, leaves, nuts, berries, fruits and grains” (149). This gathering that was mostly done by women is what kept families alive, as we needed to be able to carry before we learned how to kill. Not only does this challenge the masculine hero, but it critiques the idea that the masculine hero is what created the nature genre and is what sustained humanity. Le Guin continues by saying, “The hero has frequently taken it over, that being his

imperial nature and uncontrollable impulse, to take everything over and run it while making stern decrees in laws to control his uncontrollable impulse to kill it” (152). Not only does this perspective critique the idea that the masculine writing encourages this violence towards nature that isn't needed, as humanity began with an alliance and respect to nature as we gathered instead of murdered, but it also drives the idea that this nature writing continues to be one from the male perspective as men continue to take over, extract resources to their benefit, and control with an impulse. This idea that women were possibly the first heroes when it came to nature and adventure challenges the idea that this genre should only be viewed as masculine and written by the man, as some of the first experiences with nature were with women. This research highlights some of the issues with the man versus nature genre, and challenges other researchers to find a place for women in this literature and to continue telling the real story of heroic women who were gatherers before men took control.

*Women and Nature: Challenging the Restrictions.* When researching how these sexist constraints on nature writing was being challenged, it was best to look at some of the women writers who have been using their perspective to talk about nature and create a space for themselves in this once restricting genre. Research has deemed some women as heroines of nature, thus directly challenging the hero we often see in nature. Barbara Gates, nature author, directly wanted to bring a feminist study on how women writers challenged some of the stories that were often being told in nature writing. She specifically highlights, “what they [women] did and said in the name of nature – what part they played in the cultural reconstruction of nature” (218). In this research, Gates shows that the way women are resisting this genre and restriction on their writing is by highlighting the ways in which women connect with nature and the roles that they played in reconstructing nature after the violence nature faced in the genre that often included male



dominance and the conquering of land. Gate's research aims to show how woman changing the perspective allowed nature to be seen in more ethical way. Gates gives examples of women writers who employed narrative devices like dialogue and first-person accounts to promote ethical issues in nature through moralizing descriptions of animal behavior (220). This moral treatment of nature writing led to Gates showing women's research that was able to reach broader audiences like other women, children, and non-academic readers. These personal connections with nature and living alongside it helps women individually and helps society more broadly because women are carrying these experiences which leads to more people understanding and reading the nature genre.

Research surrounding the topic of resisting male dominant nature writing focuses on how women connect with nature in different ways than men, often a more gentle and calming approach. Research from Vera L. Norwood's "Heroines of Nature" critiques the lack of women in nature writing by, "...beginning to address the degree to which women have acted as heroines and preserving the natural environment..." (323). Norwood's research then goes on to challenge the masculine approach to nature by uncovering the new ways that people can connect with nature, she explores many of the women and their nature writing. She finds that, "The issue is freedom. At the core of the restrictions on women's movement into the wilderness is the masculine fear of the other" (343). Not only does her research offer new perspectives and discuss the issues with women being restricted on nature writing, but she also completely dismantles the hero by confronting the fear that men have in their nature writing. The man in nature writing is not heroic, but instead fearful of other, which is why women were restricted in this genre, as nature and women are seen as the antagonist. This study not only evaluates the ways in which women are resisting this hero stereotype, but also brings to the reader's attention that women

authors maybe saying something different about nature that the genre hasn't seen before. Women are writing about their connections to nature and how humankind and nature can coexist. The relationship doesn't have to be this fear that leads us to conquering, it can be an alliance that allows us to explore morally, meaning human can treat it more respectfully without viewing it as a challenge to defeat. Not only can we explore the land this way, but even ourselves. This perspective completely rewrites what adventure and heroism can look like in the nature genre.

*Women Using Nature: The Vegetarian.* As most research around women's resistance to restrictive elements of nature writing genres surrounds how women connect with nature and write about nature, there was not much research on the ways in which women use nature physically to create that harmonious relationship. This utilization is not defined in the ways man may have been using, as their utilization was often extracting for capitalistic value, but is defined as something not for commercial value, but for its value in helping women explore and fight for their personhood. This use of nature can be seen in the novel *The Vegetarian*.

Most research surrounding *The Vegetarian* is through the feminist and ecocritical lens, giving a new perspective on how women writers may create an alliance with nature to challenge some of the restrictions that they face. While most research surrounding the novel is about gender politics and the patriarchy, some research uncovers how the use of nature and the embodiment of it resist these constraints that women may face not only in their writing, but also in society. Magdelana Zolkos, a social science professor and researcher, finds that women in the novel *The Vegetarian* create an alliance with nature and use that relationship with nature to find escape from their current lives. Research specifically discusses the main character, Yeong-Hye's, diet, as she chose veganism after having gruesome dreams about meat, challenging the diet culture in her country that is surrounded by meat intake. Zolkos writes, "Yeong- Hye's veganism

is a radical project of self-exile from humanity, as well as a powerful anti-patriarchal gesture” (105). Zolkos specifically shows that women are not only resisting the violence seen in man vs nature by writing about nature, but also by using their alliance with nature to use it like men physically have but without conquering and dominating the land. Her writing then continues to discuss how embodying this nature and creating the exchange between nature and humankind created an attempt to leave violence inherent to patriarchal order (106). This embodiment of nature reimagines what nature can serve to humans, as it was once viewed only to serve resources but now serves empowerment, as Yeong-Hye found that becoming nature gave her the motivation and control she wanted over her body. Thus, showing that though women are taking from nature in the ways that men are, they are creating a reciprocal relationship to challenge the violence that the masculine hero often projects onto nature.

*Creating a New Genre.* This paper will analyze how women are using nature in their writing and are going beyond writing about it to interject themselves into a masculine genre and reimagine what heroism is. While research has found that women are already resisting some the restrictions in this literature genre by writing about nature, there was a lack of research on how women are connecting with nature and using nature to dismantle the masculine genre and hero. This essay applies the ecofeminist lens to the novel *The Vegetarian* to connect the ideas of women not only interjecting by writing but interjecting by utilizing their connection to nature physically, as men have done but without abusing the nature. This paper will connect these two ideas to analyze the ways in which women are not only challenging the masculine hero and masculine genre but are completely rewriting a new genre and new hero, utilizing nature to challenge patriarchy that they may be facing not only in their writing but also in society-- Thus, giving a voice to women who

may be connecting with nature in their writing to battle patriarchy that they may be facing in a society where nature and feminist writing is an outlet and means of resistance for them.

