

Research Article

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Radical Act and Political Withdrawal in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract

The multi-interpreted narrative of Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* is developed on an allegory. In this study, the allegory is seen as the meaning of freedom where the subject chooses to resist social intervention through the radical Act and political withdrawal — two main practices of action in the Žižek study. This study aims to examine the practices of action demonstrated by the protagonist that resulted from her childhood trauma. By applying Žižek's theory of radical politics, the results of the study revealed the radical Act of being a vegetarian taken by the main character as her criticism of the violent environment. Further, the subject's political withdrawal from living as a normal human indicates that she has gone beyond the radical Act. Even though the subject collapses in her effort to transform to become a tree, her courage to start taking this action in the first place confirms that she has value as an authentic subject.

Keywords: vegetarian; trauma; Žižek study; radical Act; political withdrawal; *The Vegetarian*

1. Introduction

Issues of environmental degradation remain the world's most critical problem. Cases on this topic are indeed considered a global crisis that has entered a state of emergency [1]. This all happens in the Anthropocene, an era in which human activities are increasingly having a significant impact on organic communities on Earth [2], [3]. Climate change [4], [5], pollution [6], [7], deforestation [8], [9], erosion [10], [11], and contamination [12], [13] are all examples of major environmental damage due to anthropogenic practices. The problems that affect water, air, and soil resources are still a challenging task, not only for environmentalists but all residents of the globe. Moreover, the development of industrialization and urbanization in a relatively fast period also leaves various kinds of problems that require sustainable solutions [14]. Apart from the international community's concern about these deteriorations, the protracted disastrous effects are still closely interconnected to the lives of the community.

A number of schemes and movements for preserving nature in a sustainable manner without over-exploitation were then put forward as a response to the impacts on the environment [15], [16]. One form of criticism on the issue of environmental degradation is widely raised in literary works, one of which is in the novel *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang [17]. More than a story about a woman who chooses to be vegetarian, later also vegan, many literary critics find this work multi-interpreted because the narrative is built from an allegory. The main character — with her recurring nightmares of human cruelty, whose life principles make her labelled as insane, and who has a strange desire to transform into a tree — indicates various psychological aspects that can be examined more deeply.

The lead character of this novel, Yeong-hye, has the potential to carry out a radical action (the radical Act, to use Žižek's term) which is a revolutionary act that is contrary to the requirement of social order in society [18]. Furthermore, when she refuses to do anything and only wants water, sunlight, and wind, like plants to survive, she also has the potential to carry out the political withdrawal. In Žižek's study, this form of refusal to take action is considered an action that is free from the dominant ideology controlling the subject [19].

Fundamentally, Žižek introduces three alternative practices of action that the subject most likely takes: (1) "the Bartleby politics," also commonly known as political withdrawal, where the subject prefers not to take any particular action at all; (2) "radical violent Act", where the subject performs a radical action; and (3) coexistence with "local pragmatic interventions" [18, p. 398]. While the third one keeps the subject to be restricted under symbolic control, the other two practices of action make the subject go beyond their symbolic order, achieving absolute freedom as an authentic subject. Based on this framework, Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* can be interpreted as an allegory about the meaning of freedom in which the subject prefers to resist social intervention through the radical Act and political withdrawal.

The two practices of action mentioned above have never received special attention from previous researchers of this particular literary work. Based on a thorough investigation of studies on *The Vegetarian* that have been conducted by earlier researchers, the scope of research is limited to ecocriticism [20], [21], ecofeminism [22], feminism [23], [24], translation study [25], [26], and specifically, feminist translation study [27], [28]. Some scholars who assessed the work from the psychoanalysis framework did not specifically assess the radical Act and political withdrawal. A study by George & Sunitha [29] examined ecopsychology in this novel by drawing on the relationship between the language of the soul and the natural environment. The results of the study indicated that the relationship appears in the narrative of the main character who decides to become a vegetarian as the influence of the people around her. Still from psychoanalytical thinking, Marchalik & Jurecic [30] view the work by underlining the mental illness suffered by the main character. The researchers focus on how emotions and anxieties are expressed by the male and female characters in the novel. Further, they question us as the readers to critically think about who is mentally ill in the novel — whether the answer is really the main character or the others around the main characters who are, in some ways, inhuman.

