

Squeezing, Tearing, and Rebirth: Constructing Dream as Thirdspace in The Vegetarian

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Abstract

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is renowned for its visceral exploration of trauma, yet the specific narrative function of its dreamscapes remains underexplored. This paper integrates Freudian psychoanalysis with Edward W. Soja's theory of "Thirdspace" to examine how dreams are constructed as a radical spatial entity in the novel. By analyzing the "dream-work" mechanisms of condensation, displacement, and distortion, the study argues that Han Kang constructs a heterogeneous space characterized by grotesque aesthetics and non-linear temporality. Within this space, the structural violence of the patriarchal order is manifested as a relentless "squeezing" of the subject, which in turn leads to an internal "tearing" of the self—a duality of victim and perpetrator that echoes Arendt's "banality of evil." However, the paper contends that the dream functions ultimately as a "Real-and-Imagined" Thirdspace: a site of strategic resistance. Through Yeong-hye's somatic "plant-becoming" and spatial inversion (the handstand), and In-hye's epistemological awakening, the dream deconstructs the binary logic of the anthropocentric reality. This study concludes that the dreamscape in *The Vegetarian* serves as a critical spatial practice, offering a post-human possibility for rebirth amidst the ruins of the symbolic order.

Keywords

the vegetarian, Thirdspace, dream narrative, spatiality, post-humanism, trauma

1. Introduction

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* has been widely acclaimed for its poetic yet brutal interrogation of historical trauma and human fragility. To date, critical scholarship has predominantly interpreted the novel through the lenses of eco-feminism, post-humanism, and ethics, focusing on binary oppositions such as gender conflict, the human-animal divide, and structural violence. While some scholars, such as Shao (2025), have noted the role of dreams in revealing the mechanisms of daily trauma, the specific narrative construction of these dreams and their function as an active spatial entity remain underexplored.

This paper aims to bridge this gap by integrating Freudian psychoanalysis with Edward W. Soja's theory of "Thirdspace." While psychoanalysis provides the necessary tools to decode the "dream-work"—the mechanisms of condensation, displacement, and distortion—Soja's spatial theory offers a "radically open" framework to interpret these dreams not merely as psychological symptoms, but as a dynamic "lived space" (Thirdspace). According to Soja, Thirdspace is a "Real-and-Imagined" realm that simultaneously encompasses and transcends the binary of perceived reality (Firstspace) and conceived representation (Secondspace).

This study argues that the dreamscapes in *The Vegetarian* function precisely as such a Thirdspace. By

analyzing the heterogeneous construction of dreams, this paper demonstrates how Han Kang creates a narrative space where linear temporality is shattered and spatiality is reinforced. It is within this “Real-and-Imagined” space that the squeezing of social discipline and the tearing of the fragmented subject are amplified, ultimately revealing a latent potential for “rebirth” and resistance against the established anthropocentric order. The dream, therefore, is re-evaluated not as a retreat from reality, but as a strategic spatial practice that seeks to break the deadlock of traumatic existence.

2. Section I. Constructing the Heterogeneous Space: Grotesque Aesthetics and Irrational Mechanisms

Having established the theoretical framework of dream-as-space, it is necessary to first dismantle the construction of this space. How is such a “Thirdspace” built within the narrative? Unlike the logical progression of the waking world, the dreamscapes in *The Vegetarian* are not random hallucinations but are meticulously constructed through specific “dream-work” mechanisms. This section examines how Han Kang utilizes grotesque materials and psychoanalytic mechanisms to build a heterogeneous reality that defies the laws of time and physics.

2.1 Material Selection: The Grotesque Aesthetics of Violence

The construction of this space begins with the selection of visceral, non-rational materials. The narrative is saturated with what can be termed “grotesque aesthetics.” Yeong-hye’s dreams are not ethereal but heavy with physical sensations. She describes “slippery eyeballs,” “cracked skulls,” and “intestines long and winding.” The auditory landscape is equally brutal, filled with “the roar of beasts” and the resonant “clanging of metal shovels.”

