

Metaphors in *The Vegetarian*: An Ecolinguistic Analysis

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This paper discusses the role of metaphor in constructing ecological discourse in *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang. The study reveals how metaphors related to vegetarianism and nature reflect the protagonist's rebellion against societal norms and her pursuit of ecological authenticity and demonstrates how *The Vegetarian* criticizes the alienation of modern society from nature and advocates for deeper connections with the environment.

Keywords: metaphor, ecolinguistics, *The Vegetarian*, human-nature relationship

Introduction

The Vegetarian by Han Kang is a profound exploration of the human psychology and its relationship with nature and delves into themes, such as identity, trauma, and the relationship between man and nature. Through the analysis of how metaphors are used to construct ecological meanings, this paper aims to uncover the novel's underlying ecological themes and its critique of modern society's alienation from nature from the perspective of ecolinguistics.

Literature Review

In recent years, ecological themes in literature have gained significant momentum, with scholars increasingly recognizing the role of literary works in shaping environmental consciousness. Ecolinguistics has emerged as a crucial field for understanding how language reflects and constructs our relationship with the environment (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001). This field examines how linguistic choices reveal underlying ecological attitudes and values, providing a framework for analyzing the ecological discourse in literary texts.

Metaphor, as claimed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), is not merely a rhetorical means but a fundamental cognitive tool that shapes our perceptual and conceptual systems. Their research helped to understand how metaphors convey complex ecological thoughts and emotions in literary works. Kövecses (2010) further explored the role of metaphor in expressing abstract concepts, emphasizing its importance in literary analysis. Ecological criticism is another relevant field focusing on the ways in which literature reflects and shapes our understanding of the natural world. Ecolinguistics is therefore particularly relevant to Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, in which metaphors and ecolinguistic strategies are used to critique modern society's alienation from nature, and explore the pursuit of ecological authenticity.

Existing studies on Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* mainly focused on feminism, socio-cultural, and psychological aspects. Feminist scholars like Paola Bica (2023) analyze the protagonist's vegetarianism as an allegorical rejection of patriarchal control, where meat symbolizes systemic oppression and her dietary refusal

becomes an act of radical feminist resistance. On a sociocultural level, as Won-Chung Kim (2019) notes, the protagonist's nonconformity triggers societal ostracization, underscoring the intolerance for deviations from traditional gender roles. Psychologically, Yeong-hye's mental deterioration reflects unresolved trauma from abuse and neglect, viewing Yeong-hye's transformation as both a breakdown and an assertion of autonomy. However, few studies paid attention to the novel's ecological themes and the metaphors employed to convey them. This study will address such limitations by conducting an ecolinguistic analysis of the metaphors in *The Vegetarian*, revealing how language constructs and critiques the human-nature relationship. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the study provides new insights into the novel's ecological discourse and its broader implications for understanding contemporary environmental issues.

Theoretical Framework

Metaphor theory, as developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), posits that metaphors are not merely rhetorical devices but fundamental cognitive tools through which we understand and experience the world. Metaphors not only shape our perceptions and conceptual systems, but also construct the mental models that guide our actions. They can either foster ecological consciousness and sustainable practices or perpetuate destructive mindsets and behaviors.

The term "ecolinguistics" first appeared in the work of Einar Haugen (1972) who argued that language is part of a larger ecology involving human mind, society, and the natural environment and defined ecolinguistics as "the study of the interactions between any given language and its environment". Ecolinguistics is shaped by key theoretical tradition, like Haugenian tradition and Hallidayan tradition, each providing unique insights into how language interacts with ecological systems. The Haugenian framework considers language an essential component of a broader ecological system, highlighting its interconnectedness with human thought, social structures, and the physical environment. Steffensen and Fill (2014) expanded on this view by categorizing the ecologies of language into four domains: symbolic, natural, sociocultural, and cognitive. The Hallidayan approach analyzes language's role in environmental harm, demonstrating how discourse patterns both reveal and reinforce human-centered worldviews that worsen ecological problems. This framework combines with critical discourse analysis to investigate how language shapes and sustains ideological systems affecting nature (Chen, 2016, p. 110; Halliday, 1991/2001).

Ecolinguistics offers a systematic approach for analyzing metaphors in environmental communication, promoting those that reflect ecological principles and support sustainability objectives. This linguistic perspective helps foster more balanced and sustainable human-nature interactions (Stibbe, 2021, pp. 64-67). It explores how linguistic choices can reveal underlying ecological attitudes and values.

Ecological Metaphors in *The Vegetarian*

The Vegetarian as a Metaphor for Rebellion

In the novel, meat consumption is deeply rooted in the cultural and familial structures, symbolizing tradition, masculinity, and social conformity. Yeong-hye's decision to eat vegetarian food serves as a powerful metaphor for her rebellion against social norms and expectations and is a radical act of defiance, challenging the status quo and insisting her individuality.

For example, when Yeong-hye's husband describes her as "completely unremarkable in every way", it underlines the pressure from society to meet certain standards of normality. Her transformation into a vegetarian

disrupts this standard and norm, making her stand out in a society that values uniformity. Here, the metaphor of vegetarianism represents a breakthrough from traditional roles and a search for personal and ecological authenticity.

