

**TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT: ENGAGING WITH THE
MEAT-PRINCIPLE IN HAN KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN***

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“... you are what you eat, to eat a vegetable is to become a vegetable, and by extension, to become womanlike.” (Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*)

Being a vegetarian and behaving vegetarian and becoming vegetarian are caught in a plexus of discrimination as against a meat-centric cultural-sexual ethos in Han Kang's novel, *The Vegetarian* (2007, trans. 2015). Yeong-hye, an ordinary, unremarkable, unattractive, yet dutiful wife, goes through a shocking transformation – from giving up meat and becoming a vegetarian to giving up food altogether and psychosomatically identifying herself with plants thereby challenging a deep rooted carno-phallogocentric society. Won-Chung Kim, following on Jacques Derrida, describes the “complex theoretical interplay between meat and sexuality in the concept carno-phallogocentrism, which he defines partially as an “interiorization of the phallus and the necessity of its passage through the mouth” (2). Therefore, Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat in such an androcratic society is itself an act of resistance, resilience and revolt. She stands at the intersection of a capitalist and patriarchal society where her voice is barely given a space and her journey is narrated in three parts by her husband, her brother-in-law and her sister. Their narratives reveal not only the discrimination, violence, aggression, perpetration, and exclusion faced by her but also her desire to be a tree. *The Vegetarian* is the story of her unfinished quest, a story of her ‘becoming’ a body without organs driven by psychosis, schizophrenia, anemia, insomnia and anorexia. On that note Magdalena Zolkos's observations are pertinent:

Because of the central motifs of bodily transgression and self-abnegation...Yeong-hye [is compared] to Frantz Kafka's Gregor Samsa or the hunger artist. Just as the hunger artist seeks seclusion from human sociality in the space of his vacuous interiority, so does Yeong-hye sequester herself from the gaze of others in her visions of animal carnage and in her arboreal impersonations. However, while the hunger artist withdraws into a space of inwardness in order to draw the crowd's attention to his own negative novelty,

Yeong-hye retreats from the human world to merge with the vegetal one. (102)

In contra-distinction to the other-human domain where the herbi-carnivore power tool does not work, there is a strong masculine, rather, fleshly culture that informs the human world. This brings us before the disturbing dialectic between carnism [a term coined by psychologist Melanie Joy that refers to the “invisible belief system (or ideology) that propagates meat consumption as a given natural thing to do, the way the things have always been and will always be” (Potts, 19)] and patriarchy. Yeong-hye’s body becomes the site for violence and this violence in a way also speaks about a narrative of antagonism against veganism. Her transformation begins after she sees a dream:

A long bamboo stick strung with great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down...there’s no end to meat, and no exit. Blood in my mouth, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin...what had I done? Pushed that raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood. (Kang 12, italics in the original)

When she stops eating meat and embraces vegetarianism her increasingly odd behavior becomes noticeable as she loses weight and practically stops sleeping altogether. Her refusal to wear a bra and eat meat at a dinner party makes her an outsider. She is raped by her husband when his physical desires go unsatisfied for a long period:

I grabbed hold of my wife and pushed her to the floor...it took me three attempts before I managed to insert myself successfully...After this first time, it was easier for me to do it again. (Kang 30-31)

It is surprising that her entire family becomes complicit in feeding her meat forcefully. Her father struck her in the face, held her mouth open and forced a lump of meat inside. Yeong-hye howled like an animal and spat out the meat, then picked up a fruit knife and slit her own wrist. Her father’s forcing meat into her mouth is a violent act of violation of sanctity of one’s body-borders and psycho-aesthetic preferences and predilections. The pedagogic discourse of eating, ingestion and gastronomy fall on the line with Yeong-hye’s lack of compliance. Although vegetarianism is also an ideology but it fails to be forceful enough to be considered as a counter hegemonic discourse. Vegetarianism exists but not without the pedagogic threats of domination.

