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**The Good Wife? Sibling Species in Han Kang's The
Vegetarian**

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Review

The Good Wife? Sibling Species in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

In her influential text *When Species Meet*, Donna J. Haraway asserts that “[s]ex, infection and eating are old *relatives* [...] whose material and syntactic intra-actions make the cuts that birth kin and kind” (287; my italics). Evoking Jacques Derrida, Haraway moves from this crucible of kinship to suggest that human and nonhuman animals should eat and kill ‘well’; that is, they should be mindful and respectful of the origins of their food, whether this is a plant-based meal or a piece of meat (296). However, it is dubious whether vegans and omnivores can tolerantly co-exist when both positions are situated in ambiguous ethical terrains; veganism is often stereotyped as inherently classist or racist, and sexism is also rife in the animal rights movement.¹ The recent translation and popularity of *The Vegetarian* is a prescient example of ethical eating’s controversial positioning in modern society. Described by its author as a “[t]rilogy or triptych, which consists of three independent novellas” (K. Han qtd. in Patrick 21), the novel epitomises an experimental sense of disjointedness: its opening segment is narrated in the first person by the titular character’s husband, the second section is third-person narration focalised through her brother-in-law (an artist who indulges in sexual fantasies about her), and the third segment is third-person narration focalised through her sister In-hye as she tries to convince the protagonist to eat. In an early narrative interruption, Yeong-hye describes the dream which prompts her decision to stop eating meat, eggs, and dairy products: a vision of a “*pool of blood in [a] barn [...] [and a] face reflected there*” (ch. 1; original italics). This is an image which I will return to repeatedly, as it motivates much of the development in plot and her ‘infectious’ ideological position. Some may dismiss Yeong-hye’s dietary choices due to her gradual lapse into anorexia, arguing that one cannot objectively classify an individual’s ethics if they are mentally ill. I take issue with this position because it privileges the very same carnophallogocentric rhetoric that regulates

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3 women's bodies:² namely, that one should aim to achieve "absolute purity,
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5 hyperintellectuality, and transcendence of the [feminised, sexualised] flesh" (Bordo 148),
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7 without considering the complexities and 'messiness' of subjective experience.
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10 At surface level, the logical conclusion of critical animal theory may seem to be the
11 development of a more tolerant, egalitarian society which is open to exchanges between
12 cultures, races, genders and species. However, a careful analysis of vegetarian movements
13 and their terms reveals that an interest in animal ethics does not necessarily allow one to feel
14 a common purpose with other humans. Firstly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* records that
15 'vegetarian' was used by British and American writers to ambiguously refer to "[a] member
16 of a Chinese religious sect which enjoins lifelong abstinence from meat" (def. 2). Although
17 this definition (of what is most likely Buddhism) is rarely used in contemporary contexts, its
18 emphasis on uninvestigated 'foreign' practices shows how perceived distinctions between
19 Eastern and Western cultures – and their attitudes towards nonhuman animals – complicate
20 the supposedly tolerant purpose of ethical eating. Orientalism has also informed the Western
21 construction of vegetarianism in order to promote certain ideologies. Writing in the
22 eighteenth century, Irish novelist Oliver Goldsmith adopts the voice of a fictional Chinese
23 man named Lien Chi Altangi to criticise English carnist eating practices (61). His ironic
24 exoticisation of ordinarily normalised dining habits may be intended to advance the rights of
25 animals, but it is saturated with Romantic primitivism; the writer imagines that the typical
26 Chinese palate is too "simple" to conceive of the "ingenious refinement" of slaughter (62).
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28 More recently, Westerners tend to imbue those from the East Asian cultural sphere with a
29 mystical sense of organic unity. Some incorrectly believe that Oriental dishes are mostly
30 vegetarian, but the diet is actually fairly uncommon in the Sinosphere. By way of illustration,
31 while it is estimated that there are at least 20 000 vegetarians in South Korea (B. Kim 12), the
32 diet is normally only associated with Buddhist monks,³ and many traditional dishes contain
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3 meat-based broth or other animal derivatives. Simultaneously, animal welfarists may be
4 incensed over the Korean dog meat trade, but continue to eat supposedly ‘uncharismatic’
5 animals like pigs and cows. These facts highlight complex interactions between traditional
6 norms and modern ethical models in South Korean society. It seems evident, therefore, that
7 there is a paradoxical co-existence of different ethical terrains within animal rights
8 movements, posthumanism, and critical animal theory – particularly in light of postcolonial
9 studies. That which is culturally permissible is rendered acceptable, whereas the foreign
10 practices of ‘others’ are treated with suspicion – even if their rituals and beliefs are actually
11 motivated by the same moral imperative.
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23 A related issue with vegan activism is that it risks equating empathy or caring with
24 ‘women’s work’. While many celebrated theorists working within animal studies are men,
25 most campaigns situated outside of the academe are dominated by women.⁴ Furthermore,
26 animal rights groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) are
27 regularly criticised for their decisions to use nude female bodies in their (often violent or
28 sexualised) advertisements.⁵ Women – who are already the targets of social expectations,
29 such as the supposedly feminine desire to bear or raise children – are therefore cast as natural
30 empaths who are in tune with ‘Mother Nature’. Simultaneously, as veganism grows in
31 popularity, some products are being rebranded and marketed towards male vegans or
32 “hegans” who wish to partake in the movement without losing their perceived masculinity
33 (Pierce 3). Even well-intentioned critics may unintentionally propagate gender-essentialist
34 notions when promoting veganism. In his essay “Contextual Moral Vegetarianism,” Dean
35 Curtin rightly argues for “an ecofeminist ethic of care [...] [which] recognises that the
36 reasons for moral vegetarianism may differ by locale, by gender, as well as by class” (241).
37 However, he then raises the dubious comparison of the consumption of eggs and dairy to
38 “exploit[ing] the reproductive capacities of the [human] female,” thereby arguing that “[f]rom
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3 a woman's perspective, in particular, it makes sense to ask whether one should become a
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5 vegan" (244). Here, the use of the term 'the female' is strikingly similar to the conception of
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7 "the animal" which Derrida problematizes ("The Animal" 402) – both are abstracted
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9 expressions which do not accommodate situational intricacies. It is unfortunate that Curtin
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11 neglects to address how reasons for moral vegetarianism may also differ *by sex* after iterating
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13 the importance of intersectional values. If one expects a person to turn vegan because of their
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15 biology, then one is not only propagating heterosexist assumptions about gender and
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17 sexuality, but also ignoring various levels of power and privilege which impact upon one's
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19 ethical views and capabilities. Intersectional feminists, therefore, are not necessarily welcome
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21 in the animal rights movement. This fact has been made clear by the self-described
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23 'abolitionist' vegan Gary Francione, who has criticised "radical feminists" for objecting to
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25 the comparison of animal exploitation with slavery (qtd. in Wrenn 2). Such intersectional
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27 theorists argue that people of colour – and their movement for rights – should not be
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29 positioned analogously with animals by white people, because it is insensitive to speak for
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31 others' oppression and to appropriate triggering terminology such as 'abolition'.⁶ Indeed, if
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33 the animal rights movement is to garner wider success, then it must strive to be considerate
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35 and accessible to people from a variety of cultures and ethnic backgrounds.

