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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtpr20

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To cite this article: Dominic O'Key (2021): Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* and the International Booker Prize: reading with and against world literary prestige, Textual Practice, DOI: 10.1080/0950236X.2021.1900376

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1900376

Published online: 18 Mar 2021.

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TEXTUAL PRACTICE
https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1900376

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and the International Booker Prize: reading with and against world literary prestige

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ABSTRACT
In 2016, the English-language translation of Han Kang's 2007 novel *The Vegetarian* was awarded the Booker group's International Prize for fiction. Although reviewers have tended to interpret the novel's plot pessimistically, as a perilous descent into starvation, literary critics have argued that *The Vegetarian* dramatises an ecofeminist refusal of carnism and patriarchy. Yet both of these interpretations neglect crucial textual and extra-textual features of Han's novel. In fact, the text's generic and narrative ambiguities on the one side, and its celebrated position within contemporary world literary publishing culture on the other, suggest that there are limits to reading *The Vegetarian* as a radically posthumanist tale of becoming-plant. This essay therefore reconsiders *The Vegetarian* in light of its narrative form *and* its incorporation into the world literary canon. By doing this I will not only complicate existing close readings of Han Kang's work. I will also develop literary-sociological analyses of prize-giving and the publishing industry, while at the same time interrogating the extent to which contemporary literature challenges and becomes folded into global capital.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 15 July 2020; Accepted 15 February 2021

KEYWORDS Han Kang; *The Vegetarian*; literary prizes; translation; world literature

Introduction

In 2016, Han Kang's three-part novel *The Vegetarian* won the newly re-imagined Man Booker International Prize. First published in Korean as 채식주의자 in 2007, *The Vegetarian* tells the story of a young, unhappily married woman in contemporary South Korea – Yeong-hye Kim – whose recurring nightmares of animal torture propel her to retreat from the expectations of her social world. She stops wearing a bra, avoids sex, repudiates meat-eating and withdraws from all familial ties. Yeong-hye's actions are incomprehensible to those around her. Her unloving husband grows exasperated, and her family, remonstrating Yeong-hye for her 'sheer obstinacy',[1]

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stage a formal intervention. But when Yeong-hye refuses to give up her nascent vegetarianism, her father restrains her and force-feeds lumps of pork into her mouth. Shocked, Yeong-hye drives a knife into her arm: 'Blood ribboned out her wrist'.[2] She survives, but by the end of the novel she is medicalised and confined within a psychiatric hospital, where she receives occasional visits from her sister, In-hye. Here, Han momentarily unsettles the novel's previously established realism, as Yeong-hye rejects the ward's food in favour of photosynthetic nourishment, whispering to her sister that 'I'm not an animal anymore […] I don't need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight'.[3] Yeong-hye ends the novel in an ambulance, moaning in apparent pain, as her sister watches over her.

Published in 2015 with Portobello Books, a now-discontinued imprint of Granta, *The Vegetarian* was awarded the Man Booker International Prize (MBIP) following Deborah Smith's English-language translation, her debut as a literary translator. In victory, the novel triumphed over both *A Strangeness in My Mind* (2014), written by the Nobel Prize-winning Turkish author Orhan Pamuk, and *The Story of the Lost Child* (2014) by Elena Ferrante, the final instalment of the pseudonymous Italian author's Neapolitan novels, whose Europa Editions paperbacks generated a passionate Anglophone readership, dubbed 'Ferrante Fever'. *The Vegetarian* became a big seller. In the UK, a Booker press release boasted of selling 160,000 copies, 'an unheard of number for a foreign novel outside the likes of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*'.[4] In South Korea, the Booker win generated an unofficial second publication of the novel, as the online retailer Yes24 reported that Han's domestic sales climbed in the weeks after the award announcement.[5] As I write today, the novel has been translated into twenty-four languages: five before the Booker award, nineteen afterwards.

Yet, curiously, the novel accrued its global literary prestige belatedly: over a decade since its first section was published as a standalone short story; a full decade since its second section, 'Mongolian Mark', was awarded the Yi Sang Literary Award, the most prestigious award for Korean-language writing; nine years after it entered Korean bookstores as a fully-formed 'linked' or 'serial novel' [*yônjak sosôl*];[6] seven years after the book was adapted and released as a feature film. Indeed, so much time had elapsed between the novel's original publication and the 2016 MBIP awards ceremony that, in her acceptance speech, Han remarked that *The Vegetarian* 'was written a decade ago, and I have walked a long way away from the book'.[7]

In their many reflections on *The Vegetarian*, the Booker judging panel, commercial reviewers and academic readers have all lauded Han's depiction of 'an ordinary woman's rejection of all the conventions and assumptions that bind her to her home, family and society', commending in particular how the novel's 'uncanny blend of beauty and horror […] reveals the impact of this great refusal both on the heroine herself and on those around her'.[8] But while newspaper and magazine reviewers have tended to interpret the novel rather literally, as a tale of how domestic imprisonment ultimately hastens a destructive and anorexic psychosis,[9] Han's academic critics have sought to rescue Yeong-hye's 'great refusal' through an affirmative counter-reading. Under this recuperative interpretation, literary studies scholars have argued that even if we were to read Yeong-hye's hunger strike as connoting a death-drive, we must also identify it as a paradoxically *regenerative* death-drive, one in which Yeong-hye shrinks and becomes-vegetal in order to dig an escape-route out of a destructive patriarchal society.[10] Yeong-hye, they argue, escapes the interlinked forces of gendered violence and 'carno-phallogocentrism' – the carnivorousness of anthropocentric modernity, theorised by Jacques Derrida as the sacrificial ingestion of animal flesh that remains central to modernity's construction of meaning[11] – and consequently embraces a form of nonviolent, vegetal life. Yeong-hye's refusal to consume animals thus constitutes for these critics a feminist resistance to an entire masculine order represented by carnivorous meat cultures.[12] And because of this, the novel is read as evincing a posthumanist ethics of 'vegetability' [*sikmulsông*][13] and ecofeminism.[14] As Rose Casey puts it, *The Vegetarian* offers an instantiation of 'feminist worldmaking', its plot suggesting 'that rejecting gender-based violence and oppression requires an internationalist mode of resistance'.[15]

When I first began teaching *The Vegetarian* in 2017 – as part of a final-year undergraduate course on contemporary world literature – I too encouraged a critical counter-reading of the novel. Across three sessions, my students and I read *The Vegetarian* alongside scholarship on Korean modernity, democratisation and gender on the one side, and vegetarian-feminist ethics on the other. Linking these topics together, my students argued that Han's novel was an indictment of Korean patriarchy, a fable of constraining domesticity and a reinvention of the metamorphosis narrative in an age of increasing global vegetarianism. But because we were also committed methodologically to an analysis of world-literary systems, we found that our readings of the novel's putatively posthumanist ethics and vegan feminism were caught in tension with questions regarding translation and publication, as well as the politics of prize-giving. Were we arguing, for example, that *The Vegetarian* itself thematises posthumanism, or were we rather saying that its ecofeminism was enabled by its linguistic and hence cultural translation into an Anglo-American milieu? How do we square an affirmative reading of the novel's politics with its ostensibly easy incorporation – or digestion – into the liberal progressivism of literary prize culture and the contemporary world literature canon? How is it that this text arrived on our bookshelves to begin with, in a language we could all understand, and how important is it that our close readings account for this network of production, publication, translation and consecration?

