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Vegetal Affect: Disruptive Unfeeling in the Face of Gender Oppression in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

Emily Cluett

Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* tells the story of a woman who has a nightmare so obscene, so violent, that it fundamentally changes how she lives in the waking world. In this disconcerting dream, the young female protagonist Yeong-hye Kim kills and eats someone—or something—with her bare hands. When she awakens, she not only immediately adopts a vegetarian diet, but her demeanor and affective expression also change. Her face defaults to a vacant expression; she begins speaking less; and when forced to interact with others she shocks them by not only behaving in socially unacceptable ways, but also emoting (or not) in non-normative ways. In doing so, Yeong-hye reveals and disrupts hegemonic gender-based power relations, particularly those relating to affective gender expectations of women such as ‘a submissive wife, an obedient daughter, an amiable person’ that keep the patriarchy intact.¹ By foregrounding Xine Yao's notion of feeling otherwise as a form of dissent, and feminist and affect theory more broadly, I propose to examine Yeong-hye's behavior as a mode

¹ Tai, Yu-Chen (Brena) Tai, 'Hopeful Reading: Rethinking Resistance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*', *College Literature*, 48. 4 (Fall 2021), p. 640.

of female liberation by means of unfeeling.² Yao asks, ‘Can a calculus of uncaring allow for us to better care for ourselves and others?’, and I will argue that Yeong-hye provides a strong example of a resolution to this apparent paradox, though she is a martyr who sacrifices herself for ‘us’.³

The novel is divided into three parts, none of which are narrated in the first person by Yeong-hye herself. The first section is narrated in the first person by her husband Mr. Cheong, while the second and third are told in the third person, from the perspective of her unnamed brother-in-law and her elder sister In-hye respectively. Each of these characters presents Yeong-hye and her experiences negatively, in terms that erase her own subjectivity, as she is in turn monstered, objectified, and pathologized. Although such terms are regularly imposed on women to disempower them, Yeong-hye's transformation involves feeling otherwise or indeed not feeling anything at all which allows her to regain some of her capacity for agency.

The most oppressive forces in Yeong-hye's life are male chauvinism and misogyny. This is immediately felt in the novel's first sentence, narrated by Mr. Cheong: ‘Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way’.⁴ Yeong-hye's husband presents her as indistinguishable, therefore invisible, her averageness betokening her lack of agency. He even admits that he chose his wife because of how submissive he perceived her to be: ‘her timid, sallow aspect told me all I needed to know’.⁵ What he thinks he knows about his wife is that she appears to lack courage, confidence, and physical strength, able to be dominated,

² Xine Yao, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

³ Yao, p. 28.

⁴ Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, trans. Deborah Smith (London: Portobello Press, 2015) p. 3.

⁵ Kang, p. 3.

and therefore desirable and socially acceptable, as the Korean literary critic Jung-Ah Lee explains. In the persistently popular Korean folk song, 'SijipSali' ('Song of Married Life'), Lee identifies that the misogynist theme of limiting a woman's life to domesticity that has been, and continues to be, reproduced by the patriarchy of Korea.⁶ Mr. Cheong explains with satisfaction that his wife rarely speaks or tries to spend her leisure time with him, which suits him precisely because it doesn't 'disrupt [his] carefully ordered existence'.⁷ Though she obeys her husband, Yeong-hye's emotional distance is not necessarily the weakness he perceives it to be, but rather a resistive power she has yet to fully exert. The night of his wife's affective paradigm shift, Mr. Cheong realizes that her disaffective tendencies might mean resistance rather than subservience. Although she was always reserved, that night he is surprised by 'her complete lack of reaction', and is baffled to find that she has become 'completely unresponsive, as though lost in her own world'.⁸ This is the beginning of Yeong-hye's radical dissociation from affective norms in favour of her own world where those rules do not apply. Arlie Hochschild's theory of feeling rules states that there is a "proper" range of inner feelings and corresponding outer display' that are socially determined.⁹ A feeling rule is most clearly observed or felt when it has been broken, which explains Mr. Cheong's dismay when his wife brazenly begins breaking those associated with being a submissive wife.

