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Starving into Being: Eating Disorders, Embodied Resistance, and the Psychiatric Imagination in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract

This article examines Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007) through the interdisciplinary lens of the medical humanities, drawing on psychoanalysis and cultural psychiatry to interrogate how the novel represents the boundaries between pathology and protest. I argue that Yeong-hye's refusal of food is not a manifestation of illness but an act of embodied dissent against the patriarchal and psychiatric orders that seek to discipline her. Rather than a descent into madness, her starvation becomes a radical assertion of subjectivity that unsettles the classificatory power of diagnosis itself. Situating the analysis within the *ICD-11* framework for feeding and eating disorders, the study exposes how clinical taxonomies both reflect and obscure cultural assumptions about body, morality, and control in East Asian contexts. A psychoanalytic reading, informed by Lacanian and Kristevan theory, illuminates Yeong-hye's retreat from the Symbolic as a paradoxical gesture of autonomy and purification. A comparative reflection with West African narratives: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path* (2012), and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1989) reveals that hunger, silence, and protest acquire distinct moral and cultural meanings across postcolonial literatures. The article concludes by advancing the concept of literary psychiatry, an interpretive practice that reads the body as a site of ethical testimony, resists reductive clinical labelling, and foregrounds the cultural variability of suffering and resistance.

Key Words: *Han Kang, The Vegetarian, Eating disorders; ICD-11, Literary psychiatry; Medical humanities.*

Introduction

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007), translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2015, has become a global literary phenomenon, earning the 2016 Man Booker International Prize and

stimulating extensive scholarship across feminist, eco-critical, and postcolonial frameworks. Critics such as Sudil Panta and Tara Prasad Adhikari (2025) and Kim Won-Chung (2019) have read the novel as a parable of gendered resistance within the constraints of South Korea's patriarchal modernity, while others, including Cornelia Macsiniuc (2017) and Rincy Chandran and Geetha R. Pai (2017), have explored its intersections with trauma, translation, and the body's symbolic economies. Yet, despite its pervasive concern with madness, hospitalisation, and corporeal refusal, *The Vegetarian* has rarely been read through the interrelated lenses of Literature as a field in Humanities and Psychiatry as a field in Medicine.

This neglect points to a broader critical silence at the intersection of literature and clinical discourse in Asian and postcolonial contexts. While Western frameworks, starting from Hilde Bruch's *The Golden Cage* (1978) to updated feminist psychologies by Malson (2023), have shaped global understandings of anorexia, they insufficiently account for culturally mediated bodily refusals in East Asia. Cross-cultural psychiatric studies, such as those by Lewis-Fernández & Kirmayer (2020), Bazzano et al. (2021), and Garrido & Borges (2023), further reveal that globally applied diagnostic categories can obscure the cultural meanings of suffering.

The dominance of Euro-American diagnostic paradigms has tended to universalise categories such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, marginalising local idioms of distress. As Arthur Kleinman argues in *Writing at the Margin* (1995), psychiatric taxonomies often "erase the moral world of suffering" when applied uncritically across cultures (52). In South Korea, where conformity, family honour, and the body's moral visibility remain central, Yeong-hye's refusal to eat enacts a culturally inflected resistance that exceeds medical containment.

Research Framework

This paper examines *The Vegetarian* as a literary site where psychiatric discourse, cultural morality, and narrative form intersect. Yeong-hye's decision to stop eating, followed by her institutionalisation, force-feeding, and eventual physical disappearance, poses a profound challenge to psychiatric interpretation and feminist allegory alike. Is she "ill," or is her starvation an act of radical refusal that exposes the limits of diagnostic language? Within South Korea's Confucian moral order, where obedience and familial duty are inscribed upon the female body, Han Kang's novel stages an encounter between medical authority and moral agency that unsettles the boundaries between madness and dissent.

The problem addressed here is the relative absence of critical readings that bring psychiatric and literary methodologies into dialogue. Without such engagement, *The Vegetarian* risks being reduced to either a case study in psychopathology or a moral allegory of female victimhood. This paper instead reads Yeong-hye's embodied withdrawal as a form of culturally inflected resistance, one that reveals how medical and moral vocabularies collide in the global circulation of psychiatric discourse.

