

**From Domestic Brutality to State Power:
Mapping Multidimensional Violence in Han Kang's
The Vegetarian and
Nayantara Sahgal's Storm in Chandigarh
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18116625>

ABSTRACT:

This paper explores how different kinds of violence—from pressures within families to the power of the state—are connected in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007; trans. 2015) and Nayantara Sahgal's *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969). In Kang's novel, a woman's choice to stop eating meat leads to increasing abuse that begins at home and ends in a mental hospital, showing how patriarchal rules justify violence in both private and public spaces. In Sahgal's novel, the 1966 division of Punjab affects marriages and friendships, suggesting that political separation and personal conflict share the same grammar of domination and exclusion.

By closely studying the texts, the paper shows how personal violence—especially men's control over women's bodies—spreads into emotional, social, and political areas. Both novels portray violence as a continuous process where the woman's body and the divided region become comparable targets of control and struggle. Although acts of resistance—such as choosing vegetarianism or leaving a marriage—are fragile and incomplete, they still reveal weaknesses in the power structures that try to suppress them.

KEYWORDS:

Violence. Patriarchy, State Power, Body, Partition, Resistance.

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Introduction

The literature of political and personal struggle often finds a chilling synchronicity between the violence that governs the intimate space of the home and the violence that dictates the terms of public life. This essay argues that Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Nayantara Sahgal's *Storm* in Chandigarh, despite being separated by geography, culture, and historical moment, share an intense preoccupation with control—control over the body, the household, and the nation-state.

In Kang's novella, protagonist Yeong-hye's rejection of meat triggers domestic aggression from her husband, father, and medical authorities, symbolizing patriarchal policing of female corporeality. Sahgal's narrative, set against the Punjab partition tensions, depicts women's entrapment in marital and extramarital dynamics amid state-induced "storms," where individual psyches mirror national fractures. In each case, the domestic sphere functions not as a refuge from public violence but as its most intimate laboratory.

The Vegetarian: From Spousal Control to Systemic Silencing

Han Kang's novel is structured as a three-part narrative, each part narrated by someone other than Yeong-hye herself, a formal choice that mirrors the systematic silencing she undergoes. The first violation is domestic and banal. Yeong-hye's husband, Mr. Cheong, describes her vegetarianism as an intolerable inconvenience:

"Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way" (Kang 11).

Mr. Cheong, the narrator of the first part, inflicts significant sexual and psychological violence on her. Frustrated by her refusal to eat meat, which leads to her physical deterioration and withdrawal from intimacy, he rapes her repeatedly. This is carried out through non-consensual sexual acts, often described in cold, detached terms that emphasize his sense of entitlement to her body as part of marital duties. The purpose is to reestablish control and satisfy his desires, viewing her vegetarianism as an inconvenient rebellion against her role as a submissive wife.

Yeong-hye's father, Mr. Kim, a Vietnam War veteran embodying rigid patriarchal authority, perpetrates some of the most brutal physical violence in the novel. During the family dinner intervention, he slaps Yeong-hye across the face when she refuses to eat meat, then orders her

husband and brother to pin her arms while he shoves a piece of pork into her mouth.

“He rammed the pork into her mouth as blood dripped down her chin” (Kang 32).

This force-feeding is executed with aggressive physical force, including holding her down and ignoring her resistance, with the explicit purpose of compelling her to abandon her vegetarianism and conform to cultural norms around food and obedience.

The brother-in-law, an unnamed video artist and husband to Yeong-hye's sister In-hye, commits sexual violence driven by artistic obsession in the second part. Fascinated by Yeong-hye's Mongolian mark (a blue-grey spot on the skin) and her plant-like detachment, he paints flowers on her naked body for a video project, escalating to non-consensual sex after painting himself similarly. This is executed by forcing himself on her despite her screams of protest, blending exploitation with eroticism in a studio setting. The purpose is twofold: to fulfill his creative vision of merging human and vegetal forms, and to gratify his sexual arousal from the process, treating Yeong-hye as an object rather than a person. His actions culminate in In-hye discovering the footage and compels her to call emergency services, highlighting how his “art” veils predatory behavior.