In this article I want to extend two branches of argument that contribute to and challenge the existing critical discourse surrounding *The Vegetarian*. In the first half of this essay I will suggest that because the novel is not simply 'about' vegetarianism, but is rather a text that stages conflicts within bourgeois, patriarchal and carniverous social relations, Han subordinates in order to intensify her vegetarian thematics. Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is motivated not by a straightforward sympathy for nonhuman life but by more of an immediate, personal repulsion at the nightmare of normalised domination within and across species. And yet, because of the novel's underlying narrative and generic ambivalences, especially because of its strict narrative focalisation and its weighting of realism over and above the fantastic, *The Vegetarian* never fully endorses its own liberatory refusal of domination. Problematically, the novel stops short of committing, at least on a textual level, to its own vision of vegetal life. There is, then, an ambivalence at the heart of this novel which attenuates the very possibility of an affirmative counter-reading.

In this essay's second half I explore how this reading might change in light of *The Vegetarian's* status as a prize-winning novel, and hence as an increasingly paradigmatic document of twenty-first century world-literary prestige. In his persuasive study of cultural prizes, *The Economy of Prestige* (2003), James F. English argues that prizes are not simply an index of prestige, but are also 'the single best instrument for negotiating transactions between cultural and economic, cultural and social, or cultural and political capital—which is to say that they are our most effective institutional agents of capital intraconversion'.[16] Must critical interpretations of *The Vegetarian* change once we take stock of these transactions between culture and economy? If so, then how do the para- and extra-textual problematics of world literary space play an underlying but often unacknowledged role in the calculation of literary and cultural prestige, and to what extent do they existing complicate close readings of the novel? I will answer these questions by drawing attention to the novel's conditions of literary production and circulation, and to the interrelation between the publishing and translation industry and the politics of prize-giving.

Although I will articulate these branches of argument in discrete sections, they are not separate. In fact, I will end by suggesting that the very textual characteristics I explore in this essay's first section play an important role in the novel's eventual translation and Booker win that I analyse in the second section. Ultimately, I contend that *The Vegetarian's* story of individual dissidence, its intertextual relation to modernist aesthetics, its navigation of the particular and the universal, and the debates and controversies surrounding the novel's translation, all connect to its critical and commercial success. This focus will clarify the contexts behind *The Vegetarian's* position within the cultural world-system, or world republic of letters, while also developing speculative answers as to why the novel was celebrated by the Booker group.

At the heart of this enquiry is a desire to test how the prevailing literary-critical readings of *The Vegetarian* transform once they are placed in dialogue with the novel's status as an object conferred with literary value. In other words, I wish to follow the contradictions and confluences between textual aesthetics on the one side and global literary institutions, markets and prizes on the other. This approach does not reduce the literary to the economic. Rather, it draws out underlying tensions between these two domains, and asks how these tensions create new opportunities for literary interpretation. This essay therefore contributes to a wider conversation concerning criticism's ability to stay alert to the limits and possibilities of the literary in a contemporary publishing conjuncture of flat sales and waning readerships, dominated by conglomerates and Amazon. Criticism, Sarah Brouillette has argued, still tends to pay much more attention to 'literature's countering force' than the more sobering question of 'to whom is literature's countering force relevant'.[17] Because literature is a commodity for and expression of the bourgeoise, Brouillette says, critics ought to be more circumspect in their assertions of a text's radical potentiality. My point here is not to abandon the power of the literary, nor still to deterministically conceive of contemporary world literature as being totally incorporated into the real economy. Instead, I wish to suggest that critics can afford to be more vigilant – indeed more honest – about the specific contexts of artistic and economic production from which literary writing and publishing are inseparable. In fact, I contend that we can build a more robust close reading of the novel *through* an analysis of its world-literary circulation.

'All those butchered bodies': vegetarianism, becoming-vegetal and ecofeminist horizons in *The Vegetarian*

The Vegetarian's plot hinges on Yeong-hye's refusal to eat dead animals. But crucially, the novel is not primarily narrated by her. In fact, Han distributes the governing narrative voice to anyone except her protagonist, as Yeong-hye's husband, brother-in-law and sister all sequentially assume narrative responsibility across each of the book's three sections. The novel's first section is narrated by Yeong-hye's husband, referred to only as Mr Cheong. A salary man with a slight paunch, Mr Cheong introduces himself as someone 'inclined towards the middle course in life', adding that, now in his late thirties, he has settled into a 'carefully ordered existence'.[18] He confesses without guilt that he barely loves his wife, that there is no 'special attraction' between them. But this is offset by her 'passive personality'.[19] The novel's plot kickstarts when Yeong-hye breaks with this perceived passivity. One morning, Mr Cheong wakes up to find plastic bags and airtight containers, all full of various meat products, tossed onto the kitchen floor:

> there was nowhere I could put my feet without treading on them. Beef for shabu-shabu, belly pork, two sides of black beef shin, some squid in a vacuum-packed bag, sliced eel that my mother-in-law had sent us from the countryside ages ago, dried croaker tied with yellow string, unopened packs of frozen dumplings and endless bundles of unidentified stuff dragged from the depths of the fridge.[20]

The plot thus begins in the space after the novel's opening sentence: 'Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way'.[21] Mr Cheong's life, equally 'unremarkable' before now, is suddenly made remarkable, which is to say, in need of narration in the present tense. For not only does Yeong-hye fail to meet Mr Cheong's expectations of a housewife – namely the reproductive labour of waking him up in the mornings, preparing his breakfast, and ironing his shirt ready for work – but she also destroys their kitchen's stocks and supplies, throwing out 'beef and pork, pieces of chicken, at least 200,000-won worth of saltwater eel', as well as their dairy products: 'I couldn't let those things stay in the fridge. It wouldn't be right'.[22] When asked about her vegetarianism, she says that she plans on giving up meat 'forever'.[23] In her husband's eyes, Yeong-hye is no longer 'unremarkable', but actively 'unreasonable'.[24]

But what *is* Yeong-hye's vegetarianism, exactly? What motivates it? These are the kinds of questions that bug Mr Cheong as he scrambles for a rational explanation of his wife's sudden 'hypersensitivity' to meat.[25] Yet Han suggests that Yeong-hye's vegetarianism derives not so much from conscious but unconscious decision-making, that is, from a repulsive reaction to the claustrophobia of gendered social relations and violence across gender and species lines. Han connects these together in the first section's two key instances of patriarchal and penetrative violence: firstly, Mr Cheong confesses that he routinely rapes Yeong-hye, 'as though she were a "comfort woman" dragged in against her will, and I was the Japanese soldier demanding her services';[26] secondly, her father, a former military general who boasts of killing Vietcong fighters, force-feeds meat into her mouth, at which 'an animal cry of distress burst from her lips'.[27] Later in the novel, In-hye reveals that as a child Yeong-hye was routinely beaten by her father.[28] Han therefore indicates that Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is a response to the violence inflicted on her by the men in her life who, as characters, embody and act out the military rule that was inflicted on and by Korea across the twentieth century. To escape this violence, she must first stop harming the world. Yeong-hye considers her body a weapon that must be blunted, softened and shrunk: ‘I like my breasts, nothing can be killed by them. Hand, foot, tongue, gaze, all weapons from which nothing is safe. But not my breasts. With my round breasts, I’m okay’.[29] It is from this position that Yeong-hye comes to question and hence denaturalise her previously unquestioned ingestion of nonhuman animal flesh. For Yeong-hye, the act of eating animals is bound up with the forms of patriarchal violence inflicted upon her. To give up animal flesh, then, is to give up the carnophallogocentric milieu in which she is imprisoned.

