



Revolt, Resilience and Remarkable Ardour in the novel *The Vegetarian*

Dr. Nasreen Banu M. Jamadar

Assistant Professor, Department of Post Graduate Studies in English,
Basaveshwar Arts College Bagalkot.

Women are often objectified by being compared to a piece of meat or dehumanized by being called a 'cow' or a 'bird'. (Gaard, Greta) There is indeed a history of dehumanization through equating humans to animals, which because of speciesism, means that they are devalued and considered to be less than other valued humans. The feminist-vegetarian connection is a concept indicating that the oppression of animals in the form of being slaughtered and consumed is parallel to the oppression of women in a patriarchal society, which establishes a connection between feminism and vegetarianism. Carol. J. Adams first published on this topic in 1975. (Lucas, Sheri) However, this topic was mentioned in 'few publications' for ten years afterwards. (Lucas, Sheri) The lack of acknowledgment on this topic in the 1980s became a concern amongst feminists and, eventually, triggered the formation of an *Eco-feminist Task Force* in 1990, raising awareness on the feminist-vegetarian connection. (Lucas, Sheri) After 1990, this connection was extensively analysed in articles and journals by numerous scholars such as Josephine Donovan and Kathryn Paxton George. Taking clue from the above mentioned perceptions we have Han Kang's evocative novel, *The Vegetarian*, which was a moment ago awarded this year's Man Booker International Prize, pushing out novels by Elena Ferrante,





Orhan Pamuk, and others. It's an odd novel, violent and disturbing, by the South Korean writer, who was born in 1970 and began her work as a poet. No surprise that the poetic bursts forth from virtually every page, thanks to Deborah Smith's lush translation. The story is brutal and elliptical, appropriately unresolved. The main character's decision to stop eating meat is troubling because of the reaction of the people (especially her husband and her parents) and the rigid society around her. No one seems to respect Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian or to give her any space to become what she wants. Ultimately, the novel becomes an indictment of patrimony and state. What kinds of choices can women make about their own lives and their bodies? No difficulty at all realizing that *The Vegetarian* is about women everywhere and their continued subjugation by men.

The thought that feminists 'should' or 'should not' be anything is arguable. Usually when one says you 'should' be anything, we are bound to become defensive.

The thought that feminists 'should' be vegetarian, though, is something of an issue. This issue is key for, but not limited to, eco-feminists. Sheila Jeffreys wrote:

"It is a joy to be in agreement about the need to abolish such practices of violence against women as prostitution and pornography, because such agreement is so rare in the male stream world. But this great feeling of sisterhood and togetherness was marred by disagreement over an issue that I consider to be of great importance, the eating of animals." (feminism-and-vegetarianism)

It's from Yeong-hye's husband's point-of-view that we observe the opening of the novel - Yeong-hye is the focal point of each chapter, and when read together the narratives fashion a





novel that is greater than the sum of its parts. Yeong-hye's husband, Mr. Cheong (referred to as such throughout), narrates the first chapter thus:

Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way. To be frank, the first time I met her I wasn't even attracted to her. Middling height; bobbed hair neither long nor short; jaundiced, sickly-looking skin; somewhat prominent cheekbones; her timid, sallow aspect told me all I needed to know. As she came up to the table where I was waiting, I couldn't help but notice her shoes—the plainest black shoes imaginable. And that walk of hers—neither fast nor slow, striding nor mincing.

However, if there wasn't any special attraction, nor did any particular drawbacks present themselves, and therefore there was no reason for the two of us not to get married. The passive personality of this woman in whom I could detect neither freshness nor charm, or anything especially refined, suited me down to the ground. There was no need to affect intellectual leanings in order to win her over, or to worry that she might be comparing me to the preening men who pose in fashion catalogues, and she didn't get worked up if I happened to be late for one of our meetings. The paunch that started appearing in my mid-twenties, my skinny legs and forearms that steadfastly refused to bulk up in spite of my best efforts, the inferiority complex I used to have about the size of my penis—I could rest assured that I wouldn't have to fret about such things on her account.