Medical professionals and hospital staff of Ch'ukseong Psychiatric Hospital represent institutional violence, perpetrated on Yeong-hye in the name of treatment. Doctors force-feed her through physical compulsion and threaten sedation or injections to prevent vomiting, stabbing her with needles when necessary. These methods are executed in a clinical setting with restraints and medical tools, with the purpose of saving her life from starvation. However, the novel portrays this as a continuation of the familial violence, stripping Yeong-hye of agency and reinforcing her desire to transcend human form. Yeong-hye's brother, Yeong-ho, assists in restraining her during the force-feeding. He shows no willingness to understand what his sister is going through. Just like their parents, Yeong-ho completely severs all communication with his sisters.

Finally, Yeong-hye herself engages in self-directed violence as a form of resistance and escape. Overwhelmed by the family intervention, she slits her wrist with a fruit knife, a deliberate act of self-harm intended

as suicide to reject the imposed violence and her human existence tainted by consumption. She also starves herself progressively, refusing all food, viewing it as a transformation into a plant free from harm. In her dreams, she envisions violent acts like devouring raw meat or fearing she might harm others, internalizing the novel's critique of humanity's inherent destructiveness. These self-inflicted harms, carried out through denial and physical wounding, serve the purpose of reclaiming autonomy, though they lead to her institutionalization and near-death state.

In the novel's final section, Yeong-hye's sister In-hye watches her perform handstands in the psychiatric ward, attempting to become plant rather than animal:

"Why, is it such a bad thing to die?" (Kang 157).

The question is not rhetorical; it is ontological. To refuse meat is to refuse participation in a cycle of violence that defines the human. Overall, the violence in *The Vegetarian* critiques the cycle of harm perpetuated by societal structures, with Yeong-hye's body as the battleground for control and liberation.

Storm in Chandigarh: Partition as Domestic Fracture

"Violence lies very close to the surface in the Punjab" (Sahgal 7).

Sahgal's narrative unfolds amid tensions between Punjab's Harpal Singh and Haryana's Gyan Singh. The novel portrays the violence, disorder, and tense political atmosphere of the late 1960s, during the linguistic bifurcation of Punjab into two new states—Punjabi-speaking Punjab and Hindi-speaking Haryana—with Chandigarh serving as their shared capital.

The rivalry illustrates how political leaders weaponize authority. Sahgal writes, "The city waited, suspended between two men who used power like personal armour" (Sahgal 47).

Gyan Singh, the Chief Minister of Punjab, is the primary perpetrator of political violence, embodying a "cult of violence" driven by Machiavellian ambition. He instigates strikes and factory outbursts against Harpal Singh, the Chief Minister of Haryana, and the broader Haryana administration, with the purpose of exerting pressure to secure concessions on resources like the Bhakra Dam's electricity and water, while exploiting linguistic and religious sentiments for personal power.

This is carried out through calculated manipulation, including threats of mass strikes that escalate into brutal confrontations, such as an evening attempt on Harpal's life where strikers shoot him, leaving him wounded and hospitalized. Gyan's actions symbolize aggressive political blackmail, contrasting with Harpal's non-violent stance, and he later calls off a strike hypocritically as a "token of respect" after the Union Home Minister's death, primarily to preserve his position. His violence extends indirectly to ordinary citizens and workers, fostering urban chaos and discontent, as seen in factory strikes that disrupt lives and reflect the novel's theme of violence surging like "tidal waves" during the partition of Punjab.

In Sahgal's work, domestic relationships mirror political tensions. Inder and Saroj's marriage deteriorates under emotional and psychological strain. Saroj reflects: "Fear had entered the house long before words named it" (Sahgal 129). When Gyan threatens violence to secure Haryana's claims, he speaks the language of territorial entitlement that Inder silently practices in the bedroom.

Sahgal explicitly ties personal violence to state power via the "storm" of Punjab's political upheaval, where partition tensions exacerbate gender dynamics. Elite women's "social butterfly" roles mask deeper hegemony, with Inder's violations echoing national divisions that exploit vulnerabilities. The novel's feminist undertones reveal state violence as an extension of domestic patriarchy, maintaining control through elite complicity. Sahgal critiques "victim feminism," portraying women as sex objects in media-like elite circles, compelled into roles that break their agency. The novel establishes a potent parallel between the personal and the political breakdown. The storm is thus both a literal, political crisis and a metaphor for the aggressive, masculine assertion of control in both domestic and public life.