Yet although Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism is a response to misogynistic violence, its grip upon her psyche largely takes place under the spell of dreams. When her husband asks why she is binning all their frozen meat, Yeong-hye simply responds ‘ … I had a dream’.[30] Later, at a business meal with her husband’s boss, Yeong-hye is asked whether ‘there was some special reason’ for her becoming vegetarian, ‘health reasons, for example … or religious, perhaps?’[31] Once again Yeong-hye sidesteps the presumed rationality that undergirds vegetarianism, replying that she ‘had a dream’.[32] But these dreamscapes turn out to be more like nightmares of excess, disorder and horror. Across the first chapter, Han incorporates fragmentary paragraphs, typeset in italics, that grant readers fleeting access to Yeong-hye’s dreams. These dreams are to be understood as fugitive moments of narration, stolen from the otherwise dominant first-person narration of her husband. In the first, Yeong-hye finds herself in ‘dark woods’ with ‘torn feet’, ‘Frightened. Cold’.[33] Entering a ‘red barn-like building’, she encounters ‘great blood-read gashes of meat’ hung across a long bamboo stick: ‘Try to push past but the meat, there’s no end to the meat, and no exit. Blood in my mouth, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin’.[34] As Yeong-hye breaks out of the barn and runs through a valley, Han counterposes her protagonist’s terror with a scene of familial happiness and plenty: ‘Families picnicking, little children running about, and that smell, that delicious smell. … Barbecuing meat, the sound of singing and happy laughter’.[35] Emerging from the dark woods, her clothes wet with blood, Yeong-hye now stands as an exile from the world of family barbecues, in which the consumption of animal flesh remains normalised and unquestioned: ‘Crouch down, don’t let anybody see. My bloody hands. My bloody mouth. […] the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood’.[36]

This nightmare of the family unit’s implied structures of gendered social reproduction offer a thematic key for unlocking the text’s vegetarianism. In a further fragment addressed to her husband, Yeong-hye desires to leave behind ‘the dining table, you, all the kitchen furniture’.[37] Her rejection begins to mutate into the uncanny: ‘Dreams of murder. […] Familiarity bleeds into strangeness […] Intolerable loathing, so long suppressed. Loathing I’ve always tried to mask with affection. But now the mask is coming off’.[38] Then, in another nightmare, Yeong-hye relives a previously repressed childhood memory: after Yeong-hye is bitten by her family dog, her father chains the dog to his motorcycle and drives in a circle until the dog reaches total exhaustion. After six laps, with the chain cutting into the dog's throat, its weak body is dragged along the ground. Later, the young Yeong-hye feasts on a bowlful of rice peppered with the dog's meat: 'The saying goes that for a wound caused by a dog-bite to heal you have to eat that same dog'.[39] The repressed shame of not caring for her pet dog, of even enjoying eating its 'burnt flesh', haunts to Yeong-hye into her adulthood.

Later in the first section, when Yeong-hye is hospitalised, she reflects that 'the thing that hurts' most is not her scarred wrists but her chest:

> Something is stuck in my solar plexus. […] 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.[40]

All of the meat she has eaten throughout her life has been digested. Yet the animals – their souls – remain 'lodged' inside her, 'scattered' like a mass grave. In this respect, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism recalls another famous literary vegetarian, J. M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello. Like Costello, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism frustrates rational explanation, and is motivated not by moral arguments but a deeply physical and personal dread, long repressed in the unconscious much like the lumps of dead animals that sticks 'stubbornly to [her] insides'.[41] Costello is adamant that her vegetarianism arises not because she has a moral conviction to save other species, but because she herself is a 'branded, marked, wounded animal' with 'a desire to save [her] soul'.[42] Likewise, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism, as a rupture within the self, connotes a desire to redeem the harm she has inflicted on other beings. The novel therefore imagines a kind of vegetarianism not guided by rationalistic sympathy for animals, religious or spiritual abstinence, or by diet and health, but by a more abstract and yet paradoxically embodied investment in relinquishing and escaping all forms of violence, within and across species lines. But where Costello's vegetarianism emerges from her own animal suffering, Yeong-hye hopes to no longer be an animal at all. She wants to become a plant.

It is plain to see, then, why *The Vegetarian* has been read as an ecofeminist text. Indeed, Han extrapolates this thematic convergence of femininity and nature across the novel's second and third sections, staging the ways in which her protagonist's vegetarianism presents a challenge to the social order of carnivorous patriarchy. After the novel's initial drama of marital breakdown, Han depicts how Yeong-hye is used and abused by her brother-in-law, a largely unsuccessful video artist who becomes obsessed with her ‘Mongolian mark’, which he fetishises as ‘something ancient, something pre-evolutionary, or else perhaps a mark of photosynthesis’.[43] Inviting Yeong-hye to be the object of his next art project, he views her not as a ‘person’, but as an interstitial being situated ontologically somewhere between human, animal and plant. He paints flowers on Yeong-hye’s body, works himself into a frenzy of sexual fantasy about her birthmark, and eventually films himself having sex with her. The novel’s third and final section takes place in the period after he is caught, with Yeong-hye now imprisoned within a psychiatric ward, diagnosed with anorexia nervosa and strapped down to a bed for IV feeding. In this sense Han’s emplotment follows the words of Yeong-hye’s weeping mother who, sitting beside her hospital bed in the novel’s opening section, warns her daughter: ‘stop eating meat, and the world will devour you whole’.[44]

Despite being ‘devoured’ by the social order she rebukes, Yeong-hye is frequently interpreted as *escaping* from this world. Han’s critics argue that Yeong-hye’s ascetic withdrawal, as a kind of bodily negation of carnism and patriarchy, becomes propositional and liberatory. Against the grain of the novel’s plotted denouement of psychic disintegration and its implication that rejecting human violence as such leads towards self-relinquishment and death, critics contend that Yeong-hye finds freedom in the world of plants, ‘as if she herself was one of the glistening trees’ in the forest surrounding the hospital.[45]

