Meat, limits, and breaking sustainability: Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Ang Li's *The Butcher's Wife*

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Abstract: Many environmental ills derive from humanity's unsustainable fondness for meat, a fondness that often pushes (and sometimes breaks) environmental limits and reveals unsustainable patriarchal ideologies. Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Ang Li's *The Butcher's Wife* each, in very different ways, expose the strands of "meat and gender" enmeshments in Korea and Taiwan respectively, showing the mutual interdependence of carnivorism and patriarchal power. So deeply rooted are the entangled strands of carnivorism and sexism that contesting them (either together or apart) means dismantling the very definition of human corporeality: in *The Vegetarian*, this means that a woman becomes a plant; in *The Butcher's Wife*, it means that a man becomes the very cattle he has spent his life slaughtering; in both, questioning meat is a very dangerous challenge that comes from a woman through a narrative perspective that is clearly feminist. Both novels plainly show deep analogies and correspondences between domestic violence and violence against animals, and yet, in both, there is a taut relationship between vegetable-based histories and a more meat-based modernity. This article argues firstly that the violence of meat-eating in *The Vegetarian* and *The Butcher's Wife* is both physical and psychological. Dreams and madness are involved. Normalcy is male, deviance female. Order is meat, chaos vegetal. And the threat of death will either be fully realized or will hang menacingly in the air. Secondly, this article argues that the novels importantly show that breaking points (psychological and environmental) are often utterly unpredictable and that once breached, the results can also be devastatingly unpredictable.
Keywords: unsustainable food practices, meat and gender, *The Vegetarian*, *The Butcher's Wife*

INTRODUCTION

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Ang Li's *The Butcher's Wife* challenge—in shocking ways and with dramatic results—traditions that are entangled with food in South Korea and Taiwan respectively, and one of the things these novels compel readers to consider is whether or not all traditions are worth preserving and at what point tradition becomes an excuse for continuing the unsustainable comforts that the privileged receive from

continued exploitation of people, animals, and nature. While meat is clearly an environmental issue in both South Korea and Taiwan, neither novel approaches the environmental aspects directly and instead force the reader into an awareness of the patriarchal traditions and values that are constitutive of Anthropocene meat. Writing from two very different sets of ideology about meat-eating, both novels reveal important conceptual entanglements between sexuality and eating, highlighting in the process questions about unsustainable appetite and agency, patriarchy and power, and carnivorism and sexism, and drawing clear correspondences in the process between violence against women and violence against animals. Relying heavily on the use of dreams as a narrative device, both novels introduce questions about surreality and, indeed, madness in their explorations of resistance. Both novels directly challenge unsustainable patriarchy and its entanglements with meat, a challenge that—as we struggle through a pandemic phase of the Anthropocene (a phase that has its origins in meat)—could not be more timely.

CHALLENGING UNSUSTAINABLE PATRIARCHAL TRADITIONS

1. Not all traditions are worth keeping

The Vegetarian and *The Butcher's Wife* each present women challenging tradition, threatening a replacement of old traditions with new, because not all traditions are worth keeping. Very few progressive thinkers, for instance, would argue for retaining the traditions of racism and exploitation on which the United States is founded. There has long been a growing resistance to those traditions. There has also been a growing resistance to long-held patriarchal traditions of exploitation and abuse. This resistance is why women can vote, can prosecute men who physically and mentally abuse them, and can seek fair pay. There has long been a growing resistance to speciesist traditions of animal exploitation, and increasingly this has meant questioning the very practice of meat-eating. The argument that tradition can somehow legitimize cruelty is frankly stupid. The relative importance of mindful behaviors must be balanced against tradition.

