A Comparative Feminist Reading of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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This article comparatively explores Margaret Atwood's Surfacing *and Han Kang's* The Vegetarian*, examining the subordinate status shared by women and animals, male-controlled medical science and camera technology, and women's mythical metamorphosis. Both fictional worlds, as lived by the heroines, are decidedly patriarchal: the I-heroine in* Surfacing ***undergoes violence in a coerced abortion while Yeong-hye in*** The Vegetarian *is force-fed meat by her authoritative father. Both narrative arcs are shaped by the heroines' realization of their share in violence: the I-heroine realizes her consent to the abortion and Yeong-hye holds herself accountable for eating the meat of a dog killed by her father. The two heroines are met with different endings–the I-heroine chooses to be pregnant again and Yeong-hye renounces her life by avoiding eating–because of the former's conviction about survival and life and the latter's conception of eating as killing. Read together, the two novels explore the legitimacy of claims of innocence, the limits of care, and possibilities of transcending victimhood in mutually illuminating ways. Meanwhile, the novels provide insights into the non-closure prevalent in women's fiction and the feminist meaning of women's spiritual quest novels.*

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Surfacing by Margaret Atwood and *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, the 2024 Nobel Prize laureate, although situated in different cultures and times, are united by deep ecological concerns: exploitation of women and animals, the pervasiveness of male-controlled technology, as well as the heroines' metamorphoses into animal or plant. Taken together, the novels offer differing ecological visions through female trans-corporeality and women's metamorphosis into animals or plants, providing new pathways to break the human-animal-plant hierarchical boundaries and to live outside anthropocentric and phallogocentric frames.

Surfacing, published in 1972, is the second novel by Margaret Atwood, depicting a woman (henceforth referred to as the I-heroine) who goes back to her hometown in Quebec with her boyfriend Joe and another couple, Anna and David, in search of her missing father. As they venture into the Canadian wilderness, the I-heroine tries to make sense of the love affair she had with her high school teacher who coerced her into abortion. Coming out of this traumatic event wounded, she becomes emotionally closed off. In the short excursion from the Ontario city, she comes to the realization that she cannot remain a victim; she initiates sexual intercourse with Joe and becomes pregnant again. In a mythical encounter with nature, she turns into a plant-animal. Then, she sees her mother who is feeding jays and turns into a jay herself.

More than thirty years later, in 2007, South Korean writer Han Kang published *The Vegetarian*, a rework of her earlier short story, "The Fruit of My Woman" (1997), in which the woman protagonist actually turns into a plant. *The Vegetarian* describes the victimhood of Yeong-hye, the second daughter in her family and the wife of Mr. Cheong, within the meat-eating patriarchy. Troubled by a recurring grotesque dream, she decides not to eat meat and is met with emphatic disapproval from her family. Later, at a housewarming party at her elder sister In-hye's, her father slaps her and force-feeds her meat. Yeong-hye then slits her wrist in an attempt to kill herself. Eventually, she is committed to a psychiatric ward by In-hye due to her alarmingly deteriorating health condition. Suffering from combined anorexia nervosa and schizophrenia, she becomes delusional and seeks to transform into a plant.

Nevertheless, the two novels contain important differences that cannot be ignored. The first one is of course contextual: while *Surfacing* is embedded in Canadian patriarchy in the 1970s, emphasizing the violence underlying man-woman romantic relationships, *The Vegetarian* is staged in Confucianism-based contemporary South Korea, highlighting father-daughter conflict and taking the violence in man-woman relationships as a derivative of the former. The parental figures in both novels are also drastically different from each other. Whereas Yeong-hye's father is domineering and authoritative, and her mother an accomplice in the violent acts her father commits, the parents of the I-heroine are her source of spiritual support. Therefore, while the I-heroine moves toward her lost parents, Yeong-hye moves away from her parents. In addition, while the I-heroine resists the debilitating forces of patriarchy by transcending victimhood, Yeong-hye makes successive renunciations—giving up eating meat, severing human contacts, and eventually

refusing to eat. In this sense, the two heroines meet two disparate destinies: the former becomes pregnant and embraces new life, whereas the latter lives a suicidal plant-like life. Finally, while the I-heroine regards animal-killing as key to survival and shows gratitude for animals' sacrifices, Yeong-hye rejects killing of any sort as valid.