Another way to describe Han's main character is stated by Arostegui [31] where he sees posthumanism in the main character's self-consciousness and -unconsciousness.

Despite the abundance of research on Han's *The Vegetarian*, there is a paucity of research on the psychoanalytic approach, particularly to see the work from Žižekian theory. Therefore, a study of the radical Act and political withdrawal on *The Vegetarian* is considered a research opportunity that presents novelty. The present study also examines the background of the protagonist's trauma by linking the analysis to an eco-critical framework of thinking. Environmental criticism delivered by the author of the novel is a considerable input in the midst of the worsening environmental degradation crisis in our era which is crucial for in-depth research.

2. Radical Act: The Protagonist's Radical Confrontation to Become a Vegetarian

The Vegetarian is a narrative of protagonist Yeong-hye Kim, a young married woman living her plain life in contemporary South Korea, whose traumatic incident that happened in her childhood drive her to withdraw from her social environment. It is started with a dream — a traumatic childhood memory to be exact — which is strongly related to the cruelty of her father murdering their family dog in an extremely inhuman way. Back then in her early years, the nine-year-old Yeong-hye was bitten by the dog, leading her father to chain it in his motorcycle to death. Ironically, they have a feast of the same dog later that evening. Even though what they did sounds heartless and disgusting to some people, they believe in a saying that reads that “for a wound caused by a dog-bite to heal you have to eat that same dog” [17, p. 49]. Practically, Yeong-hye ate an entire bowlful despite her remembrance of the dog's two sad eyes watching her hours earlier. This trauma haunts her in her recurrent dreams, which apparently leads her to make a radical decision to stop consuming meat, which is one of the most important foodstuffs in Korean dishes. On top of that, the protagonist's vegetarianism has altered her entire life, keeping her away from her relationship with her husband, her family, and even society.

Fundamentally, Žižek (who also agrees with Butler) believes that the subject is unknowingly enslaved to the symbolic and social order into which they were born [32]. The subject is given an identity by the order that distinguishes them from other subjects. In this case, Yeong-hye has also labelled a South Korean woman, living her regular life in a controlled social order that requires her to perform family chores. There is, however, a disruptive tendency where the subject can withdraw from their natural circle. The attempt places the subject in a position of radical potential, allowing for new possibilities to emerge. The subject's drive is stronger than their biological life and it is stronger than the pleasure principle. By the impulse that Lacan drew from Freud's concept of the death drive, the subject is then created. As revealed by Yeong-hye, the death drive within herself also leads her to another course of action.

The main character's extreme step to submit to *The Vegetarianism* notion clearly indicates the radical Act in Žižekian's view. As the contemporary Slovenian philosopher

Žižek argued, the subject is always in a position where reality is inconsistent at both the individual and societal levels [32], [33]. At the individual level, the subject is always in the realm of their subconscious fantasy. Meanwhile, at the societal level, the subject is always in the realm of ideological fantasy which makes reality always distorted by a certain way of thinking. To use Lacan's term, the barred Other, this inconsistency also generates the barred subject. The subject is constantly in a state of lack so they will continue to try to fill the void by seeking the Real, which is anti-symbolic. Against the backdrop of the inconsistent reality, Žižek suggested that the ruling symbolic order will not be able to continuously shackle the subject through ideological interpellation. However, there are negative dimensions that provide a way for the subject to withdraw themselves because the subject is "1) a dynamic gesture, 2) a contractive force, and 3) a kind of madness" [34]. The nature of the subject can lead them to the freedom of subjectivity [35], where the subject has the potential to release the shackles of their social environment [36], as demonstrated by Yeong-hye.

