



Existential Elements and Symbolism: A Study of *The Vegetarian*: An Exploration of Identity and the Search for Meaning

Imad Khan¹, Dr. Irfan Ullah² & Dr. Sayyed Rashid Ali Shah³

¹BS Graduate, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Marda, KP, Pakistan,

Email: imadk3000@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, KP, Pakistan,

Email: Irfanullah@awkum.edu.pk

³London Training Institute, Muscat, Oman, Email: tesoleducator@outlook.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received:	June	16, 2025
Revised:	July	17, 2025
Accepted:	July	25, 2025
Available Online:	August	06, 2025

Keywords:

Existentialism, Identity Crisis, Patriarchal Oppression, Symbolism, Resistance, Han Kang

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Irfan Ullah

Email:

Irfanullah@awkum.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This study explores the existential and symbolic elements in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, focusing on the protagonist Yeong-hye's transformation and her rejection of societal norms through the lens of existentialist philosophy. Using qualitative textual analysis, the paper investigates how Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat, her psychological breakdown, and her eventual desire to transform into a tree reflect core existential themes such as freedom, alienation, and rebellion. The research positions Yeong-hye's actions as a form of existential autonomy rather than a mental illness, arguing that her transformation embodies a rebellion against the oppressive societal and patriarchal structures that seek to define her identity. The study also highlights the symbolic role of vegetarianism, bodily autonomy, silence, and the male gaze in *The Vegetarian*, situating Han Kang's work within the broader existential discourse. This paper contributes to the understanding of contemporary feminist and postcolonial literature by presenting Yeong-hye's transformation as an act of existential resistance, offering a new perspective on the complex interplay between identity, freedom, and oppression in modern fiction.



Introduction

Existentialism, both as a philosophical movement and a literary tradition, grapples with fundamental questions surrounding the human condition—freedom, isolation, meaning, and the confrontation with absurdity. Emerging in 19th-century Europe through the works of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, and later formalized in the 20th century by thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, existentialism critiques rigid systems of morality, religion, and societal structures. Recent existentialist literature focuses on the necessity of people to define their purpose and identity in the universe that, at best, ignores and, at worse,

contradicts human subjectivity. Contemporary fiction serves especially well as the vehicle for expressing such concerns, providing highly nuanced portraits of a person dealing with an existential crisis, rejecting conformity, or continuing the quest to find authenticity against the absurd.

In the genre, the protagonists are usually suspended between accepted societal convention and individualistic identity and the climax is reached on the scale of alienation and desolation and in some cases radical revolution. *The Stranger* by Camus, and *Nausea* by Sartre are such works; their protagonists are overwhelmed with meaninglessness of their lives and turn to actions that seem absurd to them in a bid to establish their agency. The existential characters told in these works choose to live (or to die) as they please, by rejecting the social roles mapped out to them. Most of this discourse is part of the Western canon, but recent pieces written by non-Western cultural backgrounds have revisited the existentialist themes and remade them evident in idiomatic narratives of oppression, identity, and resistance in particular cultural grounds.

One of the shining examples that can be mentioned in this context is the *The Vegetarian* (2007), a critically acclaimed novel by the South Korean author Han Kang that has earned the novel the international respect due to its portrayal of the relevant psychological insight and even density of symbolism. The story is the account of Yeong-hye, a woman who suddenly and severely rejects meat because of a terrifying dream, which shows the beginning of a series of actions that lead to mental deterioration and social isolation. It is a seemingly simple denial which causes extreme responses on the part of her family, husband and the community in general who perceives her actions as indicative of a pathological disorder. On the one hand, the transformed Yeong-hye goes beyond the dietary choice, taking on the functions of a symbolic rebellion against the projection on her body and person.

The withdrawal of Yeong-hye into silence, her rejection of the traditional human actions, and her final desire to transform herself to a plant illustrates fundamental existential themes. Her unwillingness to assimilate and her pursuit of getting rid of violence and objectification inherent to the patriarchal society bring existential problems of freedom, authenticity, and rebellion. Interpreting her choices simply as symptoms of mental illness is therefore not a good solution; they are in fact proofs of existential freedom- perhaps, unfortunately, a painful and most of times an unappreciated one. Within this context, *The Vegetarian* serves as an interesting point of departure in undertaking the application of existentialist analysis to non-Western literature in showing how the issues of identity, agency, and significance are articulated through the confining parameters of cultural and gendered oppression.