Viewing *Surfacing* and *The Vegetarian* as alike in their portrayals of women's moral dilemma and psychological awakening illuminates and augments key aspects of each work. To borrow the words of Tiffany Tsao, "when we focus on the features that the two works have in common, the differences we discover about those features—ones that previously meant little in a sea of innumerable differences—gain new significance" (Tsao 97). Taken further, the differences that we observe in these similarities explain in insightful ways the moral decisions of the two heroines, thereby leading to dramatically different ways of living of the two heroines, shaping the closure of the narratives in definitive ways. Analyzing these differences helps us answer crucial cultural questions: To what extent and in what ways is animal-killing permitted by one author and rejected by another? What do the fictional animal-becoming and plant-becoming of the heroines suggest about the ravages that patriarchal violence entails and about new modes of existence?

Ruptured connections amid patriarchal violence

Significantly, both fictional worlds are riddled with rigid hierarchical and dualist ideologies, a world that comes to separate women/men, nature/culture, and animals/humans. The relationship between I-heroine with her brother is critical to understanding this world ruled by divisive ideology. Memories about her brother are inserted intermittently through the narrative. When she washes vegetables in the lake, she notices a leech, and recalls

> the good kind with red dots on the back, undulating along like a streamer held at one end and shaken. The bad kind is mottled grey and yellow. It was my brother who made up these moral distinctions, at some point he became obsessed with them, he must have picked them up from the war. There had to be a good kind and a bad kind of everything. (Atwood, *Surfacing* 38)

The moral distinction between the good and the bad is categorical, admitting no amendments nor any variations between them. Her brother has a laboratory in which he catches the slower animals, including snakes and frogs, and puts them in jars and tin cans. As he sometimes

forgets to feed them, they starve to death. I-heroine would let go of the smaller animals, which infuriates her brother. And when their mother is not watching, he throws the leeches into the campfire.

Similarly, the logic of domination reigns in the world portrayed in *The Vegetarian*, which finds its fullest expression in the conflict arising from the contrasting social practices of meat-eating and vegetarianism. The first novella is narrated from the perspective of Mr. Cheong, Yeong-hye's husband, followed by that of Yeong-hye's brother-in-law and then In-hye. Two families—Yeong-hye's and In-hye's—occupy the center of the narrative. From Mr. Cheong's perspective, his wife is defined by passivity, "completely unremarkable in every way" (Han, *Vegetarian* 11). Yeong-hye takes care of everything in the household and never complains, even if he comes back home late. She demands nothing of him but has to answer to everything he demands. The patriarchal structure of the family is replicated in the clear-cut division of public and private spheres as occupied by husband and wife separately. Therefore, when Yeong-hye refuses to prepare meat for him and throws it away, he is startled by her defiance. Soon, Yeong-hye finds herself repelled by the smell of meat. At the same time, she avoids sex with her husband. To satisfy his sexual desire and to assert his masculinity and dominion, he forces sex on her. He describes her as "a 'comfort woman' dragged in against her will" and himself as "the Japanese soldier demanding her services" (38). Despite Yeong-hye's resistance, she cannot stop spousal rape. At this point, the intimacy that a marriage should provide erodes completely into violence and indifference, severing the marital connection.

Occurrences of explicit violence also shape the narrative arc of the two novels. Whereas for the I-heroine, it is the "forced" abortion, in *The Vegetarian*, it is the father's dog-killing and force-feeding, and Mr. Cheung's spousal rape. When I-heroine finds herself pregnant, her lover, a married man, persuades her to have an abortion against her own will. However, we should pay special heed to the different power relations present in both novels. Whereas the father-daughter relationship is central to *The Vegetarian*, the heterosexual relationship takes center stage in *Surfacing*. The subjugation of Yeong-hye in relation to her father, especially manifested in the many beatings, is replicated in her subjection in her marriage. The fact that fathers still hold an immense sway over the conduct of children even after the latter get married is very culture-specific to East Asian countries shaped by Confucian filial piety. As Alix Beeston rightly asserts, "Yeong-hye is scripted into submission, silence, and invisibility by the Confucian

'Three Rules of Obedience' and 'Seven Vices,' teachings that are reformulated within the anti-colonial nationalism of late twentieth and early twenty-first century Korean society" (Beeston 687). Additionally, filial piety, a cardinal principle of Confucianism which organizes intergenerational relationships in the family, is a shared tradition in South Korea, Japan, and China. Yeong-hye's father is culturally supported in beating and force-feeding her, a malevolent act recast as benevolence mediated through filial piety.[1]