Meat is significant; meat strengthens; meat is libidinous; meat is masculine. This owes a lineage from a cannibalist culture where ‘feeding’ on the other is also about being fed upon. Cannibalism denotes strength, physicality, energy and principle of devouring. This brings with it the responsibility to ‘kill’ and, hence, overpower the other to help oneself. A subtle power discourse works through such operative machine as every flesh one draws out does not come without resistance. Trees don’t resist; grasses are trampled; even unbarking a tree meets with no opposition. But ‘consuming meat’ whether cannibalistically or consumptively comes with power-flexing, auto-hegemonization and subjection and subjugation of the other. This informs a system of empowerment where meat-making, meat-consuming and meat-delivering discriminate the vegetarian, the non-fleshly, and the non-carnal. So Annie Potts rightly quotes Melanie Joy saying that “[this] particular type of ideology [is] a violent ideology, because it is literally organized around physical violence. [If] we were to remove the violence from the system – to stop killing animals – the system would cease to exist. Meat cannot be procured without slaughter.” (19) Potts observes:

If carnism is the ideology, then ‘meat culture’ is all the tangible and practical forms through which the ideology is expressed and lived. Meat culture therefore encompasses the representations and discourses, practices and behaviours, diets and tastes that generate shared beliefs about, perspectives on, and experiences of meat. (19-20).

The prevalence of this culture and the shared approval of its perpetuation make carnism a mobile praxial cultural choice. Carol Adams in her groundbreaking book *The Sexual Politics of Meat* argues that “the recurrent interaction between the entrenched misogyny in present-day society and its fixation with masculinity and meat-eating can be seen as key factors in the continued exploitation of women as meat and domestic ‘slaves’ in many cultures, which often associate virility with meat-eating and regard women as flesh to be consumed and abused.” (Ferreira 148). So the word ‘vegetable’ has a derogatory undertone almost synonymous with passivity, a polite submission to any animalistic dominance. This valuational difference between meat and non meat translates into the devouring-devoured dialectic that traditionally informs gender relations. It is the devouring that builds a masculinity to its establishment; the devoured stands placid, subjugated under the rigorous determinative dominance of the supposedly masculine. Hence, Yeong Hye’s meat-shy status, her meat revulsive disposition, disambiguates her social position vis-à-vis her sexual identity.

Food is not about cooked and raw (following on Levi-Strauss); food is all about harnessing and hunting the substance for acquirement and control. Eating is again a power-plexus that hedges on physical superiority and resistance-defying domination. The ‘manly’ is in the flesh, the wo-manly in the non-flesh – the colour red genders and sunders the green. In fact, the injunction of green has come through limiting parameters of health, hygiene, religion and non-availability. However, the liberty and naturalness of the red is more in line with how man ‘hunted’ (the woman did not) to partake of the strength and sustenance of some other’s flesh. This fleshization has informed a socio-cultural and eco-sexual discourse within a diachronicity whose ramifications are clearly felt in Yeong-hye’s dissociation from ‘meat’ and hence, flesh, and, hence, psycho-physical belligerence.

Yeong-hye is haunted by the lives she has consumed:

The thing that hurts is my chest. Something is stuck in my solar plexus. I don't know what it might be. it's lodged permanently these days. Even though I've stopped wearing a bra, I can feel this lump all the time. No matter how deeply I inhale, it doesn't go away. Yells and howls, threaded together layer upon layer, are enmeshed to form that lump. Because of meat. I ate too much meat. The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there. Blood and flesh, all those butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny, and though the physical remnants were excreted, their lives still stick stubbornly to my insides. (Kang 49, italics in the original)

She gives up eating altogether, destroying her organs in the process where ‘her stomach acid is eating away at her stomach’ (150) but Yeong-hye sees this differently:

They say my insides have all atrophied...I'm not an animal anymore...I don't need to eat, I can live without it. All I need is sunlight. (153-4)

She also says,

I need to water my body. I don't need this kind of food... I need water. (148)

No wonder we are in the midst of a violent urge to trans-form, the seething, near self annihilating desire to transmute. I read here a violence that unhinges one's being into a violent process of becoming which, however, heuristically and operatively have its own grammatology.