Through her writing, Han illustrates how Yeong-hye's nightmarish dreams deeply influence her approach to life. A horrible collection of images of dark woods, a gloomy barn, a family picnic in the strangest way, especially a lump of meat, and a mess of blood — blood in her mouth, hands, and clothes — all troubles the ordinary life of Yeong-hye. Described as dull and ordinary, even her husband, Mr Cheong, initially considers Yeong-hye an "unremarkable" woman [17, p. 11]. However, things changed completely when the dreams appear; so real and familiar for as long as she could remember:

Dreams of murder.

"Murderer or murdered... hazy distinctions, boundaries wearing thin. Familiarity bleeds into strangeness, certainty becomes impossible. Only violence is vivid enough to stick. A sound, the elasticity of the instant when the metal struck the victim's head... the shadow that crumpled and fell gleams cold in the darkness." [17, p. 35].

Yeong-hye's occurring dreams of animal torture trigger her sensitivity so that she is truly concerned with the natural world where she lives. It eventually brings her to a decision to non-consumption of meat, which eventually leads her to a higher level by giving up milk, egg, and any other animal by-products. In fact, her adherence to vegetarianism idea does not only influence herself but also her husband, the only person she lives with in the apartment. With the change in the food items on the menu, Mr Cheong is impacted as he is forced indirectly to follow the new dietary plan. Firstly, Yeong-hye throws away all products of animal origin out of her refrigerator — there shouldn't even be any more animal-based stuff in the entire house. She does not actually care that she wasted away the money from her husband to buy all the food ingredients. Later, she even complains about "the meat smell" of her husband's body [17, p. 24].

"This is unbelievable. You're telling me not to eat meat?"

"I couldn't let those things stay in the fridge. It wouldn't be right."

How on earth could she be so self-centered? I stared at her lowered eyes, her expression of cool self-possession. The very idea that there should be this other side to her, one where she selfishly did as she pleased, was astonishing. Who would have thought she could be so unreasonable?

[...]

As far as I was concerned, the only reasonable grounds for altering one's eating habits were the desire to lose weight, an attempt to alleviate certain physical ailments, being possessed by an evil spirit, or having your sleep disturbed by indigestion. In any other case, it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as mine had done. [17, p. 21-22]

Not only is Yeong-hye becoming increasingly strange to her husband, but her vegetarianism has also become a rebellion against her husband's pre-established masculine dominance in the household. In a marriage institution that is based on patriarchal values, this is a violation of the prevailing norms. Traditionally, gender hierarchy has become more obvious in the life of contemporary Koreans, especially due to the impact of official nationalism [37]. Korean history and tradition have even constructed the androcentric system that supports economic development through their military regimes. The ideology has far-reaching implications for community life, particularly on family law and factory labour exploitation. The former indicates that men subordinate women in the institutions of marriage and patrilineal kinship, whereas the latter harms women in terms of low wages, long working hours, and stereotypes of feminine passivity. In this regard, official nationalism (also known as state nationalism), against the backdrop of industrialization, subtly establishes a male-dominated society that puts women as a marginalized group. Although women's movements challenged gender issues in the 1970s and 1980s, the patrilineal culture remains persistent [38].

Historically, Korean values are deeply rooted in Confucianism [37]. According to this philosophy, ideal women should behave by following particular rules. They are not supposed to break those standards; otherwise, they will decrease the value within themselves and the entity as a whole. Referring to Confucian social relations, South Korean culture considers that it is normal for men to play a more important role in the household. The societal structure follows the patriarchal tradition which subordinates the female group in quality of learning, career, and parent responsibilities. With the role of men who are designated as the founders of the nation in nationalist discourse, women are mandated to remain in domestic responsibilities. Even more, it is considered a vice for women to construct their own identities. As a form of resistance to this culture, Yeong-hye uses her body as a means of symbolic representation of defiance to the typical South Korean pressures. From this moment forward, the average woman Yeong-hye has demonstrated a radical confrontation towards her surrounding with something non-ideological.