The violence inflicted upon Yeong-hye is enacted through the sexual act of actual and symbolic penetration, which once again attests to the secondary sexual position that she occupies. Mr. Cheung recalls the force-feeding: "My father-in-law mashed the pork to a pulp on my wife's lips as she struggled in agony. … Though In-hye sprang at him and held him by the waist, in the instant that the force of the slap had knocked my wife's mouth open he'd managed to jam the pork in" (Han, *Vegetarian* 47–48). The force-feeding, her father opening her mouth and thrusting the pork in, resembles the act of male penetration. The fact that her brother helps their father to put the pork into Yeong-hye's mouth indicates that any man could assert himself upon the woman. Parallel to force-feeding is spousal rape. Mr. Cheong has forced sex with Yeong-hye, penetrating her and violating her body. To him, it is not spousal rape but simply a way of demanding a service, like a Japanese soldier would to a Korean comfort woman. This metaphor is illuminating, as Mr. Cheong equates himself with a colonizer and invader. As the novel suggests, patriarchal power resides first and foremost in the father figure, who endorses all forms of relational violence from men to women. In *Surfacing*, however, the father is loving while her former male lover and male friends are manipulative and invasive. Male domination is most explicit in man-woman heterosexual relationships rather than in the father-daughter relationship. This is also true between Anna and David, the married couple. Therefore, heterosexual relationships among peers structure the major conflict in *Surfacing*, while violence within the father-daughter relationship is the primal condition that defines Yeong-hye's and In-hye's victimhood.

[1] It should be noted that Han Kang, in an interview with Bethanne Patrick, mentions that *The Vegetarian* is not a singular indictment of Korean patriarchy but also about the possibility and impossibility of innocence (Han, "Han Kang").

The gendering of medical knowledge and visual technology

In both novels, medical knowledge and visual technology carry the distinctive signature of masculinity, products and extensions born of the dualist and hierarchical patriarchal culture. Both novels portray female characters susceptible to the voyeurism and invasion of technology and medical knowledge. Both novels give considerable weight to a single electronic gadget: the camera. In the narratives, it is a man who possesses and uses the camera and the woman is the object of the camera eye, a substitute for the male gaze. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's brother-in-law films the process of him painting flowers on her naked body:

> He took the camera off the tripod and began to film her close up. He zoomed in on the details of each flower, and made a long collage of the curve of her neck, her disheveled hair, her two hands resting on the sheet, seeming tense, and the buttock with the Mongolian mark. Once he'd finally captured her whole body on the tape, he switched off the camcorder. (Han, *Vegetarian* 92)

This brief paragraph establishes Yeong-hye as an object and Yeong-hye's brother-in-law as the one who is able to use the machine and direct the scene. On another occasion, he sets his camcorder to film a man named J interacting with Yeong-hye when both are naked, but J soon finds it repelling and gives up. Eventually, he substitutes the role of J and has sex with Yeong-hye. He films the whole process and makes his intention explicit: "The image he'd wanted to capture on film had to be one that could be repeated over and over, forbidden either to end or to come to a climax" (121). In controlling the camera narrative, he controls the meaning and form of the memory this tape holds, entitling it "Mongolian Mark 1—Flowers of Night and Flowers of Day." Moreover, he wants the film to be capable of inexhaustible value for endless use. He thinks aloud, "I want to swallow you, have you melt into me and flow through my veins" (121). Here, the edibility of Yeong-hye is replayed through a male desire to consume her body both in flesh and in images.

In *Surfacing*, David threatens to throw Anna into a lake if she does not undress herself for the shooting of *Random Samples*, a short film that David is recording. Despite Joe's mild interference and Anna's resistance, David puts Anna upside down over his shoulder and demands Joe to shoot. When Anna resists, David says that it is token resistance and Anna is an exhibitionist at heart. Notably, David perceives Anna as an exhibitionist when she is not. Instead, this "exhibitionist" role is socially constructed in a patriarchal culture. As Laura Mulvey argues:

"The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 837).

If in Yeong-hye's case, she still has some agency in the filming process because she consents to be filmed and she wants her body to be painted with flowers, then in Anna's case, she is made to display herself in front of the camera, a role she plays but despises. Then, "Joe swiveled the camera and trained it on them [Anna and David] like a bazooka or a strange instrument of torture and pressed the button, lever, sinister whirr" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 135–136). Like Yeong-hye's brother-in-law, David and Joe are savvy with visual technologies, free to use these machines toward their own will. Marge Piercy notices that it is typical for Atwood to portray a man who is "laden with expensive gadgets that give him a sense of power" (Piercy 41). The camera is one such gadget.[2] In both novels, the male character exercises his power on both the representational and symbolic level—he at once has authority to control/distort visual reality and to name and control its meaning, whereas it is the women who signify and bear this meaning. As Laura Mulvey argues, "the paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world" (Mulvey 833).