The article's objectives are threefold: first, to analyse how the novel represents psychiatric and institutional attempts to regulate female subjectivity and corporeality; second, to interpret Yeong-hye's starvation as an act of protest within the classificatory framework of the ICD-11's feeding and eating disorders (World Health Organization, 2022; Lewis-Fernández & Kirmayer, 2020); and third, to situate this reading within comparative and cross-cultural contexts, drawing from West African narratives such as Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, where hunger and silence encode different forms of moral resistance.

The research is grounded in psychoanalytic theory and cultural psychiatry, within the broader field of the medical humanities. Using Freud's concept of melancholia, Kristeva's theory of abjection, and Lacan's notion of the Symbolic, the analysis reads Yeong-hye's self-starvation as both a psychic revolt

and a renunciation of patriarchal law. At the same time, insights from cultural psychiatry foreground how diagnoses are culturally constructed, allowing the paper to trace how the ICD-11's ostensibly universal taxonomies encounter local meanings of illness, shame, and virtue in Korean society.

Methodologically, the paper employs qualitative textual analysis combining close reading, psychoanalytic interpretation, and comparative cultural analysis. *The Vegetarian* is examined not as a clinical symptom but as a literary psychiatry of the imagination, a narrative that dramatises the tensions between diagnosis and desire, order and refusal. Ethically, the discussion treats depictions of self-harm and disordered eating with care, resisting glamorisation and attending to the material realities of suffering that literary form transforms into reflection and critique.

As a result of merging these perspectives, the study contributes to the global conversation in the medical humanities, illuminating how fiction interrogates the language of diagnosis and reveals the cultural conditions under which suffering becomes intelligible. It also extends comparative insight by exploring how the moral economies of East Asia and West Africa differently encode the politics of bodily refusal and the legibility of "madness."

ICD-11, CULTURE, AND THE PSYCHIATRIC CONSTRUCTION OF EATING DISORDERS IN EAST ASIA

The World Health Organization's *International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision* (ICD-11), adopted in 2018 and fully implemented in 2022, represents the most comprehensive global redefinition of feeding and eating disorders to date. Under this system, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa remain the core categories, but the revision expands diagnostic scope to include binge eating disorder and avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID), acknowledging that pathological eating can arise without explicit body-image distortion (WHO, 2022; Garrido & Borges, 2023). Recent global implementation reviews (Lewis-Fernández & Kirmayer, 2020) highlight how diagnostic categories remain shaped by Western assumptions about autonomy, appetite, and the visualised body.

In East Asian clinical contexts, eating disorders often present differently from the Euro-American norm. The earliest comparative studies in Japan, Hong Kong, and Korea noted the absence of the Western "fat phobia" motif and the predominance of somatic idioms, such as loss of appetite, gastric pain, or a general sense of physical blockage, rather than explicit body dissatisfaction (Lee, Ho, and Hsu 1993; Banks 1992). Lee's landmark anthropological research in Hong Kong documented that many anorexic women denied fear of fatness, framing their refusal to eat instead as a reaction to familial control or moral exhaustion (Lee 1995). Similar findings have been reported in South Korea, where restrictive eating behaviours are often embedded in Confucian familial structures emphasising filial piety, self-discipline, and the suppression of personal desire (Kwang-Kuo Hwang, 1999). In such contexts, psychiatric interpretation tends to translate culturally inflected suffering into globally recognized diagnostic categories, thereby re-inscribing Western individualist assumptions onto collectivist moral landscapes.

Diagnosis as Cultural Translation

Within the ICD-11 model, the defining features of anorexia nervosa include "persistent restriction of energy intake," "significant low body weight," and "undue influence of body weight or shape on self-evaluation" (WHO, 2022). This final criterion presumes an interiorised, self-evaluative subject, a Cartesian agent who measures her worth through bodily image. Yet in collectivist cultures, selfhood is more relational and moral than visual or psychological. As the psychiatrist Sing Lee argues, such diagnostic language "overreads self-objectification while underreading moral discipline" (Lee 1995).

The clinical gaze, in its effort to classify, may thus erase the moral and familial economies within which eating refusal becomes meaningful. Contemporary literature reinforces this, emphasising filial obligation, moral discipline, and family pressure as central determinants in South Korean eating disorders (Choi, Choi & Lee, 2020; Moon & Kim, 2021; Hwang & Shin, 2021).

