

Madness and Rebellion: The Construction of Feminine Consciousness in *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract: *The Vegetarian* is the acclaimed work of South Korean author Han Jiang, which explores the complex interplay between the body and consciousness. This paper examines the novel's portrayal of feminine consciousness through an analysis of body writing. Through the protagonist Yinghui's physical transformation and internal struggles, the narrative illuminates the challenges and awakenings faced by women within the confines of family, society, and self-identity. Drawing upon feminist theories, including Helene Cixous's concept of "body writing" and Michel Foucault's theory of power, this paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the bodily imagery, practices, and narratives in the novel. The study reveals how *The Vegetarian* constructs and strengthens feminine consciousness through the depiction of the body, and underscores the novel's pivotal role in the formation and empowerment of female subjectivity.

Keywords: Han Jiang; Body Writing; *The Vegetarian*; Feminine Consciousness

1. Introduction

The Vegetarian is a novel by South Korean author Han Jiang, first published in 2007. The story follows an ordinary woman, Yinghui, who, after experiencing a terrifying nightmare, decides to become a vegetarian. She rejects her "human" identity, perceiving herself as a tree that only needs sunlight and water, refusing all food and human interaction. Through her physical and mental transformation, she seeks to distance herself from the self that others once knew, pursuing liberation in a delirious and tragic manner.

The Vegetarian has had a profound impact,

inspiring numerous scholarly studies. Scholars from Qingdao University have applied psychoanalytic theory to interpret the dream narratives in *The Vegetarian*, revealing the deep-rooted causes of madness and the dilemmas faced by women. Chung has analyzed desire in Han Jiang's *The Vegetarian*, examining the generation, collision, and rejection of desire within the family from various perspectives [1]. Yu Lijun, from an ecofeminist standpoint, has compared Han Jiang's work with Chi Zijian's ecological writing, highlighting the confrontational and disorderly nature of Han Jiang's writing. This paper, focusing on body writing, employs feminist and other critical methodologies to dissect the body writing in *The Vegetarian*, aiming to openly expose the absurd and insatiable desires hidden within human nature, as well as the rebellion against patriarchal society and the construction of Yinghui's unique "plant world".

2. "Behind the Body" — Women Oppressed by Power

Foucault argues that the body is a carefully cultivated instrument within the power structure, stating that "the body is primarily subjected to intervention by power and dominion relations as a force of production"[2]. Modern power leaves its mark on the body through discipline, enabling the fine-tuned control of individuals.

As power expands, the disciplined body collectively submits to authority, facilitating the application of mechanisms within the power network. Yinghui's father, a former soldier, was quick-tempered and often resorted to physical violence against her during childhood, leaving Yinghui perpetually bruised. From an early age, patriarchal violence was inscribed onto her body, leaving

deep psychological scars. On one rainy day in her youth, Yinghui asked her sister, "Can I never go back home?" Her fear was not only of the violence itself but also of the realization that, under patriarchy, men held absolute power, and violence was the tool used to extinguish women's awareness of their own rights. In the helplessness of childhood, women experience fear and numbness through the absolute suppression of male power, ultimately achieving the discipline of women's bodies.

As an adult, Yinghui marries the selfish Mr. Zheng, who chooses her as a wife due to her ordinariness, seeing her merely as a domestic servant, "a machine for washing clothes and cooking". When Yinghui descends into madness, he refuses to take her to a psychologist, instead treating her condition as a personal shame. Mr. Zheng imposes his desires upon her and, when taking her to a corporate dinner, treats her as an accessory to his own image. "After my wife embarrassed me at the banquet, I decided it was time to do something about it"[3]. When she no longer serves a utilitarian purpose, he coldly chooses to divorce her. The perpetrators of power view the discipline of women as entirely reasonable.

The author adopts an unreliable narrative perspective, telling the story through the husband's indifferent tone, subtly revealing the universal nature of women's oppression and the overwhelming force of the power system. Yinghui's brother-in-law, driven by primal male desire, seeks artistic inspiration and almost fanatically violates Yinghui's body. Some scholars, analyzing the situation from an ethical standpoint, argue that Yinghui symbolizes the violent oppression of women in Korean society, perpetuated by enduring patriarchal values. Han Jiang critiques the male-dominated societal norms through the tragic portrayal of a female character, condemning the patriarchal, family-centered system that has led to the long-standing marginalization of women in Korea. She calls for a rejection of violence and urges society to resolve conflicts with sincere communication and mutual understanding, advocating for adherence to ethical order and moral values [4].