Likewise, medical knowledge subjects women to its power and authority. In *Surfacing*, Atwood is suspicious of the power and the morality of medical science. This distrust is initially displayed through I-heroine's mother. Her mother was hospitalized before she died. I-heroine tells us:

> I went to see her in the hospital, where she allowed herself to be taken only when she could no longer walk. … She hated hospitals and doctors; she must have been afraid they would experiment on her, keep her alive as long as they could with tubes and needles even though it was what they call terminal, in the head it always is; and in fact that's what they did. (Atwood, *Surfacing* 21–22)

The heroine despises unnecessary killing as much as her mother hates the artificial prolongation of life, both framed as arbitrary intervention in life. I-heroine mentions earlier in the story that she does not want to have another child because

[2] For instance, in Atwood's first novel *The Edible Woman* (1969), the male protagonist Peter tries to take a picture of the heroine Marian at a party against her will.

> they shut you into a hospital, they shave the hair off you and tie your hands down and they don't let you see, they don't want you to understand, they want you to believe it's their power, not yours. They stick needles into you so that you won't hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering practicing on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar. After that they fill your veins up with red plastic, I saw it running down through the tube. I won't let them do that to me ever again. (80)

The uneven power that defines the doctor-patient relationship is noteworthy. The doctors control medical knowledge inaccessible to the patient. The I-heroine later describes the hand of the clinician who performs an abortion on her as criminal. She shows her antipathy toward medical professionals and institutions due to their interference with life, whether it is the prolongation of life, the ushering-in of life, or the termination of life.

Both sisters in *The Vegetarian* have received medical treatment. Yeong-hye is committed to a psychiatric ward after she is diagnosed with anorexia nervosa and schizophrenia. Yeong-hye's condition becomes alarming because she has not eaten for four days in a row. The doctor suspects that she has not taken her medication: "When the nurse then forced her tongue up and used a flashlight to look inside, the tablets were still there" (Han, *Vegetarian* 158). Yeong-hye is often seen with the drip needle inserted into the back of her hand:

> In-hye checks for burst veins and finds them everywhere; on both hands, the soles of both feet, even her elbows. The only means of providing Yeong-hye with proteins and glucose is the IV, but now there are no undamaged veins left where a needle could be put in. The only other way would be to link the IV to one of the arteries that run over Yeong-hye's shoulders. (157)

As per description, it seems that Yeong-hye's body is not cared for but violated, perforated by needle holes. Her body becomes a site on which medicine wages a war between life and death, as well as normality and abnormality. Till now, her subjective agency has been voided. Gone with her agency is her sexuality. In-hye narrates: "She hasn't had her period for a long time now, and now that her weight has dropped below thirty kilos, of course there's nothing left of her breasts. She lies there looking like a freakish overgrown child, devoid of any secondarysexual characteristics" (156). Deprived of agency and sexuality, she becomes an asexualized body only, "a bare life" in Agamben's terms.

It seems that Han Kang is critical about medicine as a highly-enclosed institution which deals with life as it pleases, with whatever technology it deems necessary. The contingent use of medical technology is only a choice between two evils.

In addition, the gendered nature of medical knowledge is fairly noticeable. Both sisters have only been examined by male doctors. In-hye describes Yeong-hye's male doctor as follows: "The doctor, who is in his late thirties, has a healthy, robust physique. The set of his jaw and his manner of walking speak of a certain self-confidence; he sits behind the desk and stares over it at her, his brow furrowed" (Han, *Vegetarian* 145). On the contrary, Yeong-hye is delusional and weak. Joori Joyce Lee observes the difference between the doctor as a detached interpreter of Yeong-hye's condition and In-hye as a sympathetic reader "who tries to understand the depth of her sister's trauma yet oscillates between understanding and ignorance" (J. J. Lee 331). Once, In-hye finds herself bleeding from her vagina for almost a month, intermittently. She decides to have a medical examination: "The middled-aged male doctor then pushed a cold abdominal scope deep into her vagina and removed a tongue-like polyp that had been stuck to the vaginal wall. Her body flinched away from the sharp pain" (Han, *Vegetarian* 167). The doctor as well as the medical technology he uses are represented as indifferent and invasive. Both novels question the power of the medical institution, accusing it of failure to take care of life properly. They further implicate the care ethic in social relations and medical institution. Seul Lee, for instance, analyzes the conflicting care ethics in *The Vegetarian*, suggesting that "the act of caring entails the violation of others, which may not be perceptible to those people who are accustomed to existing within the violent normativity that structures the order of things according to power" (S. Lee 70).