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41 In her introduction to *The Vegan Studies Project: Food, Animals and Gender in the*
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43 *Age of Terror* (2015), Laura Wright completely distinguishes vegan theory from critical
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45 animal studies, which she defines as a composite of animal studies, human-animal studies
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47 and posthumanism (10). She reasons that, while vegan studies is indebted to all of these
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49 fields, it is different because it "is focused on what it means to be vegan, a *singular identity*
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51 *category* that may or may not be linked to an ethical imperative with regard to one's feelings
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53 about an advocacy for animals" (14; my italics). Wright then frames vegan studies as
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55 inherently ecofeminist, arguing that this movement has been unfairly trivialised by (mostly
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3 male) animal studies scholars (17). While I agree that the influence of ecofeminism and
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5 female theorists is often too easily dismissed, I have several reservations with Wright's
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7 argument. The most obvious issue is that the term 'vegan' was originally coined in order to
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9 distinguish a *moral* imperative from strict vegetarianism (which is merely a dietary choice). It
10
11 follows, then, that vegan studies cannot be conflated with vegetarian critical theory unless
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13 both are ethically motivated. Secondly, while ecofeminists like Val Plumwood are critical of
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15 dualistic fallacies (8), others tend to focus exclusively on the subjectivities of oppressed
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17 beings, whether they are women or animals. Mary Daly, for example, encourages women to
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19 become "exorcists" because of the oppression that they have been subjected to (7). By merely
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21 inverting the focus of their studies from 'oppressor' to 'victim', such theorists unintentionally
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23 encourage the reductive binarist models. It appears, therefore, that there is some truth in the
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25 accusation that ecofeminism has a tendency to privilege (often essentialist) analyses of
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27 gender relations above discussions of all other forms of oppression. A further concern is that
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29 although Carol J. Adams's vegetarian feminist critical theory has influenced the work of
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31 animal rights activists like Lisa Kemmerer or feminist philosophers such as Rosi Braidotti
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33 and Donna Haraway, her theories – and, by extension, the posthumanist frameworks they
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35 inform – have been critiqued for their oversimplification of complex cultural identities. For
36
37 example, Maneesha Deckha notes that while vegetarians of colour have historically been
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39 coded as inferior or poverty-stricken "savages", white or privileged people are imbued with a
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41 "cosmopolitan status" when they appropriate culinary practices from the very same 'barbaric'
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43 cultures ("Toward" 540). As I have elucidated, East Asia and the global West may share a
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45 history of interest in animal ethics, but the latter has been significantly more powerful in
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47 forming policies, philosophies, and conceptions of normality. Lastly, it remains unclear how
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49 vegan studies can focus on a 'singular' identity when the pervasive issue of interpersonal
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51 alienation means that most vegans are inevitably defined by what – or who – they are not.
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3 It is evident, then, that ethical veganism aims to decentralise the figure of the human
4 in hegemonic discourse; yet those who are semantically pedantic may be reluctant to adopt
5 the term 'posthumanist'. Adapting Neil Badmington's work on the posthuman, Zakiyyah
6 Iman Jackson states that "[a] call for a transformative theory and practice of humanity should
7 not be mistaken for the fantasy of an absolute break with humanism", and that rather, "the
8 'post' marks a commitment to 'work through' that which remains liberal humanist"
9 ("Animal" 682). Here, it is important to clarify that much like postmodernism or
10 postcolonialism, posthumanism does not actually claim to be divorced from that which
11 sparked its development. One should be wary of pledging allegiance to "a *pan*-humanism"
12 which is less concerned with animal ethics than "more generous understandings of the
13 human" for two reasons (Huggan and Tiffin, "Postscript"; original italics). Firstly, the word
14 'pan-humanism' could be used to excuse the mimicking of Westernised humanist ideals in
15 post/colonial settings, such as when nebulous concepts like 'honour' are upheld as markers of
16 worth without questioning such terms' origins. This is an approach which critical race
17 theorist Frantz Fanon adopts when advocating for "dignity" (90), and which Jackson fails to
18 address after implying that his stance on posthumanism is analogous to Cary Wolfe's ("Outer
19 Worlds" fn. 41). Secondly, the prioritisation of 'pan-humanism' is problematic because it
20 assumes that autochthonous peoples cannot take – or, indeed, have not already taken – the
21 same critical turn as Western animal theorists have. My brief overview of ethical eating and
22 animal rights in South Korea has already demonstrated that this is simply untrue.