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* stages precisely this tension between the psychiatric and the moral. When Yeong-hye abruptly announces, "I had a dream" (Smith, 14), her husband and family interpret her subsequent vegetarianism not as an expression of personal conviction but as an aberration to be corrected. The narrative's first section, told through her husband's perspective, saturates her refusal with social shame: "So you're saying that from now on, there'll be no meat in this house?" (Smith 19). "Take hold of Yeong-hye's arms, both of you… If she eats it once, she'll eat it again. It's preposterous, everyone eats meat!" (Smith, 44). As Yeong-hye's refusal extends to all food, the response escalates from familial pressure to medical intervention. The hospital scenes evoke the coercive rituals of modern psychiatry: force-feeding, sedation, observation, culminating in the spectacle of a woman's body rendered docile through diagnostic authority.

What *The Vegetarian* reveals is that psychiatric legibility is itself a mechanism of power. The clinicians' impulse to categorise Yeong-hye, i.e., to identify anorexia, psychosis, or schizoid tendencies, enacts what Michel Foucault, in *Madness and Civilization* (1961), described as the "medical confinement of reason's other." Diagnosis performs the dual function of care and control, rescuing the patient while reaffirming institutional authority. Yet the novel simultaneously exposes how this gaze falters in the face of symbolic and cultural difference. Yeong-hye's starvation cannot be contained within the ICD-11's descriptive parameters because it is not simply about food or the body. It is an existential and ethical refusal of the human order itself.

The Korean Moral Body and the Pathology of Obedience

In Korean society, the body has historically been regarded as a site of moral inscription and filial duty. Confucian ethics emphasise the inherited nature of the body: "Our body, hair, and skin are received from our parents; we must not injure them" (Confucius, *Xiaojing*). As Haejoang Cho (1998) and Nancy Abelmann (2003) demonstrate, this moral framework persists in modern Korean life, where female virtue is often measured through self-discipline, modesty, and service to family. "In any other case, it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as mine had done" (Smith, 20). Within this cultural logic, Yeong-hye's withdrawal from eating constitutes a profound act of disobedience, not only to patriarchal norms but to the filial duty inscribed in the flesh. Her vegetarianism, initially ridiculed as eccentricity, soon becomes an ethical scandal. The father's violent act of forcing meat into her mouth (Smith, 42 - 46) functions as both familial correction and ritual punishment, an assertion of the moral order's supremacy over the individual will.

Korean psychiatric studies corroborate the novel's portrayal of familial involvement in the management of mental illness. Park, Kim, and Chung (2016) found that families often interpret psychiatric symptoms as moral failures or social burdens, leading to concealment or coercive treatment. In such contexts, hospitalisation may serve as an extension of familial authority rather than its contradiction. This dynamic is vividly dramatized in *The Vegetarian*, where Yeong-hye's institutionalisation merely relocates the mechanisms of control from the household to the clinic.

Cultural Psychiatry and the Semiotics of Refusal

Cultural psychiatry provides a vocabulary for understanding such phenomena. Arthur Kleinman's theory of the "illness narrative" distinguishes between *disease* (the biomedical category) and *illness*

(the lived experience shaped by culture and morality) (Kleinman 1988). From this perspective, Yeong-hye's self-starvation is not a disease to be diagnosed but an illness narrative, an embodied protest articulated through the moral language available to her. In the absence of social or linguistic space for dissent, the body becomes her medium of resistance.

The ICD-11, in its pursuit of global standardization, aspires to a culturally sensitive nosology. Yet, as Laurence Kirmayer (2006) notes, even "culturally flexible" diagnostic systems risk "reifying Western ontologies of self and illness" (130). The act of naming: of translating Yeong-hye's starvation into anorexia nervosa, ARFID, or psychotic disorder, is itself a moral act that asserts interpretive dominance. Literature, however, offers an alternative epistemology. By refusing to resolve Yeong-hye's condition into a single cause, Han Kang exposes the instability of psychiatric meaning. Her protagonist's transformation into vegetal life stages what Elaine Showalter (1985) might call "the female malady" turned inside out: the hysterical body no longer demands attention through speech or excess but through silence and disappearance.