### **Defining Masculinity: Man v Nature Genre**

The genre of man versus nature is often the story of the masculine man who is faced with a problem in nature or natural disaster that the man must overcome to survive. This adventurer and hero are a man who defines masculinity for other men and defines what men should be able to do and should be doing, which leads to this dominance over nature and conquering of land. Some of these issues can even be seen doing a quick Google search. When researching what stories really represent the man versus nature genre, *Robinson Crusoe* came up as an example of this genre. This story is about a man named Robin who survives being stranded on an island by using the island to build his own space and then is a hero as he enslaves a man named Friday. Research surrounding this novel says it exemplifies this man versus nature genre as he can survive and beat all odds of nature crashing his ship and stranding him on this island, as he is able to not only be a hero to another man but also a hero to himself as he survives this natural disaster. Critiques around this specific novel discuss how this hero and heroic figure is not only a way to push this idea of conquering land and even conquering people, but also this toxic aspect of masculinity where men are supposed to be able to dominate and control all situations.

Though there are also stories in the man versus nature genre where men do not overcome nature, they are still characterized and portrayed of having this dominant mindset where they believe they can overcome nature. An example of this can be seen in “To Build a Fire” by Jack London. In this story, the character was advised not to travel alone in such a dangerous space, but ignored this commentary, as he believed, “Those old men were rather womanish... Any man who was a man could travel alone” (72). The character did end up dying from freezing to death,

but this mindset that he had still pushed this idea that men are supposed to be masculine by not receiving help and being dominant, and that masculinity will allow them to defeat nature. There's the idea that the man is so dominant, he can even control nature, something that is supposed to be completely untouchable as it exists without taking humans into consideration. This violent and dominating male hero is where a lot of the issues become prevalent in current society, as a lot of the dominance that men use towards nature and their abuse of it can be seen and reflective of some of the behaviors they have towards women.

Because this essay focuses on *The Vegetarian*, it was important for the analysis to focus on the treatments of nature, as Yeong-hye would rather be a tree than a woman due to the issues she was facing. This specific aspect was intriguing, as nature in Korea isn't necessarily treated well either in writing or reality.

When analyzing the man versus nature genre in literature from Korea, a specific film called *Burning* gave great examples of what this genre can look like and what it can mean for men's masculinity and heroism in Korea. To summarize the story, it is about two men, Ben and Jong-su, and one woman, Hae-mi. Hae-mi was seeing Jong-su and then went on a trip and met Ben at the airport. When she returned, she brought Ben with her and introduced the men to each other, saying Ben was a traveler like her who often goes places. She was romantically involved with Jong-su before she left, and he presumes that she is also now romantically involved with Ben when she returns. She then goes missing and the first Jong-su becomes suspicious that Ben murdered her. He then becomes obsessed with figuring it out, and eventually ends up murdering Ben (Chang-dong). What considers this movie part of the man versus nature genre is the idea that Ben burns down greenhouses for fun at least every month. In a literal sense, this shows the disregard that people have towards nature, especially men who can get away with this type of

violence towards nature. In the metaphorical sense, Ben says that he burns down greenhouses once a month but it is believed the houses represent the women he sees, showing the issues on how nature can often be represented as women, and men can show violence towards women. Jong-su asks Ben if he has burned down his greenhouse, and Ben says that he has and that maybe Jong-su just didn't look hard enough. This is around the time Hae-mi goes missing. Jong-su believes that she didn't just disappear, as he received a phone call and heard muffling and then never heard from her again. As Jong-su visited Ben, he found her bracelet in Ben's bathroom, which suggest to the viewer that Ben did murder her. This representation of Hae-mi being the greenhouse that Ben burns down shows some of the issues with this violent and male dominating adventurer who not only is violent towards nature but also violent towards women. This specific control and a power dynamic that he has with nature and the greenhouses can also represent and symbolize the violence and controlling power dynamic he has with the women that he talks to.

Not only has this man versus nature genre arose issues in literature, but Korea's treatment towards nature in reality outside of literature is also not the best. This raises concerns as Han's novel has women connecting with nature, and even has Yeong-hye wanting to become a tree. When it comes to Korea's treatment of nature, one of the worst aspects of their treatment is how poorly polluted their air quality is. An article by AZO Clean Tech writes, "air quality in Seoul and the surrounding province significantly deteriorated throughout this period of rapid industrialization" (South Korea: Environmental Issues, Policies and Clean Technology). The conflict with this is as more people are born and the human population continues to grow, the demand for resources continues to grow and nature is unable to keep up with those demands. Instead of trying to work alongside nature, a lot of industrial countries dominated and took over land, taking those resources continuously until there was no longer anymore resources. Nature

wasn't a priority (South Korea: Environmental Issues, Policies and Clean Technology). Not only can this treatment of nature be seen in literature, as nature is second priority and is something that man can control, but it also creates the issues in reality as their country is very polluted and there is a struggle to decrease the damage that was done by their previous choices. This aspect can really emphasize the ways in which women are treated in Korea, as they rather be something that isn't even a priority more than they would like to be a woman.

### **Nature Has Always Been a Woman: Challenging the Issues in Man v Nature**

As mentioned, through a feminist lens this violence and power dynamic towards nature can reflect and further explain some of the violence and power dynamics we see with men and women. Because nature is often viewed as a mother, there is already some correlation or connection that nature has directly symbolizing a woman or a mother. As this violence and power dynamic in nature creates the definition of masculinity for men, a lot of the violence and abuse that they have towards nature can be seen in the ways they treat women, adding to the patriarchy.

