Against Man: Violence and the Vegetal in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

Cynthia Zhang

Commonly marked as a horror novel, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* follows a simple premise: one day, after a series of bloody dreams, a woman named Yeong-hye stops eating meat. Yet despite the novel's title, reminiscent as it is of such horror movies as *The Ring* or *The Grudge*, it is not vegetarianism but patriarchal violence that emerges as the true horror in *The Vegetarian*. Rather than accept her unorthodox but otherwise initially innocuous decision, Yeong-hye's family members—in particular, her husband and her father—respond to her vegetarianism with intense and often violent censure. Previously seen by her husband as "completely unremarkable in every way," Yeong-hye's conversion towards vegetarianism marks an end to her previous "passive personality" as she begins to instead start asserting control over her own body (Kang 11). As the violent responses of Yeong-hye's father and husband show, however, such attempts at autonomy are viewed as threats by patriarchal authorities and punished accordingly.

At the same time that *The Vegetarian* can and has been read as an "indictment of the Korean patriarchy," it is also crucial that Yeong-hye's resistance to patriarchal violence takes the form of solidarity with non-human actors (Kang and Patrick). In an interview for Literary Hub, Kang acknowledges the feminist currents of *The Vegetarian* while also characterizing the novel as a mediation on her "long-lasting questions about the possibility/impossibility of innocence in this world" (Kang and Patrick). In this paper, I examine Yeong-hye's vegetarianism as an act of resistance against not just patriarchal violence, but the violent logic of consumption more generally. Through allying herself with planthood, initially through choosing a purely plant-based diet and then later through rejecting consumption altogether in favor of "becoming" a plant, Yeong-hye signals her desire for a model of being that does not rely on the consumption of other bodies for its own survival. Yeong-hye's resolutely human body, however, complicates a celebration of the vegetal as an alternative to human subjectivity as her attempts to become plantlike ultimately leave her near death. Despite this, *The Vegetarian* is not wholly nihilistic about the possibility of alternatives to systematic violence, and in Yeong-hye's sister, In-hye, I read the possibility for another mode of being, one which acknowledges the impossibility of innocence while insisting on a commitment to coalitional politics.

Part I: The Meat of the Issue

In examining Yeong-hye's vegetarianism, it is necessary to first consider what meat means within *The Vegetarian*. For Yeong-hye's family, eating meat is a natural behavior, and Yeong-hye's new diet is consequently disconcerting because of its challenge to the norm. "'It's preposterous, everyone eats meat!'" Yeong-hye's father exclaims during a family dinner (Kang 46). Similarly, when Yeong-hye and her husband attend a company dinner, Yeong-hye makes the other guests

uncomfortable not because she challenges their eating habits, but because her vegetarianism implicitly offers an alternative to normative meat consumption. It is particularly telling, moreover, that the figures who most strongly police Yeong-hye's eating habits are ones with strong ties to the established social order: Yeong-hye's father is a decorated veteran while Mr. Cheong, her husband, is a decidedly archetypal office worker. That the most severe censure of Yeong-hye's vegetarianism comes from such staunch representatives of the social order further emphasizes that "what matters is not vegetarianism but Yeong-hye's difference from others" and the threat posed by that deviance (Lee 68).

If diet is one realm in which societal norms exercise control over bodies, it is far from the only one. As a woman, Yeong-hye suffers particularly gendered forms of violence: as a young girl, she is expected to bear her father's paternal violence while as an adult, her status as a wife means she is expected to satisfy her husband's alimentary and sexual needs regardless of whether she shares them. In a patriarchal society which views her body as the property of others, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism becomes a way of asserting bodily autonomy. Previously the near perfect model of a docile Korean wife, Yeong-hye becomes unyielding when it comes to defending her right to vegetarianism. Following weeks of erratic behavior, Yeong-hye's family confront her and attempt to alternatively bully and convince her into eating meat. Yet despite Yeong-hye's weakened state, when she declares her refusal to comply, "[f]or the first time in a long while, her speech was clear and distinct" (Kang 45). Even in the midst of malnutrition and weeks of insomnia, Yeong-hye finds mental and physical strength in her right to vegetarianism, a right which also serves as a declaration of bodily autonomy.