These materials-pools of blood, raw meat, and cold, dark forests-serve a dual function. Firstly, they amplify the sensory experience to an unbearable degree, forcing the reader to confront the violence that civilized society attempts to hide. Secondly, they act as symbols of resistance. By reducing human and animal bodies to indistinguishable “meat,” the dream exposes the brutality of the anthropocentric order. The blood in the dream is not merely a sign of death, but a vital fluid that connects the victim and the perpetrator, blurring the boundaries between them.

2.2 Processing Mechanisms: Condensation, Distortion, and Displacement

To organize these raw materials into a dream narrative, the text employs specific mechanisms described by Freud to bypass the censorship of the conscious mind.

2.2.1 Condensation

This mechanism is most visibly at work in the recurring image of the “faceless figure.” Yeong-hye reminds: “It’s different every time. Sometimes it feels very familiar, other times I’m sure I’ve never seen it before. There are times when it’s all bloody...and times when it looks like the face of a rotting corpse.” (Han, 2015, p.96) This single image compresses multiple antagonistic figures-her father, her husband, and her own internalized guilt-into one composite entity. This face is an amalgamation of all victims and perpetrators, signifying that violence is structural and pervasive rather than individual.

2.2.2 Distortion

While condensation compresses meaning, distortion alters the form of the subject to satisfy repressed desires. In the “Tree of Fire” sequence, Yeong-hye dreams of a radical metamorphosis: “I’m doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands...they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly...yes, I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread them wide...” (Han, 2015, p.104) Here, the dream distorts the human form to fulfill her desire to become a plant. The image of the “crotch blooming flowers” serves as a substitute for human reproduction, allowing her to birth a botanical existence. Through this distortion, the dream creates a “plant-human hybrid” that defies biological laws, offering a visual fulfillment of her wish to exit the human order.

2.2.3 Displacement

Finally, displacement reveals the deep-seated paradox of the subject. While Yeong-hye rigidly adheres to vegetarianism in her waking life, her unconscious is flooded with aggressive acts. She dreams of “chewing on raw meat” and “slitting someone’s throat.” The dream displaces her repressed rage-against the violence inflicted upon her-onto the very act she consciously abhors. This creates a tension where the “vegetarian” becomes the “butcher” in the unconscious realm, revealing the intensity of the conflict she suppresses in reality.

2.3 The Ontology of the Dream: Fragmentation, Non-Linearity, and Tension

Beyond materials and mechanisms, the dream possesses a distinct ontology characterized by three core features: narrative fragmentation, temporal non-linearity, and unresolvable tension.

2.3.1 Narrative Fragmentation and Sensory Shock

Unlike the coherent narratives of waking life, the dreams in the novel are presented as scattered fragments. These fragments are characterized by high-intensity sensory shock-visuals of “red raw meat” and “black forests,” sounds of “screams.” This fragmentation amplifies the psychological impact, allowing the reader to experience the “tearing” of the subject’s psyche directly through visceral sensation rather than logical explanation.

2.3.2 Temporal Non-Linearity and Cyclicity

The dream space dismantles the linear progression of time. There are no clear markers of “before” or “after”; instead, time is shattered into a cyclical recurrence of trauma. As Yeong-hye repeatedly dreams of the same slaughter, the narrative focus shifts from when it happens to where it happens-transforming the dream from a temporal event into a spatial entity. This echoes Borges’ concept of the “Aleph,” a point where all places coexist, allowing the dream to become a container for infinite, simultaneous truths and well preparing for the later functioning of Thirdspace.

2.3.3 The Tension of Self-Contradiction

Finally, the dream space is defined by the coexistence of irreconcilable opposites. Yeong-hye dreams of a peaceful, sunlit picnic while simultaneously feeling the terror of blood on her mouth. Similarly, In-hye sees her reflection in a mirror bleeding, yet the reflection remains motionless. These contradictory elements-peace and violence, action and stasis-do not cancel each other out but coexist in a state of high tension. This “unresolvable tension” is precisely what constitutes the Thirdspace: a zone where binary oppositions are forced into confrontation, creating a fissure through which resistance can emerge.