Purpose of the Study

The novel *The Vegetarian* is analyzed in the context of the ideas of existentialist thought and, in particular, the development of the literary figure of Yeong-hye as a demonstration of the radical freedom and authenticity. The essay explores the ways that themes of existentialism such as alienation, absurdity, rebellion, and self-definition are written in the formal structure of the novel, the development of characters and symbolic patterns. This paper defines a wider understanding of existential resistance in current feminist and postcolonial literature by analysing the philosophical consequences of Yeong-hye going into silence and the loss of her bodily integrity.

While *The Vegetarian* has been widely analyzed through feminist, ecocritical, and psychological frameworks, there is a notable gap in existentialist readings of the novel. This study fills that gap by foregrounding existential theory and positioning Yeong-hye not as a passive victim of madness,

but as an active agent confronting the absurdity and violence of her social world through her transformation.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does Yeong-hye's transformation reflect core principles of existentialist philosophy?
2. In what ways does the novel portray themes of alienation, freedom, absurdity, and identity crisis?
3. Can Yeong-hye's descent be interpreted not as insanity, but as existential rebellion?
4. What symbolic strategies does Han Kang use to express existential autonomy and bodily resistance?

Statement of the Problem

Although Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* has been examined from diverse critical standpoints, including trauma theory, psychoanalysis, and ecofeminism, few studies have explored it explicitly through the philosophical framework of existentialism. This absence is surprising, given the novel's intense focus on subjectivity, isolation, and the protagonist's rejection of prescribed identity roles. The lack of existentialist analysis leaves a gap in the interpretive landscape, especially regarding Yeong-hye's symbolic actions, her silence, and her progressive withdrawal from the human world. These behaviors, when viewed through an existential lens, become acts of radical authenticity and resistance, rather than simply signs of mental collapse.

This research thus aims to reposition *The Vegetarian* within existential literary discourse, arguing that Yeong-hye's psychological descent is in fact a conscious refusal of inauthentic existence. Her transformation—culminating in her desire to become a tree—can be understood as a literal and symbolic erasure of imposed identity, an act that challenges our assumptions about sanity, subjectivity, and the human condition.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in its attempt to bridge existential philosophy and postmodern feminist literature. By applying existentialist theory to a contemporary East Asian novel, it demonstrates the global and cross-cultural relevance of existential themes. Furthermore, it reframes Yeong-hye's actions not as pathological, but as potentially liberatory within a society that devalues bodily autonomy and individuality.

The analysis contributes to both literary criticism and philosophical inquiry. For literary scholars, it expands the interpretive scope of Han Kang's work; for philosophers, it offers a compelling example of how existential thought operates outside Western texts and contexts. The findings may also resonate with broader discussions on mental health, identity, resistance, and the right to self-definition in contemporary societies.

Literature Review

Introduction

This section reviews the critical and theoretical literature relevant to Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, focusing on existing interpretations and their connections to themes of identity, resistance, and

transformation. While previous studies have explored the novel through feminist, ecological, psychoanalytic, and cultural lenses, few have engaged with existentialist frameworks. This literature review begins by mapping the dominant scholarly approaches to the novel and then situates this research within the broader tradition of existentialist philosophy and literature. The chapter concludes by identifying key gaps in the scholarship and establishing the need for an existentialist reading that centers on agency, alienation, and symbolic rebellion.

Critical Interpretations of *The Vegetarian*

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* has received wide academic attention for its portrayal of a woman's bodily refusal to conform to patriarchal, cultural, and psychological expectations. Scholars have approached Yeong-hye's transformation from multiple critical vantage points, with a consistent emphasis on trauma, gender, and resistance.