In Confucian approaches, there are several norms to follow for becoming a decent woman that greatly influence the woman's relationship with the men around her. Before marriage, a woman is expected to obey her father. Then, her spouse takes a larger role after marriage. When she becomes widowed, however, she must follow her sons [39]. This also

largely happens to Yeong-hye. Living in a gendered world controlled by her father, husband, and brother-in-law, Yeong-hye has to face the double burden to be her own being. There's an obvious attempt from these particular three subjects that tend to discipline her body. The ultimate goal is to construct an image of an ideal woman within herself. This is reflected in her husband's attitude, who insists on her wearing makeup and behaving normally in front of his boss. His father, a Vietnam veteran, is known for his harsh personality. He does not even hesitate to commit acts of violence to make her daughter do what he wants. Meanwhile, his brother-in-law, in a more subtle way, who actually does a more heinous crime, makes her the object of his desire. However, within the control of the domination, Yeong-hye fights them all with her vegetarianism ideology.

“Enough!” my father-in-law yelled. “You, Yeong-hye! After all I told you, your own father!”

This outburst was followed by In-hye's roundly rebuking my wife. “Do you truly intend to go on like this? Human beings need certain nutrients...if you intend to follow a vegetarian diet you should sit down and draw up a proper, well-balanced meal plan. Just look at your face!”

[...]

“Father, I don't eat meat.”

In an instant, his flat palm cleaved the empty space. My wife cupped her cheek in her hand.

“Father!” In-hye cried out, grabbing his arm. His lips twitched as though his agitation had not yet passed off. I'd known of his incredibly violent temperament for some time, but it was the first time I'd directly witnessed him striking someone. [17, p. 43-46]

Yeong-hye's refusal breaks her relationship with the social order and enters the abyss of subjectivity where all the realities faced by the subject can be radically questioned. From this point, all the possibilities that arise will form the revolutionary Act. Yeong-hye's form of resistance to her father forcing her to eat meat is by carrying out a suicide attempt. When she does the radical Act, she also disassociates herself from every symbolic identification attached to her. Since social rules and ethics are considered the symbolic Other and the subject's involvement with social recognition is considered the imaginary Other, the subject who performs the radical Act can be called the real Other. Yeong-hye, as the real Other, has successfully performed the second phase in the Žižekian practice of action regarding the subject's relationship with their symbolic order. With the success of Yeong-hye in defying the local pragmatic interventions and even taking the radical Act to determine her own identity, it is considered that she has reached the subject's final purpose in Žižekian thinking.

3. Political Withdrawal: The Protagonist's Obsession with Becoming a Tree

The concept of the body has been widely explored by Western philosophers prior to the Žižekian era, including Marx, Heidegger, Foucault, and Deleuze. Fundamentally, the human body is a complex system of structures that continues to produce substances in a systematic manner for the survival of an individual, that is, the owner of the physical body. Despite their respective role, each organ serves a significant purpose by working together inside the body to have coordination. When one gives up to make each of the vital organs work, they will definitely lose their ability to function as human beings — a scenario that happened to, or intentionally performed by, the protagonist of *The Vegetarian*.

After taking the step to become a vegetarian — further also a vegan — which is radical enough in her typical environment, Yeong-hye goes beyond the radical Act by wishing to become a tree. Her passion to become a part of the vegetation is initially seen in her agreement when her brother-in-law wants to paint flowers across her body for aesthetic purposes. What her brother-in-law is doing appears to be unfair to her as he is sexually attracted to her and uses her only to fulfil his desires. However, Yeong-hye seems to be unaware of the hidden purpose. What becomes her focus is how her body will be decorated by the flowers, which brings her to experience something new in her physical body.

“Have you washed the flowers off?”

“No.”

He exhaled in a long sigh. “In that case, can you keep it on for now? Just until tomorrow. It won’t have faded by then. I, uh, I have to film you one more time.”