In order to make more sense of this reading, it is useful to follow *The Vegetarian* down to its textual roots. I have already noted that the novel was first published as three separate stories. But as translator Deborah Smith reminds us, Han’s 1997 short story ‘The Fruit of my Woman’ can be read as a ‘direct precursor’ to the novel, an earlier literary experiment which imagines a married couple in their thirties who ‘find their hitherto uneventful lives turned upside down when the woman starts to undergo a transformation’.[46] ‘The Fruit of My Woman’ tells a story of restrictive domestic hetero-monogamy in which a young woman slowly turns into a house plant. As in *The Vegetarian*, Han narrates from the perspective of an absent-minded and dispassionate husband, albeit a more sympathetic one, while also offering fugitive passages in which the nameless protagonist takes hold of the narrative. The story begins when the husband notices ‘deep bruises’ on his wife’s body that grow more pronounced as the days go by.[47] Soon she stops eating, vomits several times a day, and feels compelled to stand naked in the sunlight on their apartment’s balcony. Her speech starts slipping away. The husband calls a doctor, but the doctor cannot pin down the cause of her bruises. As her body becomes more of ‘a dark, dull blue’, the husband leaves for a business trip. On his return, he finds his wife on the balcony, naked and ‘faint[ly] murmuring’ for water: ‘her entire body was dark green. Her formerly shadowed face now gleamed like a glossy evergreen leaf. Her dried radish-leaf hair was as lustrous as the stems of wild herbs'. He splashes water over her, and she undergoes 'a quivering revival, like the leaf of a huge plant'. Struck now by her resplendent green leaves, he thinks to himself that she 'had never been so beautiful'. As the summer turns into autumn, her leaves droop and her hair falls out. When she releases a handful of 'yellowish green' fruit, the husband plants them in flowerpots, ending the story asking: 'When spring came, would my wife sprout again? Would her flowers bloom red? I just didn't know'.

Like *The Vegetarian* after it, 'The Fruit of My Woman' contests the constraints of the patriarchal household by turning towards plants. Throughout the story, Han playfully mines the associative meanings of plants, especially the seeming contradiction of a plant's rooted freedom. The key tension here revolves around the wife's inability to free herself from the trappings of rooted bourgeois heteronormativity in cosmopolitan South Korea. Han characterises the wife as someone who desires a more nomadic life ('I want to live my whole life without settling in a single place') but has acquiesced to the prison of marriage. Her husband confesses that, 'in the end, instead of setting out for the world's edge, my wife powered all her meagre funds into the deposit for this flat and our wedding costs'. She devotes herself to her collection of flowers, fulfilling her husband's dream of private and miniature ecological domesticity: 'green lettuces and perilla' on the balcony, 'bean sprouts growing in the kitchen'. Han writes that the nameless wife, confined by her apartment, desires 'to leave, to get some new blood in her veins, and to flush out her tired old lungs with fresh air'. But stuck within domesticity, 'as though a massive iron ball attached to an invisible chain prevented her from so much as flexing a single muscle', she begins to dream of becoming a plant, 'breaking the ceiling of the veranda, […] shooting up through cement and steel bars'. But she remains 'stifled':

> This isn't living, she spat out, it only looks like it. Her voice was edged with hostility, like a drunk's slurring declamation. This country's rotten through. There's no way anything could grow here, don't you see? Not trapped here in this … in this stifling, deafening place!

In this crescendo, which utilises vegetal metaphors in order to glimpse the personal as political ('This country's rotten through'), Han hastens her story towards its fantastical abandonment of the figure of the 'human'. In doing so, she implies that if, under conditions of patriarchal domesticity, this woman must become a kind of house plant, then she will at least *literalise* it. Han's nameless protagonist discovers a paradoxical liberation by literalising the expectations placed upon her, metamorphosing into the very house plant her husband wishes her to be metaphorically. In this story of metamorphosis, then, the wife's transformation is at once an ironic literalisation of bourgeois heteronormativity's expected fecundity, obedience and rootedness *and* an escape from the confines of these expectations.

'The Fruit of my Woman' and *The Vegetarian* both stage a vegetal refiguration of the human subject. Both also share surrealistic elements. Yet the two texts remain divided by their generic and tonal styles. This contrast is partly explained by 'The Fruit of My Woman's' lightness of tone and narration, as well as Han's mobilisation of the elliptical and episodic concentration of the short story form itself, which achieves here a kind of magical realism, or irrealism, which sits in marked contrast to the later novel. In 'The Fruit of Woman's' fabular rendering of everyday life, which stretches the bounds of realism, Han's nameless protagonist actually *becomes* a plant. The short story's fantastical realisation of becoming-plant thus allegorically indicts South Korean bourgeois patriarchy for turning women into houseplants.

Yet the same cannot be said of *The Vegetarian*, which creates a darker and more constrained portrayal of ontological transformation. There are important reasons for this. The first concerns Han's narratorial choices. The second revolves around the novel's ultimate commitment to realism. That is, first, without Yeong-hye's narrative voice to guide the reader, the novel's world – and the possibilities within it – remain tightly guarded by the pessimism of Yeong-hye's relatives. Because Han narrates from the position of others, deliberately denying Yeong-hye any coherent or sustained focalisation, she necessarily limits the opportunities for Yeong-hye's vegetal transformation. Second, and connectedly, this narrative exclusion leads *The Vegetarian* more towards realist mimesis than the fantastic. The novel certainly hints at a break with reality when, in its final pages, Yeong-hye insists that she only needs sunlight to survive. But this possibility is formally policed by the text's narrative focalisation and its commitment to realism, both of which are grounded in the setting of the psychiatric hospital and amidst a scene of nurses who worry that Yeong-hye is severely dehydrated. *The Vegetarian's* plotted realism makes the novel much more ambivalent about its vision of becoming-plant than the earlier short story, which transitions smoothly into a fabular register. Thus at the end of *The Vegetarian*, Han leaves the reader with a moment of ambivalence, not transcendence, as Yeong-hye mutters 'Uh … uhn … ' to her worried sister.[48] Ultimately, Han reinforces her realism by denying the possibility of a narrative spoken from the position of vegetal transformation.

Looked at from one angle, then, *The Vegetarian* stages one woman's repulsion towards the gendered social relations that obtain in contemporary South Korea. By thematically welding gender to meat eating, and by coupling the abuse of women and the abuse of animals, Han imagines a form of vegetarianism that is not motivated by a love of or sympathy for animals, but by an instinctual revulsion towards violence, whether that violence is inflicted against human or nonhuman bodies. Hence the prevailing affirmative reading of Yeong-hye's inoperativity, which claims her vegetal transformation as a feminist act against all forms of violence. Alix Beeston has already criticised this reading because its idea of feminist resistance is 'predicated on a negative epistemology of nonhuman alterity', one that forgets that nature is constructed not as the site of liberation for Yeong-hye but as 'a deadly terminus'.[49] On top of this, my analysis has intended to show how the novel's generic and narrative specificities also constrain its putatively ecofeminist vision of a life lived without animal violence. *The Vegetarian* never quite commits to the posthumanist transformation which Yeong-hye supposedly undergoes. And it is the novel's adherence to a form of straightforward realism that, in the end, consolidates Yeong-hye's withdrawal as a pathway towards death. If anything, then, the novel develops its feminism *as critique*, not through a plotted liberation from a violent humanity, but through the other characters' suppression and exploitation of Yeong-hye's dissidence. In other words, *The Vegetarian* stands more as a dramatisation of gendered and cross-species violence rather than an imagination of ecofeminist subjectivity.

