Veganism against Patriarchy: Non-Human Animal and Animalized Violence in *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract

In this article, Deborah Schrijvers examines the way in which veganism is portrayed as silent activism against violence targeting women and non-human animals in the South-Korean novel *The Vegetarian*. Through the concepts of the "animal gaze" by Jacques Derrida and the "face" by Emmanuel Levinas, she argues that the female protagonist recognizes her own suffering under patriarchal structures through that of non-human animals. As such, she acknowledges her interrelated precarity as woman and animalized other, effectively represented through her silence throughout the novel. By employing an ecofeminist perspective on the gendering of meat-eating, Schrijvers investigates how veganism is made to serve as an interrelated liberation of women and non-human animals.

Introduction

Looking and being looked at play a central role in the novel *The Vegetarian* (2007) by the South-Korean writer Han Kang.[1] It is through looking and meeting gazes that female protagonist Yeong-hye and her sister In-hye start to sense and experience multispecies existence and mutual corporeal vulnerability, making them aware of their ethical relations to others. For Yeong-hye this is triggered by the gaze of a non-human animal she meets in her recurring nightmares, prompting her to stop consuming animal products. Wishing to abstain from any form of violence, she takes her veganism to the extreme and eventually refuses to eat anything in order to become a tree, which is interpreted as a sign of unfolding madness by carers and doctors. However, before ending up in the mental hospital, Yeong-hye herself becomes *animalized* by her surroundings through verbal, physical and sexual abuse. Her becoming-tree is eventually understood by her sister In-hye as an act of taking agency over her body, based on her moral principles and judgement. In-hye, too, comes to realize their shared precariousness through the animalized gaze.

Linking looking and ethics to multispecies existence and corporeal vulnerability, I want to explore the way in which veganism functions as an intersectional critique and liberation of violence against women and non-human animals through a close reading of *The Vegetarian*. As I am focusing on interrelated oppression, I want to place my close reading of *The Vegetarian* within an ecofeminist context. Ecofeminism is an important academic and activist tradition that aims for the inclusion of marginalized groups, which entails the interrelated liberation of women, non-human animals, people of colour, and nature. Key to its conceptual framework is what ecofeminist Val Plumwood called the "master model" (23). Ecofeminist Greta Gaard argues in accordance with Plumwood that this model formulates binaries that are placed within hierarchies, forming the core identity of Western/Christian culture and the structure of patriarchy (116), such as culture-nature,

[1] Although the novel is called *The Vegetarian*, and throughout the novel the characters refer to the practice of abstaining from non-human animal consumption as vegetarianism, the moral principle and practice itself can be categorized as veganism because the protagonist abstains from all non-human animal products, including dairy, eggs and leather.

male-female and human-nature. These binaries do not only function in couplings, but also make vertical or transversal connections that form the model of the Human: white, male, culture, heterosexual, able-bodied and rational. An ecofeminist perspective therefore seeks to examine the ways in which women, queer people and people of colour are feminized, animalized, eroticized and naturalized in cultures that devalue non-human animals, women, nature and queer sexualities.

In this article I will specifically analyse the first part—"The Vegetarian"—and the third part—"Flaming Trees"—of the novel, because I believe they mirror each other thematically, through their focus on the violence suffered by both sisters, as well as their unfolding understanding of ethical relationality with non-human animals and each other through the gaze. In my analysis of the first part, I focus on the role of the animal(ized) gaze to see how it can deconstruct the patriarchal framework of these interrelated oppressions in order to explore alternative forms of co-existence. To be able to do this, I shall employ Jacques Derrida's conceptualization of the "animal gaze" in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008). I unpack the relevant implications of the animal gaze, which I link to Emmanuel Levinas' concept of "the face" and the ethical relation that being face-to-face constitutes in the context of the animal(ized) other. Secondly, I will analyse "Flaming Trees" through an ecofeminist lens that deconstructs patriarchy as formulated by Gaard, which I supplement with Carol J. Adams' vegetarian-feminist framework. Drawing on the way in which Adams links the violence against and the butchering of women with the treatment of non-human animals and the subsequent gendering of meat-eating, I argue that veganism in *The Vegetarian* is a form of silent activism and protests against the treatment of non-human animals and women.