Kakkat and Mohanty (2020) adopt a feminist eco-critical framework, interpreting Yeong-hye's refusal to consume meat as an act of rebellion against a patriarchal system that treats women's bodies as sites of consumption and control. In the context of critical inquiry, critics note that the arrangement of Yeong-hye into an immobile form of the plant is a definite effort of transitioning to a pre-cultural, non-violent state- an ontological distance in relation to human domination. Ningtyas and Azzahra (2023) continue this argument on an ecocritical level, making an argument that the corporeal transformation of the protagonist is a critique of anthropocentrism and the placement of character on the side of the natural world that- as opposed to an oppressive domestic environment.

At the same time, several researchers put emphasis on the psychological and psychiatric aspects of the novel. Choudhury (2020) denounces the institutional herding of Yeong-hye into the category of mental illness and how psychiatry discursively includes an apparatus to restore the authority of patriarchy. In this view, her quietness and food refusal are not clinical symptoms; they are rather calculated breaks to the social norms. George and Sunitha (2020) take an ecopsychological approach, connecting her behavior to trauma and fragments of the soul that could not be overcome and cured, as well as the fact that medical institutions have once failed to find a way to care about individuality in a respectful way.

Collectively, these dissections provide subtle insight into gender, environmental and trauma but often present a picture of Yeong-hye as a passive victim or saint, victimized by her surroundings or escaping into madness. She is often described as doing this through accidental transformation, and her lack of speaking is often interpreted as symptomatic breakdown, rather than resistance. This is why this literature so much does not consider an interpretation that would treat her actions not as symptoms of pathology but as careful acts of a radical agency, misinterpreted and nonetheless carefully carried out.

Existentialism and Literary Resistance

Existentialist literature has always examined the search of the person in his authenticity against a background of absurdity, conformism, and alienation. According to Sartre (1943): humans are condemned to be free which means, that the definition of self is manmade, that is people have intentions based on a meaning and not the other way around. According to existentialism, authenticity is made possible through making decisions personally rather than acting socially. Camus (1942) brought to the forefront the absurd, an allusion of the human desire to obtain meaning with a meaningless universe, as one of the essential elements of the human condition. His reaction was via rebellion which may be seen as a kind of self-assertion as opposed to cosmic obliviousness.

Fiction is one genre that can happen to be an effective context of investigating these philosophical concerns. Such characters as Meursault in *The Stranger* by Camus or Roquentin in Sartre's *Nausea* can be viewed as those who have to face social regulations and find their meanings in their own way. They are alienated but in a consequential rather than a pathological way because it is the existential price of nonconformity. In this respect, this paper will argue that Yeong-hye, the main character in *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, is a rebel of the existential syndrome through negating the imposed order of things and establishing identity through negation.

Despite the fact that the concept of existentialist theory is remarkably implemented in the discourse of the literature in the Western World, it is underutilized in the analysis of the texts of the modern non-Western literature. Nevertheless, the novel by Han Kang provides a rich soil where this kind of analysis can be introduced. The actions of Yeong-hye, rejection of eating, rejection of speaking, and rejection of remaining a human being do not point to some state of insanity but, in fact, they are a manifestation of a deep conflict with a human and the boundaries of freedom. She struggles to make meaning from the symbolic transformation, but also perceives her actions as disintegration, in the same way that protagonists in an existentialist literature would have to do.

Symbolism, Silence, and Bodily Autonomy

The veritable tome of critical investigation has been applied to the voluminous symbolic vocabulary of the novel. Kim (2019) critiques the position of vegetarianism as the ethical and political performance that challenges violent masculinist culture. The decision of Yeong-hye not to eat meat is both a personal and subversive act, which therefore threatens the stability of her family, as well as the rest of the social structure. At the same time, greater proportion of her attraction to the natural world which can be observed in the dreams about roots, branches and trees is much more than a dietary liking and signals of her metaphysical change. Imperiling human behavior up to speech, she tries to eliminate the difference between self and nature.

Another powerful motif is silence in *The Vegetarian*. Although silence is often viewed as a pointer to psychological retreat or defeatism, this discussion accepts the reasoning of Lee (2016), who believes that Yeong-hye has used silence as a form of resistance. By refusing to respond, she undermines attempts to define her, disrupting the communicative norms that structure power. Her body becomes her only language—a language of refusal, of collapse, and of otherness.