I've always inclined towards the middle course in life. At school I chose to boss around those who were two or three years my junior, and with whom I could act the ringleader, rather than take my chances with those my own age, and later I chose which college to apply to based on my chances of obtaining a scholarship large enough for my needs. Ultimately, I settled for a job





where I would be provided with a decent monthly salary in return for diligently carrying out my allotted tasks, at a company whose small size meant they would value my unremarkable skills.

And so it was only natural that I would marry the most run-of-the-mill woman in the world. As for women who were pretty, intelligent, strikingly sensual, the daughters of rich families—they would only ever have served to disrupt my carefully ordered existence. In keeping with my expectations, she made for a completely ordinary wife who went about things without any distasteful frivolousness. Every morning she got up at six a.m. to prepare rice and soup, and usually a bit of fish. From adolescence she'd contributed to her family's income through the odd bit of part-time work. She ended up with a job as an assistant instructor at the computer graphics college she'd attended for a year, and was subcontracted by a manhwa publisher to work on the words for their speech bubbles, which she could do from home.

She was a woman of few words. It was rare for her to demand anything of me, and however late I was in getting home she never took it upon herself to kick up a fuss. Even when our days off happened to coincide, it wouldn't occur to her to suggest we go out somewhere together. While I idled the afternoon away, TV remote in hand, she would shut herself up in her room. More than likely she would spend the time reading, which was practically her only hobby. For some unfathomable reason, reading was something she was able to really immerse herself in—reading books that looked so dull I couldn't even bring myself to so much as take a look inside the covers. Only at mealtimes would she open the door and silently emerge to prepare the food. To be sure, that kind of wife, and that kind of lifestyle, did mean that I was unlikely to find my days particularly stimulating. On the other hand, if I'd had one of those wives whose phones ring on and off all day long with calls from friends or co-workers, or whose nagging periodically





leads to screaming rows with their husbands, I would have been grateful when she finally wore herself out.

The only respect in which my wife was at all unusual was that she didn't like wearing a bra. When I was a young man barely out of adolescence, and my wife and I were dating, I happened to put my hand on her back only to find that I couldn't feel a bra strap under her sweater, and when I realized what this meant I became quite aroused. In order to judge whether she might possibly have been trying to tell me something, I spent a minute or two looking at her through new eyes, studying her attitude. The outcome of my studies was that she wasn't, in fact, trying to send any kind of signal. So if not, was it laziness, or just a sheer lack of concern? I couldn't get my head round it. It wasn't even as though she had shapely breasts which might suit the "no-bra look." I would have preferred her to go around wearing one that was thickly padded, so that I could save face in front of my acquaintances.

Even in the summer, when I managed to persuade her to wear one for a while, she'd have it unhooked barely a minute after leaving the house. The undone hook would be clearly visible under her thin, light-colored tops, but she wasn't remotely concerned. I tried reproaching her, lecturing her to layer up with a vest instead of a bra in that sultry heat. She tried to justify herself by saying that she couldn't stand wearing a bra because of the way it squeezed her breasts, and that I'd never worn one myself so I couldn't understand how constricting it felt. Nevertheless, considering I knew for a fact that there were plenty of other women who, unlike her, didn't have anything particularly against bras, I began to have doubts about this hypersensitivity of hers.

In all other respects, the course of our married life ran smoothly. We were approaching the five-year mark, and since we were never madly in love to begin with we were able to avoid





falling into that stage of weariness and boredom that can otherwise turn married life into a trial. The only thing was, because we'd decided to put off trying for children until we'd managed to secure a place of our own, which had only happened last autumn, I sometimes wondered whether I would ever get to hear the reassuring sound of a child gurgling "dada," and meaning me. Until a certain day last February, when I came across my wife standing in the kitchen at daybreak in just her nightclothes, I had never considered the possibility that our life together might undergo such an appalling change.

"What are you doing standing there?" (*The Vegetarian*)

I'd been about to switch on the bathroom light when I was brought up short. It was around four in the morning, and I'd woken up with a raging thirst from the bottle and a half of soju I'd had with dinner, which also meant I was taking longer to come to my senses than usual.