Female trans-corporeality and women's spiritual quest novels[3]

While Yeong-hye and the I-heroine are both supported by powerful bonding to a maternal figure, they also come to connect with a larger world—nature itself—through mythical metamorphosis. Nancy Díaz argues that "metamorphosis as literary event transcends plot, however, and informs all levels of meaning in the narrative" and that "it is in-

[3] Spiritual quest novels are novels that dramatize women's inner world and stage women's spiritual growth which does not translate into real action in political and social life. Examples are Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), and, more recently, Barbara Kingsolver's *Unsheltered* (2018).

volved in value systems and also may be relevant to anthropological, ethical, social, and psychological, as well as existential, concerns" (Díaz 4). Significantly, the fictional metamorphosis portrayed in both novels resonates with the concept of trans-corporeality developed by Stacy Alaimo. She argues that "trans-corporeality contests the master subject of Western humanist individualism, who imagines himself as transcendent, disembodied and removed from the world he surveys," and it "discourages fantasies of transcendence and imperviousness that render environmentalism merely an elective and external enterprise" (Alaimo 435–437). In other words, trans-corporeality insists on the relatedness and connectedness of human body to non-human bodies and encourages a radical rethinking of one's being as unraveled in time and space. In this way, trans-corporeality bridges the divisiveness between humans and the world, overcomes humans' false sense of separation, and restores care and connection.

Yeong-hye's connection to nature is primarily achieved through her refusal to eat meat, which constitutes a kind of killing for her. Mediated by a worsening psychiatric condition, she imagines herself to be a tree, absorbing sunshine and becoming part of nature. Adhy Kim traces Yeong-hye's plant-becoming to a vegetal turn in the Korean poet Yi Sang's poem "Untitled: Relating to Bone Fragments,"[4] the last line of which reads: "I have come to believe that humans are plants" (qtd. in Kim 438). This indistinction between humans and plants reveals the insight that humans are inseparable from the nature that they are part of. Moreover, moving away from an anthropocentrism built on hierarchies and dualisms, this awareness no longer foregrounds the human and backgrounds nature, instead encouraging pluralism and multicentrism that come to define humans and the world around them.

Critics have not neglected the gendered nature of Yeong-hye's transformation. Magdalena Zolkos argues that Yeong-hye's vegetal metamorphosis, a phantasmic one, draws out "the cultural association between the world of plants and non-violence" and that "the transformation into a gendered vegetal being metaphorizes an 'escape-impulse' that captures the irreducible desire to overcome, move beyond, or step over one's physical or social limits" (Zolkos 104). It should be noted that for Yeong-hye, it is not the "escaping from" but the "escaping into" a world of plants that defines her resistance to meat-eating and insistence on non-killing. Instead of the human world, she integrates herself

[4] Yi Sang (original name Kim Hae-Gyeong) was a notable Korean poet and writer living under Japanese occupation. His works are considered modernist and avant-garde. He is famous for *The Wings* and *Crow's Eye View*.

into nature, sustaining an other-than-human existence. Han Kang says that in "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" (Han, "Interview"). Yeong-hye tells In-hye that trees are brothers and sisters and that she dreams of becoming one of them, existing in a world shaped not by patriarchal violence but by arboreal sisterhood and brotherhood. As Rose Casey notes, the scenes of arboreal-becoming "register the vertical depth of rootedness as well as its lateral expansion, affirming both the temporal and geographical ongoingness of plant life" (Casey 347). Yeong-hye's radical claim of kinship with plants also brings to mind what Karen Houle calls a "radically collective achievement"; she argues that plant-becoming crosses faculties, bodies, phyla, and the organic and the inorganic, which "opens up thinking about relations as transient alliances rather than strategies" (Houle 112).

Carol Christ, dealing with I-heroine (also applicable to Yeong-hye), writes that "spiritual insight surfaces through attention to the body" and that "the achievement of authentic selfhood and power depends on understanding one's grounding in nature and natural energies" (Christ 330). In the end, I-heroine transforms into a plant-animal: "Through the trees the sun glances; the swamp around me smolders, energy of decay turning to growth, green fire. I remember the heron; by now it will be insects, frogs, fish, other herons. My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 168). Remarkably, it is after her metamorphosis that she mythically encounters her mother, who is feeding jays and who turns into a jay herself, and her father who is now a wolf. She becomes reassured of her parents' legacy and gift to her: "To prefer life, I owe them that" (188). Her metamorphosis is represented as a process that involves a renunciation of the human form for the sake of a transfluidity that denies the rigidity of being, defies the separation of human from its surroundings, and places the human in space and time. Practically, it renews life energies and encourages growth.