However, many of these interpretations stop short of fully theorizing what her symbolic acts mean in philosophical terms. An existentialist reading sees these actions not as passive erasure but as radical redefinition. Yeong-hye's transformation into a tree can be understood as an existential choice to cease participating in a human world she finds morally bankrupt and absurd. The body, then, becomes both the site and the medium of rebellion.

The Gap in Existing Research

Despite the extensive scholarship surrounding *The Vegetarian*, an existentialist reading remains underdeveloped. Existing interpretations emphasize Yeong-hye's suffering but rarely her agency. The frequent framing of her silence and transformation as pathological risks reinforcing the very norms the novel critiques. By contrast, existentialism foregrounds choice, freedom, and meaning-making even in suffering. Yeong-hye's metamorphosis can thus be read as a painful but purposeful existential rebellion.

This study fills this gap by interpreting Yeong-hye's actions through the existential philosophies of Sartre, Camus, and Kierkegaard. Rather than focusing solely on social or psychological causes, this research investigates what it means to reject imposed identity, to choose silence over speech, and to assert freedom through symbolic self-erasure. In doing so, it seeks to reframe *The Vegetarian* as a powerful work of existentialist literature—one that critiques the limits of social identity and explores the costs of true authenticity.

Methodology

The given qualitative research utilizes textual analysis to investigate existential themes within *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang. Instead, using a close reading approach, the paper will undertake a thorough analysis of the narrative form, development of characters, and symbolic details and place them in the context of existentialism.

It is *The Vegetarian* as a primary empirical source, especially the evolvement of the protagonist Yeong-hye, and in what ways she is rebelling against her direct environment and the social norms. Primeval existentialist principles, that is, alienation, freedom, absurdity, rebellion, and authenticity, are applied to identify and analyze certain key passages where the behavior and experience of Yeong-hye are reflective of these concepts.

The symbolic nature of the behaviour of Yeong-hye, her giving up meat, then remaining silent, and transforming her body, is the element that is methodologically focused on as this behaviour could only be seen as an expression of existential rebel or even self-determination. Additional philosophical reflection of these choices adds more depth through the interpretation of these philosophical decisions concerning the theories of the existential thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Soren Kierkegaard.

This dimensional emphasis makes the study reconceptualize Yeong-hye to a non-victim of external forces, but as someone who is actively involved in a life and death battle of meaning and authenticity. With the help of this qualitative perspective, *The Vegetarian* can be reestablished as an existentialist piece of writing, which draws new understanding to the relationships of the individual will and the societal obligation as well as the symbolic resistance in modern fiction.

Data Analysis — Existential Themes in *The Vegetarian*

This paper presents a thematic analysis of *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang and places emphasis on the existential aspects of the changes experienced by Yeong-hye. As noted by means of close reading, her actions, word selection (including silence), and physical transformation do work together as symbols of existential resistance. Such existentialist notions as alienation, freedom, absurdity, rebellion and authenticity can be viewed as tools of analysis, which help get a clearer look at the text. The analysis precedes under five interrelated themes, demonstrating how Yeong-hye's journey reflects a radical confrontation with identity, meaning, and the limits of human subjectivity.

Alienation and the Collapse of Social Identity

Alienation forms one of the main themes of existentialism discourse, which usually occurs when there is a divergence between personal beliefs and the demands of the stereotypical social norms. In the novel Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, this alienation is partly triggered by the renouncement of meat by Yeong-hye, which is an indication of her departure into the shared world. The attitude that

the family responds to them, out of hostility and disgust, instead of interest and compassion, reveals the lack of flexibility of the cultural prescriptions that regulated food, gender, and obedience. An example of the violent imposition of identity and control can be traced in the way the father insisted on forcefully introducing meat to the rest of the family during a family gathering: “*He took the spoon... He was attempting to force her open her mouth (p. 55).*” The scene can be viewed as an allegory to the larger oppression Yeong-hye faces by patriarch and the society.

The alienation experienced by Yeong-hye is further surmounted by the fact that she does not want to engage in any areas in life. She turns into the estranged mistress of her own husband, who turns her into a utilitarian instrument with no feelings. His narrative reduces her to a role—a wife who cooks, cleans, and remains silent. When she deviates from this role, he abandons her. Her sister, though more sympathetic, also struggles to understand Yeong-hye’s choice. These reactions reflect Sartre’s concept of “bad faith,” in which others attempt to fix individuals into pre-defined roles rather than recognizing their freedom to redefine themselves.

