

# Reclaiming Spaces: Female Body and Kitchen as Sites of Contestation in Ambai and Han Kang

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## ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comparative study of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and C.S. Lakshmi's (Ambai's) *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House*, two seminal works that echo women's bodies and autonomy in acts of resistance within patriarchal societies. Although they both emerge from different cultural contexts—the Korean and the Indian—the underlying core in terms of women's questionings on everyday violence, expectations, and silencing would speak to each other. *The Vegetarian* depicts Yeong-hye's radical refusal of meat as symbolic rebellion against bodily control, showing how women's agency is pathologized and punished. While Ambai's stories centre on domesticity, particularly kitchens, to reveal how the woman negotiates identity, creativity, and desire within crippling family structures. The present paper makes an attempt through feminist literary analyses as to how symbolism, narrative fragmentation, and embodied metaphors are used to represent the struggle for selfhood of women in both works. The study concludes that both texts expand the discourse on feminist consciousness by portraying the kitchen and the body as contested terrains shaped by social control yet capable of profound transformation.

**Keywords:** Gendered violence, Women's bodies, Domestic Space, Women's autonomy, Feminist Literary Analysis

## INTRODUCTION

Feminist spatial theory and body politics provide an essential perspective on the way gender power works through space. Space is not a neutral space, but one that is produced through power relations (Lefebvre 1991), and feminist authors stress the fact that the body and the home are highly politicized spaces. In one example, Alison Blunt points out that the home itself is highly political, both in its domestic relations as well as through its interactions with the rest of the world, in which gendered relations are not only practiced but also ruthlessly reproduced (Meah). In the same manner, the feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir also remark that it is not born but a woman is made, pointing out to the development of feminine subjectivity.

South Korean author Han Kang, and Tamil writer Ambai (C.S. Lakshmi) are the two writers compared in this paper. Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2015) and Ambai's *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* (2019) both foreground women's bodies and domestic space as contested terrains of patriarchal control and creative resistance. The paper argues that in both texts the female body and the kitchen are depicted as parallel gendered spaces initially sites of violent discipline but also potential sites of feminist contestation. Yeong-hye's radical bodily refusal in *The Vegetarian* and Ambai's complex reimagining of the kitchen, each expose how patriarchal norms seek to regulate women, and how women, in turn, claim agency. Ultimately, despite vast cultural differences, Kang and Ambai reveal a convergent insight the private sphere whether a physical body or a domestic hearth can be a locus of both oppression and transgressive possibility.

Han Kang and Ambai depict the female body and the kitchen as interrelated social spaces where patriarchal power is exercised and resisted. Using feminist spatial theory and body politics, this paper will show how *The*

*Vegetarian* and *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* together demonstrate that what may appear as fixed zones of discipline can be reworked by women's agency.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* has highlighted its themes of female embodiment, silence, and ecological symbolism. Critics often read Yeong-hye's abrupt refusal to eat meat as an allegory of feminist resistance. Carol J. Adams's feminist-vegetarian theory is frequently evoked meat eating is understood in *The Vegetarian* as "the re-inscription of male power at every meal"

The link between gender, space, and the body sits right at the core of feminist literary studies. Writers love to dig into how places like kitchens—and even the female body itself—end up as battlefields for patriarchal control and moments of resistance. Ambai's *\*A Kitchen in the Corner of the House\** and Han Kang's *\*The Vegetarian\** both turn these spaces into more than just settings. They're charged with meaning, alive with tension, and places where women fight to claim a sense of self.

Feminist critics see it as a gendered trap—T.S. Sridevi says Ambai's kitchen shrinks women's lives to a narrow world of care and service (Sridevi 2022, p. 8). The old line that women belong "inside the four walls" isn't just tradition; it's an old wound, kept open by sayings like the German "Kinder, Küche, Kirche," tying womanhood to motherhood, housework, and obedience. The kitchen's walls are both real and psychological.

More recent critics are pushing back, noticing sparks of defiance within those same kitchens. Daily routines, the so-called "woman's work," sometimes bite back. The kitchen, for some, is a chessboard where women test the limits of what's expected—even if it's subtle, a look, a gesture, refusing to cook exactly as expected. Spain (1993) argues that being tied to the kitchen holds women back from public life (Spain 1993, pp. 137–138), yet, even from this position, women work out tiny victories, carve out slivers of autonomy, and challenge their boundaries from the inside.

Ambai's stories don't romanticize the kitchen. Jiji, for instance, might look like she's in charge, but her "power" is mostly smoke and mirrors. The kitchen is shown as rundown, stuffy, and claustrophobic, mirroring how society undervalues women themselves (Sridevi 2022, p. 9). Blocked windows in the text aren't just decor—they shut out hope and keep women dreaming small. Scholars read this kitchen as a snapshot of patriarchal society: everything keeps running because women are there, but nobody really sees or hears them.