While it would be reckless to rush to judge the value of certain traditions, the fact is that some simply *are* good and some bad. The over-

writing of local traditions with global franchises, for instance, is bad in that, as Jonathan Safran Foer has noted, "Changing what we eat and letting tastes fade from memory create a kind of cultural loss, a forgetting" (2009: 194). Resisting the McDonaldization of the world will help prevent such loss,

> will help prevent deforestation, curb global warming, reduce pollution, save oil reserves, … decrease human rights abuses, improve public health, and help eliminate … systematic animal abuse. (257)

Foer goes on to state that *some* "kind of forgetfulness is worth accepting—even worth cultivating (forgetting, too, can be cultivated). To remember animals and my concern for their well-being, I may need to lose certain tastes and find other hands for the memories that they once helped me carry" (194). Yeong-hye in *The Vegetarian* and Shin Li in *The Butcher's Wife* encourage patriarchy to lose some of its tastes for exploitation. Again, while one doesn't want to rush to judge which traditions are good and which bad, it does seem that patriarchies have a lot to answer for. People care about people, and people care about animals, and most reasonable people at the end of the day will find that exploitation of either group is simply unacceptable.

2. Challenging meat

The two novels grow out of very different sets of ideologies regarding meat. In Korea, meat has been a central and valued part of the national diet since the Korean War, and as the country has become more and more wealthy, meat has become more and more a central signifier of affluence. Koreans have seen the rejection of meat as unnatural and have not been entirely welcoming toward vegetarian ideas. As Won-Chung Kim has explained "Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat results in her being isolated from society, because eating meat is a measure used to judge the normal and the abnormal in Korean society. Uneasiness toward vegetarianism stems [in part] from the Korean belief that meat eating is a basic human instinct" (2019: 4). In Taiwan, on the other hand, as Su-Hsin Huang notes, "many Taiwanese are at odds with … Taiwan's meat-centered culture" (2012: 722), and, she explains, citing from the 2008 *Almanac of Food Consumption Survey in Taiwan* report, "vegetarians account for

approximately 11%, or 2.5 million, of the total population" (720). Because "Taiwan has the 3rd biggest population of vegetarians per capita" in the world according to Kashlee Kucheran (Kucheran 2019), Lin Shi's suffering is all the more palpable. Huang explains that "with an enormously high per capita vegetarian population, Taiwan is, not surprisingly, a source of some very important developments in meatless living and [in] the criticism of current meat production, and it is therefore also not surprising that we see some of these important concerns registered in the literature" (2012: 730). *The Butcher's Wife* and *The Vegetarian* are radical because of the ways that they interrogate patriarchal attitudes toward women, attitudes that are intimately entangled with unsustainable mores about meat production and consumption.

While links between sexuality and eating have a long history, it is only fairly recently that scholars have theorized the implications of these links. When Michael Pollan explains the connection between the two, for instance, it is without feminist awareness: "like sex," he explains, "the need to eat links us to the animals, and a great deal of … energy has gone into helping us keep all such animal appetites under strict control" (2008: 54-5). While this quotation productively expresses the notion that the needs to eat and reproduce are ones that humanity shares with the rest of the nonhuman biosphere, the implications (both in terms of environmental ethics and feminist theory) need a kind of exploration that Pollan simply does not offer in the book. At best, this is disappointing from a man who has been described as "the food movement guru and all-around spokesman for everything food related" (Lawless 2018: 219). Peter Singer and Jim Mason have similarly explained that since "ancient Greece and Rome, ethical choices about food were considered at least as significant as ethical choices about sex" (1993: 3), but again the intersectional theoretical understandings are simply absent here. Indeed, overlaps in thinking about sex and food have a long history, and searches on the topic (apart from yielding a lot of pornographic hits) produce innumerable results. The topic is clearly well-trod. It is only with feminist theorizing, however, that intersectional insights become possible, yielding important understandings about the violence of "capitalistic patriarchy that has historically rendered animals (and women) as consumable objects" (Wright 2018: 32). Carol J. Adams is one of the early feminists who voiced concerns about "an overlap of cultural images of sexual violence against women and the