The Limits of Diagnostic Visibility

The ethical stakes of diagnosis are evident in the novel's hospital scenes, where Yeong-hye's emaciated body becomes both spectacle and object of intervention. Her psychiatrist notes "a persistent refusal to eat," diagnosing her with "anorexia nervosa" (Smith, 144). Yet the narrative undermines this label by immersing the reader in Yeong-hye's dreamscapes: images of blood, trees, and animal slaughter that evoke not vanity but metaphysical disgust. Her desire to become a tree is not delusional in the conventional sense; it represents an ontological migration away from violence. In the logic of the ICD-11, such imagery would signify psychosis (schizophrenia); in literary and cultural logic, which she was also diagnosed with (Smith, 144). It then becomes a language of ecological and moral transcendence.

This slippage between clinical and symbolic registers exemplifies what Angela Woods and Anne Whitehead (2016) call the "critical medical humanities", a mode of inquiry that reads illness as a site of meaning rather than as mere dysfunction. In this light, *The Vegetarian* performs a critique of psychiatry's epistemic violence: the reduction of suffering to a symptom. The psychiatric gaze, motivated by care, inadvertently reproduces the very coercion Yeong-hye resists. Her starvation, then, is both symptom and critique, an act that exposes how diagnostic authority depends on cultural intelligibility.

By staging the collision between the ICD-11's classificatory logic and Korea's moral order, *The Vegetarian* dramatizes the cultural construction of psychiatric knowledge. Yeong-hye's refusal to eat resists both familial discipline and diagnostic containment. When read through the lenses of cultural psychiatry and psychoanalytic theory, her anorexia becomes a symbolic rebellion against the "pathology of obedience" that structures Korean modernity.

This analysis invites a reconsideration of how we read eating disorders in non-Western contexts. Rather than searching for universal symptoms, scholars and clinicians alike must attend to the local moral worlds (Kleinman 1995) that give suffering its shape. Literature, by amplifying these worlds, performs the interpretive labour that psychiatry often elides. In Yeong-hye's starving body, Han Kang writes not a case study but a critique of diagnosis itself, a narrative that compels us to rethink what it means to name, to cure, and to understand.

PSYCHOANALYTIC READINGS: ANOREXIA, DESIRE, AND THE REFUSAL OF THE SYMBOLIC ORDER

The psychoanalytic tradition, particularly the writings of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, offers an interpretive vocabulary for understanding the body not as a biological entity alone but as a site where

social law, desire, and language converge. In *The Vegetarian* (Hogarth trans., 2015), Yeong-hye's anorectic withdrawal can be read not as an individual pathology but as a radical refusal of the Symbolic Order, the network of familial, linguistic, and cultural demands that inscribe meaning onto the body. Her self-starvation, silence, and fantasy of vegetal becoming mark a psychic revolt against both patriarchal domestication and the psychiatric mechanisms that seek to restore her to normative functionality.

Lacan's theory of desire posits that the subject's identity is produced through the mediation of the Other, the locus of social and linguistic law (Lacan, *Écrits* 1966). To refuse food, in this sense, is to halt the circulation of symbolic exchange, nourishment, dialogue, and social compliance that structures family and culture. Yeong-hye's husband narrates early on,

> '… I had a dream.' Her voice was surprisingly clear. (pp.14)
> The barn in the dark woods…the long bamboo stick strung with great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down. (pp.18)

The clarity of her voice, coupled with her refusal to elaborate, marks the emergence of an alternate discourse, one that rejects symbolic articulation. Yeong-hye offers no elaboration; the dream is a private symptom, impermeable to her husband's rationalisations. The grotesque dream-image of the barn and the endless meat establishes the source of her aversion as traumatic and imagistic rather than as a culturally legible concern about weight or beauty. The husband's reaction: bemusement turned outrage, signals the first move to classify her refusal as a problem to be solved rather than a communicative act. This framing is central: the family's immediate impulse is to repair her 'deviation' through persuasion, coercion, and eventual medicalization (her institutionalization shows how private refusal becomes a public problem). The dream of "great blood-red gashes of meat" (10) also constitutes what Lacan would call an eruption of the Real, something that resists symbolisation. Her revulsion toward meat is not reducible to dietary ethics; it is an attempt to escape the social grammar of consumption and violence that underlies domestic order.