Prizing translation: *The Vegetarian* and the International Booker Prize

The Booker Prize has received substantial but by no means exhaustive critical commentary. In *Consuming Fictions* (1996), Richard Todd historicises the Booker's rise in prestige within the neoliberal economic hegemony of the Thatcher years, thus suggesting that free market economics and entrepreneurial individualisation are not just coeval with but constitutive of the Prize's social meaning.[50] In *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), Graham Huggan interrogates how the Booker Prize's ostensibly increasing multicultural consciousness in the final decades of the twentieth-century ultimately encouraged 'the commerce of an "exotic" commodity catered to the Western literary market'. Today, postcolonial writers still negotiate what Huggan calls the Booker's 'alterity industry'.[51] Sharon Norris's work pinpoints the specific ways in which the Booker Prize acts as an elite gatekeeper for popular literary fiction, as many of the Booker's nominated authors – as well as the vast majority of its judges – studied at Oxbridge universities. Norris also examines how the Prize's highly mediatised controversies, whether real or manufactured, have not simply boosted sales of the winning novelist's back catalogue, but have effectively disassociated the Booker brand from its previous life as the Booker-McConnell corporation.[52] In spite of John Berger's infamous Booker Prize victory speech in 1977, in which he denounced Booker-McConnell for building its fortune through extensive holdings in the West Indies,[53] the brand has largely suppressed its role as the preeminent sugar manufacturer of the British empire. Booker, then, spent the post-war period of decolonisation strategically generating new symbolic value around the company's cultural programme.

In *The Economy of Prestige*, which explores the broader rise of cultural prizes in the twentieth century, James F. English builds on Norris's investigation into the Booker's 'scandalous currency'. English notes how the Prize's continued success has largely depended on generating a 'rhetoric of scandal' that captures and inflates media attention.[54] More recently, in *Prizing Debate* (2017), Anna Auguscik's synthesis of these previous studies ultimately sharpens our sense of how the Booker Foundation, by balancing 'the realm of finances and political networks with literary expertise', has come to actively shape the world literary field as both 'participant' and 'agent'.[55] These insights, often underpinned by Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of the literary field under capitalist production,[56] build a picture of the Booker Prize as a dominant force within the economy of literary-cultural prestige. The Booker is paradigmatic of how literary aesthetics, as well as the reception and circulation of these aesthetics, are mediated by capital.

There is, then, a substantial body of critical work devoted to the Booker Prize. But can these analyses be translated to the Man Booker International Prize? A brief history of the MBIP is useful here. In its first iteration in 2005, the MBIP was a biennial award that bestowed £60,000 on an author for their lifelong contribution to Anglophone literature. While the Booker Prize celebrated an individual novel in English from Commonwealth countries, the MBIP mirrored the Nobel Prize for Literature in that it sought to reward writers for their entire literary oeuvre. Winning authors such as Chinua Achebe (2007), Alice Munro (2009) and Philip Roth (2011) were all celebrated for their 'continued creativity, development and overall contribution to fiction on the world stage'.[57] But in 2016, the Booker Foundation loosened its entry criteria for the main prize, now accepting – at least in principle – any English-language novel published in the respective year.[58] The Booker has received considerable criticism for this move, as its putative globalisation in effect hastens a new centralisation, an Atlanticist focus situated between the publishing capitals of London and New York.[59]

But what has thus far gone under-discussed in the Booker Prize's makeover is how the Foundation concomitantly refashioned its International Prize, transforming the award into the Booker's foreign-language equivalent as an annual celebration of contemporary fiction published in English-language translation. According to the Booker group, this 'rationalisation' of the two prizes was designed to 'reward the best books published anywhere on the globe, in any language, as long as they have a publisher in Britain regardless of where they were first published'.[60] But this rebranding process was also prompted by a merger. As Sarah Shaffi reported in *The Bookseller*, the Booker Prize Foundation created its 'evolved' International

Prize by swallowing-up the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize (IFFP), which over a quarter of a century awarded its £10,000 prize to novels by Jose Saramago (1993), W. G. Sebald (2002), and Jenny Erpenbeck (2015).[61]

Thus the MBIP, subsequently renamed the International Booker Prize (IBP) in 2019, became an annual award bestowed upon an original work published in translation. As the £50,000 prize money is shared equally between author and translator, the IBP purports to celebrate original and translation in equal measure. This promises to rectify the longstanding cultural elision of the translator's role (publishing culture relies on the promotion of authorial personality and celebrity, and translators' names are still mostly absent from book-covers) and the relatively low industry-wide remuneration for the labour of translation itself. Indeed, Han Kang and Deborah Smith have been described as a model of a more equitable author-translator partnership, with Boyd Tonkin – previously the key judge of the IFFP, now as chair of the IBP – referring to Han and Smith as a 'formidable double-act'[62] in their book-promotion events. A more critical analysis might conceive of Smith as a simultaneous translator, second-author and informal agent-promotor – a 'necessary point of entry into the field of trade publishing' – of Han's work in English.[63] In an interview with the website *Korean Literature in Translation*, Smith writes that the most challenging part of her role is less the practice of translation itself but more the attendant promotional advocacy it requires: 'building personal connections with editors, keeping an eye on the market, selecting which publishers to submit to based on a strong understanding of their list, and putting together supplementary materials'.[64] Smith now stands as a leading literary translator within the UK and beyond, harnessing the economic and symbolic capital of the IBP in order to develop a not-for-profit publisher, Tilted Axis Press, which translates and publishes contemporary world literature, mostly from Asia and Africa, mostly by women.[65]

However the IBP's appraisal of literature in translation is not simply motivated by an aesthetic commitment to world literary culture, nor an altruistic desire to correct the ongoing marginalisation of translators, nor still a desire for 'cross-cultural exchange'.[66] It is also about consolidating the Booker brand and stimulating growth within the literary marketplace. Jonathan Taylor, chair of the Man Booker Foundation until 2015, once bemoaned that the Man Booker International Prize would lose momentum in the years it was not awarded.[67] By shifting from a biennial to an annual award, the Booker now seeks to generate continual waves of press attention across the year, with the IBP occupying the first half of the year and the Booker taking place in the second. The creation of the IBP has carved out a new niche for the Booker brand within the media and publishing calendars.

Another function of the 'evolved'[68] IBP is to foster what the UK publishing industry considers to be a small but growable translation market that promises to diversify and increase revenues within a 'mostly flat' sector.[69] A 2015 Nielsen BookScan report revealed that while the global market of book sales was sluggish, translated fiction had grown by 96% between 2001 and 2015, from 1.3 million copies to 2.5 million copies. In the UK context specifically, while translated literary fiction accounts for only 3.5% of titles published, the volume of sales stood at 7%.[70] The IBP thus presents itself as an attempt to break this 'three per cent problem', utilising the highly mediatised format of the literary prize in order to build audiences and generate sales for translated texts in the Anglo-American book markets.[71] In an illuminating article on the IBP's merger with the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, Melanie Ramdarshan Bold and Corinna Norrick-Rühl remind us that translated fiction makes up only a minimal fraction of the industry itself.[72] Yet in a flat sector, translated literature offers a small but real opportunity for greater diversity and new market share. And the Booker Foundation's press release for the refashioned IBP says exactly this. In exoticising and carnivorous language that is at odds with *The Vegetarian's* thematics of non-violence, the Foundation describe their ambitions to 'encourage an ecology of translation in which publishers are emboldened to cast their nets outside the familiar waters of English-language fiction where there are rare and fabulous creatures who should be brought in'.[73]

