

An Analysis of Subjectivity in *The Vegetarian* Under Foucault's Power Theory

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Abstract

The *Vegetarian* is an excellent novel of the South Korean female writer Han Kang, which wins the Man Booker International Prize of 2016. The novel profoundly explores the depth of humanity and the predicaments and struggling of individuals in modern society. Foucault's power theory well elaborates the connection between power, knowledge and discourse as well as how individuals are disciplined by complex power relations to lose their subjectivity in society. This paper will base on Foucault's power theory and focus on the analysis of subjectivity of three important characters in *The Vegetarian*: Yeong-hye, In-hye and In-hye's husband, trying to explain how they are disciplined by the rational and patriarchal discourse to be obedient and how they bravely resist to liberate their subjectivity.

Keywords

The *Vegetarian*, Foucault, Power and Discourse, Subjectivity.

1. Introduction

Han Kang (1970-) is an important and influential female writer of contemporary South Korean literature. Her most well-known and praised novel is *The Vegetarian* (2015), translated from Korean by the British translator Deborah Smith (1987-), winning the Man Booker International Prize in 2016 and therefore making Han Kang the first Asian writer to gain this award.

The Vegetarian is a novel exploring deep into the darker side of humanity, including its indifference, prejudice and brutality. It tells a story about an ordinary and even marginal Korean female Yeong-hye who suddenly refuses to eat meat after her dreadful nightmares and finally stops eating anything except water to live like a tree. Yeong-hye is the subject of *The Vegetarian*, but not its protagonist or even quite its main character, since her voice is rarely heard and her speech rarely present. However, it can not be neglected that her actions speak louder than words.

Among the three chapters of the novel, named "The Vegetarian", "Mongolian Mark" and "Flaming Trees" in sequence, the narration of each respectively focuses on Yeong-hye's husband Mr Cheong, her brother-in law who is the husband of her sister and her sister In-hye. The first chapter of the novel is mainly based on the unreliable narrator Mr Cheong, through whose stubborn and prejudiced eyes his wife Yeong-hye is a completely unremarkable woman in every way, with her normal face and unattractive body which is not feminine enough. Cheong is almost satisfied with his ordinary and repetitive life as an employee in a small company and with Yeong-hye cooking for him and taking care of his life, until one day she stops in a rather decisive way not to eat any meat. Since then, he gradually becomes impatient with Yeong-hye's weird behavior and indifferently watches her receiving intense doubt, misunderstanding and even violence from her family and other people around. Later Cheong divorces her and she is diagnosed with schizophrenia and anorexia to rest at home alone.

The second chapter “Mongolian Mark” is focused on Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law, In-hye’s husband, whose name has not been mentioned in the novel. Earning no money for the family and failing to be a well-known successful artist, he is a marginal person in both family and society. However, due to his unexpected hearing of Yeong-hye’s birthmark on her buttock, he becomes crazily sexually attracted to her, though he knows he may be against social ethics. He is so obsessed with Yeong-hye’s body that he finally makes it to have sexual intercourse with her, which is found out by his wife directly. The price he pays is being abandoned by his original marriage and drifting alone.

The third chapter “Flaming Trees” is narrated through the bigger sister In-hye’s perspective. After she gets divorced with her husband, she carries even more burden on her shoulder than before, raising her little son Ji-woo alone, taking care of Yeong-hye who has been sent to an asylum, running her own cosmetics store and undertaking all the gossip and judgement from around. As time passes by and she gradually gets older, she starts to think carefully of her past life—the choices she has made and the responsibilities and pressure she has taken. Also, she sees Yeong-hye’s resolute resistance towards being a “normal” human in this society. Through her continuous reflection, she finally empathizes with Yeong-hye and starts chasing her own answer of resistance.

Han Kang’s novel *The Vegetarian* depicts a vivid picture of modern society where people lost their subjectivity in life and find it so hard to escape from that situation. No matter Yeong-hye, In-hye or In-hye’s husband, they are all victims of their situations and they make different decisions as their resistance.

