



Examining Eco-psychological Connections in the Work of Han Kang: A Comparative Study of the novel *The Vegetarian* and *We Do Not Part*

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ABSTRACT

The present study seeks to explore the Eco- psychological interconnections in the context of two novels *The Vegetarian* and *We do not Part* written by Han Kang. Hence, the Primary focus of the study has been to examine the way human psychological state is interviewed with nature, ecological degradation and societal norms. Theodore Roszak (1992) concept of ecopsychology has been employed as the framework, while textual analysis method has been used for the purpose of data analysis. The findings revealed the emotional trauma and a sense of alienation that the both protagonists felt stemming from modern disconnections with the natural world. The findings also provide an insight ecological issue manifest with the human psyche especially in terms of gender, identity and cultural expectations.



Introduction

Humans beings have always considered nature as something out there in the green forests the verdant valleys and the immense solitude of the desert lands where the quaintest live their lives far away from us as though they are in another domain altogether. We have nature programmes which bring these lives to us and we have a predilection for 'natural' products with no 'chemicals' in them. We have mighty poets of nature like Wordsworth, Thoreau and Frost who learned mighty

lessons from nature and brought them to light through their works. We derisively believe that the need to protect nature as an act of charity rather than an act of survival. The living environment is a delicate equilibrium of complex inter relationships where the existence of organisms is interdependent on the existence of others within ecosystems. These relationships comprise all ranges of human life including physical, spiritual, social, psychological, economic and political and various other areas. Han Kang accentuates this through the characters in her novel and how their broken relationship with nature affects their human existence (Venugopal and George, 2020).

Eco-psychology is a very new social and intellectual movement that strives to understand and harmonize people's relationship with the Earth. "Eco psychologists offer important insights into cognition, psychological well-being and the general human experience. First, there is a deep bond and reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. This is best illustrated through the concepts of nature being both a home and family as well as nature as a representation of the collective self. Second, the separation of humans with nature leads to mutual suffering, such as through environmental devastation and grief and alienation. Third, reconnecting with nature promotes individual healing, psycho-emotional bonding, environmental action and sustainable lifestyles." In this way, Eco-psychology aims to find out how human psyche responds to the ecological environment around them.

In this way, Postmodernism emerged in the mid-20th century as a critical response to the principles of modernism, characterized by skepticism toward grand narratives, objective truths, and universal ideologies. Philosopher Jean-François Lyotard famously defined postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives," emphasizing the fragmentation of knowledge and the rejection of overarching explanations (Solanki, 2021).

Hence, in its critique of modernity, postmodernism challenges the traditional human-nature dichotomy. It questions the objectification and exploitation of nature, advocating for recognition of the "otherness" of the non-human world. This perspective aligns with postmodern critiques that urge acknowledging the ways in which human narratives have historically silenced nature, advocating for a more respectful and nuanced engagement with the environment (Chaudhary and Preet, 2011).

Han Kang, a well-known South Korean postmodern writer has done a remarkable contribution in terms of exploring the inner psyche of her Korean characters. Hence, her works often explore environmental issues, specially through the lens of human-nature relations and the psychological impact of violence and sufferings. Most of her novels feature strong female characters who seem to survive against patriarchal structure and societal norms while reflecting the interconnectedness of human beings and natural world.

However the particular study is based on the exploration of eco-psychological interconnections in terms of two particular novels written by Han Kang, a famous Korean writer that are respectively *The Vegetarian* (2007) and *We Do Not Part* (2025). It provides insight into the phenomenon that what sort of relationship the protagonist of these two books share with nature and how they do respond to the natural occurring.

Statement of the Problem

In the face of growing environmental crises and increasing psychological distress in modern societies, literature offers a critical lens through which the interconnectedness of human psychology and the natural world can be examined. Han Kang's novels, particularly *The Vegetarian and We Do Not Part*, explore themes of bodily autonomy, trauma, societal alienation,

and the human-nature relationship. However, while these texts have been analyzed for their feminist and philosophical themes, their ecopsychological implications still remain underexplored. This study seeks to investigate how Han Kang's narratives reflect the psychological consequences of disconnection from nature and how her characters' inner transformations embody ecopsychological healing or deterioration. Through comparative analysis, the study aims to fill a gap in Eco critical and psychological literary studies, offering new insights into the healing potential of reconnecting with nature through literature.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how ecopsychological themes are represented in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and *We Do Not Part*, particularly in relation to the protagonists' psychological states and their connection (or disconnection) to the natural world.
2. To compare the role of nature as a transformative or liberating force in the psychological development of characters in both novels.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do Han Kang's novels *The Vegetarian* and *We Do Not Part* illustrate the relationship between psychological trauma and disconnection from nature?
2. How does nature function as a medium for psychological transformation or resistance in the protagonists' journeys in both novels.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the emerging field of ecopsychological literary criticism by exploring how literature can reflect and potentially mediate the psychological impacts of ecological estrangement. By focusing on Han Kang's nuanced portrayal of human suffering and transformation through interactions with the natural world, the research aims to deepen our understanding of the healing potential of eco-psychology in literature. It also offers a fresh perspective on Han Kang's work by highlighting an underexplored thematic layer, encouraging more holistic interpretations that connect mind, body, society, and environment.