"Hello? I asked what you're doing." (*The Vegetarian*)

It was cold enough as it was, but the sight of my wife was even more chilling. Any lingering alcohol-induced drowsiness swiftly passed off. She was standing, motionless, in front of the fridge. Her face was submerged in the darkness so I couldn't make out her expression, but the potential options all filled me with fear. Her thick, naturally black hair was fluffed up, dishevelled, and she was wearing her usual white ankle-length nightdress.

On such a night, my wife would ordinarily have hurriedly slipped on a cardigan and searched for her towelling slippers. How long might she have been standing there like that—barefoot, in thin summer nightwear, ramrod straight as though perfectly oblivious to my repeated interrogation? Her face was turned away from me, and she was standing there so unnaturally still it was almost as if she were some kind of ghost, silently standing its ground.





What was going on? If she couldn't hear me then perhaps that meant she was sleepwalking. I went toward her, craning my neck to try and get a look at her face.

"Why are you standing there like that? What's going on . . ." (*The Vegetarian*)

When I put my hand on her shoulder I was surprised by her complete lack of reaction. I had no doubt that I was in my right mind and all this was really happening; I had been fully conscious of everything I had done since emerging from the living room, asking her what she was doing, and moving towards her. She was the one standing there completely unresponsive, as though lost in her own world. It was like those rare occasions when, absorbed in a late-night TV drama, she'd failed to notice me arriving home. But what could there be to absorb her attention in the pale gleam of the fridge's white door, in the pitch-black kitchen at four in the morning?

"Hey!"

Her profile swam toward me out of the darkness. I took in her eyes, bright but not feverish, as her lips slowly parted.

". . . I had a dream."

Her voice was surprisingly clear.

"A dream? What the hell are you talking about? Do you know what time it is?" (*The Vegetarian*)

She turned so that her body was facing me, then slowly walked off through the open door into the living room. As she entered the room she stretched out her foot and calmly pushed the door to. I was left alone in the dark kitchen, looking helplessly on as her retreating figure was swallowed up through the door.

I turned on the bathroom light and went in. The cold snap had continued for several days now, consistently hovering around -10°C. I'd showered only a few hours ago, so my plastic shower





slippers were still cold and damp. The loneliness of this cruel season began to make itself felt, seeping from the black opening of the ventilation fan above the bath, leaching out of the white tiles covering the floor and walls.

When I went back into the living room my wife was lying down, her legs curled up to her chest, the silence so weighted I might as well have been alone in the room. Of course, this was just my fancy. If I stood perfectly still, held my breath and strained to listen, I was able to hear the faintest sound of breathing coming from where she lay. Yet it didn't sound like the deep, regular breathing of someone who has fallen asleep. I could have reached out to her, and my hand would have encountered her warm skin. But for some reason I found myself unable to touch her. I didn't even want to reach out to her with words.

For the few moments immediately after I opened my eyes the next morning, when reality had yet to assume its usual concreteness, I lay with the quilt wrapped about me, absentmindedly assessing the quality of the winter sunshine as it filtered into the room through the white curtain. In the middle of this fit of abstraction I happened to glance at the wall clock and jumped up the instant I saw the time, kicked the door open and hurried out of the room. My wife was in front of the fridge.

“Are you crazy? Why didn't you wake me up? What time is . . .” (*The Vegetarian*)

Something squashed under my foot, stopping me in midsentence.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

She was crouching, still wearing her nightclothes, her dishevelled, tangled hair a shapeless mass around her face.

Around her, the kitchen floor was covered with plastic bags and airtight containers, scattered all over so that 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 croakers tied with yellow string, unopened packs of frozen dumplings and endless bundles of unidentified stuff dragged from the depths of the fridge. There was a rustling sound; my wife was busy putting the things around her one-by-one into black rubbish bags. Eventually I lost control.

“What the hell are you up to now?” I shouted. (*The Vegetarian*)

She kept on putting the parcels of meat into the rubbish bags, seemingly no more aware of my existence than she had been last night. Beef and pork, pieces of chicken, at least 200,000-won worth of saltwater eel.