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48 Given all of these issues, it becomes evident that critical theory which decentres the
49 human subject needs to be complex and self-reflexive – and also aware of its coterminous
50 philosophical origins in the West, East, and elsewhere. Claire Jean Kim's *Dangerous*
51 *Crossings: Race, Species and Nature in a Multicultural Age* is a study of American animal
52 rights debates which addresses the intricacies of discussing interspecies ethics without relying
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3 on Westernised conceptions of personhood, rights, or welfare. In a play on the title of
4 Jonathan Swift's satirical pamphlet *A Modest Proposal* (wherein he suggests that
5 impoverished Irish families should eat their children if they cannot afford meat), Kim calls
6 for two 'modest adjustments' to popular posthumanist theory, which has been criticised for
7 relying on exclusively Eurocentric modes of humanist philosophy.⁷ The first is that "we think
8 in terms of taxonomies rather than dualisms – complex classification systems instead of
9 simple dyads" (ch. 1). Comprehensive taxonomies allow for discussions of intersectional
10 oppression to move beyond the impractical and stilted tendency to discuss *either race or*
11 species as primary identity markers. Deckha makes a similar point when she argues against
12 using one vector (such as gender or race) as the primary gateway to understanding
13 posthumanist feminist theory. Instead, she contends, we should employ "*multiple* starting
14 points" and an "intersectional matrix in which race and culture figure decisively" ("Toward"
15 541; my italics). Importantly, while these postcolonial theorists are critical of the term
16 'posthumanism', they do not reject it; instead, they warn against the naïve desire to move
17 'beyond' humanism without investigating how Eurocentrism and other forms of hegemonic
18 supremacy may be propagated by abstracted analyses. The inherently ethical impetus of
19 veganism is similarly motivated by political and practical considerations: vegans try to apply
20 anti-speciesist philosophy to everyday actions by boycotting, protesting, or merely sharing
21 ideas with others.