Kristeva's concept of abjection deepens this reading. In *Powers of Horror* (1980), Kristeva defines the abject as that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (4). The abject is expelled to preserve the integrity of the self. Yeong-hye's refusal of meat renders her body abject in her family's eyes. She becomes improper, unclean, irrational. Her father's attempt to force-feed her,

> Her father...tried to shove a piece of sweet-and-sour pork down his daughter's throat...Yeong-hye broke away, spat out the pork, an animal cry of distress burst from her lips, she grabbed a fruit knife, and slashed her wrist. (pp.46)

The intervention scene reveals violence within domestic 'care'. The father's attempt to force-feed Yeong-hye literalises the psychiatric imperative to reconstitute the body as productive and compliant. Force-feeding here enacted by family, not just clinicians, reveals an ethics of restoration that tolerates bodily injury in the name of normalcy. Critically, the episode demonstrates how the family's desire to 'fix' the body precedes any clinical diagnosis; pathology is produced through coercive attempts to restore the social order. Kristeva's dynamic of abjection and return is revealed here, where the paternal figure enacts the law of the Symbolic (forcing the daughter to ingest the norm), while Yeong-hye's self-harm transforms her body into a site of abject resistance. The cut becomes speech; what cannot be articulated in language is inscribed in flesh. Yeong-hye's self-harm becomes a speech (both a refusal and a communicative escalation) that suggests how, when words fail, the body 'speaks' by producing an unmistakable crisis.

As Susan Bordo notes in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993), eating disorders often materialize as "protests against the limitations and demands of femininity" (185). In this context, Yeong-hye's emaciation enacts a similar rebellion within a Korean domestic and Confucian moral order that prizes filial obedience and bodily propriety (Kim 2014). Yet her protest exceeds Western feminist frameworks: her rejection of the human itself. She wanted to be a tree; she wanted to be a plant (p. 159).

> In-hye recalled how Yeong-hye had looked when she'd been standing on her hands. Had Yeong-hye mistaken the hospital's concrete floor for the soft earth of the woods? Had her body metamorphosed into a sturdy trunk, with white roots sprouting from her hands and clutching the black soil? Had her legs stretched high up into the air while her arms extended all the way down to the earth's very core, her back stretched taut to support this two-pronged spurt of growth? As the sun's rays soaked down through Yeong-hye's body, had the water that was saturating the soil been drawn up through her cells, eventually to bloom from her crotch as flowers? (p.173)

Yeong-hye's vegetal metaphors shift the semiotic register away from the human social world into a different ontology. To aspire to plantness is to refuse the economy of bodily exchange (feeding, labour, sexual availability) that undergirds patriarchal domestic life. The sister's later reflection, seeing the trees as 'protesting': "none of the trees would accept her," (pp.172), introduces a tragic ecology of refusal: even nature resists complete assimilation.

At this juncture, feminist and posthumanist thinkers help us move beyond the classical psychoanalytic framework. Cressida Heyes (2015) reconceives anorexia as a phenomenological politics rather than a mere symptom: a negotiation of subjectivity within biopolitical regimes that demand constant self-management. Yeong-hye's withdrawal can thus be read as a refusal of neoliberal and patriarchal self-regulation alike; a negation of what Heyes calls "the disciplinary formation of the normal body." Similarly, Emma O'Donoghue (2020) interprets hunger as a "language of refusal" through which women articulate resistance to imposed narratives of care and containment. Yeong-hye's silence and wasting body perform precisely such a refusal; they unsettle the presumption that recovery is inherently virtuous.

The vegetal turn of Yeong-hye's imagination resonates with Rosi Braidotti's posthumanism, where becoming-other (animal, vegetal, machinic) signals an ethics of transformation beyond anthropocentric boundaries (*The Posthuman* 2013). Yeong-hye's fantasy of photosynthetic existence echoes Braidotti's notion of "zoe-centred egalitarianism," in which life is distributed across species and forms. Her "becoming-plant" rejects not only patriarchal consumption but also the very ontology that underpins the psychiatric desire to restore the human subject. Stacy Alaimo's concept of *trans-corporeality* (*Bodily Natures* 2010) further illuminates this ecology: Yeong-hye's imagined rootedness demonstrates how bodies are porous to material and environmental forces. In this sense, her metamorphosis is not self-annihilation but a radical permeability; a fusion with the non-human world that exposes the limits of the clinic's humanist logic.