Switch gears to Han Kang's *\*The Vegetarian\**, and it's the body itself that becomes the front line. Ecofeminist thinkers like Carol J. Adams jump in, showing how the systems that oppress women often treat animals the same way—objects to be controlled and consumed (Adams 2015). Meat is tangled up with ideas of masculinity, so when Yeong Hye decides to stop eating it, she isn't just skipping a meal. She's refusing to play along with social scripts that tie her identity to submission and flesh (Snigdha & Gomathi 2024, p. 19).

This decision isn't just misunderstood, it's branded as madness—"her deviation from conventional food habits is viewed as insanity" (Snigdha & Gomathi 2024, p. 21). That pushback says a lot. Patriarchy isn't just about control; it labels rebellion as illness. Greta Gaard puts it simply: choosing vegetarianism in a patriarchal, meat-focused culture is a logical leap for anyone fed up with the system (Gaard 2002, p. 117). Yeong Hye's refusal, her rebellion against eating, becomes a powerful way to reclaim her own body.

People control women, critics say, by controlling what they eat. Michael Fox argues that "what we are is due to the meaning we superimpose on our food" (Fox 1999, p. 24). So when Yeong Hye says no to meat, she's really saying no to the whole package—expectations, identities forced on her, the bargain of being "female." Her later connection with plants is the final step: she's out—she won't be defined, not by gender, not even by human standards.

both Ambai and Han Kang, see how patriarchy works through kitchens, through bodies, through rules about food and space. Ambai focuses on the cramped kitchen, Han Kang on the contested body. But in both, resistance shows up through refusal, questions, and subtle acts of rebellion. Just by stepping out of line, these women

challenge Using feminist and ecofeminist ideas, critics show how Ambai and Han Kang make these spaces places to push back, speak up, and demand change. That's a solid foundation for digging even deeper into how women claim agency even when the odds are stacked against them.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is grounded in feminist spatial theory and body politics, with an ecofeminist perspective. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's idea that space is "produced" by social relations, and on Doreen Massey's argument that spaces have mutable "power-geometries" based on gender and class, we view both the kitchen and the female body as socially constructed sites. Gillian Rose's feminist geography reminds us that we must "give voice" to those silenced by space. Judith Butler's concept of gender as performative (the idea that gendered behavior is enacted rather than innate) further illuminates how Yeong-hye and Ambai's female characters rebel by violating prescribed performances. Simone de Beauvoir's insight that gendered femininity is culturally imposed underlines our view of the female body as disciplined into "womanhood."

Ecofeminist theory is also central Carol J. Adams's *Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990) argues that eating animals metaphorically serves patriarchal domination. The analysis of dualisms criticized by Val Plumwood (culture/nature, male/female) also makes us realize a way food, environment and body intersect in patriarchal systems. Lastly, the theory of everyday resistance (1985) is the theory by James C. Scott to explain even more subtle forms of rebellion like silence, intelligent compliance or re-worked domestic practices that do not fit the dramatic description of overt protest. The silent change of Yeong-hye or the minor changes to which the homemakers of Ambai resorted can be perceived through the eyes of Scott as strategies that sabotaged the control internally. Both readings will be used to read Kang and Ambai with an effort of identifying the interaction between the realms of space and the body across cultures.

### Research Gap

"The Vegetarian" by Han Kang has focussed especially regarding trauma, bodily defiance and silence. Ambai's "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" has not gotten much critical analysis, especially in transnational feminist studies. Most academic studies look at these texts separately of comparing them in an Asian literary context. Some recent research like Samal and Mishras (2025) study has started to look at gendered dynamics in Ambai's stories. However these analyses are limited to feminist literature and do not compare with other Asian literary works. Ecofeminist readings of *The Vegetarian* mainly focus on independence, aggression and the connection between humans and nature. They do not place them in the context of Asian feminist works. Because of this a big gap in research still exists. It combines feminism, body politics and ecofeminist views in a comparative transnational approach. The connection between home space, the kitchen and the female body has not been explored in South and East Asian feminist writings. This research fills that gap by comparing *The Vegetarian* and *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House*. It shows how each work rethinks the relationships between gender, space and embodiment, in cultural settings.