fragmentation and dismemberment of nature and the body in Western culture" (1990: 40). She argues that "consumption appears to be the final stage of male sexual desire" (49), and the entanglements of meat and sex are unmistakable in these novels. In *The Butcher's Wife*, as Sheung-Yuen Daisy Ng has observed, "The essence of [Shin Li's] marriage as a manifestation of the flesh trade has in fact been made clear from the very beginning. Lin is traded like a sow to Chen by her uncle—her flesh is sold for the meat Chen brings to her uncle's door every ten days or two weeks" (1993: 275-6). Ng explains that "By turning Chen [Jiangshui] into a hog to be butchered, just as she has been 'butchered' like a sow, Lin [Lin Shi] reverses the process of dehumanization. Her slaughter of Chen [Jiangshui] constitutes a breakdown of the phallocratic logic of flesh for meat" (280). Quid pro quo, and the process stops for Lin Shi, but the social structures around her appropriate her resistance, re-defining it as a crime of passion stemming from an imagined adultery, and patriarchal power remains untouched—perhaps, indeed, strengthened.

Arguing the idea that "meat is a symbol of patriarchy" (Adams 1990: 37), Adams is explicit in her intersectional understandings, long before the term itself became fashionable among scholars: "Meat eating," she explains, "is to animals what white racism is to people of color, anti-Semitism is to Jewish people, homophobia is to gay men and lesbians, and woman hating is to women" (70). Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Ang Li's *The Butcher's Wife* each, in very different ways, expose the enmeshed strands of meat and gender and show that because of the intersections of power involved with the consumption of animals, challenging carnivorism means contesting patriarchy itself, and this is a very dangerous form of resistance.

3. Resisting control of agency and body

Agency is a pivotal issue in both novels. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye has a dream and finds that she no longer wants to eat meat. To Mr. Cheong, her husband, a wife with her own thoughts and desires is inconceivable: "The very idea that there should be this side to her, one where she selfishly did as she pleased, was astonishing. Who would have thought that she could be so unreasonable?" (2015: 13). Mijeong Kim has explained that "Yeong-hye's rejection of meat is a threat to the normative principles and thus the foundation of the society. Yeong-hye's rejecting meat is thus treated as something to be punished and to be cured" (2020: 333). For

Cheong, therefore, "it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes" (Han 2015: 14). Worse, it is a deviance that leads to a breaking with sanity and humanity. Yeong-hye ends up in a mental asylum, sliding out of her human identity into a vegetal ontology. Within the Korean patriarchy, this is the face of challenging meat: madness and dehumanization. When Chen Lin Shi resists her husband's abuse in *The Butcher's Wife*, a resistance that culminates in her killing him, meanwhile, it is inconceivable that she could do it for any other reason than for her having had "an adulterous affair" (Li 1995: 3). In an unpublished 2018 interview, Li Ang explains that "What [Jiangshui] does to Lin Shi, such as sexual abuse and letting her starve, were common deeds that traditional husbands would do to their wives" (Li 2018, cited in Hu 2019). Chen Jiangshui (Lin Shi's husband) is a man for whom butchering an animal and raping a woman are consummately pleasurable: "the spurting of blood and the ejaculation of semen had the same orgasmic effect" (Li 1995: 75). If, "in the nether world, the pigs would be looking for revenge" (23) on the butcher, in this world, Lin Shi is the instrument. It is more than simply the agency of women, however, that Yeong-hye and Lin Shi express: it is the proxy assertion by these women of nonhuman agencies and rights. Within the Anthropocene context, these assertions of women's and nonhuman agencies reveal the deep resistance within patriarchies to achieving the "fundamental shift in human consciousness" that Stephen Kellert sees as being necessary for mitigating our relationships with the natural world (Kellert 1993: 26). In both of these novels, the challenge is through food habits.