As the novel progresses, Yeong-hye continues to refuse to indulge her husband with the affects he expects of her. Mr. Cheong is frustrated when they are at home, but

⁶ Jung-Ah Lee 'Misogyny in the Lyrics of "SijipSali" (Song of Married Life)', *The Studies of Korean Literature*, 10.60 (2018), 99 - 127.

⁷ Kang, p. 4.

⁸ Kang, p. 7.

⁹ Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) p. 68.

in the infinitely more complicated and public situation of a work dinner with his superiors, her defiance becomes unbearable to him. Refusing the food offered to her because it contains meat, and ignoring the veiled concern that accompanies her small meal, Yeong-hye ‘appall[s] everyone present’ when ‘the demure, apologetic smile which was the only reasonable response never came, and without having the grace to look embarrassed, she simply stared baldly’.¹⁰ In this moment, Mr. Cheong realizes the immense power of his wife's disaffactive strategy. With only one expression she is able to threaten his social standing, and concomitantly, his career. Yeong-hye's affective transgression in this exchange reveals ‘the inextricability of “affect” from power’, because her refusal to react weakens her husband's power over her.¹¹ The final straw that confirms Yeong-hye's success in shifting the power dynamic in her favour occurs when she starts to refuse to wear clothing. When Mr. Cheong finds his wife preparing dinner naked in the back yard and confronts her, he is confounded by her reasoning that she was simply too hot: ‘Look at me and laugh. Show me that your answer was just a joke. But she didn't laugh’.¹² These reactions reveal that Mr. Cheong has internalized the patriarchal expectations of female emotional responses that would keep his wife in a submissive position, as he imagines and wills her to have the normative response, which would merely be an attempt at humour, not an act of defiance. Instead, Yeong-hye resists these societal norms not only by acting outside of them, but also by not feeling anything about her disobedience.

Once Mr. Cheong acknowledges that he can no longer control his wife, he turns to his father-in-law for help. At a dinner at Yeong-hye's parents' house, her father is

¹⁰ Kang, p. 25.

¹¹ Tyrone Palmer qtd. in Yao, p. 5.

¹² Kang, p. 32.

infuriated when she refuses to obey him too. When he orders her to eat meat, she is not swayed by his extremely agitated state. She simply turns away and is ‘not the least bit apologetic’.¹³ He then tries to impose his will upon his daughter with violence, by attempting to force-feed Yeong-hye a piece of meat, before striking her. She has not only shamed him by displaying no remorse of her own in defying him, but has also refused to respond with grace and gratitude to his offering. Over the course of the argument, Yeong-hye denies her father both the aforementioned positive and negative affects he was expecting, so he feels forced to resort to physical oppression when his habitual emotional oppression is thwarted. As affect theorist Silvan Tompkins writes, ‘contempt is the mark of the oppressor. The hierarchical relationship is maintained either when the oppressed assumes the attitude of contempt for himself or hangs his head in shame’.¹⁴ Yeong-hye disrupts this hierarchy by neither feeling contempt for herself, nor hanging her head in shame for defying her father’s wishes. This lack of shame in disobeying men in her life leads them to conclude that she is insane; Mr. Cheong uses it as an excuse to divorce her.

The second section of the novel is narrated by Yeong-hye's unnamed brother-in-law, who obsessively pursues her following her divorce. A visual artist, his sexual obsession with her begins when he notices a blue birthmark on her body; from then on he cannot stop thinking about incorporating her body into one of his projects as a sexual object—a perfect example of Rae Langton's nuanced yet succinct definition of objectification: ‘reduction to body’.¹⁵ Infatuated by a specific part of her body, which

¹³ Kang, p. 38.

¹⁴ Silvan Tompkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tompkins Reader*, ed. by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 139.