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45 Kim's second 'modest adjustment' is to think of systems of social power as more
46 complex and co-dependent than merely interlocking: borrowing Anne McClintock's
47 phrasing, she argues that they "converge, merge and overdetermine each other in *intricate*
48 *and often contradictory ways*" (qtd. in C.J. Kim ch. 1; my italics). Viewing them so allows us
49 to move past seeing cultures as "fixed, bounded entities that map neatly onto particular
50 groups and particular spaces" (ch. 1). Consequently, we can progress beyond assumptions
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3 that certain cultures cannot be interested in critical animal theory – or, do not already have
4 their own conceptions of posthumanist values. This point is similar to Cathryn Bailey’s
5 assertion that classifying feminist vegetarianism as inherently classist or racist is problematic,
6 because it erases the agency and experiences of poor or black women who choose not to eat
7 meat for ethical reasons (52). The coherence of their arguments suggests that these
8 modifications to critical animal theory can improve not only philosophy, but also the lived
9 experiences of animal rights activists. Postcolonial posthumanism, therefore, has the potential
10 to simultaneously address both animal subjectivities *and* the oppression of marginalised
11 humans who have historically been associated with nonhumans by considering various
12 vantage-points in a “multi-optic vision” (C.J. Kim ch. 1). That is, it can provide a critical lens
13 for vegan activists who wish to alleviate the suffering of *any* living being – but also criticise
14 appropriative slogans from single-issue campaigns such as ‘All Lives Matter’.⁸ The
15 imperative is for critical theorists to address myriad forms of alienation – both interpersonal
16 and transcultural – which have threatened ethical eating since its conception. Unlike strict
17 diet programmes, a situational veganism (and its corresponding philosophy, which I have
18 hitherto referred to as ‘critical animal theory’) would not be based on nutritional prescriptions
19 for a solitary ‘you’ to follow, but rather on a visionary sense of communal identity.

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21 This flexible understanding of postcolonial posthumanism (and its potential
22 underpinning of veganism) is what informs my reading of female embodiment, transgressive
23 sexuality and ‘sibling species’ in all three sections of *The Vegetarian*. Despite their disparate
24 narrative styles, the novellas are united by symbols that foreground issues related to female
25 embodiment. Specifically, the protagonist’s intimate parts – breasts, buttocks and crotch – are
26 used as vectors through which questions of gender, sexuality and infection are explored. The
27 first section, “The Vegetarian,” features a recurrent focus on Yeong-hye’s nipples which
28 unlocks many thematic intricacies. Her husband notes that prior to her veganism, the only
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3 troubling aspect of the childless couple's marriage was that she never wore a bra, because he
4 worried that others would stare at her breasts (ch. 1). Hypocritically, he admits that the
5 visibility of her nipples aroused him before they were married (ch. 1). Once she becomes his
6 wife, therefore, she is expected to be 'good' by surrendering her bodily autonomy, but
7 refuses. When he forces her to attend a business dinner, she foregoes not only wearing this
8 undergarment, but also eating meat. Initially, her decisions to abstain from these two
9 normalised practices may suggest that she is troubled by her body image – a theory which
10 would seemingly be confirmed by her later decision to forego eating completely. However,
11 Yeong-hye never once expresses a desire to alter her figure. After silencing her description of
12 her recurring nightmares, her husband surprisingly perceives that her vegan transition is not
13 just a case of an "impressionable" young woman mimicking what is "in vogue" (ch. 1): he
14 rationalises that "If it had been just another instance of a woman giving up meat in order to
15 lose weight then there would have been no need to worry, but I was convinced that there was
16 more going on here than a simple case of vegetarianism" (ch. 1).⁹