Because this essay specifically looks at Korea, it was important to understand exactly how women in Korea could be representative of nature and how they viewed nature as woman. Since *The Vegetarian* has women connecting with nature to find control over themselves and put themselves in a position of power over their own bodies, it is key to understand how this may be a way for them to return to possible nature roots that have already existed in their history but were taken away from the windmill domination occurred. Korea's treatment towards nature wasn't always this relationship of domination and abuse, as their longest and most popular religious belief is shamanism. In Korea's practice of shamanism, "... shamanism includes the worship of thousands of spirits and demons that are believed to dwell in every object in the

natural world, including rocks, trees, mountains and streams as well as celestial bodies” (Historical and Modern Religions of Korea). Specifically, nature was often represented by women in shamanism, as “another important aspect of Korean shamanism is that the shamans are predominantly women, and so are their clients” (Shamanism and Its Emancipatory Power for Korean Women). What is interesting about this aspect is that shamanism was a broadly practiced religious belief in Korean history but is something that people now deem as unintelligent. This began to happen around the time where colonization put men in this masculine hero and dominating figure, making them the dominating figures in religion, and deemed other religious beliefs where women were the dominating figures as something that shouldn't be practiced. These beliefs and ideas can emphasize exactly why women may feel connected to nature in Korea, and maybe using nature in their literature to find freedom, as this was a position they were once in historically where nature allowed them to have a powerful position.

### **Women's Liberation in Korea**

Not only does the historical context of women's position and shamanism show the dynamic and connection that women have always had with nature, but it also shows us that women once had a powerful position but was then removed from it after male domination and superiority became very prevalent in their society. Like shamanism, most of women's liberation or liberating experiences and positions that they had are now deemed as unintelligent or something that they aren't supposed to talk about. Especially through the many years of colonization and conquering from other countries, such as Japan, women's liberation in Korea is still very current and still a very big issue. In Korea, much of women's resistance and liberation is not as popularized or loud in comparison to other western movements and liberation that people see. Because of this, it is important to understand the ways in which women are liberating



themselves in Korea and how that can possibly connect to the way women are writing and utilizing nature.

One specific challenge the women's liberation in Korea has been trying to overcome is the issues with the family dynamic, specifically the head-of-family system in South Korea. The head-of-family system was formally introduced by the Cho- so ñ Civil Ordinance (1912) under the Japanese colonial government family (Nam). This system meant that the legal status of a wife completely depended on her husband. The female members of a family were located at the lower end of the social hierarchy. Much of the resistance against this law was to have the law completely revised. Though the law did eventually get revised, many of the beliefs when it comes to the family hierarchy are still relevant today in South Korean families. This dynamic of women being last on the hierarchy when it comes to their family is something that many Korean women are still trying to resist today.

Another specific aspect of women's liberation that is important to understand is the way in which women played a role during the Gwangju uprising, as it not only influenced a lot of *The Vegetarian* novel, as Kang Han grew up around this time, but it was also an experience that many women had to go through and still face repercussions of to this day. The Gwangju uprising was a “mass protest against the South Korean military government that took place in the southern city of Gwangju between May 18 and 27, 1980” (Chong-suk Han). Under the military rule, political opposition and the personal freedom of South Korea’s citizens were controlled including the press and the universities. This led to many students rioting, but the military began to become violent and beat the protestors. Gwangju citizens and students insist it was around 2,000 people killed by the military (Chong-suk Han).

This uprising is one aspect of South Korea's history with women that is dire to the conversation, as it was a time where women's bodies were very disrespected and completely taken away from them. As this essay goes to discuss how nature is allowing women to regain this control and give them the motivation to feel comfortable and confident in having that power, it's important to understand where these women may have lost that power and how that has impacted them. During the Gwangju uprising, a lot of the riots were from college students. College girls and women factory workers created groups that would riot together and then hide together when the soldiers began to raid the cities and streets. A specific example where women try to use their bodies to resist was during one of the riots when a bunch of troops started going towards the women, and a lot of them began to undress as they believed that no one would touch a young girl's body that way. Han writes, "everyone held the naked bodies of virginal girls to be something precious, almost sacred, and so the factory girls believed that the men would never violate their privacy by laying hands on them now..." (154). This however was not the case, as a lot of the torture that Korean women faced was even worse than the torture men faced. Many women who were growing up during this experience or were writing during this experience almost have a fear of their own bodies after the way they were handled by the soldiers. Han writes the experience of one woman, who shared, "I ended up despising my own body, the very physical stuff of myself" (165). This specific torture that women's bodies had to go through is one that women are still challenging and facing today, as there are still cultural and societal expectations surrounding women's bodies and the purpose of women's bodies no matter what revisions happen and their law.

### **Women are Connecting With Nature to Disconnect from Expectations**

Because of these mistreatments and misuse of women's bodies, women in Korea specifically are using nature, something that they historically have had connections with, to regain that control of their own bodies and challenge the ownership that they continuously have had problems within their culture. Specifically for Korean women where a lot of their resistance hasn't necessarily acquitted to much change, they're able to connect with this nature and their spiritual roots from history to protect themselves and protect nature. These specific examples of motivation and confidence that the alliance with nature can give Korean women is where *The Vegetarian* by Kang Han comes into play.

### **Nature Heroine: Kang Han**

As this essay specifically looks at the work of *The Vegetarian*, it's important to understand not only the literature itself, but also the life of Kang Han and the influences it had on her stories. Kang Han is a South Korean author born in 1970. She was born in Gwangju and at the age of ten moved to Seoul South Korea. She is the daughter of an author and professor, whom she speaks to in her story *Human Acts* (Sunday Meeting With Han Kang). She began her published career when five of her poems, including "Winter in Seoul," were featured in the Winter 1993 issue of the quarterly *Literature and Society*. She made her fiction debut in the following year when her short story "The Scarlet Anchor" was the winning entry in the *Seoul Shinmun* Spring Literary Contest. Since then, she has gone on to win the Yi Sang Literary Prize in 2005, Today's Young Artist Award, and the Korean Literature Novel Award. Han has now taught creative writing at the Seoul Institute of the Arts and is currently working on her sixth novel (Sunday Meeting With Han Kang).

Han's debut work, *A Love of Yeosu*, was published in 1995 and attracted attention for its precise and tightly narrated composition (Korean Writers: The Novelists 78). Han then wrote

The Vegetarian, and its sister-work, Mongolian Mark. It has been reported that in her college years Han became obsessed with a line of poetry by the Korean modernist poet Yi Sang: "I believe that humans should be plants" (Human Acts as Plants). She understood Yi's line to imply a defensive stance against the violence of Korea's colonial history under Japanese occupation and took it as an inspiration to write her most successful work, *The Vegetarian*. The translated work won the Man Booker International Prize 2016 for them both. She is the first Korean to be nominated for the award. The work was also chosen as one of "The 10 Best Books of 2016" from NYTimes Book Review. Han's third novel, *The White Book*, was shortlisted for the 2018 International Booker Prize.