By awarding the IBP to *The Vegetarian*, the Booker group propelled Han Kang into the legitimating prestige machine of world-literary networks. The award also created a small but ready-made English-language readership for Han's work: Smith's translation of *Human Acts* appeared in the following year, before a simultaneous translation of Han's then forthcoming *The White Book* arrived in 2017. More widely, the award opened the door to South Korean fiction in translation, an emerging market that – as Smith herself explains in an article for *The Bookseller* – had been identified by UK small-press publishers as a potential growth avenue.[74] Indeed, *The Vegetarian's* victory followed the London Book Fair's 'Korea Market Focus', a 2014 event in which Anglophone publishers and Korean authors, agents and presses organised formal panels, stalls and meetings to forge and consolidate professional networks. In the Booker Foundation's press release for the awarding of the 2016 prize, they even framed *The Vegetarian's* victory as the culmination of an

> outstanding increase in sales of translated Korean fiction in the UK: The sales of Korean books have risen from only 88 copies in 2001–10,191 in 2015, a reflection of the South Korea Market Focus at London Book Fair in 2014.[75]

In other words, the Booker Foundation positioned *The Vegetarian* as a gateway text for hastening the globalisation of Korean literature.

In 2013, Smith was invited onto the steering committee for the London Book Fair's spotlight on Korea.[76] It was in this preparatory year for the Korea Market Focus that she first shopped her translated manuscript of *The Vegetarian* to Max Porter at Portobello.[77] Smith readily acknowledges that she began learning and translating Korean literature for 'pragmatic reasons'.[78] Korean literature was, she notes in an interview with *Korean Literature in Translation*, an 'untapped niche that I could exploit to my advantage'.[79] Smith's decision to work with Korean literature was motivated by her suspicion that it would 'provide certain opportunities for getting work as a translator, given the almost complete dearth of Korean literature available in English, and the fact that I knew Korea was a highly-developed, modern country with – presumably – a flourishing publishing industry'.[80] We might also understand *The Vegetarian's* IBP victory, then, as a celebration of translator-entrepreneurialism, with Smith's rise hailed by the Booker jury as 'a quite remarkable achievement'.[81]

Importantly, the story of *The Vegetarian's* world-literary success is not geographically one-sided, but also the culmination of South Korean investment. As Daniel Y. Kim suggests, we ought to situate Han's emergence as a global writer within the 'Korean wave',[82] or *Hallyu*, a nationally-crafted model of popular cultural globalisation that, beginning in the 1990s, has now achieved global prominence in the fields such as music (think BTS) and film (think Bong Joon-ho). An outcome of statist cultural and media policies, market liberalisation and government subsidies, the Korean Wave is a 'product and a process' of popular cultural exportation that has become an increasingly significant component of the South Korean economy.[83] During these years the Literary Translation Institute of Korea (LTI), founded by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport in 1996, has worked to promote Korean literature as world literature. As Mythili Rao explores in her *New Yorker* story 'Can a Big Government Push Bring the Nobel Prize in Literature to South Korea?', the LTI commissions and sponsors translations, coordinates workshops and translation courses, while also organising conferences with and visits from oversees publishers.[84] The LTI also funds Korean writers to attend the internationalising Iowa International Writers Program, which Han herself attended in 1998 courtesy of a Korean Culture and Arts Foundation grant.[85] Kim notes that the LTI capitalised on Han's IBP victory, producing video interviews with Han which sit prominently on the LTI website. For the LTI, Kim writes, Han's Booker win was nothing short of 'a touchstone of nationalist pride', a consequence of years of investment in globalising Korean literature.[86]

Literary prizes do not simply award but rather produce the idea of a 'best novel' by concentrating conversation around particular texts and authors.[87] One way of stimulating such discursive attention is through the rhetoric of gossip and controversy. This, too, featured in *The Vegetarian's* win. Faced with increasing scrutiny after being shortlisted, Smith's translation attracted sharp and sustained criticism in both South Korea and the Anglophone publishing world, with readers noting its many errors, omissions and embellishments, as well as its foreignising and domesticating impulses. Charse Yun details the development of this controversy in articles for *Korea Exposé* and *Los Angeles Times*. 'According to a research paper presented last year at a conference at Ewha Womans University', he writes, '10.9 percent of the first part of the novel was mistranslated. Another 5.7 percent of the original text was omitted. And this was just the first section alone'.[88] Tim Parks, in an essay-review for the *New York Review of Books* describes Smith's translation as 'uneven' and 'opportunistic', full of 'awkwardness' and 'incongruities'.[89] Elsewhere, Wook-Dong Kim's linguistic analysis of Smith's vocabulary and syntax suggests that the novel is frequently mis-, under- and over-translated. Smith makes numerous lexical errors – like mistaking foot for arm, lemon for melon – omits entire clauses, and adds adverbs and adjectives which decorate Han's flat poetic style. Kim concludes that the translation is 'flawed and thus inept'.[90]

So far, the discussion around *The Vegetarian's* (mis)translation has focused predominantly on Smith's apparent lack of technical proficiency in Korean. Yet this fixation on syntactic inaccuracies risks overlooking the ways in which Smith actively translates the plot, tone and politics of the novel into a new context, transforming the novel for an Anglophone readership. Yun notes that Smith 'ratchets up' the tone and style, adding superlatives and emphatic turns of phrase which reconstruct the novel into a story of resistance. Smith characterises Mr Cheong, Yeong-hye's husband, as an actively hateful misogynist, rather than as 'a bland, bumbling kind of guy, unaware of his own sexism or biases' as he appears in Han's original.[91] The English-language version also increases the apparent rationality behind Yeong-hye's actions, lessening the sense in which her withdrawal is passive and guided by dreams.[92] Smith's 'errors' have therefore bolstered, rather than impeded, both her and the novel's success. In the wake of the translation's controversy, Smith herself has understood better than anyone the opportunities brought forward by this ongoing debate about the ethics of translation, using a short book, *Fidelity* (2019), to respond to her critics directly. Yet in doing so Smith also concedes that she is rectifying certain translation errors for the novel's forthcoming second print edition.[93] Ironically, then, future readers of *The Vegetarian* will encounter a different novel to the one that was prized for its translation in 2016.