So deeply rooted are the entangled strands of carnivorism and sexism that contesting them (either together or apart) means dismantling the very definition of human corporeality: in *The Vegetarian*, this means that a woman becomes a plant; in *The Butcher's Wife*, it means that a man becomes the very cattle he has spent his life slaughtering. The violence of Jiangsiu's transformation is perhaps unsurprising (live by sword, die by the sword—or, the butcher's knife), and the narrative has certainly prepared the reader for the transformation by suggesting isomorphic similarities between the butcher and his victims. The reader learns early of his physical attributes, which Lin Shi observes:

A short, stocky body and a prominent paunch — more fat than a man ought to have — he walked with a sort of waddle, kept his hair cut very short and had such a sharply sloping crown that the back of his skull seemed to be missing altogether. Fairly ordinary features, except that his small beady eyes were sunk deep into a swelling of flesh around the sockets. Lin Shi was told sometime later that these were known as pig-eyes and that they always belonged to people whose fate was tied to pigs. (Li 1995: 12)

Moreover, the narrative suggestions about Buddhist ideas of karma prepare the reader for Jiangshui's transformation: "the Guanyin Bodhisattva says that kindness will be rewarded and evil will be punished" (87). But it is more than simply karmic revenge here: as a symbol of the current unsustainable food production system, Jiangshui must be excised from the narrative ecosystem, and being cut to pieces does this well. In the larger global system and the context of the Anthropocene from which the novel writes, the patriarchal abuses of the meat production system that Jiangshui represents is clearly unsustainable. It is a position that the Lancet commission makes clear in its meticulously researched and referenced 2019 "Food in the Anthropocene" article, which claims that "a substantial change in the structure and function of the global food system" (Willet *et al* 2019: 476) is required if we are to achieve any semblance of sustainability. The commission claims unequivocally that "food production is among the largest drivers of global environmental change by contributing to climate change, biodiversity loss, freshwater use, interference with the global nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, and land-system change (and chemical pollution)" (447). It also notes that "a revolutionary change in food systems to support human health and environmental sustainability is essential" (451), that "human appropriation of land for food production, is the greatest driver of biodiversity loss" (467), and that a part of the required changes involves being mindful of "animal welfare" (481). While the commission does not advocate hacking people to pieces, it does suggest taking apart current systems of food production. Jiangshui's dismemberment is an undoing of part of the novel's patriarchal meat system—symbolizing, perhaps, a wider undoing yet to come.

Yeong-hye's corporeal experiences are quite different than Lin Shi's or Jiangshui's. Language itself dissolves as she spirals out of her sense of human to vegetal corporeality, and the only person in the novel who seems to recognize this is her sister, In-hye: "You're right," she thinks. "Soon

now, words and thoughts will all disappear" (Han 2015: 154). In empathizing and aligning herself with Yeong-hye, she loses her security, and the novel ends with a very unclear sense of what is in store for her. For Yeong-hye, however, it seems that dissolution is inevitable. Hannah Cooper-Smithson sees this in a rather optimistic way, arguing "that arboromorphism can be understood as both an ethics and a poetics, a way of thinking and writing connectively, collectively, in a kin-making, assembling, or branching kind of way, that looks beyond the scope and scale of human lives and bodies" (2022: 3); yet, there is little about the ending of this novel that is hopeful. Yeong-hye loses everything.

In the final scene of the first part of the novel, Yeong-hye is holding a bird that has a bite mark. The English version simply says that the "tooth-marks . . . looked to have been caused by a predator's bite" (Han 2015: 52). Jae-kyeong Kim argues that she has bitten the bird, but this interpretation is utterly inconsistent with the way that Han has characterized her. It is not logical to assume, as Kim does, that the bite is hers.[1] The logic of the narrative suggests rather that she is comforting the bird but with the same kind of post facto ineffectiveness as her shunning of meat has for the life of the dog that her father killed. If it were the case that she had bitten the bird, then the entire structure of meaning that the novel has established would collapse. Kim's argument, in essence, is that Yeong-hye's resistance is futile and that she is doomed to answer some sort of genetic hardwiring to eat meat. There is nothing anywhere in the novel to suggest such a thing. There is futility, to be sure, but instances of it are the frustrations that meet us when countering centuries-old systemic sexism and speciesism. The sophomoric logic that Yeong-hye's hunger prompts her to bite a bird ignores the plain facts of her anorexia: refusing meat, after all, is just the first step in her transformation. She eventually stops eating everything, sunning herself like a plant; but she is *not* a plant, and her future is gloomy.