¹⁵ Rae Langton, *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

he wants to use as material in his art practice, he paints on her body in a way that emphasizes the birthmark; he then paints a man with the same floral patterns, planning to film the two engaging in intercourse. The brother-in-law experiences a mixture of shame, guilt, excitement, and fear in his pursuit. Yeong-hye on the other hand displays almost no emotion during their interactions, which initially keeps him at bay: 'Her face was so utterly devoid of expression it was impossible for him to guess what was going on inside her mind'.¹⁶ Yeong-hye is well-aware that her brother-in-law is objectifying her and only wants her for her body, but this doesn't bother her, because she doesn't let it. This shocks him because hers 'was a body of a beautiful young woman, conventionally an object of desire, and yet it was a body from which all desire had been eliminated [...] what she had renounced was the very life that her body represented'.¹⁷ Yeong-hye does not desire approval, attention, intimacy; indeed, for her, there is no need to *feel anything* about the way she is perceived. She does not believe that being naked is inherently salacious, and has renounced what it means to be an object of desire. She has achieved this by refusing to feel vulnerable, ashamed, or even desirable in her nudity.

In this second section of the book, Yeong-hye's plant-based lifestyle turns literal, as she emulates plant behaviours and their correspondingly vegetal affect, another example of 'that which cannot be recognized as feeling'.¹⁸ Wearing no clothes in her south-facing apartment to better absorb the sun's rays, her behavior seems to evoke a vague, positive affect, without any clear emotional valency.¹⁹ In the animacy hierarchy theorized by Mel Chen, plants do not rank at the bottom because they are

¹⁶ Kang, p. 79.

¹⁷ Kang, p. 85.

¹⁸ Yao, p. 5.

¹⁹ Kang, pp. 72-73.

understood to be living (which ranks them higher than minerals etc.), which in turn allows for the possibility that the boundary between what is considered human, and what is considered vegetable, may become blurred, as is the case for Yeong-hye later in the novel when she enters a near-“vegetative” state in the hospital. For Chen, ‘the question then becomes: Who are the proper mediums of affect? Are they humans? Humans and animals? Vegetables?’.²⁰ Chen, and many Indigenous scholars such as Zoe Todd, warn of the dangers of an anthropocentric ethos because the hierarchy it is founded on leads to the mistreatment of all things non-human as humans are considered as affectively superior, sometimes to the extent that humans are believed to be the only beings capable of affect.²¹ This can be harmful to beings who trouble definitions of personhood as Yeong-hye starts to do when she begins her transition to more vegetal affect. Yeong-hye's body proves not well suited to this new mode of affect as it begins to break down, but she becomes increasingly sure of herself. Rose Casey calls this ‘Yeong-hye’s will to arboreality’, which Casey argues is ‘a model of radical non-mastery and transnational feminist world-being’.²² Yeong-hye finds strength in her new, other-than-human way of being, but it is baffling to other characters in the book who see her physically deteriorating and find her mode of affect increasingly inscrutable. Her brother-in-law is desperate to have sex with her, but she doesn't care one way or another. ‘If I painted flowers on myself, would you do it then?’ the brother-in-law shrieks at Yeong-hye as he beseeches her to have sex with him, at which

²⁰ Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 41.

²¹ Zoe Todd, 'Indigenizing the Anthropocene', in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environment and Epistemology*, ed. by Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (Open Humanities Press, 2015).

²² Rose Casey, 'Willed Arboreality: Feminist Worldmaking in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*', *Critique*, 62. 3 (2021), p. 347.

point she assents only because it would make the act appealing due to its aesthetic proximity to the vegetal realm.²³ When he asks for her consent, she stares at him ‘as if limits and boundaries no longer held any meaning for her’.²⁴ She does not lust for him, but nor is she repulsed by his advances; she is instead unmoved. The conventional emotions associated with intercourse are no longer of any interest to her. It is this that leads to her eventual institutionalization.