I have been arguing that literary prizes are opportunities for the publishing industry's economic capitalisation, and that the 2016 IBP rewarded of a kind of translator-entrepreneurialism, all of which was intensified by controversy surrounding the novel's translation. But literary prizes also make political and aesthetic judgements about texts. Prize-winning works and their authors are often celebrated for the ways in which they uphold particular values that are commensurate with the worldview and ethos of judging panels which are thought of as progressive, cosmopolitan and meritocratic. As Jennifer Quist notes in her study of the Nobel Prize for Literature, judging panels tend to reward those authors who – in their writing and/or in their life – are thought of as balancing political dissidence with a commitment to the principle of individualism, and aesthetic originality with literary allusions and indebtedness to the Western canon.[94] The English-language version of *The Vegetarian* largely fits this description of a balance of politics and aesthetics, even emulating many of its prized forebears in that its story of individual dissidence comes to be both thematically and aesthetically redolent of figures and tropes from the modernist canon. Yeong-hye's nonconformity bears an intertextual affinity with the (proto-)modernist tropes of refusal, inoperativity and escape emblematised in the figures of Franz Kafka's hunger artist, Herman Melville's Bartleby, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's unnamed woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). Through Yeong-hye's ascetic withdrawal from society, which encompasses her thinning out ('she grew thinner by the day'),[95] her resistance to meat ('I won't eat it')[96] and her assumed psychosis ('A barely comprehensible yell erupts from her throat'),[97] *The Vegetarian* contributes an ostenibly feminist-vegetarian retelling of this loose literary tradition of personal refusal in which a protagonist seeks to escape their world. Pieter Vermeulen and Amélie Huerkens have recently argued that small presses across the Anglophone literary world continue to value this modernist genealogy, as world literary authors and texts come to be presented and promoted as 'heirs apparent or reincarnations of the luminaries of literary modernism'.[98] Reviewers have even presented *The Vegetarian* as a grandchild of modernist world literature, especially of Kafka's corpus.[99] The novel's ambiguous final sentences, which invite readings that confirm either Yeong-hye's death or her survival, not only conform to the ambiguous dénouements of modernist refusers, but also imagine a kind of personalised dissent that judging panels can easily endorse without also signing up to any firm political commitments.

Another prevailing motif of prize-winning fiction is a perceived dialectic between the local and the global, particular and universal. This dialectic is even more pronounced for works-in-translation, which are often commended for adopting a Janus-faced perspective: offering a window onto another culture *and* speaking to a fundamental sense of shared humanity that transcends such cultural and national barriers. *The Vegetarian* negotiates between the particular and the universal with a plot that is at once historically specific to twenty-first century South Korea (an advanced capitalist country replete with cultural misogyny and gender inequalities) and yet also relatively elastic in its opportunities for allegorical extension. In fact, Han Kang's Korean agent, who helped sell *The Vegetarian* to Granta, deems that the ‘export potential’ of literary manuscripts comes down to a given work’s combination of Korean colour with ‘universal appeal’: ‘The story should retain a distinct Korean flavour that would not be difficult for someone without an understanding of Korean culture or history to understand’.[100]

Literary prizes like the Booker have tended to function ‘as mechanisms for the management of subversive political tendencies, and for the redirecting of oppositional energies into the mainstream of Western metropolitan cultural thought’.[101] This issue becomes all the more complicated for a novel in translation, as the text’s politics are also redirected into Anglophone cultural imaginaries. This perspective goes some way to raising the stakes of the question: why did the Booker group award the IBP to *The Vegetarian* and not to Han’s other, more explicitly political and historically-situated novel, *Human Acts*, which traces the immediate and longer-lasting traumas of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising? Smith herself puzzled over this question in a panel on the politics of prizing translation in 2016.[102] Both novels were eligible for the 2016 IBP competition, and *Human Acts* was published in the months immediately leading up to the award’s longlisting process. Yet although *Human Acts* shares with *The Vegetarian* a similar lyricism, it remains a more politically and historically particular novel. With its attention to scores of dead bodies lining the floors of a school gymnasium, and to the survivors, twenty years later, who struggle on with the memory of their torture, *Human Acts* depicts a divided society still gripped by a spiritual crisis. Perhaps, then, despite its translated title’s appeal to a universal humanity, *Human Acts* was perceived as being too geographically fixed and politically specific to have generated the same volume of sales.

In all of this, it is tempting to think of *The Vegetarian* as being built for world literary success. The novel’s relationship with modernist aesthetics, allusions to the fantastic, its plotted resistance to oppressive social relations, and its balance between the particular and the universal make it ideally suited for canonisation and awards. The novel’s loosely feminist and vegetarian disposition is, moreover, ostensibly made for Anglophone reading publics; indeed these two aspects gain in translation, especially so for vegetarianism as an emergent phenomenon within Anglophone cultures. Even the controversy surrounding the text’s (mis)translation has cemented rather than dented its cultural status. However, it would be simplistic to conclude that *The Vegetarian’s* rise to world literary prestige is due to it being ‘born translated’, as Rebecca Walkowitz writes of texts which, consciously or not, appear ready-made for different global readerships.[103] In fact, the contexts behind Han’s novel and its IBP win – especially its production, translation, consecration and circulation – remind us of the confluences between the product and process of translation, literary and entrepreneurial creativity, world literary culture and Anglophone cultural markets. *The Vegetarian’s* success, far from being owed to its ready-made translatability, is in fact owed to the Booker group's efforts to cultivate a new aura of prestige around literature in translation that would help break the industry's 'three per cent problem'. In this regard, *The Vegetarian* has been embraced as a gateway novel, opening the door to new revenue streams from South Korean fiction in translation.

Conclusion

To date, critical reflections on the politics of literary prizes have neglected awards for literature-in-translation. Yet the IBP continues to both cultivate and garner increasing attention, establishing a more fixed position within the media and publishing calendar while riding on the coattails of the Booker as it styles itself as the 'leading literary award'. This is coincident with translation's rise in prominence through a growth in small presses, workshops, book fairs and indeed literary prizes dedicated to promoting literature-in-translation.[104] By emphasising the relationship between *The Vegetarian* and the Booker group's International Prize for fiction, I have sought to deepen literary-sociological investigations into world literature, contending all the while that there are more questions to be asked about how fiction is translated – literally and culturally – into the Anglo-American world literary sphere, and about how translated fiction becomes prize-worthy.

I have also wanted to shed more light on *The Vegetarian* and to develop the prevailing analyses of publishing's economies of prestige, offering a more clear-sighted vision of contemporary literature's simultaneous incorporation into and textual challenge to global capital. I have argued that studying the relationship between *The Vegetarian* and its IBP victory allows for a more critical understanding of the debates surrounding the novel's thematics, its English-language translation and its uniquely elevated position within contemporary world literature. This approach raises three important points. First, it unsettles the novel's wide appraisal from reviewers and academics alike, who commend the text's ethical dissidence, modernist intertextuality and textual navigation between the particular and the universal. Second, it foregrounds the dynamics between textual and extra-textual material in translated literature. And therefore third, it pushes for greater scrutiny of the tensions between close readings of contemporary prize-winning texts and their publication, circulation and reception.

I have explored these tensions across my two sections. In the first half of this essay, I showed how Han connects gender-based violence to carnivorousness, and in doing so imagines a form of vegetarianism that is motivated by an ethic of cross-species non-violence. But I also argued that *The Vegetarian's* apparent vision of vegetal life is compromised by its generic and narrative ambivalences, thus narrowing the opportunities for an affirmative counter-reading of Yeong-hye's plotted escape from carnophallogocentrism. In the second half of this essay, I explored how the novel's IBP win is inseparable from its translator-agent-entrepreneurialism and the controversy surrounding translation errors, its nominally progressive but individualised and non-specific dissidence, its navigation of the particular and universal, as well as its promise to boost the Booker brand while diversifying and stimulating a mostly flat publishing sector. Bringing these two lines of inquiry together, the novel's English-language translation begins to resemble a speculative checklist for guaranteeing canonisation within a liberal cosmopolitan world literary culture that values individual dissidence and modernist intertextuality alongside market and branding opportunities.