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34 Many patriarchal cultures dictate that women, who are stereotypically cast as natural
35 caregivers, must wear (often uncomfortable) undergarments to de/sexualise mammary glands
36 which would nurture their children. Paradoxically, the supposedly 'caring' woman is
37 conditioned to enjoy eating meat, which (in most modern contexts) is the product of
38 carnophallogocentric ideals. This gendered disparity between natural nourishment and violent
39 consumption is best articulated by Yeong-hye's confession that she likes her breasts because
40 "*nothing can be killed by them. Hand, foot, tongue, gaze, all weapons from which nothing is*
41 *safe. But not my breasts*" (ch.1; original italics). Her fear of violence shows that she does not
42 abstain from animal products because of an individualist concern about body image, but
43 rather because of an empathetic realisation of the similarities between how animals' and
44 women's bodily autonomies are restricted. Importantly, these revelations about "the
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3 experiences of others” remain mostly unvocalised (C.J. Kim ch. 6). This suggests that Yeong-
4 hye perceives both the intersection of varying forms of oppression between all living beings,
5 and the difficulties of drawing a “dreaded comparison” between nonhuman subjects and
6 historically dehumanised peoples (Spiegel 3) – particularly women of colour.
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11 Soon after it is revealed that Yeong-hye’s father whipped her over the calves until she
12 was eighteen, her husband rapes her “as though she were a ‘comfort woman’ dragged in
13 against her will, and [he] was the Japanese soldier demanding services” (ch. 1). At this point,
14 it is important to note that South Korea was colonised by Japan. This metaphor evokes the
15 horror of sexual violence alongside additional vectors of racist and classist oppression,
16 thereby resisting any reductive conceptions of intersectional ethics. When her worried family
17 organise a meal to convince her to rethink her new moral position, Yeong-hye refuses to eat
18 animal products. Her father retaliates by slapping her; her face is described as an “empty
19 space” which is “cleaved” (ch. 1). Considering that the patriarch is a war veteran with an
20 authoritarian past, it is clear that his cruelty not only represents interpersonal violence, but is
21 also symbolic of gendered trauma which lingers after periods of colonisation or systemic
22 control. Yeong-hye is then force-fed meat in a graphic (and almost pornographic) display of
23 dominance. Her husband describes how her father “thrust the pork at [his] wife’s lips” as a
24 “moaning sound came from her tightly closed mouth” (ch. 1). This disturbing scene calls to
25 mind campaigns by prominent animal rights groups, wherein activists may cage or gag their
26 fellow participants. Some would argue that such displays lack self-reflexivity by failing to
27 address the irony of violently exoticising women’s bodies in order to protest the ‘sexual
28 politics’ of meat. In the case of Han’s novel, however, *the woman eating meat* is focalised as
29 the victim as “[a]n animal cry of distress burst[s] from her lips” (ch. 1). This is not to say that
30 the novel does not dwell upon animal abuse, but rather that the oppression of humans is
31 considered equally alongside such suffering in an “intersectional matrix” (Deckha, “Toward”
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3 541). Once again, Han highlights the complexities of vocalising trauma when multiple power
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5 struggles are at play.
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7 The second section, “Mongolian Mark,” relays the consequences of Yeong-hye’s
8 defiance through another bodily symbol: a birthmark on her buttocks. She is hospitalised after
9 attempting to commit suicide with a fruit knife, and subsequently lives with her sister and
10 brother-in-law (whose name is never revealed). The man becomes fixated with the “almost
11 inhuman patience” of his wife’s vegan sister, whose “goodness” he views as “oppressive”
12 (ch. 2) – thus indicating how ethical eating practices can trouble interpersonal dynamics. I
13 have already discussed how Yeong-hye’s husband fixates on clothing and controlling her
14 ‘sinful’ body. In this section, however, the male obsession morphs into an exclusively erotic
15 fantasy about the “Mongolian mark” as her brother-in-law envisions painting her “denuded”
16 body in floral patterns (ch. 2). While the term ‘denuding’ is commonly used to refer to
17 geological exposition, here it describes a human body, implying that the racialised and
18 sexualised woman is “a clear object” to be ‘conquered’ (ch. 2). Furthermore, his supposed
19 concern for the physical and mental wellbeing of his family member is rendered ironic by
20 abusive imagery, as he draws a “*faceless* man with his arms around her neck, looking as if he
21 [i]s attempting to throttle her” (ch. 2; my italics). While the *nameless* everyman has no
22 qualms with comparing her to a “cornered animal” (ch. 2), her frustrated attempts to exert
23 control over her own body and eating habits merely confirm his fetishisation of her physique.
24 The implication here is that, contrary to Yeong-hye’s husband’s earlier remarks about
25 ordinariness, her veganism is not as strange as the sexually charged violence of the
26 purportedly ‘normal’ people around her.
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51 These repeated acts of infantilisation, domestication and sexualisation may appear to
52 suggest that *The Vegetarian* predominantly raises feminist themes (which are typically
53 conceived as exclusively *human* rights issues). Yet, as the author herself has stated, it would
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3 be far too simplistic to argue that the novel is “a singular indictment of
4
5 the Korean patriarchy” (K. Han qtd. in Patrick 9). Indeed, after using a masculine model
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7 (who is only referred to as J.), the brother-in-law paints his *own* body, thereby subverting the
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9 male gaze’s stereotypical one-sided nature. Although Yeong-hye is initially reluctant to sleep
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11 with him, she importantly does give her consent – even if her reasoning is that “it was the