Was she laughing? He wished he could see her expression. Was she smiling?

“I didn’t want it to come off,” she said calmly, “so I haven’t washed my body. It’s stopping the dreams from coming. If it comes off later I hope you’ll paint it on again for me.” [17, p. 104]

When Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law paints the flowers across her body for his own interests, she agrees without any hesitation. Even when her brother-in-law records her naked for his art project, she feels fine to model for him. She has her own reason for fulfilling his request: the horrific dreams do not come to her sleep anymore. She believes that the flowers on her skin have stopped the dreams that traumatize her from coming. The parallel dreams are somehow disturbing as they portray images she does not understand. Sometimes, the dreams are about a very familiar face, also “the face of a rotting corpse” [17, p. 122], and blood once in a while. For her, uniting herself with the painting of flowers seems to be a good decision. If it is possible, she even wants the flowers to become a part of her body. This indicates the initial phase where she feels closely interconnected with nature.

The idea to transform into a tree does not appear suddenly in the protagonist’s mind but is gradually constructed from her life experiences. Almost occurs at the same time with her obsession to unite with the painting of flowers in her body, she shows the sign of becoming a plant when she tends to take off her clothes on a daily basis. At the start, the idea of nudity has entered her mind as she does not like to wear a bra — or “no-bra look” in his husband’s term [17, p. 13]. While still recovering in the psychiatric hospital, she also

gets undressed once in public without worrying about what people think of her. In fact, she prefers to be casually naked around her house, exposing her body to the sunlight. This unusual habit left her brother-in-law clueless, leading him to wonder: “[...] why did you use to bare your breasts to the sunlight, like some kind of mutant animal that had evolved to be able to photosynthesize? Was that because of a dream too?” [17, p. 98].

Eventually, her brother-in-law never asked her such questions. Yeong-hye keeps doing that peculiar habit and the reason she does it remains a mystery to him. What Yeong-hye does is indeed only a basic level of photosynthesis. In the beginning, it is only the light that pours out from the sun that she needs. At a later stage, she needs to water her body. Though it is not prominently shown, her need for the wind is also visible in a scene where she sunbathes naked on her veranda: “[...] she wanted to make love to the sunlight, to the wind” [17, p. 125]. Illogically, she really thinks that her body demands sunlight and water and wind to survive.

“[...] Well, I was in a dream, and I was standing on my head...leaves were growing from my body, and roots were sprouting from my hands...so I dug down into the earth. On and on...I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch, so I spread my legs; I spread them wide...”

Bewildered, In-hye looked across at Yeong-hye’s feverish eyes.

“I need to water my body. I don’t need this kind of food, sister. I need water.” [17, p. 154]

Ultimately, Yeong-hye’s attempt to do photosynthesis is unsuccessful as the elements do not work for the chemical reaction in her body. Even though she can obtain those materials freely around her, she does not have the chloroplast inside her body like other plants have that can facilitate them to produce the food themselves [40]. The absence of this specialized organelle within the human body unable it to process photosynthesis and manufacture food. This is what the protagonist missed about her obsession with becoming a tree.

“They say my insides have all atrophied, you know.” In-hye was lost for words. Yeong-hye moved her emaciated face closer to her sister. “I’m not an animal anymore, sister,” she said, first scanning the empty ward as if about to disclose a momentous secret. “I don’t need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight.”

“What are you talking about? Do you really think you’ve turned into a tree? How could a plant talk? How can you think these things?”

Yeong-hye’s eyes shone. A mysterious smile played on her face.

