

The Gendered Politics of Meat:

Becoming Tree in Kang's *The Vegetarian*, Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*

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This essay addresses the vexed question of the gendered politics of meat, using three novels that powerfully dramatise these issues as case studies: Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1990), Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1998) and – to be treated first – Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007). The topics of meat-eating and animal farming as well as the ways in which they intersect problematically with sexual politics are the main thematic concerns in the three novels, which can be seen as engaged in a critical dialogue.

The animalising and objectifying of women as meat in contemporary culture is a persistent feature, fictionally dramatised in these narratives. Women and animals become enmeshed in a tangle of signifiers that unite them as flesh to be consumed, used and disposed of as secondary and inferior. The three protagonists attempt to escape the patriarchal ideology that dictates their place in a world where they are subject to their partners' will in different but interrelated ways, by symbolically becoming more plant-like, with the aim of regaining their voices and identities, gradually erased in their androcentric society. Indeed, they develop an overpowering empathy with plants, which eventually leads them to avoid eating even these.

The protagonists of *The Vegetarian* and *The Edible Woman* are young women who feel trapped and constricted by society's strong patriarchal conventions, attempting to escape them by eschewing meat, equated with the exploitation of women, animals and the environment. While the main character in *The Vegetarian*, mimicking the mythological Daphne in her flight from Apollo, gradually wills herself to "become" a tree, the protagonist of *The Edible Woman* eventually extricates herself from a stultifying relationship in which she felt neutralised and instrumentalised. The protagonist of Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*, a young Japanese-American woman, for her part, gradually becomes aware of the many pitfalls of the meat industry, including how the animals are treated, what they are fed and how they are killed, leading to her efforts to expose and denounce a very unsavoury reality.

The three novels thus address the sexual objectification of women as meat to be consumed, a longstanding, vexed trope, as well as their strategies to disentangle themselves from their problematical situation. Indeed, as Carol Adams argued in her groundbreaking book *The Sexual*

Politics of Meat (1990), the recurrent interaction between the entrenched misogyny in present-day society and its fixation with masculinity and meat-eating can be seen as key factors in the continued exploitation of women as meat and domestic “slaves” in many cultures, which often associate virility with meat-eating and regard women as flesh to be consumed and abused.

The protagonist of Kang’s *The Vegetarian* (2015), a young, obedient, submissive married woman, Yeong-hye, becomes a vegetarian in the wake of a dream involving meat and a pool of blood on which a face is reflected. This association, albeit unconscious, between meat and violence, coupled with a number of childhood memories revolving around cruelty to animals, conspire to lead her to gradually reject eating meat and fish and eventually most types of food, as a visceral rejection of her husband, her father and cultural conventions that dictate women’s behaviour, especially in strongly patriarchal societies like South Korea, where the author comes from, which are severely repressive of women. Symptomatic of Yeong-hye’s gradual retreat into herself is the almost total absence of her voice, only heard very intermittently. The story is told through the narratorial voice of her husband, her brother-in-law and later her sister, but the predominant lens of the narrative is a male one, indicative of the patriarchal networks of power that ensnare her.

Kang (2016a) considers that “[o]n the reverse side of the protagonist Yeong-hye’s extreme attempt to turn her back on violence by casting off her own human body and transforming into a plant lies a deep despair and doubt about humanity”. Kang further observes that Yeong-hye “refuses to eat meat to cast human brutality out of herself [...] I think that, in this violent world, hers is an extremely awakened state, a horribly true and sane state” (Filgate 2016). Indeed, in the novel, Yeong-hye feels repulsed by the thought of all the meat she has consumed: “*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*” (Kang 2015: 49; italics in the original).

The major crisis occurs when, at a family meeting, the protagonist’s father, an overpowering man, insists on force-feeding her meat, which she violently rejects, going on to slit her wrists and being taken to hospital, and later to a mental hospital where her health gradually declines due to her refusal to eat. Her unswerving ambition and obsessive fantasy consist of nothing less than becoming a tree, exposing her naked body to the sun’s rays at every possible opportunity, claiming that all she needs to survive is water and the sun to promote a type of photosynthesis.