“Have you lost your mind? Why on earth are you throwing all this stuff out?” (*The Vegetarian*)

I hurriedly stumbled my way through the plastic bags and grabbed her wrist, trying to prise the bags from her grip. Stunned to find her fiercely tugging back against me, I almost faltered for a moment, but my outrage soon gave me the strength to overpower her. Massaging her reddened wrist, she spoke in the same ordinary, calm tone of voice she’d used before.

“I had a dream.”

Those words again. Her expression as she looked at me was perfectly composed. Just then my mobile rang.

“Damn it!”

I started to fumble through the pockets of my coat, which I’d tossed onto the living room sofa the previous evening. Finally, in the last inside pocket, my fingers closed around my recalcitrant phone.





“I’m sorry. Something’s come up, an urgent family matter, so . . . I’m very sorry. I’ll be there as quickly as possible. No, I’m going to leave right now. It’s just . . . no, I couldn’t possibly have you do that. Please wait just a little longer. I’m very sorry.

Yes, I really can’t talk right now . . .’

I flipped my phone shut and dashed into the bathroom, where I shaved so hurriedly that I cut myself in two places.

“Haven’t you even ironed my white shirt?” (*The Vegetarian*)

There was no answer. I splashed water on myself and rummaged in the laundry basket, searching for yesterday’s shirt.

Luckily it wasn’t too creased. Not once did my wife bother to peer out from the kitchen in the time it took me to get ready, slinging my tie round my neck like a scarf, pulling on my socks, and getting my notebook and wallet together. In the five years we’d been married this was the first time I’d had to go to work without her handing me my things and seeing me off.

“You’re insane! You’ve completely lost it.” (*The Vegetarian*)

I crammed my feet into my recently purchased shoes, which were too narrow and pinched uncomfortably, threw open the front door and ran out. I checked whether the lift was going to go all the way up to the top floor, and then dashed down three flights of stairs. Only once I’d managed to jump on the underground train as it was just about to leave did I have time to take in my appearance, reflected in the dark carriage window. I ran my fingers through my hair, did up my tie, and attempted to smooth out the creases in my shirt. My wife’s unnaturally serene face, her incongruously firm voice, surfaced in my mind.





I had a dream—she'd said that twice now. Beyond the window, in the dark tunnel, her face flitted by—her face, but unfamiliar, as though I was seeing it for the first time. However, as I had thirty minutes in which to concoct an excuse for my client that would justify my lateness, as well as putting together a draft proposal for today's meeting, there was no time for mulling over the strange behavior of my even-stranger wife.

Having said that, I told myself that somehow or other I had to leave the office early today (never mind that in the several months since I'd switched to my new position there hadn't been a single day where I'd got off before midnight), and steeled myself for a confrontation.

Dark woods. No people. The sharp-pointed leaves on the trees, my torn feet. This place, almost remembered, but I'm lost now. Frightened. Cold. Across the frozen ravine, a red barn-like building. Straw matting flapping limp across the door. Roll it up and I'm inside, it's inside. Along bamboo stick strung with great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down. 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.

Somehow a way out. Running, running through the valley, then suddenly the woods open out. Trees thick with leaves, springtime's green light. Families picnicking, little children running about, and that smell, that delicious smell. Almost painfully vivid. The babbling stream, people spreading out rush mats to sit on, snacking on kimbap. Barbecuing meat, the sounds of singing and happy laughter.





But the fear. My clothes still wet with blood. Hide, hide behind the trees. Crouch down, don't let anybody see. My bloody hands. My bloody mouth. In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood.

Chewing on something that felt so real, but couldn't have been, it couldn't. My face, the look in my eyes . . . my face, undoubtedly, but never seen before. Or no, not mine, but so familiar . . . nothing makes sense. Familiar and yet not . . . that vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling.

(The Vegetarian)

*

On the dining table my wife had laid out lettuce and soybean paste, plain seaweed soup without the usual beef or clams, and kimchi.

“What the hell? So all because of some ridiculous dream, you’ve gone and chucked out all the meat? Worth how much?”

I got up from my chair and opened the freezer. It was practically empty—nothing but miso powder, chili powder, frozen fresh chilies, and a pack of minced garlic.

“Just make me some fried eggs. I’m really tired today. I didn’t even get to have a proper lunch.”

“I threw the eggs out as well.”

“What?”