“You’re right. Soon now, words and thoughts will all disappear. Soon.” Yeong-hye burst into laughter, then sighed. “Very soon. Just a bit longer to wait, sister.” [17, p. 159]

Yeong-hye's compulsion with becoming a tree shows that she has given up anything as a human being. Seeing through the lens of Žižekian analysis, her obsession is a form of political withdrawal. Žižek explained the political withdrawal using an analogy he adapted from Herman Melville's short fiction, *Bartleby, the Scrivener* [41]. The primary character in this story is Bartleby, a scrivener who initially shows a remarkable level of commitment at his workplace. Interestingly, the tedious routine drained his passion for work, and one day he hit a breaking point, refusing to perform what his supervisor demanded. "I would prefer not to" is Bartleby's most famous statement that indicates a refusal to take any action. The reluctance to take any particular action is reformulated by Žižek as the political withdrawal or also known as Bartleby politics.

This withdrawal is a type of modern friction in which the subject is placed beyond the hegemonic symbolic order. Even though it may appear to be a conscious decision at first, Žižek claimed that this withdrawal is a subconscious embodiment of the death drive [34]. In Yeong-hye's case, her obsession to transform into a tree is also established from the death drive — a desire for death and destruction from the Freudian psychoanalytic perspective. Freud's idea of the death drive is evidently the source of Žižekian thinking. Moreover, Žižek's formulation of the theory of ideology and enjoyment is largely based on this concept. Besides Žižek, classical psychoanalytic thinkers often associated death drive with "human civilization, subjective suffering, collective aggressivity, and self-destructiveness" [42]. In this sense, the unconscious ego is directed to the fulfilment of a desire that leads to destruction, thus the force is called death drive. For Yeong-hye, her obsession with becoming a tree is embedded in the unconscious ego as well.

"Are you trying to die?" she asks. "You're not, are you? If all you want to do is become a tree, you still have to eat. You have to live."

[...]

"Yeong-hye. Answer me. All you need to do is promise."

Yeong-hye twisted away from her sister. "You're just the same," she whispered, her voice barely "audible."

"What are you talking about? I..."

"No one can understand me...the doctors, the nurses, they're all the same...they don't even try to understand..." [17, p. 161-162]

At first, readers might think that Yeong-hye desires death. Near the ending of the story, she also asks a rhetorical question to her sister, "Why, is it such a bad thing to die?" [17, p. 162], as if mortality is only another phase in the afterlife that she is more than ready to face. By neglecting the nutrients that are actually required by a human being to survive, she seems to give up her life completely. At the mental hospital, the doctor diagnosed her with anorexia nervosa and schizophrenia, claiming that Yeong-hye's case is a particular case among other patients. The doctor is not sure of the exact reason for Yeong-hye refusing to eat. All she does is simply stop nourishing her physical body. Even the medicine provided by the hospital does not show efficacy for her. When traced further, however, Yeong-hye's defiance does not bring her to the end of her life. More specifically, she

wishes to live her life differently, to stop being a common human being with all the common demands, and start another life that is considered illogical by people's healthy minds. When on one occasion she made an attempt to escape the hospital, her sister and the hospital staff were left confused finding Yeong-hye joining the trees around her as if claiming that she is a part of those vegetations.

The protagonist's political withdrawal eventually leads her to a posthuman level. Posthumanism — roughly understood as beyond humanism — is a concept that reflects a shift in thinking beyond current social boundaries [43], [44]. In this philosophical strand, an individual is considered to exist in a state exceeding being a normal human [45]. Yeong-hye's metamorphosis of becoming a tree leads her to enter this phase of the posthuman world as she neglects all responsibilities expected by her social order. She indeed made many attempts to disconnect totally from reality to become a posthuman species. Her sister, the doctor, and the nurse in the mental hospital seem to fail to understand her anymore when she finally stops eating anything and really acts like a tree.