3. Section II. Power Projection and Subject Fragmentation

Since previous section explored how the dream space is constructed internally through irrational mechanisms, this section shifts the focus to what this space reveals about the external world. The dream in *The Vegetarian* does not exist in a vacuum; it is a direct projection of the power dynamics governing Yeong-hye’s reality. In the novel, the violence is not sporadic but structural-a relentless force that Foucault describes as “disciplinary power.” By analyzing the twin themes of “squeezing” (external pressure) and “tearing” (internal fragmentation), we can see how the dream functions as a mirror-or in Foucault’s terms, a heterotopia-that reflects and distorts the brutality of the patriarchal society.

3.1 The Pervasive Squeeze: From the Dinner Table to the Heterotopia

The squeezing begins in the Firstspace of physical reality, specifically within the domestic sphere. The novel depicts violence as an inescapable atmosphere. The most traumatic instance occurs at the family dinner, where the father, a veteran embodying authoritarian patriarchy, attempts to correct Yeong-hye’s deviation. When she refuses to eat meat, he resorts to physical force: “he’d hit her so hard that the blood showed through the skin of her cheek.” (Han, 2015, p.38) This act of force-feeding is the ultimate squeeze-the violent intrusion of the symbolic order into the subject’s body.

The dream narratives amplify this violence by connecting it to a history of cruelty. The text explicitly links Yeong-hye's trauma to the memory of "Whitey", the family dog. Her father tied the dog to a motorcycle and "ran it until it died of exhaustion" simply because "running the dog before death makes the meat more tender." In her dreams, this specific memory of utilitarian violence-where a living being is reduced to meat for consumption-permeates the atmosphere.

Under this pressure, the dream space transforms into a Foucauldian "Heterotopia of Deviation." The psychiatric hospital where Yeong-hye is confined serves as the physical manifestation of this space-a site of exclusion for those who fail to conform. However, her dreams reveal that the so-called "sane" world is the true locus of horror. In a pivotal dream, Yeong-hye wanders into a warm, sunlit park-a symbol of normative happiness-where people are enjoying a picnic. Yet, the scene is undercut by a grotesque detail: she is paralyzed by terror because she feels "blood is on her mouth" and she is "hiding a piece of raw meat" behind her back. This contrast exposes the hypocrisy of the social contract: to participate in the picnic of civilized society, one must hide the raw meat of the violence that sustains it. The dream thus exposes the "squeeze" not as a corrective measure, but as a mechanism of ruthless conformity.

3.2 The Internalized Tear: The Banality of Evil and the Split Subject

The relentless external pressure inevitably leads to an internal "tearing" of the subject. The violence of the external world is internalized, leading to a fragmentation where the distinction between victim and perpetrator collapses. This phenomenon echoes Hannah Arendt's concept of the "Banality of Evil," suggesting that violence in the novel is not committed by monsters, but is woven into the collective unconscious of ordinary people.

This "tearing" is vividly illustrated in the dreams of the male characters, who are ostensibly the agents of power. Yeong-hye's husband, an "ordinary" man who despises his wife for her non-conformity, dreams of a brutal slaughter. He describes "ripping out long, curved intestines" and "handling the corpse like a live fish," stripping the meat from the bone. This dream betrays the latent aggression beneath his mediocre facade, revealing that the "squeeze" of patriarchy also dehumanizes the oppressor, turning him into a butcher in his unconscious.

For the female subjects, the "tearing" manifests as a profound duality. In Yeong-hye's recurring nightmares, the identity of the killer is dangerously fluid. She asks: "Murderer or murdered....hazy distinctions, boundaries wearing thin. Familiarity bleeds into strangeness, certainty becomes impossible." (Han, 2015, p.30) This ambiguity signifies that she has internalized the aggressor; the violence done to her has become a constituent part of her psyche. She is torn between the desire to escape violence and the unconscious drive to reenact it.