“And I’ve given up milk too.”

“This is unbelievable. You’re telling me not to eat meat?”





“I couldn’t let those things stay in the fridge. It wouldn’t be right.” (*The Vegetarian*)

How on earth could she be so self-centered? I stared at her lowered eyes, her expression of cool self-possession. The very idea that there should be this other side to her, one where she selfishly did as she pleased, was astonishing. Who would have thought she could be so unreasonable?

“So you’re saying that from now on, there’ll be no meat in this house?”

“Well, after all, you usually only eat breakfast at home. And I suppose you often have meat with your lunch and dinner, so . . . it’s not as if you’ll die if you go without meat just for one meal.”

Her reply was so methodical, it was as if she thought that this ridiculous decision of hers was something completely rational and appropriate.

“Oh good, so that’s me sorted then. And what about you? You’re claiming that you’re not going to eat meat at all from now on?”

She nodded.

“Oh, really? Until when?”

“I suppose . . . forever.” (*The Vegetarian*)

I was lost for words, though at the same time I was aware that choosing a vegetarian diet wasn’t quite so rare as it had been in the past. People turn vegetarian for all sorts of reasons: to try and alter their genetic predisposition towards certain allergies, for example, or else because it’s seen as more environmentally friendly not to eat meat. Of course, Buddhist priests who have taken certain vows are morally obliged not to participate in the destruction of life, but





surely not even impressionable young girls take it quite that far. As far as I was concerned, the only reasonable grounds for altering one's eating habits were the desire to lose weight, an attempt to alleviate certain physical ailments, being possessed by an evil spirit, or having your sleep disturbed by indigestion. In any other case, it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as mine had done.

If you'd said that my wife had always been faintly nauseated by meat, then I could have understood it, but in reality it was quite the opposite—ever since we'd got married she had proved herself a more than competent cook, and I'd always been impressed by her way with food. Tongs in one hand and a large pair of scissors in the other, she'd flipped rib meat in a sizzling pan whilst snipping it into bite-sized pieces, her movements deft and practiced. Her fragrant, caramelized deep-fried belly pork was achieved by marinating the meat in minced ginger and glutinous starch syrup. Her signature dish had been wafer-thin slices of beef seasoned with black pepper and sesame oil, then coated with sticky rice powder as generously as you would with rice cakes or pancakes, and dipped in bubbling shabu-shabu broth. She'd made bibimbap with bean-sprouts, minced beef, and pre-soaked rice stir-fried in sesame oil. There had also been a thick chicken and duck soup with large chunks of potato, and a spicy broth packed full of tender clams and mussels, of which I could happily polish off three helpings in a single sitting.

What I was presented with now was a sorry excuse for a meal. Her chair pulled back at an angle, my wife spooned up some seaweed soup, which was quite clearly going to taste of water and nothing else. She balanced rice and soybean paste on a lettuce leaf, then bundled the wrap into her mouth and chewed it slowly.





I just couldn't understand her. Only then did I realize: I really didn't have a clue when it came to this woman.

"Not eating?" she asked absent-mindedly, for all the world like some middle-aged woman addressing her grown-up son.

I sat in silence, steadfastly uninterested in this poor excuse for a meal, crunching on kimchi for what felt like an age

Spring came, and still my wife hadn't backed down. She was as good as her word—I never saw a single piece of meat pass her lips—but I had long since ceased bothering to complain.

When a person undergoes such a drastic transformation, there's simply nothing anyone else can do but sit back and let them get on with it.

She grew thinner by the day, so much so that her cheekbones had really become indecently prominent. Without makeup, her complexion resembled that of a hospital patient.

If it had all been just another instance of a woman giving up meat in order to lose weight then there would have been no need to worry, but I was convinced that there was more going on here than a simple case of vegetarianism. No, it had to be that dream she'd mentioned; that was bound to be at the bottom of it all. Although, as a matter of fact, she'd practically stopped sleeping.

No one could describe my wife as especially attentive—often when I returned home late I'd find that she had already fallen asleep. But now I would get in at midnight, and even after I had washed, arranged the bedding, and lain down to sleep, she still wouldn't have come to join me in the living room. She wasn't reading a book, chatting on the Internet, or watching late-night cable TV. The only thing I could think of was that she must have been working on the manhwa speech bubbles, but there was no way that would have taken up so much time.





