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Resistance Across Different Scales: The Nation in Han Kang's *Human Acts* and *the Household in The Vegetarian**

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In South Korea, returning to a military dictatorship seems well-charged, like a heap of dry tinder waiting for a spark. Yoon Suk-Yeol's martial law declaration on the night of December 3, 2024, could have been the spark, but it was quickly overturned by the National Assembly, not surviving over six hours. Though the martial law imposition was soon botched, people would mostly see it as the latest echo of the global right-shift trend or skepticism toward neoliberal capitalism. Since the 1980s, capital-oriented neoliberalism has been the dominant political force in the globe. It has spread from the West to democratize and modernize non-Western economies. As critics would argue, this process of Westernization resulted in a prolonged persistence of Western conservative principles, especially following the leadership of Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK (Fosci 49). Yet, as early as in the late 2010s, this Westernizing process has met some resistance, including neo-authoritarian regimes or various forms of national protectionism. Both can be taken as a response against neoliberal capitalism because such a West-centric impact has threatened the existence of many regional diversities and political autonomy.

In South Korea, the resistance against neoliberal capitalism is embodied as reinforcement of national interest. As the ruling party at that time, the pro-PPP (People Power Party) populace of South Korea argue that the martial law imposition is to jump on the bandwagon of moving toward

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the right for the purpose of strengthening national protectionism, either against Westernization or the Communist force of North Korea. However, this defense does not offset Yoon's attempted self-coup that brings forth the questionable authoritarian mindset of the leadership of South Korea and its potentially eroding democracy. Major South Korean newspapers, such as *Hankyoreh*, *JoongAng Daily*, and *Yonhap*, claimed that Yoon's plan could be traced back months earlier in the same year, suggesting that the rise of authoritarianism cannot be easily dismissed as a random interference with democracy, but a thoughtful scheme. Fortunately, with several probes into Yoon's insurrection charges in place over the past six months, we can see how resilient the public has been. Nevertheless, it can be ironic to witness the coming of a pro-Yoon documentary (expected to release in February of 2025) defending Yoon's martial law imposition.[1] Despite this pro-conservative documentary, it was announced on June 3 that Lee Jae-myung, the candidate of the liberal Democratic Party, was elected as a new president of South Korea.

Amid this political turmoil that has potentially evoked dark memories of the country's past military regimes, a South Korean novelist, Han Kang, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. The announcement recognizing Han Kang's achievement was made on October 10, 2024, with the formal presentation of the honor taking place two months later, on December 10, 2024. Though the announcement predates Yoon's martial law imposition by two months, the two events are closely related in time. This temporal proximity juxtaposes the celebration of Han Kang's literary excellence with South Korean political crises, creating a striking, albeit unintended, contrast. However contrasting the two events may appear, I argue that the political background of South Korea plays an important role in understanding Han Kang's literature. Another way to put it is that the ongoing political crises in South Korea actually emerge as a rich tapestry or a source of creativity for Han Kang to produce award-winning literature.

All in all, Han Kang's award represents the power of literature to resist violence, particularly in how she illuminates "the fragility of human life" while articulating "historical traumas" (Han *Facts*). In her speech, Han

[1] See also the newspaper "Documentary Defending Yoon's Martial Law Decree Coming in February" (https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2025-01-31/national/socialAffairs/Documentary-defending-Yoons-martial-law-decree-coming-in-February/2232757).

Kang also emphasizes that her writings aim to uncover the meaning of life by delving into the intricate depths of the human mind, and together aiming to stand resolutely against violence (*Banquet Speech*). More broadly, her writings seek warmth and light amid widespread violence, often symbolized as darkness and bleakness in her narratives (*Nobel Prize Lecture* 3; 5). However, as she notes, these symbols also establish continuity between past and present, ensuring that past violence should never be forgotten (*Nobel Prize Lecture* 5). Therefore, her literature stands as an everlasting critical lens for reevaluating socio-political issues and, meanwhile, maintains a hopeful perspective on actual tragedies (Ways 25-26).