As this essay specifically targets South Korea it was important to choose a writer who had gone through these experiences herself or witnessed them. As Han was born and stayed ten years in Gwangju as the uprising was happening, an uprising that traumatized many women and their bodies, her writing was something to examine and understand when it came to the experiences Korean women faced and how they were reacting or using their writing to take back control of their bodies after this experience. Her awards and recognition also showed this she had something important to say when it came to these feminist characters that she wrote about, as they were challenging many traditional and cultural expectations in Korea's society. In Han's story *Human Acts*, she writes to tell the experiences of others whose voices may have been lost. In writing about other's experiences and highlighting voices that may have not been heard, her work continued to be inspired by what she witnessed and heard. This inspiration of giving voice to others is what also allowed her to write her fiction pieces, as they often told stories of experiences women had gone through without directly saying which women. This continuous

highlighting of voices that are not heard is one that this essay intends to continue and elaborate on.

### **The Vegetarian**

In first reading *The Vegetarian*, one may specifically look at the feminist aspects and the story and understand that the book is challenging the masculinity. However, the story analysis doesn't ever really go beyond to understand nature's role in liberating women and helping them liberate themselves. As a reader, one may surface level understand the ways in which the patriarchy is challenged, specifically with Korea's culture and the Korean characters, but do not fully understand the ways in which Kang Han is having her characters continuously use nature to challenge the patriarchy. After reading all her work, one may see that this heroic female figure that is embodied in *The Vegetarian* through the character Yeong-hye is one that as seen in all her pieces, thus creating a new feminist hero that continues to inspire the authors writing and its readers.

In understanding how this story creates a new genre and creates a new hero, the ways in which the women characters challenge the patriarchy must be addressed. The novel's layout gives a perfect timeline of how they resist, as it is broken up into three parts. This structure of three parts shows how the patriarchy exists, how the women resist it, and then how women connect and embody nature to fully free themselves. Because of this, the structure of the essay will stay in these three parts but will be under two distinct sections: male dominance and the patriarchy and women's resistance. These sections will not only address how the work shows issues with the patriarchy and how male dominance is very reflective of the violence they feel towards nature but will also show the ways in which women resist not only physically, but also through their connection with nature and their bodies. Thus, analyzing how Han's story not only

shows ways women can resist directly, but how they can utilize their relationship with nature to create a new hero for women to look up to.

*Man Controls Land, Man controls Woman: Male Violence and Dominance Over Women*

### **Setting Up Male Dominance: The Vegetarian**

The first chapter of this book is told from the point of view of Yeong-hye's husband. From his male point of view, there are many feminist concepts and patriarchal issues brought to the attention of the reader. Specifically, there are issues surrounding his male domination and feelings of control over his wife, as well as the issues that arise with it. The first feminist concept seen in this chapter is gender roles and gender norms, specific to the woman's dynamic in the family and role to the husband. Because Korea's family dynamic and the laws surrounding this family hierarchy, the patriarchy keeps women in these specific roles and expectation of mother and wife, leaving men to have men have the most dominant role and continuously do so as the law still invites these notions. The next feminist concept that will be analyzed is the objectification of Yeong-hye specifically, but also the other women in this story as the mother and sister are also objectified through the husband's perspective. In this objectification and family power dynamic, Han creates another important aspect of feminist theory to analyze in her character's which is patriarchal men and women. This essay will specifically define and discuss each of these concepts and how they are present and challenged through the characters in *The Vegetarian*, as well as how they connect to male dominance and the violence of these issues. To begin to understand and define these feminist aspects of theory, the concept of gender roles and norms must be addressed, as it has ties to larger feminist concepts and issues.

Gender roles in Korea are specifically tied to the idea that the man is the one in charge, due to the laws surrounding family. An example of this can be seen in the structure of Yeong-

hye's family. The father is in control of his daughters and wife, and then after his role is the husband. Yeong-hye's father exemplifies this in the first chapter as he slaps her for not listening to him, even though she is a grown woman who made the decision of what her diet should be and look like: "In an instant, his flat palm cleaved the empty space. My wife cupped her cheek in her hand" (Han 73). This domination of men can cause violence towards women and is often seen as a norm in society and even a norm in literature when men are put in this powerful position over other humans and objects (Savitri 5). Because he is the father and by previous law, the head of household, he is allowed to strike his own daughter without consequences or repercussions to his actions, as he is even dominant over her husband as the father figure.

Specifically for women, there is this idea that one must behave like a woman. Gender performativity explains to us that there is an expectation of what being a woman is and that, "One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (Butler 519). Playing the role of a woman also means embodying historical roles, meaning to be a woman is to complete all these expectations that patriarchy has set and continued to emphasize (Butler 520). An example of this can be how Yeong-hye is expected to cook and clean for her husband, being seen as a maid by him, "I thought I could get by perfectly well just thinking of her as...even a maid, someone who puts food on the table and keeps the house in good order" (Han 59 - 60). This example from the book supports the traditional gender norm that women are only there to serve their husbands, as well as that they only belong in a domestic space (Savitri 5). This expectation and almost objectification of women being objects to cook and clean not only continues the gender norm of women in the family but pushes the idea that when in a family or married, men have the control and power over their bodies and selves. Women may choose to not cook or clean in the ways that their husbands or fathers expect, but there tends to be issues with that that continue to keep

women from resisting these problems. Because there is this expectation for women to behave a certain way, there is also a backlash that comes with not behaving “like a woman.” An example of this can be seen in the book when Yeong-hye chooses to become vegetarian due to gruesome dreams she is having about meat. These dreams consisted of her murdering something and being soaked in blood, disrupting not only her sleep but also state of mind. Her husband gives backlash for her choices as he thinks, “The very idea that there should be this other side to her, one where she selfishly did as she pleased, was astonishing. Who would have thought she could be so unreasonable?” (Han 33). She is considered selfish for choosing what her body consumes because it isn’t the norm for women to make these decisions. It isn’t normal for women to take dominance over themselves, let alone “selfishly” not want to cook specific food for their husbands. Not only does this further continue the issues of male dominance and the way in which their power plays into how people view women and how women view themselves, but it also continues to push this narrative that women are objects for men to control.