Significantly, Han Kang had already written a short story in 1997 called “The Fruit of My Woman” (Kang 2016b), a tale that symbolically dramatises the objectification of woman into a beautiful artefact. In this tale a wife, similar to Yeong-hye, unhappy in her tiny flat and her married life, wills herself to become a plant, which her husband then keeps in a pot on the balcony and looks after.¹ Like Yeong-hye she gradually stops eating and her body is covered with bruise-like stains which take on distinct hues reminiscent of those of plants in different seasons of the year. As she puts it (*idem*: 2016b): “I’ve dreamed of this, of being able to live on nothing but wind, sunlight and water, for a long time now”. To be passive in this context means to avoid conflict, to remove herself from the demands of conjugal life, but also physical and

mental annihilation. “Soon, I know, even thought will be lost to me, but I’m alright”. She will also lose her voice, symptomatic of her erasure from social contact but also, symbolically, of her will to preserve herself, like the mythological Daphne.

Analogously to Yeong-hye, the protagonist of “The Fruit of My Woman” has a recurring dream, in her case of becoming a tree, which will be reworked in *The Vegetarian*:

Mother, I keep having the same dream. I dream that I’m growing tall as a poplar. I pierce through the roof of the balcony and through that of the floor above, the fifteenth floor, the sixteenth floor, shooting up through concrete and reinforcing rods until I break through the roof at the very top. Flowers like white larvae wriggle into blossom at my tallest extremities. My trachea sucks up clear water, so taut it seems it will burst, my chest thrusts up to the sky and I strain to stretch out each branching limb. This I how I escape from this flat. Every night, mother, every night the same dream. (*ibidem*)

In a kind of symbolic prefiguration of her fate, Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law, a video artist, who falls in love with her, has a vision of her as a “tree that grows in the wilderness, denuded and solitary” (Kang 2015: 64), covering her body with paintings of blooming flowers and leaves, thus effectively turning her into a work of art to be admired but also an object of lust, while Yeong-hye wishes to escape the world of patriarchal desire and violence.² Again as in Kang (2016b) the woman is regarded as a piece of art to be consumed and objectified.

In the last section of Kang (2015), “Flaming Trees”, Yeong-hye takes her goal to become a tree to its drastic, radical conclusion, by refusing to eat. She is taken to a psychiatric institution from which she often escapes to experience the natural world directly and mingle with the trees.³ On one of these occasions she is discovered deep in the woods, “standing there stock-still and soaked with rain as if she herself was one of the glistening trees” (*idem*: 125). As she explains to her sister, “*leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands [...] they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly [...]*” (*idem*: 127; italics in the original).

This deep urge on Yeong-hye’s part to identify with plants and to attain what Marder (2013: 94) has called an ontophytological state, “without projecting its own rationality upon the idealized plant”, can be construed as a capitulation to the pressures of the patriarchal world that in many ways conflates woman and nature as entities to be conquered and subjugated. Conversely, Yeong-hye’s impulse to become a tree can be seen not as a defeat and surrender but as a strategic action to circumvent a capitalist and patriarchal logic of domination and exploitation of women and nature.⁴ In this reading, her “ontophytological” drive constitutes a refusal to be complicit with that logic, a retreat into another realm where she can be herself, aligned with what Merchant (1996: 223) has described as a “partnership ethic” which holds that the “greatest good for the human and nonhuman communities is in their mutual living interdependence”. Even though it may also be interpreted as a cowardly act, Yeong-hye’s retreat into nature, while emphasising an essentialist trope and potentially suggesting a measure of defeat (after all, her physical envelope will inevitably perish, deprived of nutrients) can also be inscribed in the context of a type of

plant awareness and vegetal life and agency that suits her better. Theoretically, by erasing the body, by becoming passive, women can evade patriarchal control. On the other hand, in what sense can we talk of plants and trees as passive?