Literature Review

Asha and Benitta (2024) through their qualitative research analyzed how Yeong-hye's, the protagonist of the novel transformation from an ecopsychological standpoint, highlighted her departure from societal norms and her journey towards a more harmonious existence with nature. They considered her actions as a quest for alternative subjectivity and liberation from patriarchal constraints.

Azzahra and Ningtyas (2023) through their qualitative research examined the connections between the existence of self and nature in the particular work of Han Kang. However, the primary focus of the study was to explore the reasons why the protagonist adopted the vegetation ideology stemming from her childhood drama. Irigary and Mardner's theory of vegetal being was employed as the framework of the study along with the implementation of textual method of analysis. The results of the study provided a deep understanding of the protagonist's journey and the complicated relationship that she shared with herself and nature.

Qasim and Sultana (2023) conducted an ecolinguistic study of *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang. The main focus of the study was to trace the metaphors in the novel. The findings revealed the certain metaphors such as 'body,' 'flower,' and 'nature,' to reveal how Yeong-hye's transformation signified a deeper psychological connection to the natural world. The study also asserted that these metaphors illustrate her desire to break free from societal norms and embrace a more authentic existence.

Bright (2021) conducted an ecofeministic study of the vegetarian. The study was based on qualitative method. The main objective of the study was to examine how the protagonist, Yeong-hye's rejection of meat consumption symbolizes resistance against patriarchal control over women's bodies and the exploitation of nature. Bright argued that Yeong-hye's actions challenge societal norms and advocate for a more harmonious relationship with the environment.

George and Venugopal (2020) explored the ecopsychological aspects of *The Vegetarian* within a perspective to reveal the dimensions of Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian, considering it a manifestation of her resistance to societal pressures and a reclaiming of her autonomy. They delve into how her transformation challenges traditional human-nature relationships and reflects a deeper psychological yearning for connection with the natural world.

Research Methodology

The study is based on qualitative research because of its potential to allow researchers to go for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under a particular investigation. Theodore Roszak (1992) concept of ecopsychology has been employed as the framework of this study. While the data has been extracted from two novels *The Vegetarian* (2007) and *We do not Part* (2025) written by a Korean author Han Kang. A particular sample of content related to the topic of this research has been taken from these two novels by employing purposive sampling technique while, for data analysis, textual method has been employed by the researchers.

Data Analysis

This section explores the ecopsychological connections in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian and We Do Not Part*, focusing on how human-nature relationships are portrayed, internalized, and reflected through psychological transformation, alienation, and resistance to socio-cultural norms. Both novels depict nature as not merely a backdrop but an integral force in human identity and healing—or its lack thereof.

In *The Vegetarian*, the protagonist Yeong-hye's decision to stop eating meat is the inciting act of defiance against a rigid patriarchal and anthropocentric society. Her rejection of meat becomes symbolic of a deeper desire to reconnect with a non-violent, natural state of being.

“I had a dream. A dream... I was inside a tree... I wanted to live. As a tree.” (Part II, *The Vegetarian*)

This passage illustrates an explicit ecopsychological moment: the fusion of self with nature, expressing a desire for symbiosis rather than domination. Yeong-hye's dreamscape becomes a psychological sanctuary—a return to a pre-cultural, organic identity. Ecopsychology suggests that psychological well-being is rooted in a healthy relationship with the Earth; Yeong-hye's breakdown can thus be seen not as madness but as a rupture from an ecologically destructive society. Her family's response—shaming, institutionalizing, and forcibly feeding her—underscores the violence of a society that pathologizes alternative ecological consciousness.

In *We Do Not Part*, Kang continues to explore trauma and ecological entanglement. Though less overt than in *The Vegetarian*, the novel threads themes of intergenerational memory, physicality, and the scars of historical violence into the landscape itself. The earth, in this text, is both a witness and a container of human trauma.

“When the mother held her daughter's hair in her hands, she felt the whole forest breathing. The silence was full of voices that could not be spoken aloud.” (Part II, *We Do Not Part*)

This moment illustrates ecopsychological mourning—the Earth and human emotion entwined in mutual grief. Unlike Yeong-hye, the characters in this novel do not resist society overtly, but they carry their trauma into natural metaphors, suggesting that ecological connection becomes a medium for memory and healing. The environment acts as a co-therapist, silently absorbing and reflecting unspoken pain.

Kang's portrayal of nature as both silent and expressive highlights the eco-psychological theory that humans project inner emotional landscapes onto the natural world, seeing in it not just metaphor but shared suffering.

The Vegetarian centers on an active rejection of cultural violence through identification with nature, While, *We Do Not Part* uses nature as a quiet witness to trauma. Both narratives resist human exceptionalism—the idea that humans are separate from or superior to nature.

