

Bodily Discipline and Spiritual Breakthrough: A Study of Spatial Narrative in Han Kang's Novels - Taking *The Vegetarian* and *The Vegetarian Wife* as Examples

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Abstract: *The Vegetarian* and *The Vegetarian Wife* are representative works by the Korean woman writer Han Kang. Han Kang employs surrealist writing to expose the existential predicaments of East Asian women. Henri Lefebvre's triadic dialectic of space will be used as the theoretical basis of this paper, along with Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the Other and Chizuko Ueno's critique of patriarchy, to conduct a spatial narrative analysis of Han Kang's novels. Han Kang constructs three interrelated physical spaces in her works - the domestic, the artistic, and the medical - each of which serves as a site where power is exercised and bodies are disciplined in distinct ways. Family space is usually violent and characterised by normative control; the artistic sphere reveals the male gaze and the consequent alienation of the female body; The medical space functions as an institution that pathologises women's resistance, diagnosing it as mental illness. Han Kang creates a world of psychology through symbols, and through images such as trees and birthmarks, she has built an inner spiritual space for her female characters that can provide some comfort and resistance to the pressure of society. According to the analysis of social space, women are under structural oppression, which includes the marginalisation of subjects and exploitation of differences among women. Han Kang's spatial narration shows that the spiritual liberation of women is only achieved by escaping the restrictions of the body and rebuilding one's own world view, but this path is fraught with sorrow. This paper will examine the literary techniques employed by Han Kang and explore the general circumstances of East Asian women's writing.

Keywords: Triadic Dialectic of Space; *The Vegetarian*; Bodily Discipline; East Asian Women; Spiritual Breakthrough

1. Introduction

Han Kang's major works include *The Vegetarian* and *Human Acts*. The short story "The Vegetarian Wife" (later incorporated into the novel *The Vegetarian*) first introduced the idea of a female protagonist turning into a plant, a motif that Han Kang developed more fully in the novel. In *The Vegetarian*, the female protagonist Yeong-hye becomes a plant-like person, refusing all human food and ultimately desiring to be a tree. Through these two works, Han Kang continues to examine the existence of women and expresses her ideas in increasingly bold ways^[1].

Han Kang's works have attracted the attention of many people around the world, and after winning the 2016 Man Booker International Prize for *The Vegetarian*, she became the first Korean author to do so. Poetic Language, surreal imagery and deep philosophical exploration of human nature, violence and redemption are the features of her writing. Based on the theory of spatial narrative, this paper will explore how Han Kang uses various dimensions of space in her works to present the power relations and existential problems of East Asian women. By examining the interaction of physical space, psychological space and social space, this paper will explore the special literary methods of Han Kang and their influence on modern Chinese women's writing. The theoretical foundation is based on Henri Lefebvre's idea that space is a social product; thus, it can also be used to organise and change society, shape human activities, and thus form individuals. This way, one can see how the space in Han Kang's works shows and reinforces gendered power relations, and at the same time discover chances for rebellion and change^[2].

2. Power Network: Body Politics in Triple Spaces

The physical spaces in *The Vegetarian* are

primarily divided into three parts: Yeong-hye's family in the first chapter, the brother-in-law's studio in the second chapter, and the psychiatric hospital where In-hye visits Yeong-hye in the third chapter. Although these three appear to be actually existing physical spaces on the surface, they respectively correspond to Lefebvre's triadic dialectic of space: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces. Each space embodies different forms of power operation and bodily discipline, collectively constituting a comprehensive power network that envelops the female protagonist.

2.1 Violence and Discipline in Family Space

In the first chapter of *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye is affected by a dream and therefore becomes a vegetarian. She throws away all kinds of meat and frozen food at home, and discards everything related to meat. Her husband "I" is quite displeased with Yeong-hye's conduct. He does not understand why his wife should not eat meat according to the customs of society, and he believes her vegetarianism is a type of deviation that will disrupt family life. The husband's reaction shows that the family space is a place for normative discipline, and his wife's body and food should meet the standards set by patriarchal society.

Yeong-hye's dreams are mentioned in all the chapters of *The Vegetarian*. She dreams of walking into a forest, then dreams of someone committing murder, and so on; finally, she is the murderer. Yeong-hye's Dreams Hint at her Destiny. In the end, she still believes she is a victim and considers herself a murderer. Yeong-hye is beaten by her father and violently forced meat in an effort to coerce her back into normative behavior. The family space is supposed to be a warm and intimate place, but it is actually a place of serious violence and control. The father's authority, the husband's expectations and the pressure of the whole family, all promote the normalisation of the female body. This situation shows that the patriarchal system of the traditional Korean family was in power and women had little say in daily life. The family meal has become a battleground, and Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat is now seen by others as an act of rebellion against the established order of the family^[3].