2. Foucault’s Power Theory

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is arguably the most influential French writer and thinker of the second half of the twentieth century. During his academic career, he is keen on the power study and delivers unique power theory with his genealogical approach and archaeological method. He argues that power exists in relations and power entangles with knowledge and discourse. In his opinion, power is everywhere and man cannot escape from its complex relations that make up the whole society. His theories have profound and enduring impact upon different schools of humanities and social sciences. Remarkably, his disciplinary power theory and views of discourse power are widely applied to literary criticism.

In Foucault’s later work *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, he gives a unique definition of power. “Power traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression” (Foucault, 1978: 119). Different from traditional notions of power, power is, according to Foucault, not repressive but productive. Foucault thinks that the power is the kind of force relation existing in multiple webs. Power functions in a network of relations from top to bottom, and also from bottom to top and laterally. For him, the power has no subject, entity and it is decentralized, local and in constant mobility. Power should be analyzed in terms of forces and strategies used in those relations of networks. An important part of Foucault’s power theory is disciplinary power and its techniques.

Notably, Foucault puts forward his disciplinary power theory in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. According to Foucault, discipline refers to “the methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility” (Foucault, 1995: 137). There are three disciplinary techniques that can combine to achieve such results. The first technique is hierarchical observation. It means that every individual in a disciplinary community, is under pyramidal observation of its superiors. People who are seen will change from subjects to

objects due to the observation mechanism that is manifested by power's gaze. The ideal model of observation is Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, which enables the observation to be constant, functional and effective. The second technique is normalizing judgment, which aims to distinguish and measure the behaviors of individuals according to norms and rank them. It is different from judicial penalty and can achieve a constraint of conformity. This technique is commonly implemented in factories and schools. Examination is the third technique of disciplinary power that combines the hierarchical observation with normalizing judgment. "It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them." (Foucault, 1995: 184) The three techniques can ensure the effective exercise of disciplinary power.

Besides, as for the practical effects of the operation of disciplinary power, the object of discipline power not only suffers from physical pains, but also experiences the deprivation of power and freedom. "The chief function of disciplinary power is to 'train', in order to levy and select all the more. Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of power that regards individuals as both objects and instruments of its exercise" (Foucault, 1995: 170). In other words, power is exercised to discipline the object's body and mind so as to normalize them until they become subordinated and submissive.

The disciplinary power also manipulates knowledge and discourse to increase its effects. In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* and some parts of *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault discloses the mutual relation between power and knowledge. Knowledge is produced by power and power mainly affects the development of knowledge by generating research objects and research methods. While knowledge, as the basic means of intervention and control of power upon society, plays the role of normalization and legitimization of the system by the name of "truth". "It is a double process, then; an epistemological "thaw" through a refinement of power relations; a multiplication of the effects of power through the formation and accumulation of new forms of knowledge" (Foucault, 1980: 224). Power can manipulate knowledge to be involved into the game of truth. Foucault questions that the distinction between truth and fallacy is the result of a whole set of mandatory institutional operations, and it is often violent. Furthermore, the truth is produced by power, and it naturally consolidates the power system on which it produces with its own scientific nature and authority.

In addition to knowledge, discourse is also related to power. According to Foucault, discourse refers to "a group of statements that belong to a single system of formation." (Foucault, 1972: 123) "Discourses are composed of signs, but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this 'more' that renders them irreducible to the language and the speech. It is this 'more' that we must reveal and describe" (Foucault, 1972: 54).

He also argues that "the relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated or implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse." (Foucault, 1980: 93) Foucault further asserts that the power and discourse should be treated as an organic body. Power is closely associated with the discourse to the degree that the power can truly achieve its effect through the vital medium of discourse. Power influences and controls discourse. In turn, discourse exerts impacts on power both negatively and positively.

In light of Foucault's view, the conception of discourse belongs to the category of constructive discourse, and human beings can even construct subjects or selves and various systems including history, power and civilization. Therefore, the owner of discourse power can construct victory, history and rationality. The owner can also label the opposed discourse as "the other", keep it silent, and transform it for its own use.