A Vegetal Philosophy

“Follow the plants” (Deleuze/Guattari 2004: 12)

While the equation of becoming a tree with passivity can be reductive, it also signals a wish for a different type of interaction, a kind of rhizomatic communication devoid of power relations (to borrow Deleuze/Guattari’s terminology where they use the term to represent a non-hierarchical way of relating), emphasising principles of “connection and heterogeneity” since “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be”, unlike the “tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order” (Deleuze/Guattari 2004: 7). As Stark (2015: 194) observes, Deleuze/Guattari propose a “vegetal philosophy in their privileging of the rhizome as the model for thought”. In this Deleuzian context, Yeong-hye may be said to obey Deleuze/Guattari’s (2004: 12) injunction to “follow the plants”.⁵

Reflecting on the non-hierarchical structure of plant life Marder (2013: 85) observes that “enacting a veritable anarchy, the plant’s ‘body without organs’ does not evince hierarchical organisation. It maintains conceptual horizontality even in the tree’s spatial verticality”. Yeong-hye’s impulse to be like a tree can be seen as part and parcel of this non-hierarchical ontophytological way of being.

Yi Sang: “I believe that humans should be plants”

Modernist poet Yi Sang, quoted by Kang (2015), wrote “I believe that humans should be plants” as a reaction against the violence he witnessed in the world, a sentence that germinated Kang’s inspiration to write *The Vegetarian*. In an interview with Sarah Shin, Kang herself explains that while writing the novel she had in mind “questions about human violence and the (im)possibility of innocence” (Siiin 2016).⁶

Luce Irigaray’s philosophical reflections on plant being as not self-centred, in an effort to deflect and rethink the anthropocentrism of western societies, also reverberate strongly with Yeong-hye’s efforts to become a plant as a strategy to resist violence and patriarchal control. As Irigaray (1999: 33) muses, “How can I abandon my love of the vegetal? Would you become a plant? Or are you too attached to yourself to become anything at all?”. In related vein, Karen Houle (2011: 111) observes that “becoming-plant forces us to think [...] the complex ways that plantness composes us”, an insight that evokes Yeong-hye’s plight.

While plants have traditionally been relegated to a passive stance and regarded as ornamental

artefacts, recent scholarship has called attention to what has been described as a type of plant consciousness or awareness. Gagliano (2015), for one, believes that “many of the sophisticated behaviours plants exhibit reveal cognitive competences”, while Gagliano (2018) in polemical vein urges us to consider plants as people, with their own consciousness and voice (Gagliano started the field of bioacoustics).

Wohlleben (2016) considers the forest as a social network similar to a human family in the ways trees communicate, share nutrients and support each other, while Nealon (2015: x) points out that the plant, “rather than the animal, functions as that form of life forgotten and abjected within a dominant regime of humanist biopower”. According to Karban (2008: 727):

The best studied plant behaviours involve foraging for light, nutrients, and water by placing organs where they can most efficiently harvest these resources. Plants also adjust many reproductive and defensive traits in response to environmental heterogeneity in space and time [...] Plant behaviours have been characterized as simpler than those of animals. Recent findings challenge this notion by revealing high levels of sophistication previously thought to be within the sole domain of animal behaviour.

Houle (2011: 95) sympathises with these gestures of extending ethics to plants but is also sceptical of these philosophical efforts, of the anthropocentric attempts to think the plant in relation to the human and the animal. For his part, Pollan (2001: xiv) assesses the multiple reciprocal interactions between humans and the natural world from the “plant’s point of view”, a perspective he takes seriously, thus reversing an anthropocentric stance.