The Animal(ized) Gaze and Face

Although *The Vegetarian* revolves around protagonist Yeong-hye, it is striking that she does not narrate any of the three parts. Consequently, readers get to know her indirectly, as she is mostly described by others. "The Vegetarian" is narrated by her husband Mr. Cheong, in the

form of a confession, chronicling his witnessed account of Yeong-hye's development from ordinary, obedient housewife into a vegan who disobeys his and her father's demands to eat meat again, which leads to their divorce. "Flaming Trees" is narrated by her sister In-hye, who is now the primary carer of Yeong-hye as she is hospitalized in a mental institution. As such, the novel provides perspectives on Yeong-hye, but only implicitly offers her own. Therefore, I argue that *The Vegetarian* revolves around the ways in which Yeong-hye's family members choose to respond and relate to her, and by extension, the social relations and ethical choices that they (do not) make. These social relations are constituted for the reader through the gaze of the focalizers, emphasizing their distance to Yeong-hye through which she is further figured as an alterity in her family and society. As a result, Yeong-hye is abused, cared for, and liberated through the release from that care. The gaze therefore creates ethical relationality; in the case of Yeong-hye's family, it places them in an ethical relation with her, but for Yeong-hye, the gaze she encounters places her in an ethical relation with non-human animals.

"The Vegetarian," although largely narrated by Mr. Cheong, does contain Yeong-hye's description of her nightmares, narrated in a first-person perspective. In her first nightmare, Yeong-hye enters a barn located within a dark, cold, desolated wood, which is filled with "great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down" (20). The blood enters her mouth, clothes and skin. Although she exits the barn, running back into the woods, she remains covered in wet blood and cannot get rid of a "red raw mass" in her mouth, "slick with crimson blood" (20). Subsequently, she sees a face, which she describes as "My face, the look in my eyes... my face, undoubtedly, but never seen before. Or no, not mine, but so familiar..." (20). In the second nightmare, she sees her face reflected in the "pool of blood in the barn" (27). Although the face is not described, Yeong-hye states later that: "Perhaps I'm only now coming face-to-face with the thing that has always been here" (36). This coming face-to-face seems to point towards Yeong-hye's discovery of her own animality, as well as animal alterity. This becomes clear when, later on, as the nightmares keep recurring and developing, the anonymous

chunks of meat she encounters in the barn turn into the body of a non-human animal and, consequently, attain a face and gaze.

The description of her intensifying nightmares culminates in Yeong-hye's recounting of a childhood memory, when a big white dog named Whitey bit her. He was subsequently killed by her father and eaten by the family by way of punishment. Whitey was tortured to death in front of her eyes, while Yeong-hye kept eye contact with him:

> [E]yes rolling and gasping for breath, [...] Every time his gleaming eyes meet my own I glare even more fiercely. [...] As blood and froth mix together, I stand stiffly upright and stare at those two glittering eyes. [...] I look at the dog's four juddering legs, its raised eyelids, the blood and water in its dead eyes. (49)

Although she states that she did not care about it back then, her nightmares seem to be rooted in this resurfacing memory. What haunts her are the eyes of the dog that "appear, flickering on the surface of the soup" (50). I find that Yeong-hye's nightmares lead her to experience an encounter with alterity, stemming not from rationality or consciousness, but from her dreams and affect. Through the dog's haunting gaze in her nightmares, she eventually is forced to recognize a shared vulnerability: the inability for both non-human animals and women to have ownership of their bodies in a patriarchal society.

Yeong-hye's description of her childhood memory bears similarity to Derrida's formulation of the animal gaze. He investigates this concept through an encounter with another domestic animal—his cat—and argues that the animal gaze is able to surpass a violent, colonial logic from a human perspective, through the realization that the non-human animal is able to look back (11-12). According to philosopher Michael Naas, the human-animal hierarchy of power is reversed through the animal gaze: instead of the human first seeing and categorizing the animal, Derrida is caught by the gaze of the animal observing him (225). This realization allows Derrida to examine the philosophical "question of the animal" in a way that allows the non-human animal its otherness

without anthropocentric categorization (Derrida 47). Philosopher David Farrell Krell rightly argues that Derrida's primary aim is to respect the heterogeneous multiplicity of all living beings, because otherwise criminal violence against both humans and animals ensues (85). Derrida contextualizes the urgency and rise of the animal question by firstly describing the changed relation with animals since the Industrial Revolution, in which industrial levels of animal farming started. This changed relation is marked by unprecedented violence committed by humans, as non-human animals were and are used as tools, meat, by-product, object for experimentation and breeding machines on an unimaginable scale (Derrida 25). As Derrida signals, Western philosophy's violence against non-human animals occurs through the homogenization of the highly diverse range of existing non-human animals into one category: 'the animal,' which has facilitated both the material "genocide" of non-human animals and the human disavowal of it (26). Central to this is human exceptionalism based on the power of naming and language, which defines 'the animal' through negation of 'the human' and therefore produces a frame that is able to disregard the animal gaze. For this reason, Derrida seeks to approach animals not through their comparative characteristics to humans, but in terms of mutual corporeal vulnerability and finitude.