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13 flowers” and that the sex may stop her dreams of suffering faces (ch. 2). This is not to
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15 trivialise the fact that his sexual advances coincide with the deterioration of her mental
16
17 health, and that he abuses his power as a supposedly trustworthy family member. Yet when
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19 her brother-in-law’s body is imagined as a plant with a “penis [as] the pistil” (ch. 2), the
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21 homology between vegetal and human sexual organs renders him defenceless to Yeong-hye’s
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23 – and the reader’s – gaze. He fixates on her thoughts and values while simultaneously
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25 fetishising her form, but is also made vulnerable by this very act. Fictionalised sexual
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27 encounters between vegetarians and omnivores often propagate heteronormative
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29 understandings of gender identity and desire, such as Armand Chauvel’s *Le Vert et Le Rouge*
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31 (translated as *The Green and the Red*), a novel which follows the romantic relationship of a
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33 female restaurateur and a male pork producer who pretends to be vegetarian to gain her
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35 affections. Han, however, complicates the simplistic dualism of women as virtuous carers and
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37 men as unfeeling carnivores by presenting a transgressive take on associations with red and
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39 green: “His red flower closed and opened repeatedly above her Mongolian mark” (ch. 2).
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41 Working from Yeong-hye’s moral position, the text thus contemplates how one can conceive
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43 of sexual desire’s “carnality” without resorting to carnist imagery (ch. 2). Here, sex is only
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45 ‘creative’ in a metaphorical sense; it is not motivated by the repronormative urge to propagate
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47 the human race, but rather by aesthetic and erotic indulgence. Rethinking both omnivorous
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49 eating practices and normalised, essentialist understandings of the sexual act, the novel
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2
3 considers how posthumanist vegan theory would impact upon gender relations and sexual
4
5 relationships if such philosophy were to be enacted as praxis.
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7
8 Despite representing the potential of challenging binaries constructed around species,
9
10 gender or sexual identities, Yeong-hye's sex with her sister's husband is ultimately
11
12 ineffectual; instead of placating her, intercourse merely fuels her desire for "*flowers to bloom*
13
14 *from [her] crotch*", causing her to "*spread [her legs] wide*" and mimic the form of a tree (ch.
15
16 3; original italics). The title of the third section, "Flaming Trees," thus appears related to both
17
18 the colourful symbolism from the previous section and this final corporeal image of the
19
20 protagonist's crotch. In-hye soon discovers a video recording of the sexual act and divorces
21
22 her husband, arguing that he has taken advantage of a mentally ill woman. Upon first reading,
23
24 this diagnosis does not seem inaccurate; when Yeong-hye is still plagued by the visions of
25
26 faces which initially prompted her veganism, she gradually develops anorexia nervosa which
27
28 she ostensibly masks as a mystical, ecological awareness. Her sister speculates that she may
29
30 be trying to regress to preadolescence by starving herself and thereby losing secondary sexual
31
32 characteristics such as her menses and breast tissue (ch. 3). To some readers, her move from
33
34 veganism to 'becoming-vegetal' may suggest that truly ethical eating is an unattainable form
35
36 of moral perfectionism. Indeed, her reasoning that she should only ingest water and sunlight
37
38 because "all the trees of the world are like brothers and sisters" appears to be a nonsensical
39
40 equivalent of the (typically carnist) argument that 'plants have feelings, too' (ch. 3).
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46 However, if one considers avian imagery which persistently appears throughout all
47
48 three sections, then it becomes evident that Han is suggesting something far more complex
49
50 about the nature of 'infectious' ethical trends. The latest Portobello edition of *The Vegetarian*
51
52 (2015) features a white wing on its cover, immediately reinforcing the importance of birds
53
54 throughout the novel. In Korean culture, these animals serve as feminine symbols; Hong-Key
55
56 Yoon records that "[i]f a group of women talk a lot, they are sometimes referred to as a 'flock
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3 of sparrows” (152). The feminised element of such symbolism suggests that although the
4
5 novel does not simply criticise the patriarchy, one should prioritise the conversations between
6
7 the two female siblings – and their contrasting worldviews – in order to fully understand its
8
9 ethical conclusion. Contrary to her sister, In-hye readily conforms to gender roles: she wears
10
11 bras, mothers a child, and owns a cosmetics store. Much like gendered clothing, beauty
12
13 products also exploit both women’s insecurities and nonhuman bodies through animal testing.
14
15 It is no coincidence, then, that Yeong-hye’s last meat-based meal – the unexplained
16
17 devouring of a dead bird – leaves “her lips stained with blood like clumsily applied lipstick”
18
19 (ch. 1), further illuminating the damage of uncritically participating in normalised practices.
20
21 Subsequently, as she chooses to abandon carnophallogocentric values, her voice is described
22
23 as having “no weight to it, like feathers” (ch. 2). Despite her metaphorical voicelessness,
24
25 Yeong-hye’s “demonstrative veganism” causes her sister to become a “[n]on-vegan vegan
26
27 advocate” (Twine 632; 635); she prepares plant-based meals for her sister throughout the
28
29 second and third sections, thereby forging a dynamic (if imprecise) understanding of vegan