Others, conversely, denounce the kind of anthropocentric stance that attributes human traits to plants.⁷ Recently, a group of scientists strongly criticised the notion that plants exhibit a type of consciousness. Drawing on findings by Feinberg / Mallat, Taiz et al. (2019a, 2019b) consider that the “likelihood that plants, with their relative organisational simplicity and lack of neurons and brains, have consciousness to be effectively nil” (2019a). While pointing out the multiple adaptive traits exhibited by plants to better survive in a dangerous environment, Mehta (2018) emphatically denies that plants are conscious, in a critical response to Klein (2018), which was in turn a reaction to a study in which Yokawa et al. (2018: 747) concluded that plants are “sensitive to several anaesthetics”.

In tune with Yeong-hye’s behaviour, the protagonist in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* also experiences a strong visceral reaction against most types of food, going as far as to wonder whether the vegetables she is about to consume are sentient.

“Eat like a plant!” (Marder 2013: 185)

Like the main character in *The Vegetarian*, the protagonist of Atwood (1990), a young, professional, unmarried woman, Marian, gradually feels herself unable to eat any kind of meat, and becomes a vegetarian as a psychosomatic reaction to what she subconsciously perceives as the encroaching siege, closing in on her, of multiple social demands on herself and her condition as a young woman, in particular marriage, pregnancy and motherhood. Indeed, in their effort to escape the conventions and demands of patriarchal ideology, the protagonists of Kang's and Atwood's novels almost completely abandon social interaction and their relationship with food changes dramatically. When she gets engaged, she leaves her job, as is expected of her, and that is when her dietary problems start. Her rejection of the situation that is forced upon her results in psychological problems that lead to her eating disorder, where she finds herself unable to swallow meat. Indeed, this state of affairs comes to a head when she realises she is unable to eat a steak that Peter, her fiancé, has ordered for her. As Sanchez-Grant (2008: 86) asserts, many feminists have come to “understand the eating disorder, overwhelmingly a female problem, as a rebellion against culturally-defined experiences of womanhood”.

Gradually she also refuses other types of food, such as eggs, soon after a discussion about pregnancy, mothering, fertility and uterus envy (Atwood 1990: 159-161). During her friend Clara's pregnancy, in particular in what is described as the “later, more vegetable stage”, Marian “had tended to forget that Clara had a mind at all or any perceptive faculties above the merely sentient and sponge-like, since she had spent most of her time being absorbed in, or absorbed by, her tuberous abdomen” (*idem*: 130). Marian's resistance to fulfilling the roles expected of her is inextricably connected with her refusing to be restricted to being a wife and mother, or being profoundly reticent about it, in part associated with relinquishing the life of the mind and a more autonomous self. Tellingly, Marian is pleased to recognise the more mentally focused Clara after the latter gives birth.

Symptomatically, Marian comes to regard her colleagues as women ready to be “consumed”, in effect as edible: “They were ripe, some rapidly becoming overripe, some already beginning to shrivel; she thought of them as attached by stems at the tops of their heads to an invisible vine, hanging there in various stages of growth and decay” (*idem*: 166-167). Meaningfully, Marian's parents were afraid she would not get married and that moss would grow out of her, that she would “undergo some shocking physical transformation” (*idem*: 174). A vegetable state in these scenes is associated with a passive stance, a lack of agency which to Marian appears undesirable. However, as the narrative unfolds, she will find it hard to be herself in a society which places great value on meat-eating and virility.

Significantly, as with Yeong-hye, whose vivid dream of a puddle of blood was a powerful catalyst for her rebellion against patriarchal structures, Marian also has a dream which can be interpreted as a warning. In Marian's dream she sees her feet starting to dissolve, a memory triggered by the fear of dissolution, while in the bath, of “coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle”, of a body that somehow was “no longer quite her own” (*idem*:

218), a powerful image of the discontinuity between her own (bodily) wishes and her subordinate position and loss of control in an androcentric society predicated on rigid gender conventions.

As in Kang (2015), Marian becomes acutely aware of all the animal killing that goes on almost surreptitiously, without the majority of people paying any attention to it or giving it much thought. Marian reasoned that her body had taken an ethical stand by refusing to “eat anything that had once been, or (like oysters on the half-shell) might still be living” (Atwood 1990: 178).