Han Kang's novel *Human Acts* clearly exemplifies this commitment to serve as a critical reflection of socio-political issues. As a work of historical realism originally published in Korean in 2014 and translated by Deborah Smith into English in 2017, the novel offers a literary chronicle of the historical and emotional scars endured by the families of victims of the Gwangju Uprising in 1980. Specifically, the novel portrays the era of military dictatorship under Chun Doo-hwan and the subsequent waves of civilian unrest and militia-led protests (Han, *Human Acts* 78; 115; 187). Though Yoon's self-coup failed, seemingly rendering *Human Acts* less relatable, the novel's vivid depiction of state violence and unjust treatment of the innocent citizens remains a poignant, unwavering reminder of the traumatic histories of South Korea, specifically by carrying allegorical messages to warn the public against contemporary political concerns.

This reminder takes wing after Han Kang wins the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Nobel honor not only amplifies Han Kang's literary voice, but also brings global attention to South Korea's complex histories. With such an honor, many aspects of the South Korean historical and social issues are found to resonate with the rest of the world. Hence, Door Ways argues that the depiction of human violence and political cruelty in *Human Acts* transcends the confines of South Korea's historical events, speaking instead to universal aspects of human condition (Ways 20). In short, *Human Acts* is believed to address universal human conditions despite its South Korean setting, and to achieve that, the novel blends historical realism with imaginative elements, such as multiple narratives and a non-linear time structure, to make the storytelling more engaging than a mere collection of dry historical facts.

The narrative and temporal structure of *Human Acts* is experimental, besides being historical and semi-autobiographical. It opens with the perspective of a 15-year-old boy, Dong-ho, who catalogs corpses in the aftermath of state-driven violence. Han Kang deliberately contrasts such a relatively naïve narrator against the hegemony and military violence of the country. The following chapter shifts to a second-person perspective, narrated by the souls of civilian corpses. These souls are described as "shadows," newly departed from the corpses but remaining in a liminal state between "wakefulness" and "consciousness" due to their unrestful deaths (Han, *Human Acts* 49; 55-56). These shadows' interactions expose the nation's brutality: "Every time our shadow-boundaries brushed against each other, an echo of some appalling suffering was transmitted to me like an electric shock" (*Human Acts* 62). Their voices also pose rhetorical questions about human cruelty: "Is it true that human beings are fundamentally cruel? Is the experience of cruelty the only thing we share as a species?" (*Human Acts* 133).

Rather than openly criticizing state violence, Han Kang threads these grieving statements together to prompt a poetic meditation on the subject. Then, the souls' narratives fluctuate between present conversations—the ones that take place during the uprising with regard to how innocent citizens, regardless of their age, are murdered by the internationally-banned "lead bullets"—as well as past childhood memories—the ones where the victims' daily, household activities are unfolded (*Human Acts* 203). The alternating narratives and temporalities highlight the victims' enduring traumas. In other words, the novel characterizes these perspectival shifts, instead of directly depicting the horrors, to reveal the inescapability of these tragedies as if one should be haunted by traumas even after death. Ironically, the dead are honored with "the national anthem" to make them "something more than butchered lumps of meat," while the "Taegukgi" (the national flag) hangs among their coffins as if to deny they were killed by soldiers and the nation itself (*Human Acts* 171; 17, emphasis removed). Such a sarcastic tone can be a very effective literary strategy to enhance readers' empathetic involvement.