This dynamic of men controlling women and expecting specific behaviors out of them creates this idea that women are there for men and are there to serve men, thus making them an object. Objectification can be defined as how men position and see women as an object, as they are the ones who have the authority to evaluate (Savitri 3). In this book, the objectification of Yeong-hye, specifically from her husband in this first chapter, is continuous. An example in this book is the objectification of the male character’s wives and the marital rape that happens to both women. When Yeong-hye’s husband was discussing how compliant she normally was with his sexual urges, the language is compliance and not consent or mutual partaking. She often struggles and doesn’t want to even be near her husband. Her husband says, “So yes... I would grab my wife and push her to the floor. Pinning down her struggling arms and tugging off her



trousers...” He continued to even discuss how, “She put up a surprisingly strong resistance, spitting out vulgar curses all the while, one time in three I would manage to insert myself successfully” (Han 60). This example of him not only showing his power but enjoying the ways in which she resists connects to the idea that male dominance can lead to violence for women. Because Yeong-hye is his wife, he doesn’t think what he is doing is abnormal because societal norms tell him that he is in control of her body because she is a woman and his wife. He believes she is just a body for him to use whenever he pleases, making her a sex object for him to use and abuse. This type of masculinity is one that is defined in the genre of man v literature and often finds itself posited in men and their mindsets. This powerplay and thriving off the power is one that men often also have with nature and reflect onto women as seen in this marriage.

This power doesn’t only come in violent waves of physicality, but also in aggression when women choose to not listen or do something a man doesn’t like. An example of this can be seen in the way Yeong-hye’s husband reacts to her choice of clothing, specifically her choice of not wearing a bra. He says, “The only respect in which my wife was at all unusual was that she didn’t like wearing a bra...It wasn’t as though she had shapely breasts which might suit the “no-bra look” (Han 11). This perspective is continued, as he becomes embarrassed when he finds his wife isn’t wearing a bra to a work dinner. He thinks, “I would have preferred her to go around wearing one that was thickly padded, so that I could save face in front of my acquaintances” (Han 21- 22). As he is trying to make his wife look good to his acquaintances, he objectifies Yeong-hye into this trophy that he carries around. He brings her to the dinner and wants her to look her best, so that he can show that he has a good trophy as a wife, thus reinforcing this idea that women need to be good to be important. When she doesn’t wear the bra and embarrasses him in front of his acquaintances, she is no longer this trophy and instead becomes a bad woman.

In feminist theory, we discuss how often women are seen as a trophy for men to carry on their arm, making them an object for men to show off to other men. By wanting her to wear a bra, he is wanting her to show her chest for his male coworkers, so they look at her and are pleased by the view. This male domination is what keeps women “in their place” and makes them accept the patriarchy and its issues.

This idea of keeping women in their place is what leads to the next feminist concept illustrated in the book: patriarchal men and women. Patriarchal women can be defined by Tyson as, “...a woman who has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy, which can be defined... as any culture that privileges men...” (Tyson 81). This concept of patriarchal women and men is exemplified in the novel, specifically through the power dynamics and hierarchy that we see in Yeong-hye’s family. The most patriarchal character who really embodies and internalizes these values and norms of patriarchy is her father. He has internalized the patriarchy and pushes this onto the women in his life, he has specific expectations for his daughters and specific expectations for his wife period. He projects his expectations and proceeds to get upset when these expectations are not met with his daughter specifically when it comes to the choices they make and the disagreements that he feels with them and their behavior. This can be seen he tries to use his dominant figure to force Yeong-hye to eat, ““Don’t you understand what your father’s telling you? If he tells you to eat, you eat!” (Han 71). In calling himself her father, he is acknowledging that his dominant figure means that he is in control of her since she falls lower on the family hierarchy as a woman and daughter. He tries to use his dominance and power to make her do something she does not want to do, thus furthering the idea that men are in control of women’s bodies even past the point of childhood and marriage. This power continues as Yeong-hye’s father tries to make her eat, though she is showing clear discomfort and resistance.

Her mother and sister even internalized this patriarchy of power in men, as they stand idle and even tell her to behave: ““Sister, just behave, okay? Just eat what he gives you”” (Han 74). Her mother and sister have internalized the norms of not speaking up and accepting what men do that they won’t even stand up for her because she is resisting her father. Everyone in the room of this scene can be considered a patriarchal man and woman because while the father is asserting his dominance, no one tries to stop him, meaning they have accepted that patriarchy labels him the dominant figure. This scene not only shows some of the violent issues with the male dominance, but also shows how there has been a continuous expectation that men are dominant figures and will continue until challenged. This male dominance and violence outlash can even go as far back as human evolution, as man was recognized for his violence while women weren't recognized for their connection to nature. This power dynamic has been at continuous, especially in Korea’s history, and highlight some of the violence and issues that male superiority has brought upon women and the expectations of women. The control that man wants not only has created a continuous male superiority complex, but has also brought upon violence men once had towards nature onto women, as they now have a superiority complex over everything as the conqueror.

### **Losing the Body: Objectification in Mongolian Mark**

As men continue to show their domination and power over women, the objectification of the woman's body begins to worsen in the second part of *The Vegetarian*. Specifically, we see a critical aspect as Yeong-hye completely loses control over her own body and voice, as her disassociation from the world leads to her being used. The objectification worsens as the sexualization of her body is emphasized in this chapter, and is not only objectified by her husband's, but also by her sister's husband. There is also a new feminist concept illustrated in this

second chapter, which is the male gaze. Introduced in this chapter is also a connection with nature, as the mongolian mark has a significant aspect and the ways in which Yeong-hye's brother-in-law chooses to objectify her. There also is an emphasis on her connection with nature and flowers in this chapter. As the mongolian mark has to do with the ways in which she is objectified through the male gaze, it is important to understand exactly what this concept means and how it reflects in the chapter.