2.2 Gaze and Alienation in Artistic Space

In the second chapter, "The Mongolian Mark",

"he" (the brother-in-law) has had sex with his sister-in-law Yeong-hye under the pretense of creating video art in order to satisfy his own sexual desires. To get close to Yeong-hye quickly, he asks J to come and help him finish filming with Yeong-hye. Yeong-hye is depicted as plant-like, allowing herself to be controlled, with only a faint trace of consciousness remaining. The art space, which ought to be a place for creation and freedom in aesthetics, has become another location for men's dominance and women's objectification.

It also makes one think about the roles of the subject and the object in art. Is the Goal of Art Truly Pure? As W. Somerset Maugham said that art is the expression of emotions, and it should use a language that everyone can understand. The general opinion is that the contents of art should be true, good and beautiful. In "The Vegetarian", the brother-in-law's work of art is shown to be motivated by sexual desires, and thus the problem of the male gaze is presented through the framework of art. The female body serves as the subject of men's art, and the women themselves are reduced to passive objects lacking will^[4].

2.3 Institutional Violence in Medical Space

In the third chapter "Tree Fire" of *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye is near the end of life. Her older sister In-hye will look after Yeong-hye in her daily life because Yeong-hye is ill. The subject of the story is now In-hye, not Yeong-hye. From the sister's perspective, we can see that Yeong-hye has become very thin and is slowly merging with the world of plants. The medical space, ostensibly designed for healing, becomes a regulatory institution that forces Yeong-hye back into the rules of society^[5].

The third chapter of *The Vegetarian* is a place reserved only for the two sisters. The "plant space" is gradually encroaching on "human space" and also has a characteristic of resistance. The two sisters are in the middle, like seeds. Yeong-hye strives to break through the soil, but the price of her survival is her own life; In-hye's awakening is slower, but it is nonetheless imminent. The medical field has institutions and medical intervention, and it represents the last effort of patriarchal society to discipline and normalise the female body that refuses to conform. Yeong-hye's resistance is in the form of refusing food and wishing to become a plant, so it has been classified as a mental illness and

excluded from the medical system^[6].

3. Metaphorical Reconstruction: Imagery Breakthrough of Spiritual Dilemma

Han Kang has created many psychological spaces in addition to using real places to create specific problems and has extended this type of exploration. Psychological Space usually refers to perception-symbolic representation in the perceptual-spatial dimension, imagistic representation and mental-image representation in the situational space, and relational-network representation in the semantic-spatial dimension. American linguist Gilles Fauconnier has put forward the concept of mental space to explain how these symbolic systems create different worlds for the characters.

3.1 Roots and Awakening in the Imagery of "Trees"

The symbolism of "trees" in *The Vegetarian* is also a kind of psychological space. The forest that appears in Yeong-hye's dreams in the first chapter is a spiritual symbol, and it represents the two opposite psychological states of Yeong-hye. In the second chapter, the "tree" is a woman-like figure in the imaginative world of In-hye's husband, and he projects his sexual fantasies onto the tree-like body of Yeong-hye. In the third chapter, the image of a tree is used to represent Yeong-hye's final state and resistance; she wishes to become a tree and take root in the ground to escape human harm^[7].

The overbearing and controlling maternal love prevalent in East Asian families constitutes a form of collective repression. Women are expected to live in sexual repression, and they should not have their own lives and interests. They accompany their husbands when married and their sons after their husbands' deaths, and their duty is to be obedient, patient and prepared to sacrifice at any time. A tree has deep roots and grows high up, so it is an alternative way of life that does not agree with this patriarchal domestication. Yeong-hye's transformation into a tree is a way to break free from the roles of daughter, wife and woman, and to create a new form of life that is free from human violence. The tree is still and has grown slowly; it is a kind of agency that does not need to speak out or gain social recognition. Han Kang proposes that the form of women's resistance may be passivity or even self-destruction in human perception, according to the botanical metaphor, but it is

also deeply transformative^[8].

3.2 Gaze and Original Sin in the Symbol of "Birthmark"

Yeong-hye has a green birthmark on her bottom in *The Vegetarian*. She keeps the birthmark instead of covering it, partly because she does not wish to be sullied by the world. If the birthmark is associated with innocence and kindness, then the bad omen is objectification of the female body. In-hye's husband is sexually aroused by Yeong-hye's birthmark and believes that because it is "other", she is desirable and thus worth violating. Therefore, the birthmark becomes a place for the male gaze and female identity to meet^[9].