Although both plots are rooted in female trans-corporeality, the ending of the two heroines' metamorphosis differ in the sense that I-heroine continues her life whereas Yeong-hye's life, as a human or as a human-turned-plant, is on the verge of self-annihilation. I suggest that the two different closures are pertinent to the heroines' perceptions of killing and therefore of life itself. To begin with, killing in any form and at any level is abhorred by Yeong-hye. In order not to kill, she must not eat. To not eat, she will surely die. However, in this way, she kills

herself, an act which is as affirmative as punitive. Here, the contradiction underlying Yeong-hye's idea reveals itself: to not kill, she must see herself wither away. I-heroine, however, endorses nonviolence but at the same time sustains the notion that killing is inevitable for the sake of survival, meaning that killing is context-sensitive, and only unnecessary and gratuitous killing should be prohibited. Besides, humans should show gratitude to animals which die for humans' survival. As I-heroine remarks:

> Whether it died willingly, consented, whether Christ died willingly, anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ; if they didn't kill birds and fish they would have killed us. The animals die that we may live, they are substitute people, hunters in the fall killing the deer, that is Christ also. And we eat them, out of cans or otherwise; we are eaters of death, dead Christ-flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us life. Canned Spam, canned Jesus, even the plants must be Christ. (Atwood, *Surfacing* 140)

This paragraph is essential for understanding I-heroine's notion of killing and survival. Animals are eaten for the sake of survival of other lives. To the heroine, the will to survive is understandable in each living being and killing becomes need-based. Certain acts of killing should be tolerated so long as it is a means to survive. Her viewpoint about killing reminds us of "contextual moral veganism," which Greta Gaard explains as an important component of critical ecofeminism: "Contextual moral veganism is capable of acknowledging the sentience of plants and other ecological beings, and in diverse contexts, placing humans in the food chain as both eater and eaten, pointing to context-specific moral directions that strive to produce the least suffering and greatest care for all involved" (Gaard 38). In fact, Margaret Atwood believes that survival is foundational to the belief systems of Canadians. She argues that "the central symbol for Canada—and this is based on numerous instances of its occurrence in both English and French Canadian literature—is undoubtedly Survival, *la Survivance*" (Atwood, *Survival* 32). Precisely because survival is crucial, I-heroine cannot let herself die, and an essential component of transcending her victimhood is to survive her victimhood. Since her "crime" lies in not allowing her fetus to live (survive), she must conceive again, this time allowing the fetus to grow together with herself.

However, critics may not praise the compromised ending of *Surfacing*, leaving I-heroine's feminist role undefined. Marge Piercy doubts if the protagonist can translate her rhetoric of refusing to be a victim into action (Piercy 43). Arnold and Cathy Davidson suspect

that I-heroine would settle for less when she returns to Ontario City (Davidson and Davidson 38). Judith Plaskow points out that "the woman whose quest in cosmos does not find social expression leaves political power in the hands of men who will act according to their own understanding of reality" (Plaskow 337). Similarly, *The Vegetarian* ends on a tragic tone, suggesting the imminent death of the character. Moreover, Yeong-hye resists mainly through renunciation, a kind of power that belongs to the province of the powerless, which results often in defeating behaviors and harm to oneself. Han Kang admits that "the gesture of refusal also holds within itself an attempt to recover—narrowly, with great difficulty—dignity through a self-destructive action" (Han, "Interview"). Additionally, both heroines effect rebirth through a metamorphosis actualized through a dissociation from human identity and the real world, relying on inexplicable mythical forces. What accounts for the prevalence of novels on women's spiritual quests and mythical metamorphosis aside from female corporeality's close association with nature? Why does women's fiction often end ambivalently in renunciation and resistance?

Carol Christ has notably interpreted *Surfacing* as a novel of women's spiritual quest, different from novels of social quest. She distinguishes the two kinds of novels as follows: "The social quest is a search for self in which the protagonist begins in alienation and seeks integration into a human community where he or she can develop more fully," while in spiritual quests, "increased self-knowledge is not translated into new social roles for women" (Christ 317). Spiritual quest novels of women portray a heroine who starts a journey directed to the interior. Due to an irreversible wound caused by a traumatizing event and everyday violence, she looks inward in search of a dormant power that needs to be activated and a self-identity that demands redefinition to renew a severed connection either to the self or to the other. Aided often by strong female relationships and mythical powers that are sometimes unaccounted for, she is then awakened to new truth about her self, which subsequently changes her relation to her self and the other.[5]

The repetitiveness and circularity of the two novels are characteristic of novels that center on women's spiritual quest. Marianne Hirsch,

[5] Annis Pratt's formulation of "rebirth novels" is similar to spiritual quest novels. She outlines the narrative structure of rebirth novels into seven phases: splitting off from the world of the ego, the green world guide or token helps the hero cross the threshold, confrontation with parental figures, the green world lover, the shadow, the final decent to the nadir, and the ascent and re-entry into society as known (Pratt 142–146).