The first aspect of the male gaze that can be seen in the chapter is through the brother in law's perception, as he is the point of view of this chapter and instantly begins objectifying characters. The male gaze defined by Tyson is, "... the camera eye... is male: the female characters... are the objects gazed upon by the camera and often eroticized as if a male eye were viewing them..." (Tyson 80). Not only is it the idea that the camera or view is seen from the male gaze, but the purpose and reason for the women are to be gazed upon by the male, "The woman displayed... as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium..." (Mulvey 62). We can see this gaze amongst male characters when reading the ways in which the brother-in-law views Yeong-hye. Though her sister's husband, his power is shown in this gaze as he is still a man and above her in the hierarchy of gender and family. As the chapter is told from the brother-in-law's point of view, there are many ways present in how he gazes and objectifies Yeong-hye, and excuses the behavior by covering it as art. An example of this gaze can be seen on page 174, "Everything about her sister pleased him—her single-lidded eyes; the way she spoke, so blunt as to be almost uncouth, and without his wife's faintly nasal inflection; her drab clothes; her androgynously protruding cheekbones. She might well be called ugly in comparison with his wife..." (Han 108). By talking about how beautiful she is to him but could be ugly compared to others, he is saying

her beauty only comes from the male gaze and the perception that men have of her, as he compares her beauty standards that were created by men and were held as an expectation to women. Through the male gaze, men are given the dominant role as the viewer. They get to evaluate women and give them a rating depending on if they like what they see or not, they create the scale, requirements, scoreboard, and more. Not only is he showing his power through the family hierarchy, but also just showing his power through the superiority of men and the idea that men control anything and everything, even women that they have no connection or correlation with.

His gaze continues and even becomes stronger when he begins to think of creating a sexual film with Yeong-hye. He often fantasizes about making Yeong-hye this erotic object for an art piece he wants to make, but the art piece is just for him to watch. He is the one behind the lens, as well as another character in the piece that is viewing her as an object for his sexual desire and is making her appeal to his gaze, specifically when he thinks of looking at her mongolian mark: "In precisely that moment he was struck by the image of a blue flower on a woman's buttocks, its petals opening outward... [he] became inexplicably bound up with the image of men and women having sex, their naked bodies completely covered with painted flowers" (Han 101- 102). The male gaze is present by the way he sexualizes her birthmark and how he wishes to record it for himself. He is making her appeal to his sexualized view of her mark and her body. This Mongolian mark not only shows the ways in which women are represented by nature, but continues the point that men feel they need to conquer and control this nature. This mark aroused him and had him become almost feral like an animal who needed to take out his violence but found another way to do so and making a film. This power of the male gaze gave him a

position where he was able to reinforce male superiority, as well as find an outlet for the violence and internal urge to control.

As Yeong-hye's brother-in-law places his male gaze on her, he also objectifies her in this process, as he dwindles her individuality down to just this mongolian mark and erotic figure for him to sexualize and record. He makes her the eroticized object of his sexual desires, completely objectifying her as he doesn't even view her as a person whom he needs to get consent from for this desire. This can be seen in the way that the brother-in-law not only treats his own wife as a sexual object to assault but also his sister-in-law. When he comes home to his wife and proceeds to have sex with her without asking for her consent, he objectifies her body by making her an object of desire instead of a human, even though she stated, "'I'm scared', she'd muttered, turned away from him. No, it wasn't that. You're scaring me... She might have lain there sobbing for hours in the darkness. He didn't know" (Han 135). This concept of objectification of his own wife and the fear she has not only illustrates how male dominance works in this piece but also emphasizes the violence and issues that women face due to the power men feel they have over women.

The male character also does this to his sister-in-law, even though he is aware that she is not able to truly consent in the mentally unstable condition she is in, "He stood up, stepped close to her and pushed her still-fevered body up against the wall. But when he pressed his lips firmly against hers, probing with his tongue, she shoved him away again" (Han 172- 173). Not only does this chapter show the feminist concept of male objectification of women, but also shows the issues with it by illustrating how women react to this male dominance and how they want to resist. This male character physically sexualizes the women in his life, but he also makes his sister-in-law a sexual object for an audience when he wants to create an art piece of her naked

body. He physically makes her an object by treating her as an art piece for him to film and view: “She shed her clothes and lay down again, on her back this time, looking up at the ceiling. The spotlighting made him narrow his eyes as if dazzled, although the upper half of her body was still in shadow” (Han 143). Not only is the feminist concept of objectification present in this scene, but we also see how this concept ties to the male gaze, as the male gaze is what creates the idea of women being sexual objects for men to view. This shows the clear male dominance that was often defined and persisted in this nature writing genre that many women were left out of and how that exclusion of women and power over women creates many violent issues. As the masculinity was defined through these heroes and adventurous male figures often represented by overpowering land or animal, they are reflecting these behaviors onto women and are now overpowering and controlling women. Especially in this case they are overpowering and controlling women that they don't even have connections or correlations with, showing how this tie to men in general and the superiority seen in the patriarchy, and how this creates violence against women, leading them to the loud and quiet resistance we can see in this book.

*You Can't Control Me: Women's Resistance and Nature*

### **Flaming Trees: The Trees Will Set Me Free**

As these male dominant issues continued to reoccur in the story and exemplified many of the issues and violence that women faced, the third chapter leads to us finally seeing how these women resisted the patriarchy. Specifically, the ways in how Yeong-hye used her body as a form of resistance to the patriarchy and domination, as well as her connection to nature to finally bring freedom and peace to her and her sister's life. While this piece is focused mostly on how the women in the book used their bodies as a form of resistance, it is important to acknowledge all the forms of resistance in this piece, as this resistance is what helped illustrate feminist concepts

and issues with male dominance and patriarchy. The first form of resistance is loud and physical resistance, defined as the ways the woman boldly challenged the man. These could be verbal cues and physical ways that the women, specifically Yeong-hye and her sister In-hye, resist the male dominance in their life and the patriarchal issues that come with it. The other form of resistance that is present in this novel is in the form of quiet resistance. This quiet resistance is the way in which the sisters resist the patriarchy without being physically forward with it. This form includes the use of the body as resistance and the ways in which they choose to connect with nature to aid them in their journey to freedom and control. This form of resistance creates the new way of heroism and inspiration for women, specifically for each other, and how the weight they carried in life can be seen as the real hero that deserves recognition in the nature genre, thus reimagining the genre to be one about an alliance with nature instead of dominance.