“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 up high 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 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? When Yeong-hye had balanced upside down and stretched out every fibre in her body, had these things been awakened in her soul?” [17, p. 175]

One of the streams of ecocriticism, eco-ability, is a philosophy that respects differences in capabilities by prioritizing values that are compatible with ecosystem management. In an anthropocentric sense, the environment is not seen as a marginalized group. However, given the current ecological crisis, it is evident that the living world we call “nature” is clearly a victim of human domination and unbridled technological progress [46]. Inspired by eco-feminism, eco-racism, and eco-colonialism, eco-ability questions the cultural conception of “normalcy” formed by dominant social groups. Contrary to the tradition of normalcy, eco-ability puts forward the concept of respecting differences and diversity by deconstructing social views of what is considered normal and equal. Eco-ability also challenges labelling and categorization that creates gaps between ecological elements. In this case, eco-ability actually upholds imperfections and “lack” values. In fact, the real differences between creatures are considered an essential factor for survival, both individually and globally [47].

On the other side, normality has become a social construction inherent in society. Normality is on a positive point, as opposed to disability which is on a negative point. As a consequence, all aspects that in society's perspective indicate a disability are automatically considered wrong, imperfect, or flawed. Based on these problems, Nocella II [47] underlines the role of each organic community that inhabits the earth. For them,

each element has a unique role, function and ability to survive, which cannot be generalized to achieve equality. As once thought by Yeong-hye's sister, "[i]t's your body, you can treat it however you please. The only area where you're free to do just as you like. And even that doesn't turn out how you wanted" [17, p. 182], the human's body can actually be treated as the owner wants to do. However, the outcomes might be different when it is not handled according to the needs.

Deriving from the eco-ability concept, it is obvious that there exist real differences between humans and plants that make the two cannot be generalized [48], [49]. In terms of structure, both clearly show distinguishing features in their appearance. Although both are multicellular living organisms, the smallest parts that make up the two are different. While plants are limited in a single habitat due to their lack to move from one place and another, humans are equipped with certain nerves and muscles that allow them for mobility. This makes their natural habitats different. Although both share similar characteristics as eukaryotic organisms, the relationship between the two is fundamentally complex. Plants are used by people to fulfil their needs for food to maintain their well-being. On the other hand, plants do not use humans for their needs. This also makes the world living by humans to be greedy for anything — one of many reasons that make the protagonist sick to be a part of her community. To Yeong-hye, the world is violent, and humanity makes it even worse with its carnivorous, damaging, envious, brutal nature. That is the main reason why Yeong-hye wants to live life in a different way than normal people do.

As Yeong-hye could not fulfil the nutrients needed by her body, her efforts to become a tree make her no longer able to live her life, both physically and psychologically. Moreover, the doctor in the rehabilitation centre who had given up on her condition finally threatened her to use sedation. As the eco-ability critique suggested, real differences between living things are considered an important element of life support. This concept of thinking assumes that every creature has different abilities and needs, so uniformity or normalcy cannot be justified. Thus, Yeong-hye's failure to transform into a tree is natural. Since the physical body does not obtain the nutrients that it needs to survive, it does not function as it should any longer. However, her failure to transform into a complete tree does not necessarily cancel out her accomplishment to achieve authenticity. Even though she cannot leave her role as a human being, she has demonstrated her courage to break social norms. In the end, it can be seen that Yeong-hye has succeeded in carrying out the political withdrawal through her desire to become a tree. This obviously proves her value as an authentic subject, which is the ultimate purpose of freedom of subjectivity in Žižekian's concept.

4. Conclusions

Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* is a representation of the subject's resistance to her symbolic order. Through a broader framework of thinking, this literary work can be seen as an allegory about the meaning of freedom to live a life differently without fulfilling the

expectations of society — or, in Žižek study, to be an authentic subject. Because of her childhood trauma, the protagonist took a radical Act by being a vegetarian. Moreover, the subject also acts beyond hegemony by making political withdrawal through her transformation into a tree. This withdrawal is intended to disconnect herself from the world she thought violent, murderous, and greedy. Despite the fact that she collapses on her way to transforming into a tree, she has, at any rate, taken subversive steps that eventually prove her existence beyond a marginal presence in society. The revolutionary changes she has made in her life indicate that she is qualified of becoming an authentic subject that can break the control of the symbolic order

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