The philosophical implications of the reversal of power that the animal gaze poses are twofold in my view. The animal gaze is firstly Levinasian in focus, because it demonstrates the encounter between the singular I and Other due to being face-to-face. Because of this encounter, the gaze of the Other constitutes an immediate ethical relation which precedes any form of (linguistic) representation or conceptualization by the human or the Other. For Levinas, the ethical relation is infinite and without reciprocity. With the gaze being the starting point of an ethical relation, it calls upon one's responsibility to prevent and relieve the suffering of the Other. This is vital for Levinas' ethical implication of the gaze and being face-to-face, because according to Levinas, suffering is an excess that overwhelms the faculties: it can only be endowed with meaning afterwards (82). As such, suffering cannot be redeemed or justified as it is meaningless to singularities at the moment

of undergoing suffering. Yet, at the same time, Levinas argues that in (attending to) suffering lies the "very nexus of human subjectivity" (84), opening an interhuman ethical perspective. I argue that this ethical perspective is extended to non-human animals in *The Vegetarian*, which is a fundamental shift from Levinas that both ecofeminism and Derrida argue for. Secondly, the animal gaze unveils the animality present in the human animal prior to meeting the animal gaze, because the animal gaze acts as a confirmation of being wholly other and inscribes differentiation, while simultaneously constituting a difference between the observer and observed. This means that the animal gaze is an ethical experience in the Levinasian sense, but also an experience of the limit of subjectivity and of the endlessly folded human-animal limit. These understandings of the animal gaze are of importance in *The Vegetarian*, because they allow for an ethical relation between Yeong-hye and non-human animals, as well as between (animalized) Yeong-hye and In-hye. In both cases, the gaze activates responsibility for the other, and both women subsequently act on it: Yeong-hye abstains from non-human animal products and In-hye permits Yeong-hye agency of her body.

Shared Silencing

The gaze and mutual corporeal susceptibility it attests to can also produce violence, as Mr. Cheong demonstrates when Yeong-hye has been vegan for a while. He observes that she has grown increasingly skinny, is restless, suffers from insomnia and actively avoids sexual relations with him.[2] As a man "in the prime of his life," he finds himself unable to have his "physical needs go unsatisfied for such a long period of time" (38), so when he comes home inebriated one night, he rapes her. Raping Yeong-hye becomes his new norm, and while it would sometimes "strike a chill" the next day, coupled by the meeting of Yeong-hye's gaze that also "niggled at [his] conscience" (39), he continues to habitually rape her until their divorce. Near the end of their marriage, at a family gathering, Mr. Cheong also allows Yeong-hye's father to hit her so hard for

[2] She states she avoids Mr. Cheong because he smells of meat and, by extension, violence and death (24).

her refusal to eat meat "that the blood showed through the skin of her cheek" (46). Her father then hits her again, and the instant that "the force of the slap had knocked my wife's mouth open he'd managed to jam the pork in" (47-8). This forced feeding, another form of transgressive subjugation,[3] continues in "Flaming Trees," when Yeong-hye is hospitalized in order to keep her alive. This is the case until In-hye realizes that Yeong-hye should be allowed to decide what happens to her own body, stating "It's your body, you can treat it however you please. The only area where you're free to do as you like. And even that doesn't turn out how you wanted" (182). This realization is what marks a change in the way In-hye relates to Yeong-hye and approaches care: from wanting to protect her from herself to respecting her wishes, even though she knows this might cause her death.

Yeong-hye herself is silent (or silenced) about the repeated rape she suffers from her husband. I consider this an implicitly related fate to the forced reproduction through artificial insemination of factory farm animals, due to the explicit link made in the novel between Yeong-hye and them. Although their circumstances differ, the naturalization of rape is condoned through the patriarchal structure Yeong-hye opposes through veganism, the structure that relies on the male-female and human-animal divide and the subsequent animalization of women and minorities that solidify sociopolitical hierarchies. In both cases, rape is naturalized: by Mr. Cheong as part of his unsatisfied "physical needs" (38), which he claims by the contract of marriage that assigns Yeong-hye's body to him; in the case of factory farming, livestock reproduction is industrialized for capital made through human consumption of their bodies. Historian Gabriel N. Rosenberg argues that the reproduction of capital, as procreation, is exempted from the law of bestiality or sexual abuse of animals, which necessitates the obliteration of any form of acknowledgement of personhood or agency of factory farm animals (488).[4] As such, the human heteronormative structure as part of patriarchy is

[3] This description recalls the force-feeding experienced by the incarcerated activists of the suffragette movement (see Pankhurst 90).