However, the causes of South Korea's militarism are often underdiscussed in the existing criticisms. The country's militarism is believed to stem from its nationalism, one that is deeply rooted in Confucianism, Buddhism, and the Tangun myth. As Seungsook Moon also explains, the traditional South Korean ideology primarily stems from

Confucianism, whose subtext is androcentric and is often adopted to justify the military and patriarchal regimes of the country until the 1980s (Moon 35; 50). Besides, the Tangun myth that prioritizes manhood over womanhood and the Buddhist transcendence that prioritizes collectivism over individualism are another two ingredients that contribute to South Korea's militarist nationalism (40-41; 48).[2] The Japanese occupation of South Korea from 1910 to 1945 is yet another colonial history that reinforces South Korean nationalism. Together, these ideological pillars reflect a nuanced difference against the political and cultural ideologies of the West. From this perspective, we can infer that the histories of South Korea do not necessarily offer a universal account of human violence. The experience can be exclusively South Korean instead. Therefore, what Han Kang depicts in *Human Acts*, emphasizing the androcentrically military background of the country, should not be entirely understood as a universal condition.

Moreover, South Korea's nationalism was largely legitimized by Park Chung Hee. As a South Korean politician and president during the postwar period, he resorted to authoritative means to modernize the country. His political reforms also included a sentiment of anti-Japanism and anti-Communism of North Korea despite his underlying emphasis on militarism and values of Confucian hierarchy. Specifically, the difference against the West lies in South Korea's restoration of tradition for the sake of national protectionism, though one may interpret this kind of nationalism as implicitly militaristic. Yet, as viewed from the histories of South Korea, the historical violence leading Han Kang to write about the Gwangju Uprising can be specifically concerned with the South Korean context, despite some beliefs speculating that she does not intend to paint a picture of the South Korean society because cruelty can be universal as if carved into the human genes (Way 34).

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[2] Hwanung, the son of the sky god Hwanin, descends to Earth and tasks a tiger and a bear with remaining in a cave for one hundred days to become human. Only the bear succeeds and transforms into a woman who gives birth to Tangun. This transformation of the bear into a woman symbolizes sacrifice and suffering, often regarded as the foundational symbol of women. The bear-woman's role, as Moon argues, represents a prototype of a nationalist womb which underscores her contribution to the creation of the nation (41). Tangun later becomes the king of Gojoseon and emerges as a symbol of national identity. Overall, this myth reflects how Korean nationhood, specifically in the South Korean context, is rooted in a gender hierarchy or a kind of "a patriarchal strategy" (42).

While *Human Acts* deals with violence on the scale of a nation, the scale of violence shrinks to a domestic level in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. Han Kang published *The Vegetarian* in South Korea in 2007 and initially wrote it in Korean. Deborah Smith's translation of the novel into English in 2015 played a significant role in helping the author win the Man Booker International Prize in 2016, and to this day, the novel has been translated into over thirty-two languages worldwide.[3] This novel features Yeong-hye, a female protagonist whose silence and conscious bodily metamorphosis into a plant symbolize her resistance against a patriarchal household. Unlike *Human Acts*, which is rooted in historical incidents, *The Vegetarian* is fictional and speculative, appearing to lack a solid historical context. That being said, some may argue that the protagonist's bodily transformation only carries metaphoric significance or is a product of the protagonist's delusion, which makes it academically difficult to justify her resistance against patriarchy through her arborealization into a tree.

Its earlier vision, "The Fruit of My Woman" published in 1997, by contrast, does depict a literal morphing of a woman into a fruit tree that bears fruit for her husband. Han Kang explicitly states that *The Vegetarian* retains several "formal elements" from its earlier version (28). In fact, the two works are thematically connected, in spite of the fact that the tone of *The Vegetarian* is darker and more agonizing than its predecessor (29; 36). Yet, the textual connection between them can support the interpretation of the trope in *The Vegetarian*. Collectively, the trope of a female

