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# Reconceptualisation and Narrativisation of "Burnout" in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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**Research Paper**

## I. Introduction

In contemporary psychological and workplace discourse, burnout is most often understood as a multidimensional condition associated with chronic occupational stress. Beata Mańkowska's review of burnout research notes that scholars continue to debate its definition and dimensions, although many established models connect it to prolonged work-related stress, exhaustion, disengagement, and difficulties in functioning (Mańkowska). This history matters because it cautions against treating burnout as a self-evident label that can be transferred without qualification from workplace research to literary characters.

Burnout is also frequently addressed through individualised strategies such as wellness interventions, boundary-setting, and temporary withdrawal from professional responsibilities. Such responses may be useful, but when they become the only frame of analysis, they risk making exhaustion appear to be an individual failure of resilience rather than a response to social arrangements. Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* paves the way for examining this problem beyond the conventional boundaries of paid employment. Through the main character, Yeong-hye's, progressive rejection of meat, conventional relationships, and ultimately human existence as she understands it, the novel exposes the violence rooted in patriarchal authority and domestic conformity.

This paper argues that *The Vegetarian* can be read as reconceptualising the burnout narrative: not by depicting a straightforward case of occupational burnout, but by extending the concept into a critical framework for examining the exhaustion produced by compulsory social participation. Drawing on Byung-Chul Han's critique of achievement society, Silvia Federici's analysis of unwaged domestic labour, Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary power, Donna Haraway's challenge to human exceptionalism, and Joan Tronto's feminist ethics of care, the paper reads Yeong-hye's transformation as an escalating form of bodily refusal. The concept of the "somatic strike," used here as an original analytical term rather than a phrase taken from Han Kang, describes the interruption of ordinary social functioning through the body when conventional negotiation is unavailable or ineffective.

The argument requires an important qualification. Yeong-hye's experience should not be diagnosed as burnout in a clinical sense, and her withdrawal cannot be celebrated as uncomplicated liberation. Instead, the novel tests the limits of a productivity-centred model of burnout by asking what happens when the demand is not only to work, but also to perform an acceptable identity: dutiful daughter, accommodating wife, desirable body, and responsible family member. The contrast between Yeong-hye and her sister, In-hye, further reveals the unequal costs of endurance and the limited alternatives available to women whose suffering is either concealed or treated as disruption.

### I. The Quiet Self-Exploitation of Everyday Compliance

Before Yeong-hye's transformation becomes visible, her life exemplifies a form of depletion sustained through ordinary domestic compliance. Her husband, Mr Cheong, chooses her as a wife

because she appears unremarkable and undemanding. He values her conventional habits and her apparent ability to fit comfortably into married life. Her ordinariness is therefore not simply a personality trait; it makes her convenient within a gendered domestic arrangement. The opening sentence, "I had a dream," introduces the private disturbance that will interrupt this apparently orderly life (Kang 4). The dream is not immediately legible to those around Yeong-hye, but it signals a rupture between the life she is expected to maintain and the violence she can no longer ignore.

Yeong-hye's daily existence includes the largely invisible labour of maintaining a household, preparing food, accommodating her husband, and fulfilling the expectations attached to the roles of wife and daughter. The novel does not represent every domestic task as spectacularly oppressive. Instead, it draws attention to the cumulative effects of a life in which personal desire is subordinated to the maintenance of domestic order. Her depletion is difficult to recognise precisely because her compliance appears normal.

Silvia Federici's feminist critique of housework is useful here. In Wages Against Housework, Federici challenges the idea that domestic labour is simply a natural expression of women's love or duty. Her deliberately provocative statement, "They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work" (Federici 74) makes visible the labour hidden beneath the language of feminine care and devotion. Read through Federici, Yeong-hye's domestic role becomes more than a private arrangement between husband and wife. It reflects a social structure in which women's time and emotional accommodation are treated as resources that can be claimed without adequate recognition.