Radical Freedom and Existential Choice

One of the most powerful expressions of existentialism in the novel is Yeong-hye’s refusal to comply with norms, even at great personal cost. Sartre argued that individuals are “condemned to be free”—that is, they cannot avoid the responsibility of defining themselves through their actions. Yeong-hye’s decision to stop eating meat, to reject language, and eventually to live as a tree, is radical assertions of this freedom. She does not offer explanations or justifications because her choice stems from a deeper existential impulse, one that seeks authenticity rather than validation.

Her quiet but firm statement—“*I had a dream*” (p. 23)—is the only justification she provides, and it becomes a refrain for her actions. In existential terms, dreams often represent the subconscious revolt of the self against an inauthentic life. In this context, Yeong-hye’s dream acts as the catalyst for rejecting the life imposed on her. Her choices are not impulsive or irrational; they reflect a deliberate movement toward an identity grounded in personal conviction rather than social performance.

Absurdity and the Refusal of Meaning

Camus’s concept of the absurd centers on the human desire for meaning in a world that offers none. When this conflict is recognized, one can either submit to illusion or embrace the absurd and rebel. Yeong-hye’s behavior can be interpreted as an encounter with this absurdity. Her growing disinterest in speech, food, and human interaction mirrors the collapse of conventional sources of meaning. As she states in the psychiatric ward, “*I don’t need words anymore. They’re meaningless*” (p. 104).

Rather than striving to restore order, Yeong-hye chooses to descend further into meaninglessness—not as defeat but as a philosophical rebellion. Her final desire “*to become a tree*” (p. 113) is an absurd act. It is impossible, irrational, and utterly unintelligible to those around her. Yet, in existential terms, it may be understood as her response to a world that has rendered her human identity unbearable. Like Camus’s Sisyphus, Yeong-hye embraces her own absurd fate without asking for justification. In this light, her actions are not failures of sanity but manifestations of existential clarity.

Rebellion against Patriarchal and Institutional Control

Throughout the novel, Yeong-hye's body becomes a site of conflict—between her and the patriarchal society that seeks to dominate it. Her initial act of vegetarianism challenges her father's authority; her refusal to speak disrupts psychiatric control; her disinterest in motherhood and sexuality defies expectations of womanhood. As her body weakens, she is institutionalized and subjected to surveillance, restraint, and forced feeding—all actions designed to return her to the status quo.

This control is most visible through the figure of the doctor, who embodies institutional authority. As the narrator observes, *"His eyes show that he holds no great hopes for her attempts at persuasion. He seems worn out, trying to conceal the anger he feels toward those patients who fail to live up to his expectations"* (p. 96). The doctor represents institutional control, mirroring Foucault's idea of biopower, where institutions define what is "normal" and "ill." Yeong-hye does not conform to medical logic, frustrating the doctor, who cannot categorize her condition.

From an existentialist perspective, this conflict illustrates the struggle between authenticity and imposed identity. Yeong-hye refuses to perform femininity as expected—she is neither maternal sexual, nor submissive. The metamorphosis of Yeong-hye, as a human species into vegetal species, is a symbolic protest against the patriarchal gaze that has reduced her body to a sexual object and reproductive vessel. As a reaction, the familial group, the institution of marriage, and even psychiatry attempts to place her under the influence of regulating systems once again. But her disobedience happens through withdrawal rather than active defiance. Ironically, this passivity is informed by a radical act, and it is through this act of passivity that the secret veins of power embedded in oppressive systems against women are revealed.

The Body as Language: Symbolism and Metamorphosis

In existentialist discourse, it is understood that linguistic failure can transform the body into a valid and powerful channel of meaning. In Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, speech is gradually substituted by the physiology of the main character, Yeong-hye, who is denied the right—and perhaps the will—to speak. The marks left by mandatory feeding, her emaciation, and, finally, her motionless, upright pose as a conscious flora can all be viewed as externalizations of her inner world. Her body becomes her only means of communication, a vessel through which she expresses resistance, transformation, and liberation.