The first type of resistance in the book is in the form of resistance through the body and its connection to nature. The book opens with Yeong-hye's husband telling the reader that she is now vegetarian. As the issues with her diet guide the reader through the book, it is shared that Yeong-hye has become vegetarian to escape the violence of her dreams, specifically the violence towards meat. In using the psychoanalytical lens, this itself could represent how the diet is a way for Yeong-hye to resist male dominance, as the meat in her dreams can often represent men, according to the psychoanalytical theory defined by Tyson. Tyson says, male imagery or phallic symbols can exist in dreams. Dreams about gender roles or our attitudes towards ourselves and others as sexual beings can be revealing in this way" (19). Meat often represents men, as red meat not only is always included in the male diet, but meat itself can also be used to refer to male genitalia. This fear of meat not only could represent the ways in which she fears men and their dominance, but also just the carnal desire that is often represented in men when it comes to their



red meat diet and way of dominating and extracting from the land. Her choosing to become vegetarian, even though her husband doesn't want her to, is her way of resisting him and gaining control and ownership of herself as well as removing herself from that fear of men and their dominance, as no longer eating meat allowed her to distance herself from those dreams and fears. In connecting with nature, in the even using the alliance she has with nature to take from nature but also give back to it with her diet, she can resist her husband and the power and control he has over her body period. Hence, using her body and nature as a form of resistance to the male domination from her husband: Her sister says, "It's your body, you can treat it however you please. The only area where you're free to do just as you like. And even that doesn't turn out how you wanted" (Han 275).

This connection between Yeong-hye resisting male domination through her body and nature can also be seen when she wants her body to turn into a tree, leading her to not eat at all. This is best illustrated when her sister visits her at the psychiatric ward, "Look, sister, I'm doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands...they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly..." (Han 200). Her wanting to be one with the trees and transform herself into a plant can be seen as her fully wanting to escape from the control others have over her body. This resistance is important because even though she left her husband, there are still her doctors and family telling her what to eat. Connecting with nature and embodying this tree allows her to fully remove herself from the power and control that others had over her, as embodying a tree and becoming a tree would allowed her to finally be free, connecting to her spiritual roots once seen in Korea's history of shamanism. In the end, it is her decision to do what she wants with her body, and even her sister finally realizes this. Her connection to nature and the ways that she sees herself as a plant, allows her to finally be at

peace as no one can tell her what to do once she becomes nature. Not only does this show the extent that women must through to find freedom, but also shows how nature is supposed to be. Nature isn't meant to be told what to do or who to exist around, which is why she feels that to finally be free from control and power, she needs to become part of nature. Not only does this completely challenge the ways in which men have controlled nature in nature writing, but also rewrites it as her experience shows that she's able to connect nature and even take from it without having to completely control it, as she gives back to nature and even embodies it.

Yeong-hye's resistance through her body is also exemplified in the way that she chooses to dress. We learn early on that Yeong-hye is seen as strange by her husband because she does not wear a bra, "when I managed to persuade her to wear one for a while, she'd have it unhooked barely a minute after leaving the house... she wasn't remotely concerned" (Han 22). The idea of women gaining back control of their bodies through clothing is one that historically been seen in Korea, as even during the Gwangju uprising, women stripped to save themselves from being touched, using their clothing and body to resist. Yeong-hye choosing to not wear a bra is just one way that she showed resistance to the male dominance and patriarchy that tells her she should be dressed for men and their gazes. Her not caring is just another factor that shows she is doing this for herself, as it makes her uncomfortable and it is her body to put the clothes on and off. These forms of resistant could be considered quiet because it isn't as bold, but nonetheless carries the same strength and power that other forms of resistance have. Yeong-hye has shown not only her sister but also the readers that it is up to a woman what happens to their bodies and that it is important for them to take that control away from men and give it to themselves. Not only does this inspiration challenge the dominance and power that men have over women, but also creates a feminist hero in this nature writing that allows women to feel inspired to take back control.

Though she doesn't necessarily use nature to resist in her clothing, in her becoming a tree, she understands that plants don't have to wear clothing and that being bare is being free. This motivated her to not only take back control over her body and what she wears, but also inspire the readers to do so as well.

Though this essay is focused on the ways women resisted the male dominance and patriarch using their bodies and nature, there are also scenes in the novel where there is a verbal or physical resistance to the male characters. An example is the way Yeong-hye begins to resist her husband verbally and physically after she becomes a vegetarian, “she’d been aware of everything—me coming out of the bedroom, my question, coming over to her. She’d simply ignored me” (Han 25). The fact that she blatantly ignored him was a way she resisted his male dominance over her, as she regularly was responsive to him always and did as he said, as well as was expected to do so. This expectation can be seen through the shock that he faces when he realizes that she was doing, since he believes that she should respond to him always as he is the male, and she is his wife. This verbal resistance from Yeong-hye also exist when she tells her father no, “‘I won’t eat it.’ For the first time in a long while, her speech was clear and distinct” (Han 71). It is very shocking to everyone that Yeong-hye refuses the men in her life, specifically her father. Though this could be seen as her using her body to resist him, since she is ignoring him telling her to eat, it is also important to see the verbal and loud ways that she is resisting male dominance, especially from someone with such a high dominant position in her family.

Another loud example of resistance and use of the body to resist patriarchy in the book is emphasized when Yeong-hye has a suicide attempt: “‘Stay back!’ Blood ribboned out of her wrist. The shock of red splashed over white china. As her knees buckled and she crumpled to the floor...” (Han 76). This can show how strong her resistance is to male dominance and the

patriarchy, as she is willing to even harm her body to have control and freedom. It also emphasizes the issues with male dominance as it shows the issues are worth dying over if it means the woman is free. The power that these men have over her body and the lack of control that she has over her body is something that creates many issues and violence towards her, that she just wishes she was able to escape and finally be at peace. These issues are so consistent and demanding, that she rather harm her body and kill it in order to finally be at peace and have control. Even in harming her body, it allows her to be the one in control and her to be the one in charge of herself. These issues are so harmful and she knows that the only escape may be to harm herself, as it takes drastic measures in order for the men in her life to finally listen and see her as an individual.