How violent is this otherisation? Does 'becoming plant' become a discourse? Yeong-hye's self-transcendence which is a kind of 'letting out of the animal into the plant' risks being challenged as a discourse: are seeking sunlight and staying inverted with legs held apart like a tree mere processes to become something that is telic?

Well, I was in a dream, and I was standing on my head...leaves were growing from my body, and roots were sprouting from my hands ... so I dug down into the earth. On and on ... I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch so I spread my legs; I spread them wide... (148)

So this becoming-plant syndrome strikes me as discursive embedded in certain motors of transformation – like relinquishing of flesh, clothes, and then the very act of eating – which, again, is an aspiration to transhumanise. Transhumanism here is not about extending the realms of being human or going beyond human; it is more about the reduction of being human, the violent extenuation of being the human as animal, the extinction of the flesh to emerge in the bark. This in plant philosophy is called the debarking: the diminishment of being what you are to allow the overtaking of what you aspire to be.

Yeong-hye's standing before the refrigerator is clearly about contemplating the affordances that one's transubstantiation needs.:

Around her, the kitchen floor was covered with plastic bags and airtight containers ... Beef for shabu-shabu, belly pork, two sides of black beef shin, some squid in a vacuum-packed bag, sliced eel... dried croaker... unopened packs of frozen dumplings and endless bundles of unidentified stuff dragged from the depths of the fridge. (9)

The Nietzschean movement here is deeply processual in that becoming plant is not just about unveiling but a clear progression that is self-willed, that is a will to power and transform and overcome what one requires to emerge from Yeong Hye's debilitating extant predicament. She is a trajectory in motion. The denial to eat is a case in point. It is for me less about self-obliteration and more about the animal metaphor of 'eating': do plants in general "eat"? How does one eat sunlight, air, minerals and water? Does that mean eating needs to morph into assimilation and contact, processes that are not overtly physical and alimentary? What human ontology understands as eating disorder in Yeong Hye is indeed the self-annihilation to plantise.

“This deep urge on Yeong-hye’s part to identify with plants and to attain what [Michael] Marder has called an ontophytological state, ‘without projecting its own rationality upon the idealized plant’, can be constructed as a capitulation to the pressures of the patriarchal world that in many ways conflates woman and nature as entities to be conquered and subjugated. Conversely, Yeong-hye’s impulse to become a tree can be seen not as a defeat and surrender but as a strategic action to circumvent a capitalist and patriarchal logic of domination and exploitation of women and nature.” (Ferreira 149).

The meat denying and green surrendering self of Yeong-hye builds a rationality that is unique to itself. Her meat revolting state does not stay green welcoming for long, as she reframes her bio-ontology through two broadly defined parameters of eating and non-eating. This is neither partnership with meat nor non meat, for eating involves killing and killing is a way of inflicting defeat and building a hegemonic overpowerment. The question remains that her vegetal transformation in the end owes to meat defiance or an espousal of a philosophy that promotes non-hierarchicalism. What this means is that eating as an act is only possible when humans become plants and plants become animals and animals become humans. The philosophy of eating resists hierarchical topology and promotes an egalitarianism of preference, indulgence and praxis. What kind of vegetal love then Yeong-hye projects if bra denial, carnal intercourse and flesh gastronomy empower her for a separate biopower? The question at the other end remains as to what makes her a plant, how does she become a plant. Does her plant point of view explain the patriarchy of meat centrism or does it become a green hegemony fought for and developed against a meat dominance? The argument becomes complex because being plant and being no meat is another form of dominance which one should not be candid enough to interpret as anti-patriarchy. This complicates the tenor of her life decision as she gets webbed into a consciousness of being vegetal without being plant centric. This vegetality defies not merely meat but the whole act and metaphor of eating. Giving up on eating is giving up on a system of existence whose (im)possibility is intriguing and intricate. The novel promotes a vegetality that is flat ontology; it is being-state, a relinquishment of any form of consumption, and a submission to non-appropriative ways of thinking. Meat matters as much as non-meat but only to make possible a being-state that is outside patriarchal forms of life-thinking and matrices of dominance and power that rule every sphere of life and life-world.

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