This metamorphosis is vividly expressed in Yeong-hye's hallucinatory vision: *"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"* (p. 87). Here, Yeong-hye envisions herself as a tree, rejecting human identity entirely. The handstand inverts reality and social order, symbolizing her rebirth into something otherworldly and untethered from patriarchal expectations. This inversion of bodily norms becomes a symbolic language of protest and transcendence.

Earlier, her physical transformation is foreshadowed through imagery that conveys her growing alienation from human form: *"Her skin was a pale green. Her body lay prone in front of him, like a leaf that had just fallen from the branch, only barely begun to wilt"* (p. 67). The unnatural greening of her body marks a departure from the familiar and a shift toward estrangement—reflecting Sartre's notion of existential alienation, where individuals become estranged from themselves when their inner identities conflict with the roles imposed upon them. The loss of identifiable human features, including the disappearance of her Mongolian mark, deepens this disconnection, not only between Yeong-hye and society but also between her and the observers around her.

This pattern of development—from verbal withdrawal to symbolic embodiment—is not only systematic but deliberate, marking Yeong-hye's evolution from a silenced woman into a wordless symbol. Her final hospitalization, where she assumes a fixed, upright pose, has strong existential meaning: she has attained her imagined state. This figure also practices an extensive denial of normative human engagements thus locating herself well outside the human register of either action or expression. This negation of the corporeality seems to be reminiscent of Nietzschean ideas of the self-overcoming impulse in that the value of things is overwritten by self-imposed constructs. Yeong-hye refuses to conform to the prescriptions proscribed by her social milieu, and she does not only fight against them; she creates a kind of transformation, which makes her a site of pre-human otherness.

Summary of Analysis

The career of Yeong-hye in the Han Kang novel *The Vegetarian* is best understood as a multi-dimensional existential reconfiguration as opposed to the reductive process of psychopathological falling apart. Here is an alienation that is normatively constituted; a radical autonomy whose negotiations of freedom are carried forward through expressive choice; a persistent silence that puts into oblique light the absurd contingencies of life; and an act, a negation that is opposed to patriarchal hegemony. Placed in this context, the main hero does not come out as a helpless victim of madness through which he succumbs to, rather he appears out as an existential agent who manages to navigate in the disputed spaces of meaning, identity, and being.

Discussion

Overview of the Analysis

A thematic analysis of *The Vegetarian* indicates that the transformation experienced by Yeong-hye is an existential journey that is crucial because of alienation, radical autonomy, and a symbolic rejection of social constructs that aim at legitimizing Yeong-hye and her identity. Not a corruption of psyche, her silence by choice, her vegetarianism, her wish to transform herself into a vegetable are not necessarily the symptom of some decline but a principled denial- the denial of inauthentic life led by fakery. Thus, the text is difficult to consume reductively in which the behavior of Yeong-hye was narrowed down to either psychological or cultural frameworks. Rather, it makes her a footing agent with existential efficacy even though her condition is suggested to be quite irrational or pathological in the context of social perceptions.

Existential Themes Revisited

By existentialist standards, Yeong-hye is forced into a conscious refuting of food, language, and human identity because she is presented with the absurd; a rebellion against a world, which does not guarantee her existence within its accepted confines. She is a reflection of the absurd hero that Camus portrays; she consciously does not conform even though such defiance means she is left on her own. Her little reluctance to eat meat at the beginning, which is taken as a mere dietary habit, later turns into a radical move that shakes the norms of social order. By means of starving herself, by means of no longer speaking, and by means of becoming motionless Yeong-hye employs the notion of the so-called radical freedom of Sartre, therefore playing a totally responsible role in founding her own meaning.

The muteness and stillness of Yeong-hye can be stereotypically perceived as the signs of disease, yet it can be seen as one of the symbolic expressions of rebellion. Appealing to the idea of bad

faith coined by Sartre herself and which entails that people deny their free choice and yield to the model of social roles, she opposes it by deconstructing the statuses of wife, daughter, patient, and woman imposed on her. She establishes a new identity that cannot be defined through self-destruction and transformation of the body. It is this procedure that drives her to her existential authenticity but not without extreme struggle and unconcernedness.