Similarly, her sister In-hye experiences a moment of terrifying dissociation. In a dream-like trance, she gazes into a mirror and sees "blood flowing from her eyes." She raises her hand to wipe the blood, but "the reflection in the mirror remains motionless," staring back blankly. This specular split symbolizes her complicity. As a bystander who watched her father abuse the dog and her sister without intervening, In-hye is "torn" between her guilt and her survival instinct. The motionless reflection represents her "frozen" moral agency. Through this image, the dream space reveals that the "tearing" of the subject is the inevitable cost of surviving in a world structured by the "banality of evil"-where silence is a form of violence, and no one remains whole.

4. Section III. Radical Openness and Rebirth in Thirdspace

Having analyzed the mechanisms of construction and the projection of oppressive power, we arrive at the crucial question: Is the dream merely a passive replay of trauma, or does it offer a possibility for agency? This section argues for the latter. Drawing on Soja's concept of "Thirdspace" as a site of "radical openness," we demonstrate how the dream serves as a strategic spatial practice. It is within this "Real-and-Imagined" realm that the subject, pushed to the brink by the "squeeze" of reality, attempts to carve out a new ontology. By deconstructing the binary logic of the waking world, the dream opens up a hybrid space where resistance is enacted not through violence, but through spatial inversion and epistemological awakening.

4.1 Spatial Inversion: Body Politics and the Rejection of Verticality

The most profound manifestation of this spatial resistance is Yeong-hye's obsession with the "handstand." In the Firstspace of physical reality, her behavior is pathologized as madness; however, within the logic of the Thirdspace, it is a deliberate counter-hegemonic practice. She explicitly states her reasoning: she needs to stand on her hands to "water her body" because she is becoming a tree.

This act constitutes a radical spatial inversion. In the anthropocentric order, "standing upright" (*Homo erectus*) is the defining posture of humanity, symbolizing rationality, civilization, and the domination of nature (the head positioned above the earth). By inverting her body-burying her head (the center of logos/reason) towards the ground and extending her legs (the agents of mobility/conquest) into the air like branches-Yeong-hye physically rejects the vertical hierarchy of the patriarchal system.

Her dream narrative reinforces this metamorphosis with vivid botanical imagery: "leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands..." (Han, 2015, p. 104). This is not merely a hallucination but the construction of a "plant-human hybrid" identity. The image of the "crotch blooming flowers" is particularly significant; it serves as a counter-narrative to traditional biological reproduction. Instead of birthing another human subject into the Symbolic Order (as expected of a wife and mother), she births a botanical existence. Through this "becoming-plant" (a Deleuzian concept realized here spatially), she exits the predator/prey binary entirely. She refuses to be an agent of violence (a meat-eater) or a victim, choosing instead a third mode of existence: pure, vegetative receptivity.

4.2 Epistemological Rupture: In-hye's Awakening and the "Real" Nightmare

If Yeong-hye's resistance is somatic (bodily), her sister In-hye's resistance is epistemological (cognitive). Throughout the narrative, In-hye embodies the "Secondspace"-she is the upholder of social norms, the good wife, and the responsible sister who maintains the façade of order. However, through her constant witnessing of Yeong-hye's disintegration, In-hye enters the Thirdspace of the dream, which facilitates a profound "epistemological rupture."

The turning point occurs when In-hye gazes into the mirror in a dream-like state. She sees blood flowing from her eyes, yet her reflection remains motionless. This dissonance forces her to confront the falsity of her waking life. For years, she has believed that Yeong-hye is the one trapped in a nightmare of madness. However, the Thirdspace of the dream reveals the inverse truth: the "normal" world-characterized by marital rape, emotional estrangement, and the "squeezing" of social expectations-is the true nightmare.