30
31 practices. While In-hye never adopts her sister’s dietary choices, she does move beyond the
32
33 instinctual protectiveness which initially fuels her divorce, and is the only member of the
34
35 family who continues to care for her. In-hye is also deeply protective of her sister,
36
37 particularly after a doctor inserts a tube down her sister’s throat in a scene which is
38
39 reminiscent of their father’s force-feeding (ch. 3). Ethical thinking appears contagious when
40
41 In-hye grows equally aware of patriarchal expectations: in the hospital she observes that “It’s
42
43 your body, you can treat it however you please. [...] And even that doesn’t turn out how you
44
45 wanted” (ch. 3).
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51
52 In overcoming base reactions like disgust and jealousy, In-hye comes to adopt a
53
54 humanist philosophy which is also postcolonial: it rails against exploitative and possessive
55
56 individualism. Thus while she is initially concerned about Yeong-hye’s unconventional diet
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3 and mental health, she comes to realise that “sometimes it’s the tranquil streets filled with so-
4 called ‘normal’ people that end up seeming strange” (1671). Tensions between the ‘strange’
5 and the ‘familiar’ recur throughout the text.¹⁰ As I have already suggested, it is infantilising
6 to read protests against social norms – such as the refusal to wear a bra – as irrational.
7
8 Similarly, it is problematic to dismiss Yeong-hye’s inaction as mere ‘illness’ with “no
9 reason” when her internal monologue clearly highlights how she views abstinence as a
10 political act (ch. 3).¹¹ This is not to say that her anorexia should be discounted, but rather that
11 one cannot depoliticise her intersecting concerns about eating ethically in a carnist culture.
12
13 The comparison of her crotch to a tree trunk illuminates how she is “trying to root herself into
14 this extreme and bizarre sanity by uprooting herself from the surface of this world” (K. Han
15 qtd. in Patrick 31). That is, her attempt to silently abandon her (hum)animality is a move
16 towards ending debates about ‘dreaded’ comparisons by exiting the very society which
17 allows for such violent rhetoric to replicate itself.
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32 The novel concludes with In-hye’s “protesting gaze” as she looks out of an ambulance
33 window at passing trees and a bird in flight (K. Han in Patrick 27). Once again, the recurring
34 themes of siblings and species¹² show that both Yeong-hye’s posthumanist veganism and In-
35 hye’s belief in the “inherent goodness [...] [of] humanity” are ultimately flawed (ch. 3). The
36 former’s problems have already been alluded to: strict dietary choices are not only difficult to
37 adhere to in certain situations, but also alienating in communal settings. Yeong-hye’s
38 attempts at “trying to shuck off the human” must fail (ch. 3), because suffering (and inflicting
39 harm) are inevitabilities of living. In-hye’s inclusive humanism is similarly problematised. In
40 the final sentences it is revealed that she cannot fully adhere to her selfless revelation because
41 she decides to abandon her child. She may be challenging societal norms by ‘taking flight’
42 like the bird which her son dreams of (ch. 3), but she is also prioritising her own happiness
43 and knowingly causing suffering. Furthermore, during one of her hospital visits, she looks her
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3 ill sister in the eyes and notes that “all that she sees reflected there is her own face” (ch. 3).
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5 Beholding the mote in her adulterous sister’s eye, she is forced to ‘face’ her own ethical
6
7 shortcomings. Here it is worth returning to the vegan vision which Yeong-hye comes “*face-*
8
9 *to-face with*” at the beginning of the novel (ch. 1; original italics). Importantly, the text never
10
11 identifies whose faces haunt her dreams – or even which species these ‘persons’ belong to.
12
13 This experimental, stream-of-consciousness segment thus provides an important clue for
14
15 understanding the standardised first- and third-person narration focalised through the
16
17 protagonist’s husband, brother-in-law and sister. The reflection of sisterly faces in a “multi-
18
19 optic vision” resonates with the anonymous visages from her nightmares (C.J. Kim ch. 1),
20
21 suggesting that *all* beings have the capacity to inflict harm upon others.
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25 For all its emphasis on cyclical abuse enacted upon historically oppressed peoples,
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27 therefore, the text also shows these beings to be capable of causing further harm. At first
28
29 glance, its focus on futility and infection does not paint a hopeful picture for posthumanist
30
31 interpersonal relations. However, the very resistance of binaries and simple assumptions
32
33 allows us to reassess our ideas of personhood. As Yeong-hye lies slowly dying, In-hye resorts
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35 to the first-person plural, asking “surely the dream isn’t all there is? We have to wake up at
36
37 some point, don’t we?” (ch. 3). If there is an answer to this ethical conundrum, it lies in
38
39 learning to navigate *between* the two sisters’ views – to reconcile idealised philosophy with
40
41 lived realities. Yeong-hye navigates practical ramifications of using posthumanist theory to
42
43 escape the strictures of sexist, heteronormative, repronormative expectations. Her failure
44
45 suggests that philosophers and activists should be open to the complexities of repression,
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47 particularly for those subjects who are targets of multiple vectors of oppression. In-hye’s
48
49 determination to care for her sister shows that a communal sense of personhood is more
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51 important than single-issue campaigns that often antagonise and estrange others – but her
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53 moral ambiguity also speaks to the disjoint between homogenised philosophical ‘goodness’
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and the complexities of an individual ‘life well lived’. By exploring such contradictions, *The Vegetarian* shows what many critical theorists neglect to address; both its form and content confront the reader with an uneasy, imperfect, but provocative praxis.