Though Yeong-hye is the main female character who is resisting, she also influenced her sister to resist in the third chapter. In-hye loud resistance can be seen in her taking her sister's side and divorcing her husband after catching him assaulting Yeong-hye, In-hye says to her son, “No one at all. There's only you and me [her and her son.] That will have to be enough, now” (Han 210). Not only does she resist in taking her sister's side, but she also resists as she sends her husband to the psychiatric ward and continues with the divorce and full custody of her child. This not only showed her resistance to him but also to male domination in general as it is normally frowned upon for a wife to leave her husband in Korea's culture, as women were once viewed as the father or husbands to own. Once she had a husband, she became his and now she is no one's. She did not care what the expectation was of her as a wife and mother, even when she risked backlash possibly, because she was now taking control of her life and self. She also takes over her life completely in the third part of the novel when she recognizes that it was never her life, to begin with, nor even her home that she was living in (Han 257- 258). These forms of

resistance shown in the book, specifically the third chapter, not only illustrates what issues woman have with male dominance that is defined and continued in the nature genre, but also shows us the importance of resisting it, whether it be through their bodies and nature or physically.

### **Creating a New Hero: Heroism in *The Vegetarian***

And showing readers the issues with male dominance and the patriarchy, the book also emphasizes the importance of women's resistance in their connection with nature, as it motivates them to use their body in order to resist these violent issues they are facing. Specifically, the novel shows the importance of this resistance, as it can influence others in the ways that the sisters were influenced by each other. An example of this new idea of heroism can be defined in the carrier bag theory, which is the idea that a hero is a carrier instead of the brutal murder that is shared in the man v nature genre and human evolution. "If it is a human thing to do to put something you want... into a bag, or a basket... and then take it home with you ... then I am a human being after all" (Le Guin 152). This carrier can be seen when In-hye discusses her sister and father's relationship, "she had merely absorbed all her suffering inside her, deep into the marrow of her bones" (Han 246). Yeong-hye was a carrier, which is why she finally resisted. She carried all this suffering and pain, which considers her a new hero. It shows she is human, and that is what makes her a hero, as this evolution of human beings would not have existed without the carrier. Not only did she carry from her childhood, but as a woman herself is constantly carrying an inborn suffering that women are expected to just deal with period this specific internal suffering is one that Han often writes about, as women are expected to go through pain and violence but not say anything about it. These issues are not only shown in *The Vegetarian*, but also in her novels *Convalescence* and *Human Acts*. Thus, adding a new perspective on what

heroism can look like as her novels continue to put women in these positions and show that the suffering is what makes a hero, not the perpetrator.

She is also a hero in the sense that she never chose violence towards others or nature to show her heroic figure. She chose to quietly resist by gaining back her body from the men who took it for her and created a connection to nature instead of overpowering it. Her choice of being vegetarian also showed this resistance to violence and murder, which is normally what heroism is defined by: “I’m not an animal anymore, sister” (Han 240). This could mean she is no longer like the men in her life and will no longer accept the violence from them, as well as represent her connection with nature as she will not be violent towards it either.

This heroism from Yeong-hye is also present in the fact that she inspires and influences her sister. Her resistance is what inspires her sister to also resist, and at the end of the book, they are who the other has left, completely freeing them from the violence and domination they faced. “Perhaps this is all a kind of dream... “I have dreams too, you know. Dreams...and I could let myself dissolve into them...” (Han 284). In-hye discussing her dreams could mean she now understands Yeong-hye, as it is her dreams that led her to be vegetarian and resistant. Not only is new heroism a present feminist concept in the book, but it is also of importance when thinking of how this story creates a new hero in general and completely challenges and rewrites the genre of man v nature, as the adventurer no longer is man or violent to land. It showed not only how resistance to the patriarchy and dismantling of the hero is important to an individual woman but also for others, as these women and their resistance inspire those around them.

## **Conclusion**

As women have often been left out of the man versus nature genre, it was important to understand the issues that arose from this and why exactly women were not being heard for their

writing. As far back as history goes, men have always been the ones to be portrayed as heroic and even the starters of human evolution, though women were the ones to carry and care for the family. This issue not only discredited women's experiences and work that they put in historically but continued to create a masculine hero in the nature genre. In doing so, women who craved adventure were left to find representation elsewhere or were to write their own stories knowing that they would never be read. In this heroic adventurer, masculinity was defined by violence. These stories were often told of men controlling and dominating nature, no matter what experiences he was going through. As nature is often represented by women, these behaviors and masculine ideals that men were meant to take control over things that they were once supposed to coexist with were projected onto women.

The issues that women faced were often ignored, as the masculine hero was the one that everybody was told. As women found themselves not being able to not write about nature or get credited for their writing, they also were facing male dominance issues in the patriarchy and society that they were existing in. These issues were often reflective of the behaviors that men had toward land, as they felt they needed to be powerful and controlling of everything. These issues are specifically worse for women in countries where they are not free to resist, as laws or history has told them that that's not their position. In learning about the ways in which women wanted to finally take over this genre and challenge the resistance, Kang Han's *The Vegetarian* was a great example to show the ways in which women were connecting with nature and writing about it to challenge the masculine hero that the genre has often portrayed. As the story is told from Korea, it was also understanding that nature not only allowed the author to use it in her writing to resist, but also allowed her to create characters who could connect with nature to feel motivated to resist the violence and domination from men.

Specifically, when looking at Han's work, *The Vegetarian* exemplifies this idea that women can connect with nature, something that they historically have been represented by, to motivate themselves and find the power within themselves to take back control over their individual being. In this novel, as the women connect with nature and completely overthrow and challenge male dominance, they create a new hero who can not only inspire themselves but also each other. In connecting with nature, *The Vegetarian* shows that women can use this alliance to challenge issues instead of overpowering and control nature. The adventurer and hero become softer instead of violent and masculine, thus dismantling the hero and rewriting what the hero looks like in this nature genre. In doing so, the genre itself is rewritten as it no longer needs to be a challenge with nature but can be an alliance. This writing allows women to resist and free themselves from the issues that they are facing, as they now feel represented by a hero and inspired by a hero that better fits them than the toxic masculine one that's often in this drawn are. This hero and genre not only inspires, but tells the readers that the body needs to be heard and needs its story to be told by the rightful owner, as woman will eventually return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her (Cixous 880). This connection with nature not only allows women to resist a genre that is often excluding them, but also allows them to understand the importance of this alliance with nature as it encourages and inspires women to finally return to their bodies and take control over themselves.



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