in her study on the spiritual *Bildung* of female characters in the nineteenth-century novel, asserts that "the plot of inner development traces a discontinuous, circular path which, rather than moving forward, culminates in a return to origins, thereby distinguishing itself from the traditional plot outlines of the *Bildungsroman*" (Hirsch 26). Coral Ann Howells comments that *Surfacing* follows the arc of a circle in which the heroine leaves human society to heal the split in her own psyche in the wilderness and then leaves the wilderness to return to society (Howells 25). Likewise, Jennifer Murray argues that the quest structure of *Surfacing* requires "a journey towards self-knowledge, involving a return to origins" (Murray 2). These insights into the circularity of women's spiritual development illuminate the gendered distinction of spiritual quest and social quest novels. That is, novels that constrain themselves to inner development predominantly portray a heroine, whereas social development was originally the realm of male characters. In typical women's quest narratives, a heroine's development and assertion of self is often one involving a spiritual or inward journey as opposed to a social or outward journey. While internal routes can lead to political change to some extent, the fact that heroines' quests are often directed inward instead of pointing outward raises questions about how much women are denied access to or are punitively discouraged from embarking on outer (material, political, geographical) journeys of either individual self-expression or collective feminist expression.

Lacking social power, the heroine can only direct her quest inward and start a change at the individual level. This is best seen in Yeong-hye's tactic, one that combines renunciation with resistance. What is particular about Yeong-hye's resistance is paradoxically her non-resistance. She resists by not resisting. This survival tactic culminates when her brother-in-law sees her naked in her apartment. Interestingly, he comments that Yeong-hye was "armored by the power of her own renunciation" (Han, *Vegetarian* 94). In other words, since she resists nothing and renounces everything, she has nothing left to be consumed by others. Agamben argues that a clothed man observing a nude woman indicates the "sadomasochistic ritual of power" (Agamben 55). However, through Yeong-hye's non-resistance and utter renunciation, she evokes a being that cannot be violated. Her brother-in-law tells us: "This was the body of a beautiful young woman, conventionally an object of desire, and yet it was a body from which all desire had been eliminated. But this was nothing so crass as carnal desire, not for her—rather, or so it seemed, what she had renounced was the very life that her body represented" (Han, *Vegetarian* 92). If she has already given

up everything, nothing in her can make her an object of exploitation, not even the gaze of her brother-in-law. Yeong-hye's renunciation is radical and its consequence suicidal. She recalls the paradoxical agency of powerless women who end their lives to stake a charge against patriarchy. In her renunciation of life, she affirms herself and simultaneously excludes herself from human society. Defense via non-resistance finds its expression in and can be explained by *Surfacing* as well. In the immediate aftermath of David's videotaping naked Anna, I-heroine remarks in similar terms: "The machine is gradual, it takes a little of you at a time, it leaves the shell. It was all right as long as they stuck to dead things, the dead can defend themselves, to be half dead is worse" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 165–166). Nothing and no one can hurt the dead just as nothing can hurt Yeong-hye because she has nothing that can be targeted.

Why are both heroines' quests achieved only via a phantasmic metamorphosis, a total or semi-dissolution of the human body? Why is it such a poignant account that women must cease to be human or become man in order to survive? If the I-heroine cannot turn into a plant-animal and if Yeong-hye does not become a plant, what are their alternatives, if there are any? Generally, metamorphosis allows a character to accomplish things that were formerly beyond reach when in human form. I argue that metamorphosis of women in spiritual quest novels, while affirming the transfluidity of the female body with nature, also indicates some measure of renunciation and withdrawal. In this aspect, the metamorphosis of Daphne, a minor figure in Greek mythology, is revealing. Infatuated with Daphne, Apollo chases her against her volition to the river. She transforms into a laurel tree to escape Apollo's ardor. In her analysis of Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes,* in which the female protagonist turns into a sow, Jeannette Gaudet points out that "the literary trope of metamorphosis explicitly illustrates the radical re-organization of the female body by the sociosymbolic structures in which it is enmeshed" (Gaudet 183). However, the metamorphosis of the two heroines in question is slightly different: the transformation is a self-willed re-organization of the female body to escape the hierarchical sociosymbolic structures in which they are perpetually displaced and marginalized. While misogynistic structures of patriarchy are forces that deform the body in *Truismes*, mythic encounters with nature fuel the transformation of the two heroines.