Lacan's notion of the Name-of-the-Father, which is the symbolic authority that enforces social law, further illuminates the family intervention scene. The father's violence at the dinner table exemplifies the patriarchal return of this function: he seeks to reinstate order through coercion. The daughter's resistance destabilises this symbolic structure, revealing the fragility of paternal law. Her subsequent institutionalisation extends this paternal logic into psychiatry's bureaucratic apparatus. "We'd tried on

numerous occasions to get some gruel into Yeong-hye by inserting a long tube into her nose, but this had always ended in failure" (p. 153 - 156). The nurse's phrasing failure attributed to the patient shows how clinical discourse constructs refusal as pathology. The hospital scenes show the medicalization of refusal: nasogastric tubes, monitoring, and the threat of surgical intervention convert Yeong-hye's refusal into a problem of bodily maintenance. The language of 'failure', the tube 'had always ended in failure as Yeong-hye had', recasts agency as pathological resistance. The novel allows us to see medical technologies as instruments of power that, while nominally therapeutic, function also as modalities of force. The return of such scenes in narrative memory underscores the traumatic imprint of medical coercion. As Michel Foucault argued in *Madness and Civilization* (1961), the asylum transforms dissent into diagnosis; the medical gaze both observes and disciplines. Yeong-hye's body thus becomes a contested text through which medical, familial, and literary discourses struggle for interpretive authority.

The vegetal metaphors that dominate the novel's final part "The trees by the side of the road are blazing, green fire… As if protesting against something" (p. 182), signal a move from individual symptom to cosmic allegory. In-hye's observation reframes Yeong-hye's suffering as an ecological witness, a "protest" that exceeds the human frame. In Jeffrey J. Cohen's terms, this is a "material ecology" in which human and nonhuman bodies interpenetrate (*Prismatic Ecology*, 2013). Yeong-hye's becoming-plant rejects anthropocentrism and reframes anorexia not as disappearance but as a new form of presence, what Braidotti calls "vital materiality."

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Yeong-hye's anorexia operates as a refusal of incorporation, literal and symbolic. Yet her gesture also exposes the violence inherent in the social command to be healthy, normal, and productive. The novel's clinical and familial scenes reproduce what Elaine Showalter termed "the female malady" (Showalter 1985): the cultural inscription of women's suffering as madness. But Kang's narrative resists that closure. The text neither romanticizes Yeong-hye's starvation nor resolves it into recovery; instead, it leaves the reader in a suspended state of ethical discomfort. As such, *The Vegetarian* dramatizes the limits of both psychoanalysis and psychiatry when faced with a body that refuses to signify on their terms.

COMPARATIVE STUDY: WEST AFRICAN TEXTS AND LITERARY SILENCES ON DISORDERED EATING

To situate Yeong-hye's self-starvation in a broader comparative frame, I turn to West African literature, where hunger is a recurring metaphor but usually coded as collective, political, or moral rather than psychiatric. In the canon of West African fiction like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), food, scarcity, and appetite are almost always entangled with colonial violence, gendered subjection, or nationalist struggle. The particular idiom of voluntary food refusal as a private psychic protest, so central to *The Vegetarian*, is comparatively rare. This absence itself is diagnostic: it reflects differing epistemologies of the body and illness, shaped by communal moral economies rather than by psychiatric individualism.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, hunger is collective, not chosen. The Biafran war transforms food into a weapon of siege; starvation becomes a political instrument rather than an act of defiance. As Florence Stratton observes, Adichie's war narrative "transfers the politics of hunger from the domestic to the national" (Stratton 2011, 46). Ugwu and Olanna's experiences of deprivation dramatise the body's entanglement with a collapsing social order, not with individual pathology. The emaciated bodies in Adichie's novel, therefore, index the violence of history rather than an inward rebellion of the self. The pathology of

compliance that marks Yeong-hye's psychiatric milieu has no direct analogue in Adichie's wartime landscape, where survival rather than refusal defines the moral economy of hunger.

Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path* (2012) approaches the body through the trauma of sexual violence and cultural silence. Kilanko's protagonist, Morayo, experiences her body as a site of contamination and shame, echoing feminist readings of silence as a strategy of endurance rather than agency (Okuyade 2013). Food, in this narrative, functions symbolically: eating and appetite index emotional recovery and communal acceptance. Yet, as in Han Kang's text, the female body becomes the register through which moral discipline and trauma are expressed. The difference is epistemic. Whereas Yeong-hye's refusal enters a psychiatric order that names and contains her as "anorexic," Morayo's bodily symptoms are mediated by kinship, spirituality, and storytelling, domains where pain is socialised and reabsorbed rather than clinically isolated.