Yet while Yeong-hye's commitment to vegetarianism can easily be read as an assertion of bodily sovereignty, Yeong-hye herself does not make this connection and instead consistently links her vegetarianism to her dreams. As generations of psychoanalysts have established, dreams are a primary space where repressed memories and unconscious desires can take form. Yeong-hye's blood-soaked dreams can thus be read as the return of the repressed, a way in which the bodies she has previously consumed "return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt" (Žižek 23). It is telling, then, that one of Yeong-hye's most vivid dreams is a childhood memory of eating a dog that had bitten her. Prior to biting Yeong-hye, the dog is Whitey, a beloved presence whom "everyone in the had village always thought... could do no wrong" (Kang 49). After biting "the big man's daughter," however, Whitey becomes merely 'the dog,' a creature whose flesh, according to folkloric tradition, must be eaten for Yeong-hye's wound to heal (49). To kill the dog, Yeong-hye's father ties it to the back of a running motorcycle, forcing the animal to run to its death in an ordeal that is supposedly "a milder punishment" than flogging but which Kang describes in excruciating, nightmarish detail (49). While not directly responsible for the dog's fate, Yeong-hye's implication in its death is more direct and visceral than it would be with a fish or piece of pork bought from a grocery store, and thus her recollection of this childhood anecdote can be seen as a sign of her lingering guilt over her role in a violent system that preserves certain lives at the expense of others.

Notably, the manner in which the dog's death is arranged mirrors the operation of humanistic systems of sovereignty. As a companion animal, Whitey occupies a para-human space and is granted a para-selfhood, one which is accordingly stripped away when Whitey becomes 'the dog' and thus an entity which can be killed and eaten. Almost human yet indelibly animal, dogs represent a border space where selfhood is largely provisional. Such a space of precarious subjectivity is also the domain of traditionally Othered humans, and within *The Vegetarian* itself, Kang connects the practice of meat consumption to the legacies of patriarchy and colonialism. The first section of *The Vegetarian*, also called "The Vegetarian," is narrated by Mr. Cheong, and throughout the sub-novella, he never refers to Yeong-hye by her name—she is only ever 'my wife,' a term which neatly condenses his understanding and expectations of her. Yeong-hye is his wife; therefore, she prepares meals for him, sees him off to work each day, and fulfills his sexual needs. When she ceases performing the last of these wifely duties, it is not long before Mr. Cheong's frustration leads him to rape her in a scene he mentally compares to that of "a 'comfort woman' dragged in against her will" by "the Japanese soldier demanding her services" (38).

The link between colonial violence and Yeong-hye's plight are further underscored by the fact that Yeong-hye's father, her first abuser, was a veteran of the Vietnam War, another colonial conflict in which South Korea fought on the side of former colonizers. As Rose Casey and other scholars have noted, Yeong-hye's father is described as taking immense pride in his service, taking any opportunity to boast of his actions there: "*I myself, in Vietnam… seven Vietcong…*" (Kang 38). Note how the enemy here is referred to as not men or soldiers, but simply 'seven Vietcong.' Just as renaming Whitey to 'the dog' makes it possible for a village to kill and eat a former beloved pet, referring to enemy soldiers as 'seven Vietcong' is a gesture that reduces the value of their lives and thus enables their death. Similar to how human sovereignty rests on the consumption of animal bodies, patriarchal subjects and colonial powers acquire sovereignty through the 'consumption' of female subjects and colonized countries.

Considered alongside the other forms of violence present in her life, Yeong-hye's turn towards the vegetal can be seen as her attempt to exit a model of sovereignty that demands consumption. In becoming vegetarian, Yeong-hye rejects the consumption of animal bodies; in becoming a plant, she rejects the consumption of any living bodies. Rather than being predicated on the domination of others, plants are self-contained and self-providing; through photosynthesis, they meet their own needs rather than relying on others. Upon first meeting Yeong-hye, In-hye's husband describes his sister-in-law as "radiat[ing] energy, like a tree that grows in the wilderness, denuded and solitary," and those tree-like qualities—self-sufficiency and lack of either excess or desire—are only intensified after Yeong-hye converts to vegetarianism (71). "[U]ncommonly hard and self-contained," Yeong-hye post-vegetarianism is a subject who has exited an economy of desire that depends on consumption of the Other for its fulfilment (94).