[3] Given the worldwide translation of Han Kang's books, it remains a controversial topic. In general, the translation of South Korean literature is criticized for potentially recolonizing South Korea and undermining its nationalism (Godley 194; 198). However, Door Ways argues that these translations actually help raise global recognition of South Korean literature and draw attention to the country's violent histories (Ways 20-21). Han Kang herself also believes that the translation of her writings does not diminish the value of the original texts (Ways 30). Other references that analyze Deborah Smith's suspected mistranslation of the original works, regarding stylistic and semantic alteration, and a distortion of South Korean culture, include Charse Yun's "How the Bestseller *The Vegetarian*, translated from Han Kang's Original, Caused an Uproar in South Korea" in *Los Angeles Times*, Jiayang Fan's "Han Kang and the Complexity of Translation" in *New Yorker*, Claire Armitstead's "Lost in (Mis)translation? English Take on Korean Novel Has Critiques up in Arms" in *The Guardian*, Wook-Dong Kim's "The 'Creative' English Translation of *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang," and Kyongjo Woo's "A Comparative Analysis of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and its Translation from the Perspective of Ecofeminist Themes: Focusing on Transitivity and Appraisal Analysis within the Systemic Functional Grammar Theory."

metamorphosis critiques Western masculinity and, more precisely, the Confucian patriarchy ingrained within the traditional South Korean family structures (Moon 51). Speaking of Confucian influences, critics also emphasize the ancient Chinese value of group harmony, where collectivism takes precedence over individualism, in their interpretations of *The Vegetarian* (Ways 44). Therefore, Yeong-hye's transformation is to challenge these ideologies that violently marginalize females. For this, Han Kang raises open-ended questions aiming to explore the paradox of becoming a plant: "Can a person ever be completely innocent? To what depths can we reject violence? What happens to one who refuses to belong to the species called human?" (Han, *Nobel Prize Lecture* 2-3).

One of the prominent discussions about *The Vegetarian* is whether the protagonist chooses to transform into a plant or if she is forced to perform such a bodily transformation. In "Radical Act and Political Withdrawal in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*," Sulistya Ningtyas argues in favor of the idea that the protagonist's action is triggered by her deliberate consideration (81). Yet, whether Yeong-hye's seemingly surreal arborealization represents a self-redemptive and wishful journey should remain a paradox. In the novel, the depiction of Yeong-hye's rejection of meat and any forms of nutrients, including water, serves as a critique of "human brutality" or, namely, a "world of mingled violence and beauty," a perspective aligned with Han Kang's philosophy in creative writing (Han, *Vegetarian* 153; Patrick np). As a result of the female protagonist's dietary choice, her body is reduced to a "skeletal frame of an invalid" (Han, *Vegetarian* 18). Though she eventually transforms into a "mutant animal that had evolved to be able to photosynthesize," she experiences a slow death toward the end of the novel simply because she does not contain "the chloroplast" to produce nutrients like other plants (Han, *Vegetarian* 91; Ningtyas 82). Given the textual evidence, Yeong-hye's process of bodily metamorphosis results in starvation and corporeal death, raising doubts about whether her alternative existence beyond the human form can free her from the constraints of patriarchy.

However, beyond a literal interpretation, Yeong-hye's refusal of sustenance leads to her *liberative* transformation into a plant. On the one hand, in *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction*, Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari argue that the literary trope of becoming a tree may cater to male fantasies (174). This motif operates within a broader context of reinforcing the biopolitical control and domestication of female bodies

and their subjectivities. To loosen our grip on this dilemma, we might need to positively analyze Yeong-hye's ultimate death at the end of the story. Rather than fulfilling male projections by transforming into a vegetal existence, she is instead taken away by an ambulance to an unknown destination (Han, *Vegetarian* 180-81). The ambulance—not a hearse indeed—can symbolize a trace of hope for Yeong-hye, albeit being an uncertain one. In other words, there is a chance of salvation where she might presume her vegetal existence while maintaining her vital signs on a corporeal level.