A further contrast emerges in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1989 English trans., Heinemann), an epistolary novella that redefines feminine refusal through writing rather than through the body. Ramatoulaye, the narrator, responds to her husband's polygamous remarriage not by starving or self-harm but by cultivating silence, seclusion, and ultimately narrative articulation. As Obioma Nnaemeka notes, Ba's women "transform silence into a discourse of moral protest" (Nnaemeka 1997, 13). The ethical act is textual rather than somatic; the letter becomes a substitute for the body, carrying the trace of suffering without performing it through self-destruction. In this sense, Ramatoulaye's epistolary voice enacts what could be called a *discursive anorexia* i.e. a refusal to participate in social rituals that demand self-effacement, yet one articulated through moral literacy instead of pathology.

Placed beside *The Vegetarian*, these West African texts reveal what we might call different moral grammars of refusal. Yeong-hye's starvation is deeply private, legible within an urban, psychiatric infrastructure that prizes autonomy and control. Ramatoulaye's silence and Morayo's embodied trauma, by contrast, emerge within communal and relational frameworks that conceive distress as shared and morally mediated. Where Yeong-hye's body becomes a clinical object, Ramatoulaye's letter and Morayo's healing remain embedded in narrative and community. Both forms of dissent challenge patriarchal order, but their semiotic currencies differ: the clinical versus the ethical, the pathological versus the testimonial.

This comparison also illuminates how psychiatric modernity, the cultural regime that renders "anorexia nervosa" a diagnostic entity, depends on specific institutional infrastructures. In East Asian and Western contexts, the body is medicalised through psychiatric discourse and the clinic's gaze. In much of West African fiction, by contrast, hunger is situated within the collective field of economic precarity, spirituality, or postcolonial governance. As Emmanuel Obiechina (1993) argued in his study of African realism, African novels typically "transpose suffering into the social world, where redemption must also be sought." The locus of meaning thus shifts: where Yeong-hye's anorexia symbolises a revolt against the Symbolic order of patriarchy and medicine, Ramatoulaye's and Morayo's refusals are mediated through moral and communal codes.

The comparative point is therefore threefold. First, the psychiatric modernity that produces eating disorders as clinical objects is largely a feature of societies where diagnostic infrastructures and individualist subjectivities dominate. Second, West African literary traditions render hunger primarily as a collective and ethical condition rather than as a personal pathology; voluntary starvation as protest is rare because suffering is interpreted through communal and spiritual frameworks. Third, the juxtaposition of these literatures destabilises universalising psychiatric categories, revealing how cultural infrastructures of meaning shape the legibility of bodily refusal. Yeong-hye's starvation, while resonant with global feminist themes, is thus culturally specific, rooted in South Korea's psychomedical

modernity, even as it invites a broader humanistic reflection on embodiment, resistance, and the limits of psychiatric reason.

CONCLUSION

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* compels readers to inhabit the uneasy threshold between pathology and protest. Yeong-hye's refusal of food, read through psychoanalytic and cultural psychiatric frameworks, exposes the violence embedded in the desire to render the body legible to medicine. Her starvation is neither an allegory of aesthetic control nor a simple descent into illness; it is a form of embodied resistance that contests the familial, cultural, and clinical imperatives that seek to restore her to normative life. The novel's quiet radicalism lies in this insistence that the body can speak in languages the clinic cannot translate.

By situating *The Vegetarian* within the field of medical humanities and extending the analysis comparatively to West African texts, this study has shown how cultural infrastructures shape the meanings of hunger and refusal. In Adichie, Kilanko, and Ba, hunger and silence emerge not as psychiatric symptoms but as ethical and communal idioms through which women negotiate constraint. The contrast underscores that anorexia, as a diagnostic entity, is not a universal category of distress but a culturally contingent expression of suffering tied to specific histories of psychiatric modernity.

Taken together, these readings point to the need for what might be called a literary psychiatry, a mode of criticism that listens to the body's symbolic utterances without collapsing them into clinical nomenclature. Such an approach resists the reductive closure of diagnosis and reclaims the literary text as a space where suffering, subjectivity, and protest intersect. Reading across regions (East Asia to West Africa) reminds us that bodies do not only suffer; they also signify, remembering what institutions would forget.

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