Yet for all the potential of the vegetal as an alternative form of subjectivity, one cannot escape the fact that by the end of *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye is physically near death. While death can be read as an ultimate rejection of human subjectivity, Kang herself has described *The Vegetarian* as

a novel about "human violence and the (im)possibility of refusing it," implying that for all that we are meant to sympathize with Yeong-hye, there is still something irrevocably quixotic and doomed about her philosophy (Kang and Patrick). Queer theorists such as Lee Edelman may read death as a refusal of normative values and systems, but in the final analysis, death is still death; it is not a mode for living in this world. Yeong-hye's commitment to the vegetal may command our respect, but she does not serve as a model for future dwelling. For that, one is better served by examining Yeong-hye's sister, In-hye.

Part II: Sibling Sympathies: In-hye and Vegetal Solidarity

As the narrator of the "Flaming Trees," the third and final section of *The Vegetarian*, In-hye is positioned throughout as a counterpart to Yeong-hye. Despite not being close in age, the two sisters are often described in terms of their physical similarities, with both Mr. Cheong and In-hye's husband commenting on their resemblance to each other. Beyond physical similarities, In-hye and Yeong-hye initially both adhere to standard expectations of good Korean wives; prior to the Yeong-hye's conversion to vegetarianism, she is noted as being a "skilled cook" like her sister, with both women dutifully preparing their husbands a variety of meat-based dishes (Kang 42). When In-hye's husband consistently prioritizes work over his family, In-hye never directly confronts him; similarly, pre-vegetarianism, Yeong-hye is the type of wife who dutifully irons her husband's clothes and sees him to the door each morning. Despite these similarities, In-hye is consistently described as the more conventionally attractive of the two: while Yeong-hye is androgynous, In-hye has "larger and prettier" eyes and is generally "much more feminine" (35). In better conforming to societal standards of femininity, In-hye is marked as also better conforming to societal standards than her sister. As a diligent wife to her husband and a caring mother to Ji-woo, In-hye fits typical expectations of womanhood, while as the successful owner of her own cosmetics store, she exemplifies the self-determining liberal subject whose "innate strength of character" enables her "to make one's own way in life" (145).

Yet for all that In-hye is the more successful of the sisters, such success does not make her immune to patriarchal violence. While their father's violence targeted Yeong-hye primarily, he does not shy from using physical discipline with his other daughter. Similarly, while In-hye's husband is less demanding than her sister's, he still expects sexual services from her, neither stopping nor caring when she starts crying during a sexual encounter. For all her outward accomplishments, In-hye is as much a victim of the patriarchy as Yeong-hye, and as her sister's condition worsens, In-hye begins to consider the hollowness of her success: "She had never lived. Even as a child, as far back as she could remember, she had done nothing but endure" (167). As the stressors pile up on her, In-hye begins to be haunted by the same bloody dreams that tormented her sister, a sign that she too is vulnerable to the existential dilemmas that have led Yeong-hye to self-destruction. More so than any of the characters in *The Vegetarian*, In-hye understands her sister—and consequently, more than any of them, she is vulnerable to following in Yeong-hye's steps.

Ultimately, however, In-hye does not share her sister's fate. Speaking on her intentions for the novel, Kang states that the novel's ending image—one in which "In-hye stares fiercely at the trees" while she accompanies Yeong-hye in an ambulance—was intentionally chosen for its ambivalence (188). Even as In-hye searches for answers by studying the trees her sister seeks to emulate, her interrogation is an open-ended one: "Without start or finish, only struggling tenaciously with her open eyes, in the same form/way of "now" in our life" (Kang and Patrick). Like Yeong-hye, In-hye is acutely aware of the violence endemic to a system of humanist subjectivity; unlike her sister, however, In-hye does not accept vegetal sovereignty as an alternative to the liberal humanist subject. By acknowledging violence without fully renouncing humanity, In-hye can be seen as enacting what Julietta Singh would call the project of dehumanism. As a practice, dehumanism seeks "to dispossess oneself from the sovereignty of man [and] to refuse the anticolonial reach of becoming masterful human subjects" by making oneself vulnerable to the Other (Singh 157). Yet even as a project that encourages sympathy for both Othered humans and non-human actors, dehumanism remains a practice of "vital ambivalence," one which "emphasizes, politicizes, and embraces the subject's contradictions and slippages" (158). Just as In-hye's gaze embraces the coexistence of beauty and violence in the world, the dehumanist subject is both altruistic and selfish, a wronged victim and a perpetrator of violence themselves.