The Vegetarian's rise to prominence as a paradigmatic text of twenty-first century world literature calls into question the prevailing readings of the novel, which, in positioning themselves against overly literal and pessimistic interpretations of Yeong-hye's starvation, come to read the text as an ecofeminist rejection of mastery. Yet these interpretations encounter two problems: they fail to account for how the text's realism and narrative focalisation deny the possibility of Yeong-hye's becoming-vegetal, and they do not examine the complex networks behind the text's translation, reception and celebration. In other words, critics have failed to ask why and how the text arrived on their bookshelves to begin with. Any affirmative reading of *The Vegetarian* must, I think, be situated in relation to the text's belated incorporation into the Anglo-American market and world literary canon. I flag these patterns of literary prestige not to prevent future close-readings of the novel, but rather to caution against projecting radical political possibilities onto a novel whose plotted withdrawal from the world was palatable to the Booker judging panel.

Instead, then, of elevating *The Vegetarian* as a transformative articulation of ecofeminism, I suggest that we read the novel as being primarily concerned with existential or species-level violence. This is a text which plots out – as if a literary experiment – one character's developing disengagement from worldly relations. Yeong-hye, yearning for a dreamlike fantasy of non-violence, hopes also for an abdication of the flesh, of the fleshy reality of being a human animal ('I'm not an animal anymore'). In interviews, Han frames her work as being preoccupied with the horrors that humanity inflicts upon its own kind. Even in *Human Acts*, her novel about the Gwangju uprising, Han insists that it is 'human' rather than political violence that she wishes to articulate, dramatise and call into question.[105] In other words, Han's literary works look to political violence and see, underneath it, a more foundational ontological violence: 'I wanted to describe a woman who desperately didn't want to belong to the human race any longer and desperately wanted to reject being human'.[106] This thematic preoccupation with violence as such gives *The Vegetarian* an apparent thematic universality that transcends national boundaries while also fitting with the emergent critical concerns of new materialist philosophies of distributed agency, which see political potential in destituent action. Yet if, as I have argued, the novel's form prevents its protagonist's ontological regenesis, if the novel's realism militates against Yeong-hye's fantasy, then what becomes of this apparent political potential? Yeong-hye's characteristic passivity may still be claimed by critics, counterintuitively, as an act of resistance. Yet her retreat from humanity does not remake the world, nor unmake it, but rather unmakes the self in the face of the world.

Notes

1. Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, trans. Deborah Smith (London: Portobello Books, 2015), p. 14.
2. Ibid., p. 41.
3. Ibid., pp. 153–4.
4. See The Booker Prizes, 'Then there were six … ', 2017. https://thebookerprizes.com/news/then-there-were-six [Date accessed: 18 February 2020]. A *Bookseller* article would later report that, as of July 2017, *The Vegetarian* had sold a much smaller sum of 57,449 copies. https://www.thebookseller.com/news/granta-launches-website-han-kang-595266 [Date accessed: 18 February 2020.]
5. See 'Sales of Han Kang's "The Vegetarian" Soar on Man Booker Award News', *Korea Bizwire*, 17 May 2016. http://koreabizwire.com/sales-of-han-kangs-the-vegetarian-soar-on-man-booker-award-news/54813?ckattempt=2 [Date accessed: 17 February 2020].
6. It is common within South Korean literary culture for authors to publish standalone short stories and then later 'link' them together, whether loosely or tightly, in the form of a novel. Deborah Smith writes that the linked novel is 'regarded as a literary form in its own right'. See Claire Armistead, ' https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/05/han-kang-interview-writing-massacre [Date accessed: 19 February 2020].
7. The Booker Prizes, 'Weekly Round-up: The Vegetarian, a meaty winner'. https://thebookerprizes.com/international/news/weekly-round-vegetarian-meaty-winner [Date accessed: 13 May 2020].
8. The Booker Prizes, 'The Vegetarian wins the Man Booker International Prize 2016'. https://thebookerprizes.com/international/news/vegetarian-wins-man-booker-international-prize-2016 [Date accessed: 18 February 2020].
9. See Lisa Zeidner, 'A Woman Going Mad, and a Radical Refusal, in "The Vegetarian"', *The Washington Post*, 20 January 2016.
10. Magdalena Zolkos, 'Bereft of Interiority: Motifs of Vegetal Transformation, Escape and Fecundity in Luce Irigaray's Plant Philosophy and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*', *SubStance*, 48.2 (2019), p. 105.
11. Jacques Derrida, '"Eating Well," or the Calculation of the Subject', in *Points … : Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. by Elisabeth Weber, trans. by Peggy Kamuf and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 280.
12. See Hwang Do-kyung, 'Review of Han Kang's "Mongolian Mark": 'Blue Flower,' or the Origin of Art and Desire', *A Collection of Short Stories, the*

Winner and Runners-up for the Yi Sang Literary Award (Seoul: Munhaksasang, 2005), pp. 359–60. See also Kim Jae-kyeong, 'Cultural Symbolism between Food and Authority Shown in Fiction - with a Focus on Kim I-tae's *Food Habit* and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*'. *Feminism and Korean Literature*, 22 (2009), pp. 251–81.

13. Mijeong Kim, 'A Deleuzian Reading of "Becoming-Plant" in Han Kang's Writing: "The Fruit of My Woman" and *The Vegetarian*', *Critique* (2020), p. 3. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1713716.
14. Caitlin E. Stobie, 'The Good Wife? Sibling Species in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*', *ISLE*, 24.4 (2017), p. 796.
15. Rose Casey, 'Willed Arboreality: Feminist Worldmaking in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*', *Critique* (2020), p. 1, 8. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1841725.
16. James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 10.
17. Sarah Brouillette, *UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2019), p. 3.
18. Han, *The Vegetarian*, p. 3.
19. Ibid., pp. 2 and 3.
20. Ibid., p. 9
21. Ibid., p. 3.
22. Ibid., pp. 10 and 13.
23. Ibid., p. 14.
24. Ibid., p. 13.
25. Ibid., p. 6.
26. Ibid., p. 30.
27. Ibid., p. 40.
28. Ibid., p. 157.
29. Ibid., p. 33.
30. Ibid., p. 8.
31. Ibid., p. 24.
32. Ibid.
33. *The Vegetarian*, p. 12.
34. Ibid., p. 12.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., p. 19.
38. Ibid., p. 28.
39. Ibid., p. 42.
40. Ibid., p. 49.
41. Ibid., p. 49.
42. J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (London: Vintage, 2004), pp. 70–71, p. 89.
43. *The Vegetarian*, p. 90.
44. Ibid., p. 48.
45. Ibid., p. 124.
46. See Deborah Smith's translator's note in Han Kang, 'The Fruit of My Woman', *Granta*, 19 January 2016, no pagination: https://granta.com/the-fruit-of-my-woman/. [Date accessed: 19 May 2020].
47. Han Kang, 'The Fruit of My Woman'.
48. *The Vegetarian*, p. 182.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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