Nature as a Restorative Power

Nature is frequently cited in the novel as a source of restoration and transformation. Yeong-hye's connection with nature is often described through vivid metaphors that blur the boundaries between the human and the natural world. For instance, she longs for "Leaves are growing out of my body" and "Roots are sprouting out of my hands", which shows her yearning to be integrated with nature. This metaphor not only reflects her psychological state, but also implies her deep ecological desire to reconnect with the natural world.

In addition, the imagery of trees and forests frequently appears in the novel, symbolizing the beauty and the terror of nature. When Yeong-hye is standing in the rain-soaked woods, her body is "like a ghostly afterimage overlaid on the silent scene", highlighting her fragile connection with the natural world. The forest here metaphorizes the unconscious mind, where repressed traumas and desires emerge. Through these metaphors, the novel explores the healing potential of nature while acknowledging wild and uncontrollable aspects of nature.

The Body as a Site of Ecological Struggle

In the novel, Yeong-hye's body becomes the central site of ecological struggle. Her physical body transforms from a conventional wife to a "vegetarian" and ends up becoming an existence that seems to transcend human boundaries, with her physical transformation richly expressed through metaphors. For example, her husband describes her as "a ghost" and "the skeletal frame of an invalid", highlighting the huge changes in her appearance. These metaphors not only depict her deteriorating health, but also symbolize her rejection of societal expectations and her pursuit of a more realistic, authentic, and ecological state of existence.

Furthermore, the metaphor of the body as a battleground is also evident in scenes where Yeong-hye's family tries to force her to eat meat. Her father's stuffed flesh into her mouth and the subsequent bloodshed were stark metaphors of social oppressive forces trying to control and dominate the individual. Yeong-hye's revolt, symbolized by her vomiting and self-harm, represents a desperate attempt to regain her body and maintain her ecological identity.

Ecolinguistic Analysis of *The Vegetarian*

Firstly, the language in *The Vegetarian* reflects a range of ecological values and attitudes. For instance, the repeated use of nature imagery and metaphors underscores the novel's ecological consciousness. The description of Yeong-hye's body as "a tree flickering in the rain like the spirit of some dead person" not only creates a vivid visual image but also conveys a sense of ecological interconnectedness. The tree here symbolizes both life and death, growth and decay, reflecting the complex relationship between humans and nature. Moreover, the language in the novel emphasizes the sensory and embodied experience of nature. Phrases like "the raindrops drum against her umbrella" and "the wet body of the woods" evoke a tactile and auditory connection with the environment, highlighting the importance of sensory perception in ecological awareness. Through such language, the novel invites readers to engage with nature to a deeper, more immediate level.

Secondly, silence plays a significant role in the ecological discourse of *The Vegetarian*. Yeong-hye's increasing withdrawal into silence can be interpreted as a form of ecological protest against the dominant linguistic and cultural norms. Her silence challenges the conventional modes of communication and forces those

around her to confront the limitations of language in expressing ecological experiences.

By contrast, the novel also explores the power of non-verbal communication, such as body language and gestures. For example, Yeong-hye's handstands and other physical acts serve as a form of communication that transcends language. These acts convey her ecological message more powerfully than words ever could, highlighting the importance of embodied experience in ecological understanding.

Ecological Themes and Critique of Society

One of the core ecological themes in *The Vegetarian* is the alienation of modern society from nature. This novel criticizes the materialist and consumerist culture that places human needs and desires above the well-being of nature. Yeong-hye's transformation can be seen as a criticism of this culture, because she refuses to accept societal norms that lead to environmental degradation. For instance, when she is invited by her husband to a luxurious restaurant for dinner, there is a scene where Yeong-hye's family tries to force her to eat feed her meat, which symbolizes the commodification of nature and the exploitation of animals for human consumption. The guests' reactions to her refusal to eat meat reveal their inadequacy to and discomfort with challenging the status quo and their tendency to maintain social harmony rather than solve ecological problems.

The novel also explores the desire for authenticity in a world full of ecological degradation. Yeong-hye's yearning for becoming one with nature represents a longing for a more real and meaningful existence. Her transformation fraughts with pain and suffering, but reflects a deep ecological desire to reconnect with the natural world and find a sense of belonging. This pursuit of authenticity is also reflected in Yeong-hye's sister In-hye. In-hye's struggles with social expectations and her ultimate realization of her co-conspiracy role in perpetuating these norms highlight the difficulty of living a real life in a society that advocates compliance with rules. Her attempts to understand and support Yeong-hye's ecological journey highlight the novel's exploration of the complex relationship between personal identity and ecological consciousness.

Conclusion

Through the rich use of metaphors and ecolinguistic strategies, *The Vegetarian* strongly criticizes modern society's alienation from nature and conducts a poignant exploration of the pursuit of ecological authenticity. The novel's ecological discourse challenges readers to reconsider their relationship with the natural world and to reflect on the linguistic and cultural norms that shape our ecological attitudes. By analyzing the ecological metaphors and ecolinguistic characteristics in the novel, this paper has attempt to reveal the ecological themes behind the novel and the novel's criticism of social norms. *The Vegetarian* ultimately invites readers to engage with the natural world on a deeper, more meaningful level and to recognize the importance of ecological consciousness in our contemporary lives.

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