Notes

¹ The problematic connotations of mainstream or ‘white’ veganism are critiqued not only on websites such as Vegan Feminist Network (www.veganfeministnetwork.com) and Vegan Hip Hop Movement (www.veganhiphopmovement.blogspot.com), but also in a collection of essays titled *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health and Society*, edited by critical theorist Amie Breeze Harper.

² In an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy titled “‘Eating Well’, or the Calculation of the Subject”, Jacques Derrida introduces the term “*carno-phallogocentrism*” to symbolise how Western culture favours not only masculine and logocentric narratives, but also meat-eating or carnism (280; original italics). His argument suggests that modern subjects internalise masculinity, rationality and carnivorous eating as signifiers of social power.

³ It is important to note, too, that vegetarianism is not a requisite for following this belief system; Dean Curtin observes that in Tibet, even some Buddhists eat meat (243).

⁴ A 2016 study conducted by The Vegan Society and Vegan Life Magazine reports that the percentage of female vegans in the United Kingdom (63%) far exceeds that of men (37%).

⁵ For a scholarly analysis of some of their most controversial campaigns, see Maneesha Deckha’s 2008 article “Disturbing Images: PETA and the Feminist Ethics of Animal Advocacy”.

⁶ Other potentially problematic tropes include the comparison of dairy production to rape, or the assertion that factory farms are similar to concentration camps. For example, in J.M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* (1999), a Jewish character states that to insensitively evoke images of the Holocaust is to “misunderstand the nature of likenesses” (49-50). It is therefore evident that there is more than one “dreaded comparison” which contemporary animal theorists must eschew (Spiegel 3).

⁷ This is not to say that Western posthumanism inherently lacks nuance or self-reflexivity. In fact, contemporary philosophers are beginning to reinvent the pedagogical methods which critical animal theory typically rejects. For example, Paola Cavalieri’s *The Death of the Animal* merges continental criticism of moral perfectionism and terms like “the animal” (Wolfe 40) with an inclusive format based on a classical tradition: the Socratic dialogue. The concern, therefore, is not that the field is reductive so much as that most prominent posthumanists are positioned within the Western philosophical tradition, which may not always apply to postcolonial settings.

⁸ This adaptation of the phrase ‘Black Lives Matter’ frequently appears on animal rights forums, and is used to silence black vegans or rights activists who protest racialised discrimination in the USA and elsewhere. For screenshots and an analysis of this problematic rhetoric, see Claire Heuchan’s article “Veganism Has a Serious Race Problem”.

⁹ His remark is of particular interest if one considers that studies on vegetarianism and feminism have found that those who identify as semi-vegetarians are more likely than vegans to mask eating disorders or to change their eating habits for body image rather than ethical reasons (Brinkman *et al.* 173). Furthermore, here the word ‘vegetarian’ connotes a mere nutritive choice, much as how I have used the term ‘strict vegetarianism’ to refer to meat-, egg- and dairy-free diets which are not ethically motivated.

¹⁰ Variations on the word ‘strange’ appear 33 times, while forms of the latter (including its antithesis, ‘unfamiliar’) are used 15 times.

¹¹ In one of the rare moments when she is able to vocalise such thoughts, her reason is not that she cannot, but rather that she “won’t eat it” (ch. 1). Her choice of phrasing is crucial; the word ‘won’t’ implies that this is not a question of being unable to eat the food (as in the case of dietary restriction), but rather because she does not *want* to.

¹² A 2009 filmic adaptation titled *Chaesikjuuija (Vegetarian)* opens with a voiceover addressed to “My sister”, thus reinforcing the importance of familial relationships throughout the novel. Critics such as Carol J. Adams and Lisa Kemmerer have popularised the notion of “sister species” (Kemmerer 3), but I choose a gender-neutral noun because of the novel’s focus on philosophical exchanges between both women *and* men. The word ‘siblings’ therefore implicitly reinforces intersectional feminism’s tenet that “the question of ranking oppressions is at least provisionally irresolvable” (C.J. Kim ch. 6)

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