She didn't come to bed until around five in the morning, and even then I couldn't say for sure whether she actually spent the next hour asleep or not. Her face haggard and her hair tangled, she would observe me over the breakfast table through red, narrowed eyes. She wouldn't so much as pick up her spoon, never mind actually eat anything.

But what troubled me more was that she now seemed to be actively avoiding sex. In the past, she'd generally been willing to comply with my physical demands, and there'd even been the occasional time when she'd been the one to make the first move. But now, although she didn't make a fuss about it, if my hand so much as brushed her shoulder she would calmly move away. One day I chose to confront her about it.

"What's the problem, exactly?"

"I'm tired."

"Well then, that means you need to eat some meat. That's why you don't have any energy any more, right? You didn't used to be like this, after all."

"Actually . . ."

"What?"

". . . it's the smell."

"The smell?"

"The meat smell. Your body smells of meat."

This was just too ridiculous for words.

"Didn't you see me just take a shower? So where's this smell coming from, huh?"

"From the same place your sweat comes from," (*The Vegetarian*)

she answered, completely in earnest.





Now and then, all of this struck me as being not so much ridiculous as faintly ominous. What if, by chance, these early stage symptoms didn't pass? If the hints at hysteria, delusion, weak nerves and so on, that I thought I could detect in what she said, ended up leading to something more?

All the same, I found it difficult to believe that she might genuinely be going soft in the head. Ordinarily she was as taciturn as she'd ever been, and continued to keep the home in good order. On weekends she prepared seasoned vegetable side dishes for us to eat during the week, and even made stir-fried glass noodles with mushrooms instead of the usual meat. It wasn't actually all that strange once you took into account that going vegetarian was apparently in vogue. It was only when she hadn't been able to sleep, when the hollows in her face were even more pronounced than usual, as though she'd deflated from within, and in the morning I would ask what the matter was only to hear "I had a dream." I never enquired as to the nature of this dream. I'd already had to listen once to that crazy spiel about the barn in the dark woods, the face reflected in the pool of blood and all the rest of it, and once had been more than enough.

All because of this agonizing dream, from which I was shut out, had no way of knowing and moreover didn't want to know, she continued to waste away. At first she'd slimmed down to the clean, sharp lines of a dancer's physique, and I'd hoped things might stop there, but by now her body resembled nothing so much as the skeletal frame of an invalid.

Whenever I found myself troubled by such thoughts, I tried to reassure myself by running through what I knew of her family. Her father worked at a sawmill in a small town, way out in the sticks, where her mother ran a hole-in-the-wall shop, while my sister-in-law and her





husband were both regular people, and decent enough—so, at the very least, there didn't seem to be any strain of mental abnormality lurking in my wife's bloodline.

I couldn't think of her family without also recalling the smell of sizzling meat and burning garlic, the sound of shot glasses clinking and the women's noisy conversation emanating from the kitchen. All of them—especially my father-in-law—enjoyed yuk hwe, a kind of beef tartar. I'd seen my mother-in-law gut a live fish, and my wife and her sister were both perfectly competent when it came to hacking a chicken into pieces with a butcher's cleaver. I'd always liked my wife's earthy vitality, the way she would catch cockroaches by smacking them with the palm of her hand. She really had been the most ordinary woman in the world.

Even given the extreme unpredictability of her condition, I wasn't prepared to consider taking her for an urgent medical consultation, much less a course of treatment. There's nothing wrong with her, I told myself, this kind of thing isn't even a real illness. I resisted the temptation to indulge in introspection.

This strange situation had nothing to do with me.

At the family dinner, Yeong-hye's father loses his temper. Social convention is very important to the family, and Yeong-hye is flouting it. They read her apathy and silence as insolence. The most passive resistance can provoke the most enormous rage. The father commands Yeong-hye to eat before trying to force meat through her clenched teeth. In perhaps the most troubling disjuncture between perception and reality, Cheong is deeply moved by "the fatherly affection that was choking the old man" shortly before this concerned figure hits his daughter across the face. Here the patriarchy is literal: if the invisible expectations of conformity don't exert the required pressure, her father must step in — for her own sake, naturally — and physically





overpower her. As soon as she can get free, Yeong-hye grabs a knife and slashes her arm with it.