Also like the protagonist in *The Vegetarian*, Marian progressively comes to reject even vegetables and fruit, developing a sense of concern against eating vegetables which might be alive and have a type of plant consciousness. As she was peeling a carrot she became aware of it:

It's a root, she thought, it grows in the ground and sends up leaves. Then they come along and dig it up, maybe it even makes a sound, a scream too low for us to hear, but it doesn't die right away, it keeps on living, right now it's still alive. (*idem*: 178)

Marder's fundamental text in critical plant studies states that “plant-thinking does not oppose the use of fruit, roots, and leaves for human nourishment” (2013: 184) and gives the advice that we “eat like a plant!” (*idem*: 185). As he explains, “Eating like a plant does not entail consuming only inorganic materials but welcoming the other, forming a rhizome with it, and turning oneself into the passage for the other without violating or dominating it, without endeavoring to swallow up its very otherness in one's corporeal and psychic interiority” (*idem*: 184-185), words that recall and critically engage with Deleuze/Guattari's rhizomatic, arborescent thinking and shed light on the plights of Kang's and Atwood's young women characters.

Stark (2015: 183) suggests that on a practical level Marder's concept of “eating like a plant”, which advocates eating locally, sustainably and in a respectful way, involves being “wary of genetic modification and industrial food production, both of which are fundamentally inimical to the ethics of plant being”. Marder (2013: 31) also urges the adoption of a “drastically different comportment toward the environment, which will no longer be perceived as a collection of natural resources and raw materials managed, more or less efficiently, by human beings”.

Significantly, at the end of Atwood (1990), having finally ended her relationship with Peter, Marian is free to acknowledge her body and its physical urges. In a deeply satisfying act of assertive recognition of her newly regained self, Marian eats a cake she had baked in the shape of a woman, thus putting to rest the objectified state of her former self, controlled by patriarchal conventions, including her parents' and her fiancé's wishes.

What the protagonists of *The Vegetarian* and *The Edible Woman* are signalling is their refusal to be somebody's “meat”. On the other hand, can't their actions of gradually retreating from social life and avoiding their husband and fiancé be interpreted as a surrender to the androcentric status quo, an admission of defeat, a relinquishing of their own autonomy and independence, a becoming passive?

In similar vein, Margaret Atwood's (2005) poem “She Considers Evading Him” also suggests a similar line of action, of potential evasion:

I can change my-
 self more easily
 than I can change you
 I could grow bark and
 become a shrub (*idem*: 4)

What is suggested here is that it seems easier for a woman to change, even if it means relinquishing her physical body and retreating into another, vegetal state, than for patriarchal society to allow her to be herself, without the imposition of unwanted advances from some of its members, a predicament illustrated in the mythological story of Daphne and Apollo.

Daphne: Woman into Tree

The trope of the metamorphosis of woman into tree, relatively common in classical mythology and later revisited by the women Surrealist artists, can be said to address, in literature and the visual arts, the politics of gender and of woman's subordinate position in relation to man, seen as the pursuer and potentially a rapist. This trope thus underpins an essentialist view of woman as nature, or as having to hide in nature to escape undesirable male attention. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is full of episodes detailing transformations into trees and flowers.

The mythological story of Apollo and Daphne provides just such an example, where Apollo relentlessly pursues Daphne who, unable to sustain her flight forever, asks for her father's intervention and is turned into a laurel tree: "a heavy numbness seized her limbs, thin bark closed over her breast, her hair turned into leaves, her arms into branches, her feet so swift a moment ago stuck fast in slow-growing roots, her face was lost in the canopy. Only her shining beauty was left" (Ovid: 525-552). However, even in this vegetal guise Apollo finds her enticing: "placing his hand against the trunk, he felt her heart still quivering under the new bark. He clasped the branches as if they were parts of human arms, and kissed the wood. But even the wood shrank from his kisses, and the god said 'Since you cannot be my bride, you must be my tree!'" (*idem*: 553-567).