Foucault's power theory can be used to analyze the different situations of three important characters in *The Vegetarian*: Yeong-hye, In-hye and In-hye's husband. They all receive the

discipline of patriarchal discourse and rational discourse in society and become docile and submissive. However, in order to reconstruct their own subjectivity, they make different moves as resistance.

3. Discipline of Power and Loss of Subjectivity

According to Foucault, disciplinary power is a new type of power, which mingles with knowledge and discourse manipulation and aims to achieve such effects as dominance, manipulation and normalization. Therefore, individuals in modern society will unconsciously become objects of power/knowledge system and different discourses to be normalized as docile and submissive subjects, which have lost their subjectivities. In *The Vegetarian*, many power relations exist and affect one another, among which the most significant ones are the discipline of the patriarchal society and social rationality.

3.1. Discipline of Patriarchal Society

In the narration of *The Vegetarian*, each character suffers from different kinds of power relations of the patriarchal society, which make them docile, submissive and later alienated and lost. This chapter will mainly focus on the two female characters of the novel: Yeong-hye and In-hye and try to analyze how they are affected by power and discourse and gradually lose their subjectivity.

Firstly, Yeong-hye, the focus of the whole novel, is one of the most direct victims of the brutality and arbitrariness of patriarchal society. Since she was born, she has long been living under her father's dominant discourse. When she leaves her family and gets married, she is subjected to her husband, another man. From her ill-tempered father to her hypocrisy husband, Yeong-hye never has choices but to act as subordination to their lives.

Yeong-hye's father has once been in the Vietnam War and is a man who is both bad-tempered and with strong-fixed opinions. As the eldest male member in the family, he takes the highest power position than all the others. Therefore, his wife, described as always exhausted by In-hye, should listen to his orders without any complaints as well as taking the responsibility of taking care of his daily life, like cooking, cleaning for him and satisfying his sexual needs. Also, he uses his overbearing attitude and violence to make all his children bow to his authority, especially his daughters. For example, he slaps both the sisters in the face when he is angry and whips Yeong-hye's calves until she is eighteen years old. Therefore, his discourse is the only valid discourse in the family, and Yeong-hye never has her right to question that and speak out for herself. Yeong-hye's discourse is the abandoned "other".

Being the second daughter of the family, neither can Yeong-hye clever like her elder sister In-hye to watch her father's behavior carefully and do as he wishes, nor does she relieve her suppressed feelings from her father through imposing violence on others like her younger brother Yeong-ho. As a result, Yeong-hye is the only one in the family who absorbs all the suffering inside and silently takes everything, which leads to her alienation and later resistance.

Apart from Yeong-hye's father, her husband Cheong is another person who utilizes patriarchal discourse to take control of her. According to the first-person narration of Cheong in the first chapter of the novel, it is clear that he only sees the practical value of Yeong-hye as a wife, including preparing breakfast for him every day, ironing his shirts before he goes to work and unconditionally satisfying his sexual desire. When Yeong-hye begins having dreadful nightmares and stops eating any meat, he doesn't have any patience to hear her explanations and feelings. Instead, he only gets irritated because she fails to attend to him well as before. Just like Yeong-hye's father, Cheong's indifference and overbearingness keep Yeong-hye silent again and losing her power of discourse.

In-hye, Yeong-hye's elder sister, is another female in *The Vegetarian* that is deeply affected by the patriarchal society. Different from Yeong-hye's passive acceptance, In-hye seems to intentionally cater to all the demands upon her from the family and society. Not only does she endure her father's overbearingness and violence and help her mother serve him, but she also always keeps considerate to her husband no matter what happens. She regards her sacrifices to her father and husband as necessary and a right thing to do, which is actually the "truth" created by the patriarchal discourse. Foucault (1978: 145) once writes that: "Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it." When In-hye is convinced of the "truth" of the patriarchal society, she is already disciplined and becomes docile objects of power, losing her subjectivity.

3.2. Discipline of Social Rationality

Foucault believes that reason and irrationality are always intertwined: they depend on each other in communication, and communication separates them, so the insane and the rational are estranged from each other.