Byung-Chul Han's *The Burnout Society* provides a complementary, though not identical, framework. Han argues that contemporary subjects are shaped by an achievement-oriented culture in which demands for performance and self-optimisation become internalised. The subject is not merely ordered to obey; the subject is encouraged to understand continuous activity and self-improvement as personal freedom. Yeong-hye's circumstances cannot simply be equated with the achievement-oriented worker Han describes. Her pressure is more directly domestic and patriarchal. Nevertheless, Han's account helps this paper ask how the obligation to keep functioning can extend beyond paid employment and become attached to socially approved forms of femininity.

Yeong-hye is expected to remain a dutiful daughter, an accommodating wife, and an unobtrusive participant in family life. The violence of this arrangement lies partly in its apparent normality: a person's autonomy can be diminished without a single, dramatic crisis. Before Yeong-hye stops eating meat, the novel establishes a world in which her social value is closely connected to her willingness to accommodate others. The paper therefore uses 'burnout' beyond mere diagnosis of Yeong-hye, and more as a way to investigate the exhaustion produced by compulsory functioning.

**II. The Somatic Strike: The Body as a Site of Refusal**

Yeong-hye's disturbing dreams of slaughter and violence precipitate her decision to remove meat from the family refrigerator and refuse to eat it. What initially appears to be a dietary choice develops into a fundamental challenge to the expectations governing her life. Her refusal can be interpreted as a "somatic strike": a withdrawal from expected social participation enacted through the body when ordinary negotiation proves inadequate.

The phrase "somatic strike" is this paper's analytical formulation, not a concept explicitly proposed by Han Kang. It describes the way Yeong-hye's body interrupts the ordinary functioning of family life. Outside a fully articulated political programme, her refusal emerges through dreams, disgust, silence, and a changed relationship with food. The body communicates what ordinary social language cannot adequately express within the relationships available to her.

Meat becomes a significant symbol in this transformation. Its rejection may be read as a refusal to participate in the consumption of animal flesh and, more broadly, as a challenge to the violence Yeong-hye increasingly associates with human existence. The novel does not, however, provide a simple equation between vegetarianism and moral purity. Her changing relationship with food unsettles the boundaries separating the human from the animal, nourishment from violence, and personal choice from social obligation.

The family's response exposes the coercive dimension of apparently ordinary social practices. During the pivotal family meal, Yeong-hye's father attempts to force meat into her mouth. The meal becomes a scene of physical domination, exposing the violence underlying the demand that she return to expected behaviour. The mouth, which might enable speech and self-expression, becomes the site at which patriarchal authority attempts to impose obedience.

Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish* helps explain this confrontation. Foucault examines how institutions and everyday practices regulate bodies, establish norms, and produce compliant subjects. His concept of "docile bodies" describes bodies rendered

useful and governable through discipline (Foucault). In Yeong-hye's case, the family attempts to correct a body that has ceased to behave as expected. Her refusal is treated as a disruption requiring intervention.

Yet the scene also demonstrates the limits of interpreting Yeong-hye's body exclusively as an object of power. Her refusal exposes the coercion on which the family's apparent stability depends. When she injures herself during the confrontation, the consequences become devastating. This act should not be romanticised as an uncomplicated assertion of freedom. Rather, it reveals the tragic entanglement of resistance and self-destruction when bodily autonomy is denied and the available means of refusal become increasingly restricted.

The concept of the 'somatic strike' therefore captures both the force and the limitation of Yeong-hye's resistance. Her body interrupts the family's expectations, but interruption does not automatically produce liberation. The scene exposes a social order in which the right to refuse is subordinated to the demand for conformity. This is where the burnout framework becomes productive: it allows the analysis to move from the question of whether Yeong-hye can continue functioning to the question of why the conditions of ordinary functioning have become intolerable.

**III. The Vegetal Turn**

In the second section, "Mongolian Mark," Yeong-hye's body becomes the object of her brother-in-law's artistic and erotic fascination. He projects his creative desires onto her and transforms her painted body into an aesthetic surface. Although Yeong-hye participates in aspects of this transformation, the episode remains deeply ambivalent: her body becomes the medium through which another person attempts to fulfil his artistic vision.