Daphne thus only partially manages to avoid the unwanted advances of Apollo, who still lays claim over her, by sacrificing her body and being returned to "nature", which suggests the greater strength of male, patriarchal power over women, who can only circumvent it by passive resistance, by becoming "other", and in Daphne's case becoming an evergreen laurel tree. Her escape is thus couched in terms of surrender, even though she is not subjected to his sexual assault. Apollo's chasing after Daphne can also be equated to an act of hunting for prey, where the equation between woman and animal is again operative.

The story of Daphne and Apollo can be said to articulate, in a rich metaphorical and allegorical vein, the dilemma in which the two protagonists of *The Vegetarian* and *The Edible Woman* find themselves. Indeed, in their effort to avoid their husband's and boyfriend's undesired attention, respectively, they gradually and increasingly retreat into types of behaviour that refuse any

complicity with the repressive society they represent, changing into representative examples of the metamorphic trope of becoming plant, becoming tree. As suggested before, this trope can be seen to underpin an essentialist, reductive view of woman as nature, of woman having to hide in nature to escape undesirable male attention. On the other hand, it is possible to read Daphne's story not only in terms of her own dissolution, the disappearance of her bodily being, but maybe also as suggesting her release from unwanted sexual advances. We could thus reconsider the sexual politics of the trope of woman turning into a tree, arguing that in spite of the feminine flight into nature and evasion of the pursuing male that characterises it, it may convey the possibility of a transgression of patriarchal codes and the creation of new ones where women can build a feminine space of their own.

In sum, both Yeong-hye in *The Vegetarian* and Marian in *The Edible Woman* reject the meanings of femininity imposed on them by society by refusing to eat, in particular meat, which has been traditionally associated with masculinity and virility. In tune with Yeong-hye and Marian, Jane Takagi-Little, the protagonist of Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1998) also undergoes a profound change, driven by her gradual learning about the dominant practices of breeding cattle in the US in the last century and the impact that eating that meat can have on the population.

Ruth Ozeki, *My Year of Meats*

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* can profitably be compared with Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*, a book that exposes the hidden secrets of the American meat industry and distribution, while contrasting the Japanese and American ways of life through a television show, called *My American Wife!*, produced in the US but targeting a Japanese audience, whose main objective is to sell American meat to Japanese housewives. The protagonist is a Japanese-American woman, Jane Takagi-Little, who is the coordinator of the show. As part of the production team that shot the 52 episodes, she had to travel all across America, identifying families and in particular wives who corresponded to the all-American ideal of wholesomeness and beauty, characteristics to be emulated by their Japanese counterparts, who also faithfully followed their meat recipes, thus imbibing the spirit of an idealised American lifestyle and the food that went with it, in this case a glorification of meat. The show was sponsored by the Beef Export and Trade Syndicate, determined to sell their meat to the Asian market.

As in *The Vegetarian*, in Ozeki (1998) one of the main characters is Asian, a Japanese woman named Akiko Ueno who feels she does not have a voice or identity, submerged under her husband's authority. Like Yeong-hye, Akiko resists being associated with meat by her husband, the Japanese producer of the show, even as she is fascinated by the American women's way of life as portrayed in *My American Wife!*

Indeed, the all-American wife who will be centrally featured in the show, together with the meat itself she will help to publicise and sell to a Japanese audience, is tellingly described as "Meat Made Manifest" (*idem*: 8) in the description to sell the programme written by Jane.

In both *The Vegetarian* and *My Year of Meats*, strictly misogynistic husbands control their submissive wives to such an extent, including the use of physical, domestic violence, that eventually they rebel and leave them and their overpowering ways, drastically changing their eating habits while embracing a radically new way of life. While in *The Vegetarian* the main character retreats into a tree-like stance, the Japanese wife in Ozeki's novel, exposed to a seemingly attractive American lifestyle, reaches out to Jane, the Japanese-American documentarian responsible for the programmes and asks for her help to start a brand-new life in the USA.