Yeong-hye's lack of affect is pathologized first by the men in her life, but then also by the women, including her sister, In-hye, who admits her to a psychiatric ward after finding her in bed with her husband. Infidelity itself is not a mental illness, but In-hye takes it as a final sign that Yeong-hye is no longer able to conform to social norms. This appears particularly evident as she expresses no guilt or remorse when In-hye walks in on the scene, ‘her face a perfect blank. Her gaze utterly devoid of any form of expression’.²⁵ Unlike the men in Yeong-hye's life, In-hye reacts with concern rather than outrage; she takes Yeong-hye to the hospital to seek treatment rather than beating her or abandoning her like her father and husband did. But her concern is ambivalent, because it is blended with resentment. In-hye admits that she begrudges her sister for the ‘magnificent irresponsibility that had enabled Yeong-hye to shuck off social constraints and leave her [sister] behind, still a prisoner. And before Yeong-hye had broken those bars, she'd never even known they were there’.²⁶ Yeong-hye made visible to her sister the oppressive patriarchal power structure and the effects of its ramifications on her life in new and unavoidable ways. For sociologist Joseph E. Davis, emotions like shame and pride ‘arise in our relations with other people and the social

²³ Kang, p. 107.

²⁴ Kang, p. 107.

²⁵ Kang, p. 118.

²⁶ Kang, p. 143.

order [...] and so involve our self-worth and vision of the good life [...] they also illuminate the normative frameworks that are inescapably involved'.²⁷ Yeong-hye has done the work of illumination through her nonconformism, and what is brought to light is the crushing oppression of the patriarchy. She makes her sister realise that 'she had never lived [...] Her devotion to doing things the right way had been unflagging, all her success had depended on it', but her devotion to the norm leaves her unarmed when faced with the reality her sister has revealed.²⁸ Doing things the right way for young Korean women at the time, like In-hye, involved marrying a man and creating a new family with him.²⁹ Sara Ahmed describes the family as a 'happy object' that only becomes one 'through the work that must be done to keep it together [...] the point of the family is to keep the family the point'.³⁰ For In-hye, the family was a happy object for her because she was committed to it, but as soon as Yeong-hye challenged the idea of keeping the family the point by repudiating the patriarchal affective expectations of women in the family, and destroying In-hye's marriage and family, it ceased to be a happy object for both women. This revelation leaves In-hye reeling, questioning her own choices and sanity. When her sister is in the hospital dying because of her commitment to vegetal norms, In-hye asks her "Have you really lost your mind?" as 'an inscrutable fear makes her draw back from her sister'.³¹ In-hye is terrified by her own question because what distinguishes her sister from everyone else is only that she has refused to feel, and therefore act in ways that are socially acceptable. Her sister has

²⁷ Joseph E. Davis, 'Emotions as Commentaries on Cultural Norms', in *The Emotions and Cultural Analysis*, ed. by Ana Marta González (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 31-49 (p. 34).

²⁸ Kang, p. 162.

²⁹ Sungeun Yang, 'Young Generation's Perceptions of Same-Sex Sexuality and Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Marriage in South Korea', *SAGE Open*, (2021).

³⁰ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 46.

³¹ Kang, p. 167.

been tentatively diagnosed with anorexia and schizophrenia, but her doctor seems unconvinced by his own diagnosis because Yeong-hye remains lucid and all too self-aware.³² She is hospitalized by her family not because her body is failing (she surprises everyone with her strength even when she is down to an inconceivably low weight); instead, Yeong-hye is hospitalized and pathologized because she has deliberately alienated herself from the familial hegemony, and its affective regime.³³