This episode complicates the assumption that withdrawal from conventional social roles necessarily ends exploitation. Even as Yeong-hye moves away from domestic expectations, her body continues to be appropriated for another person's purposes. Her apparent passivity does not guarantee autonomy. The artistic encounter demonstrates how a withdrawn or vulnerable subject may continue to be made available to the desires of others.

The distinction between refusing participation and escaping appropriation is therefore crucial. Yeong-hye's rejection of ordinary social roles does not immediately free her from systems that assign value to her body. Her brother-in-law's project converts her vulnerability into a source of aesthetic and personal gratification. The demand for performance persists even when she has ceased to perform in socially conventional ways. Her body is no longer required to fulfil the role of the compliant wife, but it is made to fulfil another person's artistic fantasy.

In the final section, "Flaming Trees," Yeong-hye's desire to become a plant marks a further transformation. She increasingly imagines herself as a being that requires neither meat nor the ordinary forms of human nourishment and existence. Her insistence that she needs sunlight and water, together with her attempts to position her body as though it were growing roots, expresses a desire to leave behind the conditions associated with human life.

Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* provides a useful posthumanist context because it questions the assumptions through which humans define themselves in opposition to other species. Haraway's work does not provide a direct explanation of Yeong-hye's individual trajectory, but it encourages attention to the relations and boundaries through which "the human" is constructed. In *The Vegetarian*, the movement from refusing meat to imagining vegetal existence unsettles the hierarchy that places human life above animal and plant life. Yeong-hye's desire is not simply to live differently within society; she seeks an existence outside the human condition as she has come to experience it.

An ecocritical reading can extend this argument. Plants appear to offer an imagined alternative to a human world associated with consumption, domination, and social performance. Whereas human relations in the novel repeatedly involve the exercise of power over other bodies, vegetal existence appears to promise a mode of being outside those relations. This promise, however, belongs to Yeong-hye's imagination rather than to an objective account of plant life. Plants remain vulnerable and embedded in ecological relations; they are not simply symbols of freedom from all need. The vegetal ideal is consequently ambivalent. Yeong-hye imagines plants as an alternative to the violent human world she rejects, but her physical deterioration exposes the gulf between this imagined refuge and the consequences of her withdrawal. The vegetal turn cannot be understood as a straightforward achievement of freedom. It is simultaneously an expression of resistance, a rejection of human identity, and a sign of the devastating limits of the alternatives available to her.

Through this transformation, *The Vegetarian* extends the burnout narrative beyond exhaustion within a social system. Yeong-hye's withdrawal becomes a rejection of the terms through

which that system defines meaningful existence. The novel asks what remains of the self when participation, consumption, and conformity become intolerable, while offering no secure alternative through which that self might survive.

**IV. Intergenerational Exhaustion and the Medicalisation of Revolt**

The final section shifts attention to Yeong-hye's sister, In-hye, whose experience offers a crucial counterpoint to Yeong-hye's visible collapse. In-hye continues to work, care for her son, manage the consequences of family breakdown, and assume responsibilities that cannot easily be abandoned. Her capacity to function contrasts with Yeong-hye's withdrawal, but the contrast should not be mistaken for a simple distinction between health and illness.

In-hye's apparent competence conceals considerable emotional strain. She has learned to endure the demands placed upon her, even when those demands compromise her own needs. Her experience reveals another form of exhaustion: one that remains socially acceptable because it is concealed beneath the performance of responsibility. Unlike Yeong-hye, who increasingly refuses participation, In-hye continues to sustain the everyday structures of family life.

Joan Tronto's *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* is a framework for examining this unequal distribution of responsibility. Tronto defines caring as the activity through which people "maintain, continue, and repair our 'world'" so that life can be sustained (qtd. in Tronto). Tronto's broader argument makes care a political and ethical issue rather than a private virtue naturally assigned to women. Applied to the novel, this perspective reveals how women's capacity to endure and care for others can become an expectation that obscures their own vulnerability. The sisters thus embody contrasting responses to gendered and familial pressure. Yeong-hye's distress becomes visible through her refusal to conform, while In-hye's suffering remains contained within her ability to continue functioning. Their experiences expose the limits of a social order that recognises suffering more readily when it disrupts ordinary life than when it is absorbed through continued labour. The novel does not suggest that In-hye's endurance is simply false or that Yeong-hye's refusal is necessarily more authentic. Rather, it makes visible the costs attached to both responses.