Han Kang uses the two physiological connotations of a birthmark to present the different physiological conditions and psychological states of men and women. This is another level of social meaning: can innate identity be considered original sin? "Before learning of the birthmark, I had no strong feelings, only pity and confusion for her..." After learning about the birthmark, his feelings for his sister-in-law changed fundamentally. As an innate physical trait, a birthmark is also a mark of difference that is both attractive and repulsive to women. It shows how women are often judged and defined by their physical appearance, and their bodies are thus both objects of desire and shame. Thus, the birthmark can be viewed as the original sin of being female in a patriarchal society; the female body is thus regarded as a source of temptation and moral danger.

4. Identity Shackles: Structural Oppression in Social Space

In short, through the power network and metaphor reconstruction, Han Kang shows the actual life of women in the family. In addition, there is social space, which is a combination of all modes of production, gender relations, etc., forming a very complex system of relations. Han Kang uses strong words to peel back the layers, based on the particular circumstances of Korean patriarchal society, and shows the structural oppression that women face.

4.1 Subject Neglect and Identity Exploitation

In 2017, the theme of Korean literature was "women". The work "Kim Ji-young, Born 1982" was written by the female writer Cho Nam-joo

in 2016 and quickly gained popularity, becoming a national bestseller in Korea. Cho Nam-joo tells the story of the character Kim Ji-young from elementary school through to marriage and child-rearing in chronological order, showing how subtle and pervasive gender discrimination has affected Korean women at all times. The whole of culture also provides a background for the problems in the works of Han Kang^[10].

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* shows, in different ways, the experience and encounter of an identity crisis among the two sisters In-hye and Yeong-hye. After Yeong-hye becomes a vegetarian, her husband is no longer satisfied because she will not cook the barbecue he enjoys, and her increasingly deflated breasts and thin body can no longer satisfy his sexual needs. In-hye, as the responsible wife and mother, sacrifices her own needs to maintain the family, only to discover her husband's infidelity and artistic exploitation of her sister. Thus, both sisters are subject to identity exploitation; their worth is judged only by how useful they are to men and the family.

4.2 Identity Cards and Internal Differentiation

In *"The Vegetarian"*, there is a contrast between the two subjects and objects of "vegetarians" and "meat-eaters". Related to the productive activities of human society, Han Kang does not simply distinguish between the two aspects by gender but also breaks down the relatively isolated boundaries and allows the two to penetrate each other. Among the women are also those who are "meat-eaters" and participate in the oppression of other women, showing the internal differentiation and complicity among women under patriarchy.

As a class, the material basis of oppression for women is the two types of alienation experienced by women as housewives: firstly, they are excluded from productive labour; secondly, they are forced to bear the burden of unpaid reproductive labour. If we take the female images of Yeong-hye and In-hye as the subjects, then the female characters who uphold patriarchal norms can be regarded as the internalised oppressors within the female group. In the story *"One Day"*, there is a scene of a girl being choked by other girls. After Min-hwa is harmed by her husband, her colleague Miss Lu is not angry at all, but says: "She... the relationship between men and women is inherently

complicated." If it is someone she likes, she will easily give her heart away. I expected it. This kind of blame and judgment among women shows how patriarchal ideas have affected the female group to create internal divisions and prevent collective action.

5. Conclusion

Han Kang has said that she wishes to show women as real people, and that speaking, writing and living as a woman are very important to her. "Even in the face of violence, people can still feel the pain of others and have the will to live outside of their own circumstances." I believe that as long as our hearts have the capacity for empathy, there will always be hope for humanity. Through space, Han Kang has created a world with many layers and shown how women are oppressed by families, art, medicine and society. The physical spaces of family, art and medicine are all different types of power and discipline, and the psychological spaces of tree imagery and birthmark symbolism offer ways for spiritual resistance and self-reconstruction. Analysis of social space shows that the structure of gender oppression is not only overt male domination but also internal differentiation and complicity among women.

Han Kang's works are full of violence in daily life, but she has also imagined ways to resist this violence that go beyond the physical. Yeong-hye is a plant, and although it is tragic and will not last, it is a way out of the constraints imposed by patriarchal society. In-hye is slowly waking up, and there may be other forms of resistance. Han Kang shows in her works that a spiritual breakthrough is possible even in the most restrictive space, but it often requires great courage and may have a high cost. Therefore, her works have contributed to the general trend of East Asian women's writing and offer rich ideas on how space, gender, power and resistance are interrelated in modern society. Han Kang focuses on the bodily experiences and spatial struggles of the female characters to have readers face the invisible violence in daily life and imagine other ways of life outside the constraints of a patriarchal spatial order.

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