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**Han Kang. *The Vegetarian*. Translated by Deborah Smith. London/New York: Hogarth, 2015. 252pp.**

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*“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” (27).*

Posthumanism reformulates the idea of human agency and its relationship with the natural world. By shunning dualisms, it blurs the man-made boundaries between the human and the animal in the natural and technological world. As a rejection of universality, posthumanist studies aim to rearrange the way we view societal values through a more intersectional approach, without completely divorcing itself from the tradition of humanism. Instead, it seeks to expand the way the human interacts with the wider world, and in the case of *The Vegetarian*, the title character Yeong-hye’s actions may be part of a moral imperative—that which is closely

associated with “animal studies”—but perhaps should be interpreted through the many intersections of her own identity, including her sex within the context of a patriarchal society.

Yeong-hye’s self-consciousness is expanded upon by her consciousness of the natural world and the lives she has taken, both in her dreams and through eating meat. Her hyper-empathy comes about after a dream of slaughter and violence, reflected in the quote above. The decision to become a vegetarian is provoked from outside her own consciousness, highlighting the decentralization of human agency. However, for those around her, this change is unthinkable, representing the power of cultural limits and the perceived dominance of wo/man over nature. In spite of that, Yeong-hye feels powerless: “*Nobody can help me. Nobody can save me. Nobody can make me breathe*” (78). She is no longer in control of her own body as it has been uprooted and displaced into the wider ecosystem beyond human society.

In the final scenes of Part 1, commensality, usually denoting a scene of sharing food and good company, becomes a source of horror. While dining with her family, who have recently found out and are abhorred by her vegetarianism, Yeong-hye is confronted by her father with violence. She “won’t eat it” (62), as in meat, and the choice of “won’t” describes her deliberate choice to go against cultural norms and patriarchal society. Yet her father will have none of it. As described by her husband, her father “thrust the pork at my wife’s lips. A moaning sound came from her tightly closed mouth” (66). Although not a sexual act, the verbiage of thrusting and moaning make it once again more similar to rape than familial affection.

Part two “Mongolian Mark” is narrated by Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law, whose name is never presented. After spending some time in his home with her sister, she moves out on her own. But not until he learns of her “Mongolian mark”—a birthmark on her behind that has never faded—does he begin to obsess over her. Even as Yeong-hye tries to escape human relationships, her brother-in-law further objectifies her. As she challenges the essential human self, joining both the conscious and unconscious mind through the effect of the dream on her own life, he seeks to find or ascribe meaning on her body, as his infatuation is bodily more so than psychological.

“The Mongolian Mark” shows another side of Yeong-hye as she consents to sex even though her desire is not the male body, but the arousal she feels when looking at the flowers painted on both her and men’s bodies. For the brother-in-law, once he sees the infamous mark, he reflects on it as “...something ancient, something pre-evolutionary, or else perhaps a mark of

photosynthesis, and he realized to his surprise that there was nothing at all sexual about it; it was more vegetal than sexual” (122). It is a mark that represents her vulnerability, her animal-ness.

The final section “Flaming Trees” is told in the third person view of Yeong-hye’s sister, In-hye. She has placed her sister in a home after a failed suicide attempt, but Yeong-hye’s problems, problems for others not necessarily herself, only grow. This third part is marked by silence and Yeong-hye’s final transformation, her need to become a tree. At this point, she suffers from anorexia and unnamed mental distress, yet feels more as one with the plant life around her. She no longer feels the need to eat and performs her identity in ways more akin to trees, wishing to photosynthesize and escape into nature. As she puts it: “I’m not an animal anymore, sister,” ... “All I need is sunlight” (213). Although her condition and lack of health should be kept in mind, this section is truly about In-hye and her own introspection.

In-hye sees her sister’s pain and reflects upon her own life and the ways a decision such as giving up meat can upended life in all ways. More than anything, she thinks about herself: “The feeling that she had never really lived in this world caught her by surprise” (224). Her own thoughts end on dreams, the very state that caused Yeong-hye into her transformation: “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...” (252). It is then that she realizes that perhaps dreams are also part of life, there is no reality or social net that protects you. Although pained by her sister’s debilitating state, she feels a respect for her quiet dignity, her ability to be at one with herself and posthuman in the sense of letting go of human constructs and embracing the natural world.