It can be argued that the consumption of meat, predicated upon the domination of animals, their hunting and killing, as well as keeping them in factory farms and slaughterhouses, can be metaphorically equated with the exploitation and subjugation of many women as objects to be used and abused, symbolically "eaten" or "consumed". This "carnophallogocentric" rhetoric, to borrow Jacques Derrida's term (1991: 113), has been complicit in the subordination of women regarded as meat in a continuum with other animals to be exploited for male consumption.

Carol J. Adams's (1990; new edition 2015) groundbreaking book powerfully shows how the objectification of women and the ways in which they are rendered akin to animals as meat to be consumed and devoured are closely interlinked in the popular imagination. Adams (2015: 19) also points out the intersections between feminism and vegetarianism, providing a synthesis that makes sense, as she remarks, "of two seemingly divergent impulses – justice for women and concern about animals", treating "vegetarianism seriously as a political act of resistance". Williams (2014: 247) emphasises the ecofeminist critical stance of the novel, with its "explicit connections between nonhuman animals' experiences and female-bodied human experiences within structures of power. Harrison (2017: 473), in turn, argues that Ozeki's novel shows the "rhetorical value of literature that combines the data-driven analysis of the sciences with the imaginative, affect-producing work of fiction for encouraging the critical awareness that enables political action and, in doing so, illustrates the need to reconsider how narratives 'document' the relationship between marginalized bodies and environmental degradation".⁸

For Derrida (1991: 113-114), the notion of carnophallogocentrism, of a "carnivorous virility" that places the "virile figure at the determinative center of the subject" constitutes a mainstay of the Western philosophical tradition. As he further asserts (*idem*: 114), the "virile strength of the adult male, the father, husband, or brother [...] belongs to the schema that dominates the concept of subject. The subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh". In this context, eating meat contributes to strengthen patriarchal values, an aspect Adams repeatedly stresses. This association is also endlessly reinforced in Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*, where animals are described as ceaselessly exploited and sacrificed for human consumption, but women are often also victims of this carnophallogocentrism.

Despite the fact that Akiko, the wife of the Japanese producer of the show, ceases to eat animal flesh, she is nevertheless still symbolically inscribed in a type of society characterised as carnophallogocentric, predicated on a patriarchal logic that inevitably associates the dominant (by default) male rule with the ingestion of other animals, in a show of supremacy and authority, even if at times only symbolic. Jane herself, as she unveils the most gruesome details of the production of

meat in the US, also feels to some extent complicit in this business scheme and finds it incumbent upon herself to denounce it by means of another documentary that she makes public.

As Baumeister (2017: 55) observes, the

schema of carnophallogocentrism is fundamentally sacrificial, and reflects the legacy of animal sacrifice in Western mythology and religion. Carnivorous virility is therefore manifested not only in our eating practices, where one would expect it to be, but is also dispersed throughout the (human) cultural or civilizational field, inflecting morality, religion and politics.

This near-impossibility of totally evading the carnophallogocentric nature of society thus characterises not only Akiko's but also Marian's and Yeong-hye's dilemma: even when they stop eating they are still an integral part of society where at least symbolically they are regarded as "flesh" to be consumed.⁹ In this scheme where carnophallogocentrism is predicated on sacrifice and violence exerted against animals the women also become sacrificial victims.

Conclusion

Placing these three novels in a critical dialogue fleshes out a series of topics that run through the books: women who rebel against patriarchal society and androcentric norms through their dietary styles, by giving up eating meat, and more radically in the case of Yeong-hye, by refusing to consume any type of food.