In its focus on ambivalence and refusal of innocence, dehumanism appears as a powerful alternative to both liberal humanist and vegetal conceptions of the subject. Rather than a vegetal form of sovereignty, I argue that dehumanism enacts what one could call vegetal solidarity. While vegetal sovereignty is represented by Yeong-hye's attempt to literally become a plant, vegetal solidarity can be best found in In-hye's relationship with her sister. As represented by Yeong-hye, vegetal sovereignty moves inwardly away from the world and seeks to erase the difference between self (Yeong-hye) and other (trees). By contrast, vegetal solidarity reaches outwards towards the world, operating via sympathy with radically different others rather than a totalizing empathy. In-hye may participate in her family's disastrous intervention attempt, but she is also the only person who does not attempt to dissuade her sister from vegetarianism, instead focusing on how Yeong-hye should "draw up a proper, well-balanced meal plan" (Kang 43). While this advice remains a corrective injunction, In-hye remains the only member of her family who respects the essence of Yeong-hye's decision to give up meat. When Yeong-hye's complete rejection of food leaves her close to death, In-hye's worry may tempt her "to force [Yeong-hye's] mouth open" and shove food inside, but In-hye ultimately sides with her sister against psychiatric doctors who would use coercive violence to rescue her (160). In-hye may find her sister inscrutable, but she still cares for her, and in this care, one can see the coalitional promise of dehumanism: the promise of being sensitive to not only those beings similar to us, but also "those which we still imagine as radically distinct" from us (Singh 64).

In addition to extending outward, vegetal solidarity is also a relational practice that extends forward towards the future. While responsibility towards others also entails guilt over one's failures to carry out one's ethical duty to others, responsibility's future-facing orientation is one which

does not allow one to be caught in the mire of this guilt. Musing on the similarities between herself and her sister, In-hye concludes that it is her son, Ji-woo, and "the sense of responsibility she felt toward him" that ultimately anchors her to the world (Kang 173). Given that children are commonly figured as representatives of futurity, In-hye's responsibility towards her son can also be read as a responsibility towards the future and the possibility of newer, kinder forms of existence. At the end of the novel, as the ambulance rushes Yeong-hye to the hospital, In-hye admits to her sister that she shares her bloody dreams. "[A]nd I could let myself dissolve into them, let them take me over… but surely the dream isn't all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don't we? Because… because then…" (187). Ambivalent and uncertain as they are, In-hye's questions do not point to any concrete model of being that can supplant the liberal humanist subject and all its flaws. Yet in this same ambivalence and refusal of clear-cut answers, one can see glimpses of a mode of existence that neither repudiates nor resigns oneself to the world, but which rather aims to dwell imperfectly within it.

Works Cited

Casey, Rose. "Feminist Aesthetics in Han Kang's The Vegetarian." *American Comparative Literature Association*, 10 March 2019, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. Conference presentation.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke University Press, 2004.

Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian: A Novel*. Translated by Deborah Smith. Hogarth, 2016.

Lee, Jihyun. (2017). "Debt, Payback, and the Sustainability through the Vegetal Imagination: Atwood's Payback and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*." *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2017, pp. 57-78.

Meeker, Natania & Szabari, Antónia. "From the Century of the Pods to the Century of the Plants: Plant Horror, Politics, and Vegetal Ontology." *Discourse*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2012, pp. 32-58.

Patrick, Bethanne, and Han Kang. "Han Kang on Violence, Beauty, and the (Im)Possibility of Innocence." *Literary Hub*, 12 Feb. 2016.

Singer, Hayley. "Erupt the Silence." *Animaladies*, edited by Lori Gruen and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, pp. 65-76.

Singh, Julietta. *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." CR: The New Centennial Review, vol. 3 no. 3, 2003, 257-337.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*. MIT Press, 1991.

Cynthia Zhang (she/her) is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California. She received a B.A. in comparative literature and an M.A. in the humanities from the University of Chicago, where her work focused on the intersections between new media technologies, reading practices, and fandom. As a fiction writer, her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Phantom Drift*, *Kaleidotrope*, and *On Spec*, among other venues. Her debut novel, *After the Dragons*, is out with Stelliform Press in 2021.