In addition to the debate on Yeong-hye's struggle either as liberative or captive, a psychological perspective is another common interpretative angle to interpret the significance of her metamorphosis. Some interpretations view Yeong-hye's abstention from nutrients as a sign of mental illness, suggesting that she will be catapulted into another abyss of illness, whereas most other critics would interpret this phenomenon as a successful, albeit impulsive, escape from patriarchal exploitation (Casey 354; Zolkos 102; 105; Biscaia 111). Nevertheless, we should not approach Yeong-hye's condition from a psychological point of view, as this will reintroduce the idea of phallogocentrism privileging masculinity in the production of meanings. This viewpoint is also echoed by Caitlin E. Stobie, Daniel Marchalik, Ann Jurecic, and Jharna Chowdhury (Stobie 795; Marchalik and Jurecic 147; Chowdhury 2-3). Nor should we understand the negotiation between Yeong-hye's vegetal becoming and the non-vegetal world as a set of easily-opposable dichotomy, for this view will simplify the complex relation between the two. Instead, in the process of becoming, Yeong-hye's physical state is gradually decomposed into "biochemical matter[s]" that will blend into "the soil" to nurture other "vegetal life" like "trees" (Casey 350). This perspective brings forth a profound transspecies connection between Yeong-hye and the natural world, powerfully challenging a more reserved view that fails to perceive the potential of her metamorphosis, namely, relating to the question of whether the trope of metamorphosis can confront traditional societal constructs. In brief, Yeong-hye's metamorphosis can be non-liberating if judged from a psychological and realist point of view, but it can be fully liberating if judged from an ecocritical and materialist perspective that prioritizes the eco-ability of Yeong-hye's organism.

Since becoming a plant is related to a transspecies connection, several critics also adopt an ecofeminist interpretation of *The Vegetarian*.

Conventionally, female bodies are objectified by being situated closer to nature, as evidenced by Lynda Birke's *(Un)Stable Relations: Horses, Humans and Social Agency* and Nancy Tuana's *Racial Climates, Ecological Indifference: An Ecointersectional Analysis*. Their works show how the traditional Western thinking regards female bodies as biologically determined, further entrenching females' marginalization and exploitation by dominant forces. Interestingly, Yeong-hye bears an inexplicable Mongolian mark, described as "something ancient" and "pre-evolutionary," and with this mark, she is rendered "more vegetal" (Han, *Vegetarian* 83). On the surface, this bodily mark seems to endorse the traditional Western thinking of aligning females with nature, and her metamorphosis into a plant can be considered a metaphor following this tradition. However, as Lee Myung Ho observes, Yeong-hye's bodily mark suggests a kind of "remnants of vegetability in human body" (112). In other words, rather than employing an empirical or humanistic lens that highlights the fundamental distinction between humans and plants, I argue for the interconnectedness between them. The human corporeality can be reimagined not as a self-enclosed entity but as a medium that reconnects itself to the natural world, as readily exemplified by Yeong-hye's status. With this, Han Kang seems to advocate for the ethics of an ecological perspective, revealing a new "life system" as a radical critique of human-centered modes of existence that prioritize destroying other lives rather than reconnecting them (103-5). That the body can be a site of conceptual conflicts resonates with contemporary discussions on identity, autonomy, and gender politics, and it is to argue that Yeong-hye's morphing into a vegetal body is to position herself outside or against patriarchal constructs and to escape the societal responsibilities put on her.

To conclude, the military regimes of South Korea and the patriarchal oppression of women play a crucial framework for Han Kang's literature. While much emphasis is placed on the global resonance of her books, I argue that the context is specifically rooted in South Korean history and culture. Han Kang explores the historical backdrop of the Gwangju Uprising in *Human Acts*, which utilizes historical realism, and employs the surreal metamorphosis in *The Vegetarian*. More importantly, it marks a historically significant moment in the androcentric histories of South Korea to witness a female writer like Han Kang, who takes on the mission of portraying her country's histories on a global stage. Her efforts to confront socio-political realities have inspired resistance both within South Korea and beyond, which eventually culminates in her receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature.

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