[4] To get an impression of what artificial insemination entails in factory farming practices, see Rosenberg 485.

placed on nonhuman animals and licenses rape in both cases. Societal norms therefore assign agency over Yeong-hye's body to Mr. Cheong, much like non-human animal bodies are legally assigned to the agricultural industry.

Yeong-hye's absence of linguistic expression is a stylistic choice that emphasizes her animalization, demonstrating the distancing quality of language from experienced reality. According to Adams, this distancing quality materializes in denying non-human animals (and women) their singularity, which retains them from any form of ethical relation. She argues that through butchering, the non-human animal loses her singularity (and body), and through language, the non-human animal is turned into meat as separated from the singularity (45). Therefore, through butchering and language, non-human animals become "absent referents" (45): they are made absent as animals in order to become consumable meat for humans. However, this practice of turning particular animals into anonymous masses of meat does not end with butchering: instead, Adams argues that meat is part of the cultural mythology of maleness, reinterpreted and reproduced in and through popular culture (xviii). The politics of meat entails the dominance of a male role and fixed gender system, with its meaning arising from "patriarchal attitudes including the idea [...] that the objectification of other beings is a necessary part of life, and that violence can and should be masked" (xxxv). As vegan studies theorist Laura Wright states, this enables consumers to conceptualize the non-human animal outside of our consumer culture (19): factory farm animals are denied personhood, faces and gazes. As Adams states: "Meat becomes a symbol for what is not seen but is always there—patriarchal control of animals and language" (48). As meat-eating is gendered, this extends to the traditional role of women: "We oppress animals by associating them with women's lesser status" (53). In its alignment with ecofeminism, vegetarian-feminism argues that language establishes and naturalizes hierarchies of binaries. As such, language is not only male-centered, but also Human-centered, casting non-human animal and animalized minorities aside in dominant discourse.

In-hye's recognition of Yeong-hye's current animalization while she is abused by her family and labelled as 'mad' develops into the realization that Yeong-hye had been animalized long before her veganism. She recounts the ways in which Yeong-hye was recurrently abused by their inebriated father as a child and became increasingly more taciturn during her marriage with Mr. Cheong. In-hye's recognition of this violence makes her aware of her own similar suffering within the same societal structure of patriarchy. Due to this mirroring structure of the novel, the animalized other ceases to be an other, but becomes part of a traumatized collective that employs different survival techniques. In her chapter, "Flaming Trees," it becomes clear that In-hye has also suffered marital rape and has also been silent about the assaults. It indicates the naturalization of these transgressive acts of violence in the patriarchal context. She is also an insomniac and is suffering from recurring bloody nightmares. In-hye also has a longing for death, although she knows she is unable to act upon it, due to her young son. While Yeong-hye is hospitalized, In-hye at first expresses envy towards her, as she is able to break the "boundary she herself could never cross" (148). These are boundaries of social constraint for women that imprison In-hye, while "before Yeong-hye had broken those bars, she'd never even known they were there" (148). Later, she recognizes herself in Yeong-hye, stating that:

> if everything hadn't splintered apart, then perhaps she was the one who would have broken down, and if she'd let that happen, if she'd let go of the thread, she might never have found it again. In that case, would the blood that Yeong-hye had vomited today have burst from her, In-hye's chest instead? (186)

The animal(ized) gaze that stirs conscience and responsibility in both sisters opens up the questioning of socio-cultural norms and casts a critical glance at the endured violence justified or naturalized by these norms.

Conclusion

In *The Vegetarian*, societal structures of hierarchy that create the human-animal divide, patriarchy and heteronormativity, are framed as an intersectional force of violence against women and non-human animals. This violence devours women and non-human animals, who are silenced and abused in this process. Yet, patriarchal silencing is unable to mute Yeong-hye completely, as she communicates through her actions: embracing veganism for her appears to be a silent form of activism, forming an alliance with non-human animals and other women who face oppression under patriarchy. Due to the framing of her suffered childhood and marital abuse and her absence as narrator, she figures as a victim of violence. However, at the same time, her becoming-vegan and becoming-tree are decisions she makes about her body, gaining physical self-control. The novel shows that language is an enactment of dominance and the ability to mute, as has been the case for Yeong-hye, and is employed as a literary technique to effectively show repression. Silence and silencing here represent restricting patriarchal structures, which are both silently subverted and carried on by In-hye. As such, literature provides a way to resist power and broaden cultural conceptual frameworks through new terms, names and the rephrasing of questions or actions, as the novel demonstrates. In this way, (contemporary) literature has the ability to play a key role in this shift of our conceptual framework, both scrutinizing violence against women and in human-animal relations, as well as recasting them through traversal alliances.

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Biography

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