In both novels, bodily imagery—especially that of plants, trees, and flesh—acts as a site of psychological conflict and ecological symbolism. Yeong-hye's transformation into a plant-like being, and the quiet physical gestures in *We Do Not Part*, such as the touching of hair, skin, or soil, represent a longing for reconnection with the Earth in the face of societal disconnection.

“Her body was no longer hers... It belonged to the trees, the grass, the wind.” (part III, *The Vegetarian*)

This line affirms the breakdown of human/nature boundaries—a core concern of ecopsychology. In contrast, *We Do Not Part* presents more ambiguous boundaries but evokes a shared vulnerability between land and body.

In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's decision to stop eating meat is a protest not only against patriarchal oppression but also against a violent, consumerist society that objectifies both women and nature.

“I had a dream,” Yeong-hye said. “A dream. I was in the woods, and... there were trees, and I was a tree. I wanted to be a tree (Part I'll, *The Vegetarian*).

This dream signifies Yeong-hye's subconscious yearning to transcend human violence and merge with the natural world. Her transformation is not only psychological but deeply ecological: she moves toward a state of non-violence by rejecting meat, speech, and even human form. Ecopsychologically, Yeong-hye's breakdown becomes a form of biophilia—a return to a non-human mode of being as a means of healing.

In *We Do Not Part*, the female protagonist grapples with post-traumatic stress and emotional numbness after surviving state violence. Her fragmented self gradually reconnects through the motifs of nature, silence, and bodily disintegration.

“Her body had learned to speak the language of grass. She no longer screamed; she listened to wind (Part II, *The We do not part*).

Both Yeong-hye and the unnamed narrator in *We Do Not Part* express trauma through their bodies, resisting societal expectations through physical withdrawal and symbolic transformation.

Findings and Discussion

This study explored the ecopsychological dimensions of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and *We Do Not Part*, focusing on the intersections between human psychology, nature, and socio-cultural constructs. Both novels present a nuanced portrayal of ecological consciousness and psychological resistance through the embodiment of trauma, alienation, and transformation.

1. Nature as Resistance and Refuge

In *The Vegetarian*, the protagonist Yeong-hye's turn toward vegetarianism and eventual rejection of human norms can be interpreted as a radical ecopsychological response. Her withdrawal from societal expectations, expressed through her refusal to consume meat and her obsession with becoming plant-like, symbolizes a yearning for ecological unity. This transformation illustrates nature not merely as a setting but as a medium of psychological refuge and resistance against patriarchal and anthropocentric systems.

Conversely, if *We Do Not Part*, nature functions more subtly as a background presence tied to memory, trauma, and healing. The fragmented narratives of survivors echo the deep ecological wound inflicted by war and displacement. Here, ecopsychological themes are expressed through the characters' estrangement from both their environments and inner selves, revealing the psychological toll of historical violence on both personal and environmental levels.

2. Ecological Embodiment and the Disruption of the Self

Han Kang presents bodies as sites of ecological rebellion. Yeong-hye's transformation is a physical and metaphysical rejection of violence—her body becomes symbolic of environmental purity, yet also psychological decay. Her progressive withdrawal from the human world echoes a deep eco-centric view where integration with non-human life becomes a form of liberation, albeit through self-erasure.

In *We Do Not Part*, bodily trauma also conveys ecopsychological dissonance. The dismembered and violated bodies in the text parallel the disrupted landscapes, suggesting a shared trauma between human and nature. The characters' struggles to reconcile with their bodies mirror the post-traumatic ecological consciousness that emerges from wartime atrocities.

3. Silence, Memory, and the Non-Human Voice

Silence is a recurring motif in both texts and serves as an ecopsychological device. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's silence disrupts communicative norms, allowing the non-human voice—represented through trees, dreams, and images—to emerge. Her muteness is not passive; it's a refusal to engage with a violent, disenchanting world.

In *We Do Not Part*, silence is loaded with unspeakable historical grief. However, nature becomes a repository of memory—fields, rivers, and trees serve as silent witnesses to human suffering. The landscape retains a memory of violence, and in doing so, offers a quiet but persistent form of ecological storytelling.

4. Interconnected Suffering and Ecological Ethics

Both novels suggest that psychological suffering cannot be detached from ecological devastation. Kang's work embodies a form of deep ecology that recognizes the interconnectedness of all life forms. Yeong-hye's alienation parallels ecological degradation, implying that healing requires a reconnection not only with the self but with the larger web of life. *We Do Not Part* similarly extends this interconnectivity to a collective ethical imperative—highlighting the importance of empathy, remembrance, and ecological stewardship in the face of both human and environmental loss.

Future Implications

1. The future researcher can explore the same dimensions in the work of other Korean postmodern writers.

2. They can conduct their research on the comparative study of Pakistani and Korean writers' work to trace the Ecopsychological connections in two different cultures.

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