Annis Pratt develops an archetypal and contextual approach to *Surfacing*, arguing that "when a woman author wants her character to enact possibilities unsuitable to these realms [the subconscious and

conscious realms], she cannot choose material from them but must delve into unconscious materials necessarily alien to her mesocosm or social matrix", and that the world of the unconscious may contain puzzling, bizarre, and even "crazy" images, symbols, and archetypal narratives (Pratt 141–142). Therefore, "the tearing apart of narrative structure, tacked-on denouements, and sense of irresolution" abound in so much of women's fiction (142). Pratt convincingly points out that the re-entry of the fully transformed woman into society is problematic, because her role is necessarily "secondary" and "auxiliary" in society, and this is the reason why "so many women's rebirth novels are, at best, open-ended, the heroine's precise plan in society being left to guesswork on the part of the reader" (145). The confrontation with truth about one's past can lead to the heroine's disintegration, like that of Yeong-hye, or a transformation, as is the case with I-heroine, which leaves a sense of irresolution.

Although transformations in both novels are self-desired, they point to different endings and purposes, respectively. In other terms, Yeong-hye's metamorphosis stems from an antipathy for the human world and her human identity; therefore, she hopes to turn into a plant, running away from her sexuality and predisposition for violence. Meanwhile, the metamorphosis of I-heroine ends in a hybrid plant-animal body, keeping its maternal and reproductive functions. Therefore, while the boundary between the self and the other is crossed in *The Vegetarian*, the self and the other are united in *Surfacing*. At another level, while the metamorphosis logically means the death of the human body for Yeong-hye, I-heroine survives the metamorphosis, which actually affords her a sort of freedom previously unattained.

The two novels are marked by the social withdrawal of both heroines. While Yeong-hye gives up the human world to integrate herself into nature, I-heroine, whose abortion cuts her off from herself and the rest of the world, does not fully resolve her antipathy for human society in the end. Marge Piercy assumes that in *Surfacing*, the heroine does not have a name until the end of the novel because she has not earned one (Piercy 44). While a name indicates a proper place in human society, her namelessness might also testify to her discomfort in and incompatibility with the human world. Like Yeong-hye, who tells In-hye that all trees in the world are sisters and brothers, I-heroine gains a connection to nature. To the extent that the dichotomies of private/social, personal/political, nature/culture, and inner/outer are maintained, the social quest will always be favored at the expense of the spiritual quest. The same dichotomous logic is used to justify male

dominance and superiority. However, critics' general insistence on the social quest belies a lack of full understanding of the heroines' situation and historical limitations, and devalues their efforts in the interior realm. Granted, to say that inner quests of the heroines are admirable is not to say that those inner journeys are sufficient to effect change on the collective and social level. It would be a mistake to say inner transformations are tantamount to material forms of change. However, to the extent that all social actions are begotten by an inner awakening for change, the spiritual quest novels about women are as feminist as any narratives that have their heroines gain substantial power in the end. After all, a journey outward must have a beginning, and a beginning for women—as Virginia Woolf envisions—starts with, simply and humbly, a little room of one's own.

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Primerjalno feministično branje romanov *Na površje* Margaret Atwood in *Vegetarijanka* Han Kang

Ključne besede: kanadska književnost / korejska književnost / Atwood, Margaret: *Na površje* / Han, Kang: *Vegetarijanka* / ženski liki / literarna metamorfoza / mesojedstvo

Razprava primerjalno obravnava romana *Na površje* Margaret Atwood in *Vegetarijanka* Han Kang, pri čemer raziskuje podrejeni položaj žensk in živali, medicinsko znanost in vizualno tehnologijo pod nadzorom moških ter mitično preobrazbo žensk. Fikcijska svetova, v katerih živita glavni junakinji romanov, sta dosledno patriarhalna: prvoosebna junakinja v romanu *Na površje* prestane prisilni splav, medtem ko junakinjo *Vegetarijanke* Yeong-hye avtoritarni oče prisilno hrani z mesom. Oba pripovedna loka oblikuje junakinjino spoznanje o njeni lastni vlogi v nasilju: prvoosebna junakinja sprevidi, da je proti svoji volji pristala na splav, Yeong-hye pa se čuti odgovorno, ker je jedla meso psa, ki ga je ubil njen oče. Njuni zgodbi se različno razpleteta – prvoosebna junakinja se odloči, da bo znova zanosila, medtem ko se Yeong-hye odreče svojemu življenju in neha jesti –, saj prva junakinja sledi svojim prepričanjem glede življenja in preživetja, druga pa stališču, da je prehranjevanje ubijanje. Primerjana romana raziskujeta legitimnost trditev o nedolžnosti, meje skrbi in možnosti preseganja vloge žrtve ter se medsebojno dopolnjujeta, pri čemer lahko prek njiju dobimo vpogled tudi v vprašanje nezaključenosti, ki prevladuje v ženski literaturi, in v feministično sporočilo ženskih romanov o duhovnem iskanju.

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