The hospital scenes intensify this conflict. Yeong-hye's refusal of food is treated as a condition requiring medical intervention, including force-feeding. The institution's concern with preserving her physical life creates an ethical tension between preventing bodily harm and recognising her expressed wishes and suffering. Foucault's account of disciplinary power is relevant because medical institutions, like families, possess the authority to define acceptable bodily conduct and intervene when that conduct departs from established norms. Yet the novel does not require readers to conclude that medicine is inherently oppressive or that Yeong-hye's condition should be understood only as political revolt. Her physical deterioration is real, and the ethical responsibilities surrounding her care cannot be dismissed. The more difficult question is what happens when the preservation of the body becomes the principal measure of well-being, while the experiences that have made ordinary existence unbearable remain insufficiently addressed. Medical intervention may be necessary to preserve life, yet bodily restoration does not automatically resolve psychological suffering or restore autonomy. The novel asks readers to hold these claims together rather than choose between them.

In-hye's visits to the hospital force her to reconsider the life she herself has continued to sustain. Her experience reveals that endurance is not necessarily evidence of freedom, just as collapse is not necessarily evidence of resistance successfully achieved. The sisters' trajectories expose the unequal costs of compulsory participation: one continues to function while confronting her own exhaustion, and the other withdraws so radically that her survival becomes endangered.

The novel's familial dimension further complicates burnout as an isolated personal crisis. The sisters' experiences emerge within a family shaped by authority, violence, obligation, and the unequal distribution of care. Their suffering cannot be understood entirely through individual psychology because the conditions surrounding them are social and relational. Han Kang thus makes burnout a critical question about the structures that demand endurance and the consequences faced by those who can no longer sustain it.

## II. Conclusion: The Ethics of Collapse

Through *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang's narrative can be read as reconfiguring the burnout narrative by shifting attention from individual exhaustion to the social arrangements that make continued participation compulsory. Read alongside Byung-Chul Han's critique of achievement society, Yeong-hye's trajectory exposes the violence concealed within the demand for continuous functioning. Federici's feminist critique of domestic labour reveals how these demands are unevenly imposed upon women, while Foucault's account of disciplinary power illuminates attempts to regulate

bodies that depart from established norms. Haraway's posthumanist work helps frame the novel's challenge to human exceptionalism, and Tronto's ethics of care makes visible the gendered distribution of responsibility.

Yeong-hye's rejection of meat, resistance to familial authority, and eventual desire for vegetal existence constitute escalating forms of bodily refusal. Her transformation challenges the assumption that meaningful existence depends upon compliance, consumption, and the fulfilment of socially prescribed roles. Yet the novel does not present her collapse as uncomplicated liberation. Her physical deterioration reveals the tragic limits of resistance when withdrawal from an oppressive social order does not provide a viable alternative form of life.

In-hye's experience further complicates this narrative. Her continued performance of domestic and caring responsibilities demonstrates that exhaustion may remain concealed beneath social competence. The sisters' contrasting trajectories expose two consequences of compulsory endurance: the normalisation of invisible suffering and the pathologisation of those whose refusal disrupts established expectations.

Burnout, in this reading, is not a clinical label applied to Yeong-hye. It is a critical framework through which to examine the ethical costs of a world that treats conformity and continued functioning as necessary conditions of social existence. The novel's most unsettling question is not simply why Yeong-hye collapses, but why the world around her makes ordinary participation so difficult to refuse. Her vegetal aspiration reveals both a radical desire to escape a violent social order and the devastating limits of imagining freedom only through the abandonment of human existence. The Vegetarian therefore does not merely depict burnout; it interrogates the conditions under which endurance becomes compulsory, resistance becomes destructive, and survival itself becomes an ethical problem.

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