In the Oedipus myth, the male character is marked by a desire to kill his father and marry

his mother, and from a physiological perspective, the evolution of human history reveals that men's subconscious possessiveness toward women reflects the relationship between power-wielders and those who endure it. The oppression of women under male-dominated power is both biologically and socially rooted. Yinghui's sister, Renhui, reflects, "Had it not been for my son Zhiyu, I too might have fallen apart like Yinghui." The patriarchal bond of carrying on the family name restricts Renhui's resistance, and her sense of responsibility unwittingly positions her as an unconscious enabler of patriarchal power. This illustrates that the origins of patriarchal oppression are deeply entrenched, and the forces supporting it remain formidable. The path for women to claim power remains long and arduous.

3. "Madness" — A Form of Rebellion Against Patriarchal Society

Yinghui's madness begins with a dream. In this dream, she finds herself in a dark forest, and when she escapes, her body is drenched in blood. She cannot forget the pleasure of chewing raw flesh with her teeth, and faces, both familiar and foreign, are reflected in the blood of the carnivores within the warehouse. Foucault mentions in *Madness and Civilization* that "the dream-like quality of madness was a common view in the classical period" [5]. He cites the *Encyclopedia's* definition of madness as "a deviation from reason, yet with a firm belief that one is following reason".

The dream-like nature of madness lies in its detachment from reality, free from the constraints of objective reality, plunging into an irrational state. However, this irrationality subtly harbors a pursuit of reason within the subconscious. Yinghui's dream reflects the oppression she experiences and her involuntary entanglement in the patriarchal society, symbolizing her sense of helplessness and alienation. Deep within, she longs for equality and peace.

The dark forest in her dream represents the predatory, desire-driven patriarchal society, while the blood symbolizes the suffering of women and other marginalized groups oppressed by patriarchy. In her first dream, the only warmth Yinghui feels comes from the power of the plants. "Suddenly, the forest

became bright, the spring trees lush and green. In front of me appeared a dazzling scene beyond description." In her delusion, she believes she is a tree, drawing nourishment for growth through the natural process of photosynthesis. This reveals that her madness stems from the inspiration of the dream, and the connection between her madness and the dream is profound.

At the same time, both the dream and the madness express a rebellion against and a destruction of the current patriarchal social order. Helene Cixous once proclaimed the slogan "writing the body", stating: "Men are tempted to pursue worldly fame, while women have only their bodies; they are their bodies, and thus, more writing." This writing breaks through the repressed relations of women, and through the release of their primal strength, achieves liberation. Cixous points out that the female body is a tool for escaping the symbolic order, thus becoming an essential metaphor.

The language of women's writing is inherently subversive, disruptive, and illogical. "Blow it up, reverse it, grab it, turn it into your own, embrace it, eat it, bite that tongue with her own teeth, thus creating a language embedded in her own"[6]. This "Androgyny" is prophetic, contained within the male language yet deconstructive. Similarly, Han Jiang in *The Vegetarian* constructs Yinghui's character, using body descriptions to deconstruct the world she faces. Yinghui never wears a bra, and when her husband takes her to a corporate dinner, "those two acorn-like nipples of hers almost burst through her shirt", attracting everyone's gaze. After her descent into madness, the usually compliant Yinghui refuses to have sex with her husband and, in the face of her father's assault, chooses to slit her wrists, using her body as a means of resisting violence. She once reflected, "The only thing I can trust is my chest. I love my breasts, and that makes me content." "Have I become so sharp in order to pierce something?"

This demonstrates her disdain and defiance toward the rules of a patriarchal society. The power of her body reflects the ugliness of male desire, selfishness, and the desperate attempts to conceal it, as well as the authoritative control exerted over the marginalized. Subconsciously, she seeks to

use "bodily defiance" to dismantle the existing patriarchal order. These actions intensify the male violence, putting Yinghui in a vulnerable position.