Engagement with Existing Literature

This interpretation challenges much of the existing scholarship, which tends to frame Yeong-hye as a passive victim of patriarchy, trauma, or psychosis. The existing critical literature dwells, in the main, on the psychological or socio-political conditions that trigger Yeong-hye to undergo this transformation but this methodology is inclined to discount the existential individual power of agency that the character assures. The current argument furthers these kinds of analyses to suggest that rather than an icon of resistance, Yeong-hye can be viewed as an independent existential actor. That silence cannot only be read as withdrawal; it represents an ethical refusal to be a part of a discourse that has failed to speak the experience. Similarly, the metamorphosis that she undergoes is no collapse but a graceful transformation. The rearticulation of her rebellion as opposed to breakdown restores the agency of a figure that has often been discussed as silent or psychologically disturbed.

This interpretation is consistent with the existentialist theories of Camus and Sartre that prove that by denying to eat, speak, and be a human person, one makes a radical assertion of the identity. As a character figure in the novel, Yeong-hye turns to be a kind of existential rebel who denies a life that is predetermined by others even to the point of her social and physical annihilation.

Answering the Research Questions

This discussion directly responds to the study's guiding questions:

1. **How does Yeong-hye's transformation reflect existentialist philosophy?**
Her rejection of societal expectations and pursuit of a new, non-human form reflect Sartre's concept of radical freedom and Kierkegaard's pursuit of authentic selfhood. She defines herself through negation, choosing to be rather than to seem.
2. **In what ways does the novel portray alienation, freedom, absurdity, and identity crisis?**
The novel consistently shows Yeong-hye's detachment from family, language, and social structures as forms of alienation. Her symbolic acts—refusing food, embracing vegetal stillness—are expressions of existential freedom. Her transformation challenges the boundaries of identity and reflects the absurdity of a society that equates non-conformity with illness.
3. **Can Yeong-hye's descent be interpreted as existential rebellion rather than mental illness?**
Yes. While her actions are pathologized by characters in the novel, they are shown to be coherent within an existential framework. They are not irrational but respond to the irrationality of imposed roles and the violence of cultural conformity.
4. **What symbolic strategies does Han Kang use to express existential autonomy and bodily resistance?**
Kang employs motifs of silence, nature, and the body to externalize Yeong-hye's interior

revolt. The symbolism of trees, blood, roots, and stillness connects her journey to broader themes of metamorphosis, transcendence, and existential refusal.

Implications of the Study

This existentialist reading of *The Vegetarian* offers a new way of understanding Yeong-hye's transformation—not as a descent into madness, but as a metaphysical revolt against imposed identity. In an era when literature increasingly engages with themes of trauma, gender, and mental health, this interpretation expands the analytical lens to include philosophical autonomy. It also demonstrates the relevance of existentialist thought beyond the Western canon, situating Han Kang's novel within a global tradition of literary resistance.

For literary scholars, the study encourages a re-evaluation of silence, irrationality, and non-conformity in fiction—not as mere symptoms, but as complex philosophical responses. For readers and educators, it invites reflection on how individuals navigate identity in oppressive environments and what forms of rebellion are available when traditional language fails.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. It focuses on a single character and applies a specific philosophical framework, which may not account for all interpretive possibilities. The existentialist approach does not deeply engage with intersectional feminist, postcolonial, or psychological dimensions of the novel, which could offer further insights. Additionally, the analysis is limited to textual evidence and theoretical interpretation without empirical reader-response data.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies could compare *The Vegetarian* with other existentialist narratives—such as *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath or *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih—to explore how existential themes manifest across cultures and genders. More interdisciplinary work combining existential theory with trauma studies or cultural psychiatry could also deepen the conversation. Reader-response research might help assess how readers interpret Yeong-hye's transformation and whether they see it as agency, illness, or both.