Cheong's interpretation of them is conspicuously at odds with contemporary Western values. Is he representative, at least in part, of Korean social mores? The father is a more extreme version of restrictive propriety, while the rest of the family seems less absolutist. Both men care less for Cheong's well-being than they do for how her decisions reflect on them. When Yeong-hye ends up in hospital, the whole family is embarrassed and ashamed around each other. They feel responsible for other people's actions in a way that feels very distant from the attitudes of contemporary Western society.

It's soon clear that Yeong-hye's issues are not confined to her diet. At the hospital she disappears from the bed, to be found sitting naked in the courtyard. The final pages of this first section are the first time Cheong's response to events seems reasonable. He realises he does not know his wife at all, but "compelled by responsibilities which refused to be shirked, my legs carried me towards her, a movement which I could not for the life of me control." When he reaches her, he asks why she is undressed. Her simple response is because it was hot. "Have I done something wrong?" she asks. Then Cheong prises open her right hand. A dead bird falls out, crushed and with bloody tooth marks on it. The first section ends on this heavily symbolic note — with Yeong-hye carrying out a violent act like the ones that so terrify her in her nightmares, even though refusing flesh was supposed to prevent this.

The three different points of view in *The Vegetarian* afford us three different ways in to the Korean psyche, or to three different Korean psyches, as well as the implied point of view of Yeong-hye. In the second section we see Yeong-hye from the perspective of her unnamed brother-in-law, in a third-person narrative that takes place two years after Yeong-hye slashes





her wrists. He's an artist and filmmaker with a young son — middle-aged and feeling it — and his life lacks discipline and routine. His wife In-hye, Yeong-hye's sister, has a successful business, which means he doesn't need to earn money. After a year without artistic inspiration, he has an idea of people decorated as flowers having sex. He blames his wife for this idea, so different from his previous documentary work: she mentions in passing one day that Yeong-hye might still have her "Mongolian mark," a small blue birthmark known medically as congenital dermal melanocytosis that usually disappears in early childhood, which he instantly imagines as a blue flower on her buttocks.

He becomes obsessed with how to make his fantasy a reality, ignoring his family and letting himself be carried away with thoughts of his sister-in-law. Yeong-hye is on the point of divorce, and In-hye worries about her. When her husband offers to visit, In-hye is pleased that her husband is assuming some of the burden of family responsibility. When he arrives at Yeong-hye's flat, she's naked but unconcerned by it, taking her time getting dressed — oblivious rather than seductive. Ever since the family dinner two years earlier Yeong-hye has seemed increasingly vacant, amenable and passive. She is perhaps too ill or too medicated to lift herself out of a serene fog, and her emotions are inscrutable. Soon the man is plotting and scheming to get Yeong-hye to agree to be painted and filmed.

Yeong-hye inspires many different feelings: her husband is baffled and angry while her brother-in-law is so obsessed with her physically that he can think of nothing else. The two men have very little sympathy for each other, but they are linked in feeling a violent desire for Yeong-hye, and in taking advantage of her passivity. Neither of them truly sees Yeong-hye as a person; instead she is by turns an object, a decoration or a prop.





An increasing obsession with his sister-in-law leads the filmmaker to neglect his family, but he doesn't care about that, or about In-hye's increasing exasperation.

An artist is inspired by the radical and colourful artist Yayoi Kusama to paint nude bodies with flowers. Soon he realises he wants to film Yeong-hye having sex. He would like it to be with him, but is too self-conscious about his ageing body. He talks his studio mate, J., into modelling for him, but when at the crucial moment he asks J. if he could "maybe, you know, do it for real?" J. leaps up, horrified. J. lets himself be persuaded to simulate for the sake of art, while careening between apology for being too uptight and outrage at having been asked, but quickly decides against it. When J. leaves, Yeong-hye says that she wanted to do it — the flowers affected her strongly. This gives the filmmaker courage: he hesitantly asks if she would do it with him if he painted himself, and if she would let him film it. He races off to an artist friend to get his body painted and then returns to film the two of them having sex.