In modern society, power/knowledge system creates the contrary concepts of reason and irrationality and continuously elaborates and differentiates them. The rational discourse is constantly reinforced to maintain the stability of society, while the irrational one is repressed and even eliminated. Therefore, people in modern society, who are used to the "training" and discipline of the rational discourse, cannot bear the appearance of the heterodox objects that are different from the dominant rational discourse. In order to release their tension and anxiety, they spare no effort to restrict the irrational and even use violence to kill it.

In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's sudden decision to be an extreme vegetarian arouses uneasiness in everyone around her. Her husband Cheong is the first one to resist her change but his irritation and indifference cannot turn Yeong-hye back. In addition, at Cheong's company dinner, people at the table show their sarcastic manner towards Yeong-hye for being vegetarian. Moreover, all of Yeong-hye's family members try to persuade her to eat meat again, including her mother, her sister In-hye and brother Yeong-ho. When all these approaches fail, people of rational discourse even resort to violence to stop the "irrational". Finally at the family dinner, with the help of Cheong and Yeong-ho controlling Yeong-hye, her father tries to violently thrust the pork into her mouth, which causes Yeong-hye to cut her wrist as an intense resistance. As a conclusion, all people of the rational discourse don't accept Yeong-hye's different behavior as a vegetarian, and in order to defend the dominant position of rationality, they work together to "kill" her.

As Foucault said, wherever there is madness, there are asylums and prisons, and the mad and the mentally ill must face diagnosis or treatment, and the fate of madness is to be expelled or persecuted. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye is later diagnosed as schizophrenia and sent to an asylum to be taken care of. However, the treatment there doesn't make her any better but instead put her into even more dangerous situations. Under the rational discourse of treatment by the asylum is actually confinement, isolation and medication. What's more, when Yeong-hye chooses not to eat anything but water, the doctors and nurses forcibly inject food into her body, which causes her gastric bleeding. Therefore, the dominance of rational discourse equals the violent and brutal suppression of madness. Under such a society of rationality, it is difficult for people to maintain their self-consciousness, and their spiritual world is controlled by the mechanism of power in society, restricted to the predicament of losing self-subjectivity.

4. The Liberation of Subjectivity

According to the analysis above, the characters in *The Vegetarian* are disciplined by complex power relations and deprived of their power of discourse. However, there is still hope for them to regain their subjectivity. As Foucault said, "Where there is power, there is resistance." Some characters in the novel are not totally obedient and instead, they bravely resist against the disciplinary power they receive in different ways. In this chapter, the analysis will focus on the disciplined characters Yeong-hye, In-hye's husband and In-hye and explain at length how they try their best to escape from the power network and regain their subjectivity.

4.1. Yeong-hye: Liberation Through Madness

Yeong-hye is without doubt the most important character of the whole novel, not only for she suffers the cruelest treatment of people from the dominant discourse, but also for she makes the most intense resistance back.

Yeong-hye's first act of resistance is not wearing bras. Bra's basic role is to help support and protect women's breasts, but its structure can also serve as repression and bondage to women's comfort. However, in the patriarchal society, bra is also regarded as a tool to make women decent and attractive to men, which makes bra not a choice but a must for female. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye chooses not to wear a bra for her own comfort, not for pleasing any man, which is her resistance to the power of patriarchal discourse.

Yeong-hye's another resistance is not eating meat. Meat means brutal killing of animals. In a long history, human beings hunt animals or feed them for their meat. Their long-lasting habit of eating meat makes them easily forget the cruel part of it, which is human's hegemony over other animals in nature. Yeong-hye is at the same passive position as the animals under humans' control, since she is also restricted in the patriarchal discourse to be an obedient daughter and wife. She stops eating meat to be in line with the animals and emphasizes with them.

Yeong-hye's resistance reaches its peak when she finally refuses to eat anything except water in order to be a tree herself at the asylum. She doesn't even want to hurt other plants and wishes to be like a tree who just need the nourishment of sunshine and water. Yeong-hye is undoubtedly regarded as mad for her behavior and gains no understanding for herself. However, she is so determined to get rid of the all the dominant discourses and discipline on her that she even risks her life to resist them. It is a pity that only when Yeong-hye chooses not to live as a human can she escape from the ubiquitous power relations forever.