Because the majority of the novel is told from the perspective of characters other than Yeong-hye, the reader does not know what she is feeling at any given time, but rather how she is (or is not) expressing emotion as perceived by others. The only time the reader is given access to Yeong-hye's perspective is in sparse, italicized recollections of her nightmares. In these moments Yeong-hye does feel, she does have emotion, but one emotion only: abject horror. Yeong-hye's thoughts in the first nightmare are '*My bloody hands. My bloody mouth [...] what had I done?*' and she is repulsed by the sensation of blood and flesh in her mouth.³⁴ In this first dream Yeong-hye is confronted with the violence inherent in the food she was eating, because the slaughter and consumption of flesh are not alienated from each other, or, as Carol Adams would describe it, the 'absent referent' has been found, to horrifying effect.³⁵ Later dreams also bring to the fore the violence of her abusive father,³⁶ and the violence she has subsequently inflicted upon herself.³⁷ Adams argues that violence against women and the consumption of animals is intricately linked because the same

³² Kang, pp. 140-141.

³³ Kang, p. 173.

³⁴ Kang, p. 12.

³⁵ Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat (20th Anniversary Edition): A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), p. 67.

³⁶ Kang, p. 41.

³⁷ Kang, p. 49.

patriarchal logical of objectification is used to justify the mistreatment of both: ‘women stand in relationship to the “total woman” as they do to “hamburger,” as something that is objectified, without agency, that must be prepared, reshaped, acculturated to be made consumable in a patriarchal world’.³⁸ When Yeong-hye no longer agrees to emote in a way that is palatable to her father, he beats her. When her brother pins her down so her father can force meat into her mouth, she breaks free but sees self-harm as her only escape in that moment and slits her wrists.³⁹ Yeong-hye's dreams reveal to her the ineluctable violence of being human, and that horrifies her. Julia Kristeva writes that ‘the abject has only one quality of the object - that of being opposed to *I*’.⁴⁰ Yeong-hye's dreams evoke in her abject horror because she is made to see that she has been actively participating in a regime of exhaustive violence, which is a part of her *I* that is made unbearable through this confrontation. In her waking life, Yeong-hye decides to no longer passively participate in the violence inherent in humanity, so she changes her diet and uses disaffect to wrest herself from the expectations of not only womanhood but also human subjectivity.

By the end of the novel Yeong-hye has eschewed almost all human convention and is biologically close to death. Her body has shrivelled to thirty kilograms and her organs are breaking down.⁴¹ However, in her decay Yeong-hye displays a new, unknowable emotion. In-hye describes seeing for the first time ‘Yeong-hye's face shining like this [...] her eyes glittering and sharp’.⁴² It is impossible to name this new emotion, but for Yeong-hye it is a positive affect because it comes about as a result of

³⁸ Adams, p. 83.

³⁹ Kang, p. 41.

⁴⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon Samuel Roudiez (Germany: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 1.

⁴¹ Kang, p. 151.

⁴² Kang, p. 147.

her commitment to her new approach to being. Yeong-hye's physical self-destruction is not an act of nihilism because Yeong-hye believes and proves that her new way of life has disruptive power. As bleak as this sentiment is, her annihilation of her previous life allows for possibility: in this way Yeong-hye can be read as a vanguard of immense possibility through the use of disaffect for resisting patriarchal societal pressures. In 'Hopeful Reading: Rethinking Resistance in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*,' Yu-Chen Tai maintains that Yeong-hye engages in a form of self-affirmation that is not comprehensible to others, not a form of self-destruction: 'Yeong-hye's unintelligible embodiment and social interactions do not signal an elimination of her being but an enrichment of it'.⁴³ She refuses to emote in the way that is expected of her gender, and though she is nearly destroyed in the process, she creates space for alternative possibilities not only for In-hye, but also for the novel's readers. The character of Yeong-hye provokes readers to question if their feelings are rooted in patriarchal norms, thereby reifying the oppressive structure that determines them. Yao writes that 'unfeeling is the detachment from attachments to hegemonic structures of feeling and the potential for striving toward a radical politics of liberation', and Yeong-hye provides tangible examples of how to put said theory into practice.⁴⁴

⁴³ Tai, p. 639.

⁴⁴ Yao, p. 17.