Afterwards, Yeong-hye asks him if the dreams will go now. It's her only response, her only concern. Is that why she went along with the idea? She's still having the dreams—faces appear, sometimes rotting. She had thought if she stopped eating meat the dreams would stop, but it didn't work. What else is left to try?

They fall asleep. In the morning the filmmaker wakes up. His wife is in Yeong-hye's flat; when he comes out of the bedroom he sees her sitting dejectedly at the table. She has watched the video in the camera. Betrayed and uncomprehending, she exacts revenge by calling psychiatric doctors to take him away.

The last of the three sections is again third person, this time very close to In-hye's perspective. It's around a year later, and In-hye is travelling to the psychiatric hospital where Yeong-hye now resides. At the hospital, In-hye learns that her sister is dangerously ill. By this point she is





refusing food altogether; the doctors will try force feeding but if it doesn't work she'll need to be transferred to a critical ward. This section moves back and forth between the hospital, the recent past (In-hye's husband's betrayal and departure, its effect on her young son), and more distant family memories, as if the answer to Yeong-hye's struggles might be explained by an incident from their past.

In-hye is consumed with sisterly concern but at the same time bewildered and impatient. She is the first (and placed last in the book) to even consider Yeong-hye as a person, a human being with feelings and thoughts and agency. Nonetheless, even her concern is occasionally tinged with frustration at the social conventions Yeong-hye has broken and with how that might reflect on the family. Unlike her sister, In-hye has done the responsible thing, building a business, having a child, and now caring for her sister. There are flashes of jealousy in the portrayal of In-hye — exactly where has following the rules got her? Yeong-hye has freedom from responsibility, yet she seems careless of this freedom: it means nothing to her. In-hye herself can never quite decide if Yeong-hye's condition is wilful or involuntary. Nonetheless, it is her sister who sticks by her even when she cannot fathom the reasons for Yeong-hye's actions, even when she despairs of Yeong-hye's apparent refusal to help herself.

Despite the tube feeding, Yeong-hye continues to deteriorate, and the book ends with In-hye and her sister in an ambulance, rushing to a hospital more suited to care for a seriously ill woman. Yeong-hye can barely speak. Thoughts and emotions race through In-hye's mind. What can she say to bring her sister back? What can she say to make her understand? "I have dreams too, you know. Dreams ... and I could let myself dissolve into them, let them take me over ... but surely the dream isn't all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don't we? Because ... because then ..."





Whether Yeong-hye survives or not, the implication is clear: women either submit to what is expected, or they rebel and are punished. The connection between women and consumption — their own consumption, or other people’s consumption of them, and the edible woman refusal of the one as a protest against the other — is not a new theme in fiction, but *The Vegetarian* is in no way a derivative novel. Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*, a groundbreaking work of feminist fiction, is an obvious comparison. Yeong-hye finds herself, like Atwood’s Marian McAlpin, unable to live within the restrictions of society, and like Marian she does not choose to protest — her body does it for her. But unlike in *The Edible Woman*, Yeong-hye’s problems cannot be reversed: Cheong divorces her, and she lives on her own for a while, but repeatedly ends up in hospital, first for psychiatric care, and finally for intensive care when she refuses all nourishment and even an IV drip fails to revive her. Will she survive? The novel doesn’t tell us, but it certainly points a lot of fingers. It gives a strong voice to each of the three characters. Makes its readers to ask questions that the characters themselves ought to be asking, but never do.





Work Cited:

Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian: A Novel*. London: Portobello Books, 2015.

<https://radicalhubarchives.wordpress.com/2011/07/25/feminism-and-vegetarianism/>

Gaard, Greta. "Vegetarian Eco-feminism: A Review Essay." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*. (2002): 117-146. Web. 2 October 2015

Lucas, Sheri (2005). "A defense of the Feminist-Vegetarian Connection". *Hypatia*. **20**: 150–177
– via JSTOR.

Atwood, Margaret. *The Edible Woman*. Toronto : McClelland and Stewart-Bantam, 1978.