Conclusion

The researcher gains an idea and information about Yeong-hye's nightmares, vegetarianism, and her neurological and physical metamorphosis, and her existential crisis stretches out. The journey of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is a demonstration of defiance against forced individuals, reflecting the existentialist pursuit of authenticity. The fact that Yeong-hye breaks the strong ties with human norms and compounds into the nature can be considered an escape of the societal social oppression, which is aligned with the ideas of Nietzsche concerning self-overcoming and the radical freedom formulated by Sartre. A close analysis of existentialist freedom will only reinforce the fact that the path that Yeong-hye follows is a kind of alternative way of expressing freedom: her rejection of existing conventions and her integration into nature will symbolize identity. The criticism against Yeong-hye by the oppressive agents that insist to control her who see her objection to remain mute as unacceptable is, admittedly, a wincing experience but in its end a successful bid to rise free and clean.

References

1. Anand, J. (2019). Constricting Life: Constructing/Deconstructing Violence in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *CAESURA*, 6(1), 70–86.
2. Bica, P. (2023). *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang: A Postmodern Allegory for Women's Fight for Power and Freedom. *RIHUMSO: Revista de Investigación del Departamento de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales*.
3. Camus, A. (1942). *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Gallimard.
4. Choi, J. (2016). Food and Identity in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *Journal of Korean Literature*, 12(3), 20–35.
5. Choudhury, J. (2020). The Struggle with Disease Taxonomy in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 12(6), 1–6.
6. Earnshaw, S. (2006). *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Flynn, T. (2006). *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*.
7. George, R., & Sunitha, V. (2020). Exploring Ecopsychological Interconnections: A Study of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *Journal of Critical Reviews*, 7(17), 1294–1296.
8. Gielen, G., Wambacq, P., & Sansen, W. M. (1994). Symbolic Analysis Methods and Applications for Analog Circuits: A Tutorial Overview. *Proceedings of the IEEE*, 82(2), 287–304. doi:10.1109/5.265355.
9. Han Kang. (n.d.). *Han Kang Official Website*. Retrieved from <http://han-kang.net>.
10. Jung, H. (2018). Symbolism in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *Korean Studies Quarterly*, 45(2), 50–65.
11. Kierkegaard, S. (1844). *The Concept of Anxiety*.
12. Kierkegaard, S. (1985). *Fear and trembling* (A. Hannay, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1843).
13. Kim, S. (2017). Existentialism and Feminism in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *Asian Literature Review*, 24(1), 40–70.
14. Kim, W.-C. (2019). Eating and Suffering in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 21(5).
15. Lee, K. (2016). Violence and Being Human: A Conversation with Han Kang. *World Literature Today*, 90(3), 61–67. doi:10.1353/wlt.2016.0155.
16. Lee, M. (2019). Freedom and Alienation in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *Modern Korean Fiction Studies*, 18(2), 30–45.
17. Marx, K. (1844). *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Nietzsche, F. (1883–1885). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.
18. Ningtyas, S., & Azzahra, N. A. (2023). The Confrontation of Human-Nature Existence in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. In A. Mustofa et al. (Eds.), *Proceedings of the International Joint Conference on Arts and Humanities 2023 (IJCAH 2023)* (pp. 167– 171). Atlantis Press. doi:10.2991/978-2-38476-152-4_16.
19. Park, J. (2020). The Absurdity of Existence in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *Journal of Existential Literature*, 15(4), 75–90.
20. Patra, P. (2024). The Female Body and Consumerism: An Ecofeminist Reading of *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang and *The Edible Woman* by Margaret Atwood. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*.
21. Plato. (1992). *Republic* (G. M. A. Grube, Trans.). Hackett Publishing.
22. Plato. (1997). *Complete works* (J. M. Cooper & D. S. Hutchinson, Eds.). Hackett Publishing.

23. Ravikesh. (2017). From 'Being' to 'Becoming': A Critical Analysis of Han Kang's Novella *The Vegetarian*. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*, 4(5), 249–255. doi:10.17507/jltr.1304.16.
24. Crowell, S. (2020). Existentialism. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>
25. Sartre, J. P. (1943). *Being and Nothingness*. Gallimard.
26. Sartre, J.-P. (1946). Existentialism is a humanism (P. Mairet, Trans.). Methuen.
27. Vishnu, S. P. (2017). Transcending the Human: Manifestations and Repercussions of Trauma in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *The Literary Herald*, 3(3), 1–6.
28. Zhang, C. (2021). Against Man: Violence and the Vegetal in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. *SFRA Review*, 51(3), 259–263