Yet, she chooses to be a fighter. She must use the body—the "unspeakable" body within the male discourse—to strike at men's primal desires, making her resistance heard and revealing the oppression of women in a patriarchal society. Shi Qi notes that the first chapter of *The Vegetarian* employs the unreliable narrative voices of both Yinghui and her husband to reveal the deep causes of her madness and the thoughts behind it [7]. Yinghui's dream narrative and her acts of madness rely on bodily imagination and bodily actions to resist the patriarchal society and its oppression. Furthermore, the opening chapter deepens the tension of Yinghui's "mad defiance" by using her husband's unreliable narrative, highlighting his selfish and hypocritical nature.

4. "Botanical Imagination" — The Symbol of Constructing a Female Utopia

Yinghui imagines her body as a plant. In the chapter *Tree Fire*, she escapes from a mental hospital into the forest on a rainy day, merging with the wilderness. When her sister Renhui inquires about the reason, Yinghui responds, "In my dream, I was upside down, with leaves growing from my body, roots sprouting from my palms, and it felt as though flowers were about to bloom beneath me." "I no longer need to speak or think. Only by melting into the rain can I be reborn."

Julia Kristeva suggests that the symbols concealed within symbolic language exist on the periphery of the discourse system, representing the heterogeneous parts of language, which carry a deconstructive significance against the symbolic order, much like the position of women in a patriarchal society. Therefore, women's symbols serve to deconstruct the binary oppositions of patriarchy. At the same time, Kristeva believes that the process of gestation helps women understand the meaning of life, breaking the boundaries between subject and object, and internal and external. Yinghui's bodily imagination of herself as a plant resonates with this idea. A patriarchal society, centered around male dominance, is filled with competition and violence, driven by

inflated ambition and the desire for control, much like the predatory animal world symbolized by carnivores. In contrast, the ideal society within a feminist discourse should be peaceful and tranquil, aligned with feminine qualities, especially the ability of women to bear life, a characteristic in harmony with the reproductive processes of nature.

Han Jiang, from a "male-centric" perspective, depicts the extreme destruction of nature and ecology by human civilization, suggesting that the otherness of nature parallels the otherness of women [8]. Deleuze, through his concept of "becoming", dissolves the traditional tendencies of unification and centralization, resisting and escaping from conventional norms, while also serving as a means of self-redemption for the subject. Yinghui's psychological transformation into a plant, however, does not translate to a physical transformation.

Hence, her "becoming" is ultimately a failure, which also hints at the difficult and treacherous path of female self-redemption [9]. Yinghui's dynamic process of becoming a plant, along with her bizarre behavior, mirrors Gregor's transformation in *The Metamorphosis*, stemming from the alienation of social life. This transformation becomes a critique of the mainstream cultural system. The "botanical imagination" is Yinghui's protest against the oppressive patriarchal society and her utopian, symbolic vision.

The entry point for constructing the symbol of a female utopia lies in the writing of the body. Yinghui believes she is an upside-down tree, with the direction of growth symbolizing her genitals. "It felt as though flowers were about to bloom beneath me", which points to the joy she associates with the ideal world, also closely related to bodily writing. When her brother-in-law proposes using Yinghui's body as the basis for a painting, she, in a dazed state, feels neither fear nor dread.

On the contrary, she becomes unusually calm, even feeling a sense of novelty and attachment. "Can I not take a bath? That way, the flowers on my body won't disappear." She believes that by using her body as a medium, she has transformed into a plant, breaking free from the violent constraints of patriarchy and returning to nature, constructing a world symbolized by the body and plants. She even

believes the allure of this world has captivated her brother-in-law. In Han Jiang's other work *The Plant Wife*, the wife transforms into a green plant and disappears freely and comfortably into the city, while Yinghui in *The Vegetarian* can only remain within the realm of botanical fantasy. This starkly reveals the illusory and fragile nature of the female utopia [10].

5. Conclusion

Li Zishu has long transcended the grand narratives "I often contemplate these questions while writing: To what extent can human violence go? How do we define rationality and madness? To what degree can we truly understand others? I hope *The Vegetarian* can answer these questions." Han Jiang, in her speech at the Man Booker International Prize ceremony, candidly acknowledged that she writes with these questions in mind, and this consciousness of inquiry permeates her entire body of work.

The author directly confronts the profound social issues in South Korea regarding the oppression of women and their marginalization in discourse. Through Yinghui's madness, using the medium of bodily writing, she reveals the psychological journey from female oppression to resistance, and ultimately to the construction of a utopian fantasy symbolized by plants. This reflects the widespread hope among women for gender equality and their urgent call for the empowerment of female voices.

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