4.2. In-hye's Husband: Liberation Through Sex

In-hye's husband is the focus of narration of the second chapter of *The Vegetarian*, but his name is never mentioned in it. As a male artist who earns no money for his family but mostly depends on his wife, he also suffers from the whipping of dominant patriarchal discourse. He is always busy and fruitless, messy and slovenly and with a sensitive and proud heart of an artist. In a patriarchal society where men are supposed to be financially successful, rational and mature, he has low sense of value and satisfaction, gradually expelled by the main discourse.

In-hye's husband liberates his subjectivity through sex. According to his story in *The Vegetarian*, when he hears In-hye mentioning the light green birthmark on Yeong-hye's buttock, he suddenly gets inspired and desires to record a video of Yeong-hye and him, both naked and painted with beautiful flowers, naturally having sexual intercourse with each other. Different from Yeong-hye's ex-husband Cheong, he can discover much beauty in Yeong-hye's slim body, her face with no desire as well as her peaceful and silent attitude. His lust for Yeong-hye grows so strong that he decides to make his wish come true. When Yeong-hye peacefully agrees with his suggestion to record the video, he is both surprised and delighted. Finally, he gets himself

and Yeong-hye painted with colorful flowers on their naked body and has a thoroughly enjoying sex with his sister-in-law, Yeong-hye, which is well recorded by him.

Under the rational discourse of society, sex is often considered as an intimate thing, which is not often directly recorded as art to appreciate. Also, having sex with sister-in-law is behavior that is against the ethics, which is also not tolerated by rational society. So tired of restricting himself to the discipline of both rational and patriarchal society, In-hye's husband tries to create his own art regardless of the breach of ethics and breaking of his own family.

4.3. In-hye: Liberation Through Reflection

In-hye is the main character of the last chapter of the novel which mainly narrates a story of the last time she visits Yeong-hye in the asylum. During her visit, In-hye frequently has flashbacks to her past time with her families, her husband and Yeong-hye, which makes her question many things in life which she used to regard as common and right. Her consciousness of resistance is awakened when she can finally empathize with her sister Yeong-hye on the discipline they receive together in the patriarchal society. In-hye tries to seek her way of resistance and regain her liberation of subjectivity through reflection.

When thinking of her father and husband, In-hye asks herself why she is always so obedient to them and bears with their behaviors even though she does not agree with them. Only then does she realize that her submission to them is not due to her wisdom but her cowardice of thinking and speaking for herself. She constricts herself to the discipline of patriarchal discourse to be a filial and sensible daughter and beautiful and considerable wife, neglecting her own wishes and demand.

In-hye also reconsiders her treatment to her sister Yeong-hye. Deeply affected by the "truth" produced by the power/knowledge system of rational society, In-hye acts as an accomplice of the rational discourse to force Yeong-hye to eat meat through her constant persuasion. It is also In-hye who sends Yeong-hye to the confinement and mandatory medication of the asylum. Her muting Yeong-hye's marginal discourse is also neglect of her own suppressed discourse. When she finally divorces her husband and has more time to think alone, she realizes her permanent lack of sense of existence since she has lost her subjectivity for long. She finally empathizes with Yeong-hye and tries to seek her own resistance to the rational and patriarchal discourse of society, regaining her autonomy for herself as a subject.

5. Summary

The Vegetarian is a Man Booker International Prize-winning work of Han Kang which well explores the depth of humanity and the predicaments and struggling of people in modern society. Under Foucault's power theory, each individual in the novel fails to escape the discipline of complex power relations in society. This paper mainly focuses on the analysis of subjectivity of three important characters: Yeong-hye, In-hye and In-hye's husband, exploring how they lose their subjectivity under the rational and patriarchal discourse and their different ways of resistance to regain their subjectivity. As a conclusion, the novel is written to alert readers to the discipline of ubiquitous power relations of modern society and also encourage them to stay calm and awake to bravely fight for their subjectivity.

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