Inder, a young industrialist managing textile mills, perpetrates significant emotional and domestic violence on his wife Saroj, rooted in patriarchal chauvinism and resentment over her premarital affair. She revealed her premarital relationship to him, hoping it will help her make a fresh start and leave the past behind. However, this admission ultimately destroys their marriage. From that moment on, Inder continues to harass her both emotionally and physically. The hypocrisy of male-centered ethics becomes evident when Inder, who tries to make Saroj feel "ashamed" of her past relationship, is himself involved in an extramarital

affair with Mara.

He inflicts this on Saroj with the purpose of punishing her for perceived betrayal of female chastity—comparing it to “ancient, tribal, male roots” demanding virginity—and asserting dominance in their marriage, treating her as a possession or sex object rather than an equal. The violence turns physical when her growing relationship with Vishal Dubey and her assertion of self-respect infuriates him, leading him to brutally beat and abuse her. This physical assault is the final straw that compels Saroj to leave him.

Vishal Dubey, the protagonist and IAS officer deputed to monitor the crisis, does not directly perpetrate violence but observes and indirectly enables it through advice and affairs. He persuades Harpal to confront Gyan’s challenges, contributing to political escalation, and engages in emotional liaisons with Saroj and Gauri, which inflict indirect harm on spouses like Inder by filling voids but disrupting marriages. His purpose is seeking authentic connection amid personal emptiness, carried out through adulterous relationships that parallel the search for higher morality in politics. Vishal’s role critiques violence’s pervasiveness, as he sympathizes with victims like Saroj (equating her to Harpal) while navigating his own failed marriage to Leela.

Jit, a liquor manufacturer, inflicts emotional violence on his wife Mara through an initial void in their childless marriage, despite material comforts. He does this for the purpose of unintentional neglect, failing to provide emotional communication amid domestic monotony. This is carried out by emotional disconnection, leading Mara to seek affairs with Inder, before disillusionment and reconciliation. Jit’s involvement contrasts with Inder’s overt dominance, reflects the novel’s theme of violence infiltrating relationships as a “joint product of the aggressive and the inert.”

Saroj and Mara, endure violence rather than perpetrate it, though their affairs (Saroj with Vishal and Mara with Inder) can be seen as responses that indirectly cause emotional harm to husbands like Inder and Jit. These acts serve the purpose of escaping domestic suffocation, executed through seeking external companionship, but often lead to further disillusionment and reinforce cycles of alienation. Overall, the novel uses these instances to advocate for non-violence and genuine human bonds,

portraying violence as a destructive force eroding both public and private spheres in post-independence India.

The Body as Battlefield: Comparative Analysis

Both novels insist on the body as the primary site where domestic and political violence intersect. Yeong-hye's emaciated frame and Saroj's seamless emotional struggle are not incidental details; they are inscriptions of power. As Butler writes, "The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence" (Butler 26).

Kang and Sahgal also share a refusal of redemptive closure. Yeong-hye does not triumphantly become a tree; she is sedated and tube-fed. Saroj does not find liberated wholeness; she walks into an uncertain future carrying the scars of marital partition. Such separation does not heal the wound of division; it merely relocates it. Resistance, in both texts, is less a victory than an exposure of the violence that structures everyday life.

The differences are equally revealing. Kang's violence is visceral, corporeal, often sexualized; Sahgal's is psychological, bureaucratic, and coldly procedural. Yet both demonstrate that the hand that slaps a daughter across the face at the dinner table and the hand that signs a state reorganization order belong to the same body politic.

Conclusion

By mapping violence across scales—from the marital bed to the psychiatric ward, from the drawing room in Chandigarh to the threatened streets of a divided state—Han Kang and Nayantara Sahgal compel us to recognize that there is no private sphere immune from public power. The female body, like the body politic, is never fully sovereign; it is always already subject to violation. Yet precisely because sovereignty is illusory, resistance remains possible, however fragile, however incomplete. In refusing meat and in refusing marriage, Yeong-hye and Saroj perform acts that do not end violence but make its mechanisms visible. That visibility—painful, unresolved, and necessary—is the lasting achievement of both novels.

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Funding:

This study was not funded by any grant.

Conflict of interest:

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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