This realization culminates in the novel's closing moments, where In-hye whispers a subversive truth to the ambulance window: "Perhaps this is all a kind of dream." (Han, 2015, p. 145). This statement is not a retreat into nihilism but a radical political act. By labeling the oppressive reality as a "dream" (a construct), she strips the Firstspace of its absolute authority and inevitability. In Soja's terms, she realizes that the "sanity" she has fought to preserve is merely a mechanism of control. This awakening allows her to align herself, finally, with Yeong-hye. She moves from being an agent of the "squeeze" (forcing Yeong-hye to eat) to a subject who recognizes the "tear" in the fabric of reality.

4.3 The Intergenerational Metaphor: The Bird with Hands as Evolutionary Possibility

The potential of the Thirdspace extends beyond the individual tragedies of the sisters and manifests in a singular, surreal image: the "bird with hands." This image appears in the dream/hallucination of In-hye's young son, Ji-woo.

In the symbolic economy of the novel, "hands" are consistently associated with human violence and agency-hands that beat, hands that force-feed, hands that butcher. "Wings," conversely, symbolize transcendence and escape. The child's vision of a bird that possesses both implies a hybridity characteristic of Soja's Thirdspace-a "both/and" logic rather than "either/or."

This hybrid creature serves as a "radical allegory of life". It suggests an evolutionary possibility: a being that retains human agency (the hand) but has acquired the capacity for freedom (the wing). Unlike Yeong-hye, whose escape requires the total negation of her humanity (becoming a tree), and In-hye, whose awakening comes at the cost of despair, the child's dream hints at a future synthesis. It offers a glimmer of hope that the

next generation might navigate the “squeezing” world without being “torn” apart—that they might find a way to fly with their hands, transforming the instruments of violence into tools for flight. Thus, the dream concludes not in death, but in the open-ended possibility of a new form of life.

5. Conclusion

This paper has systematically interrogated the dream narratives in Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*, repositioning them from mere psychoanalytic symptoms to active spatial constructs within the framework of Edward W. Soja’s “Thirdspace.” By synthesizing Freudian mechanisms with spatial theory, this study demonstrates that the dreamscape in the novel serves as a “Real-and-Imagined” site where the binary oppositions of reality/fantasy, human/nature, and compliance/resistance are radically deconstructed.

Through the analysis of the dream’s construction, we observed how the author employs “grotesque aesthetics” and irrational mechanisms—condensation, displacement, and distortion—to build a heterogeneous space. This space is not a passive receptacle of trauma but a dynamic field that mirrors the structural violence of the “Firstspace.” As discussed, the pervasive “squeezing” of disciplinary power manifests as an omnipresent threat in the dream, forcing the subject into a state of internal “tearing” where the roles of victim and perpetrator become indistinguishable.

However, the ultimate significance of the dream lies in its function as a Thirdspace of radical openness. It is within this “lived space” that the protagonists enact a desperate form of resistance. Yeong-hye’s “plant-becoming” and her spatial inversion (the handstand) represent an ontological refusal of the anthropocentric order. Similarly, In-hye’s epistemological awakening—redefining reality as a “dream”—destabilizes the legitimacy of the patriarchal hegemony.

In conclusion, *The Vegetarian* suggests that when the physical body is squeezed by the machinery of modern civilization to the point of collapse, the “Thirdspace” of the dream offers the only possibility for flight. This is not an escape into void, but a strategic spatial practice. By coupling corporeality with spatiality, Han Kang reveals a profound paradox: it is only through the “ruin” of the human subject—the tearing apart of the self—that a new, post-human possibility for “rebirth” can emerge. The “bird with hands” remains a fragile yet potent symbol of this evolution, signaling that even in the darkest grasp of structural violence, the drive for life persists in searching for a new spatial form.

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Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my instructor, Professor Gong Jushan, from South Central Minzu University, for his inspiring lectures on the course Literary Criticism. His guidance on spatial narrative theory and Freudian psychoanalysis provided the essential theoretical framework for this study. I also wish to thank Mr. Chen Junyan for his constructive suggestions during the early stages of this research.

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