## METHODOLOGY

The present paper utilizes the methods of qualitative and comparative literary analysis based on feminist hermeneutics. The research work engages in the close reading of the English translations of *The Vegetarian* (Korean to English), *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* (Tamil to English) and explore how the power of space and body is encoded via narrative, imagery, and characterization. The texts were selected because of their dominance in Asian feminist fiction today and their direct emphasis on domesticity and body. Interdisciplinary literary interpretation is informed by feminist geography, body theory and ecofeminist criticism. At all times, we keep the focus on the two novels in balance such that a cross-cultural comparison is made which points out the commonalities and differences

### Analysis

The aim of this paper is to explore the concept of reclamation of spaces as it has been represented in the female body and kitchen as spaces that were contested in the stories written by C.S. Ambai and Han Kang, both of whom, though they come from different backgrounds, have one thing in common, i.e., their interest in feminism

and patriarchy. The kitchen, as it has been represented in the stories written by Ambai, not only represents a physical space within a particular home but also represents a historically constructed space wherein women's work, silence, and emotions were represented. However, it has also been a space wherein women negotiated their actions as a subversive act. The female body, as it has been represented in *The Vegetarian* written by Han Kang, represents a subversive space wherein the female protagonist's act of not eating, not being sexual, and not being social represents a subversive act against the cultural expectations that are laid upon women's bodies in a Confucian-patriarchal society in Korea. Thus, both these authors have moved beyond the idea of spaces as they were represented to reveal them as spaces wherein women have struggled.

Analysis of the texts has shown that while Ambai's characters are able to take back space through their own reflection and assertion, Han Kang's character makes a much more dramatic withdrawal from normative embodiment, one that uses the body as protest. What one can see from these texts, and others like them, is that patriarchal systems seek to control both space and body, and that these are also sites of women's negotiation of identity, autonomy, and agency.

In terms of the methodology, the research can be classified as utilizing an interdisciplinary methodology with elements of feminist spatial theory, body politics, and domesticity studies.

Utilizing the concept of the social production of space as described by Henri Lefebvre, the research has revealed that the kitchen can be described as an ideologically constructed space, and that the gender roles that are spatially played out can be described as the ideologically constructed environment. The description of space as relational and dynamic, as described by Doreen Massey, has also been useful in the description of the kitchen as a space that can be imagined and reoccupied through narrative form.

The understanding of the female body is also greatly influenced by the ideas of theorists like Susan Bordo and Judith Butler, who have greatly contributed to the understanding of body discipline and performativity, thus greatly helping in understanding how culture writes obedience on the female body. Close analysis of texts is the major method used, whereby the use of imagery, narrative, and symbolism, as well as the senses, is used to gain an understanding of the use of spatial and bodily metaphors in each of the texts. Another method used is the comparative method, which greatly helps in understanding Ambai's South Asian context and the East Asian context of Han Kang, thus understanding how the mechanisms of gendered confinement are constructed differently in different socio-cultural contexts. Instead of focusing on space as a backdrop, this method ensures that physical and metaphorical space is understood, thus gaining an understanding of how literature helps in spatial reclamation.

The results of this study confirm that the space of the kitchen and the space of the female body are parallel spaces of patriarchal domination, and yet, at the same time, they are spaces of empowerment. In Ambai's work, space becomes a space of female memory and knowledge, where women attain emotional and intellectual freedom in the space of domination, thus becoming a space of resistance in life. In Han Kang's work, the non-compliance of the female body to patriarchal norms reveals the violence that is embedded in cultural norms, thus becoming a space that sustains cultural norms through the domination of female bodies.

Ultimately, what both authors are working against is the idea of oppression and freedom as binary concepts, and what they are working toward is the idea of a spectrum of negotiation, where women are negotiating spaces and subtly changing their definitions. The research also hopes to prove that feminist spatial reclamation is an interplay between the physical, psychological, and symbolic, and that it highlights the power of literature to redefine gender spaces as unstable and open to reinterpretation. The comparative analysis of the works of both authors hopes to contribute to the discourse of feminist literature, showing how spaces such as the home and the body are not peripheral but, in fact, crucial to understanding the dynamics of power and resistance in women's worlds.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that both *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang and *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* by Ambai employ the female body and the kitchen to discuss male power and female resistance to it, despite the

fact that the use of their cultures is evident. The mutism and refusal of meat by Yeong-hye in *The Vegetarian* are physical point zero of her insurrection to male dominance, based on the ideology of ecofeminism. In the collection by Ambai, the kitchen that appears to be a relatively banal part of the house turns out to be a symbolic place of battle, in which the efforts and memory of women clash with social limitations. These two texts therefore show that gendered spaces are not only prisons they can be places of creative possibilities.

This paper would add to the field of feminist literature and spatial theory by showing that female agency can take on similar but highly distinct forms. It extends the discussion of transnational feminism by drawing parallels between the South Asian and East Asian views. It also reveals the merit of integrating ecofeminism with the spatial theory vegetarianism and domesticity become intertwined in opposing mastery of nature and women by fathers (Adams 1990; Plumwood 1993). Future studies could apply this transnational spatial method to other genres and spaces (such as discussing kitchens in Chinese literature or body politics in Southeast Asian fiction) or just examine the actual space of resistance in modern Asia. At any rate, Kang and Ambai make us aware of the fact that even the most personal areas may be engaged in the struggle a theme of critical significance in feminist studies.

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