The three characters in the texts under investigation, Yeong-hye, Marian and Akiko, feel neutralised and objectified, mere pawns in a male-dominated, carnophallogocentric society, to borrow Derrida's useful term again. While these women manage to escape the social scripts written down for them, the outcomes of their actions are drastically different. While the main character in *The Vegetarian*, mimicking the mythological Daphne in her flight from Apollo, gradually wills herself to "become" a tree, eschewing any physical or social contact and refusing to feed herself, the protagonist of *The Edible Woman* eventually extricates herself from a stultifying relationship in which she felt subjugated and without a voice of her own. Akiko, for her part, feeling she does not have a voice or identity, submerged under her husband's authority, leaves her old life behind and moves to the USA, where with Jane's help she will start anew. In the three novels, the sexual objectification of women as meat to be devoured, an enduring, contentious trope, is thoroughly deconstructed.

As already suggested, the gradual retreat into becoming plant of the main character of *The Vegetarian* can be read as a sign of resistance against a strongly patriarchal society with extremely restrictive rules for women, where they are considered their father's and husband's property. While this strategy can be regarded as a surrendering to a passive state which perpetuates the long-standing association between women and nature, traditionally perceived as passive and pliable, it can also be seen as a defiant gesture of confrontation and survival, even though it

could be equated with the relinquishing of agency and the willing, if forced, acceptance of an apparently inert or inactive state of becoming plant.

These metamorphic negotiations thus go a long way towards suggesting a deep-seated malaise towards women's roles, on the one hand, and the sexual politics of meat, on the other, a dietary choice perceived as deeply imbricated in the exploitation of both women and animals, often caught in networks of violence and cruelty that women tend to find very difficult to disentangle themselves from, caught in the dominant logic and ideology of a still masculinist society. Within this persistent and deeply embedded carnophallogocentric logic, vegetarianism or veganism are not effective on their own, while resistance to these gendered politics of meat is at best difficult and often ineffective, since that schema will at least symbolically continue to be operative because it provides the cultural and philosophical foundations of Western civilisations. Aside from Kang's *The Vegetarian*, however, these novels end on a more optimistic note, suggesting that the women's struggle against androcentric norms, including dietary ones, is possible and valuable, not only for their sake but also to promote necessary changes in terms of the fraught gendered politics of food.

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Notes

1. Kang remarks that she reworked the image of a woman turning into a plant in *The Vegetarian* in a "darker and fiercer way" (Patrick 2016).
2. As Biscaia (2019: 105) observes, Yeong-hye "chooses not to eat in order to escape gendered systematic violence but also, quite simply, human violence".
3. Marchalik/Jurecic (2017: 147) read Yeong-hye's symptoms as anorexia nervosa and argue that her "abstinence from meat symbolises a desire to purge herself of the violence and cruelty that has defined her entire life". Although I do not have time to analyse this topic here, the three books under investigation also deal with the development of eating disorders in women as a result of the imposition of traditional gender norms of behaviour, as they intersect with gender politics and the vexed politics of meat eating. See Colebrook (1998).
4. Ruether's (1975: 204) contention that women "must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society, whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination" is as topical as when it was written. Her call for women to "unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society" sounds as contemporary and pressing as it did then. These ecofeminist ideas were also echoed and reinforced later by Merchant

(1996: 7) who analysed the "twin oppressions of the domination of woman and nature".

5. In sync with Yeong-hye's transformations, the protagonist in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (2004) feels herself changing in tune with the natural world, becoming animal and plant in Deleuze/Guattari's rhizomatic sense: "My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between life and death, I multiply" (*idem*: 197).
6. As Kang (2016a) further remarks: "I also think my preoccupation extends to the violence that prevails in daily life. Eating meat, cooking meat, all these daily activities embody a violence that has been normalized".
7. Indeed, the fraught question of plant consciousness hinges in part on linguistics, on the terms used to define types of cooperation shown by plants, actions described drawing on human behaviour.
8. See also Cheng (2009).
9. As Baumeister (2017: 57) points out, it is the "broad framework of human civilization that is carnophallogocentric and that must be transformed in order for our eating practices to no longer play into the mechanism of carnophallogocentrism".