The Butcher's Wife, on the other hand, ends with a sense of euphoric liberation. "I must be dreaming," Lin Shi thinks as she butchers her husband, reducing him to dismembered parts as he himself has done to countless pigs. His corporeal dissolution is her ontological solution. It is an act of defiance through which she gains control of her life, but it is also a clear defiance of patriarchal carnivorism: "she cut him up like a pig, just as she had seen him do at the slaughterhouse. In her own mind this deed

also served to avenge the deaths of the countless poor animals that had met their end at his hand" (Li 1995: 3). The irony drips like all of the blood in this short novel. While it is Lin Shi who has been consistently associated with pigs, it is the man on whom the association finally turns. Before this, as Chia-ju Chang has explained, "the cross-references between woman and pig throughout the text, as a feminist strategy to reveal a violent side of human behavior, help intensify the grave social status and living conditions of the female protagonist" (2009: 263). Lin Shi's specific circumstances are indeed horrendous. Her home is a virtual prison, a point Kathryn Yalan Chang has made well: for Lin Shi, she explains, "'home' does not possess any romantic interpretations; rather, it is a legal space where a married woman must submissively accept mental and physical exploitation from her husband" (2013: 171). It is a space of suffering.

ECO ANALOGIES AND CORRESPONDENCES

Home as a space of rape and suffering is a dominant image of *The Vegetarian* and *The Butcher's Wife*. In both, rape is the norm. Mr. Cheong confesses that he regularly rapes his wife:

> So yes, one night when I returned home late and somewhat inebriated after a meal with colleagues, I grabbed hold of my wife and pushed her to the floor. Pinning down her struggling arms and tugging off her trousers, I became unexpectedly aroused. She put up a surprisingly strong resistance and, spitting out vulgar curses all the while, it took me three attempts before I managed to insert myself successfully . . . After this first time, it was easier for me to do it again. (Han 2015: 30-1).

He is a serial rapist, less obviously than Chen Jiangshui, for whom marriage obviously sanctions rape. Jiangshui rapes Lin Shi with relish, and her resistance only makes him "more lustful than ever" (Li 1995: 20). There is nothing she can do:

> She just lay there enduring Chen Jiangshui's violent, rapid movements until she seemed on the verge of losing consciousness. Until all she could see were two shining eyes with a brutal light. Until her ears were filled with the sound of his labored breathing, mixed with a steady string of curses: "I'll fuck the life right out of you! I'll fuck the life right out of that stinking cunt of yours! I'll fuck the life . . . fuck the life right out of you!" (61)

In the patriarchy of both novels, there is nothing wrong with rape within marriage. The systemic condonement of sexist power here takes many forms. One of these is the assumption that physical violence against women is acceptable: Jiangshui beats Lin Shi regularly; Yeong-hye is physically abused, too, by people other than her husband. First her father and then her medical team (doctor and nurse) try to force-feed her (Han 2015: 39-40, 175)—all because she refuses to continue her part in the exploitation of animals. She takes out all of the dead animal parts from her fridge—"beef for shabu-shabu, belly pork, two sides of black beef shin, some squid in a vacuum-packed bag, sliced eel, . . . dried croaker tied with yellow string, unopened packs of frozen dumplings and endless bundles of unidentified stuff dragged from the depths of the fridge" (9). Then she throws "out anything made from leather" (20). This is dangerous resistance. Lori Gruen has explained that

> By refusing to consume the products of pain (not eating animals, not wearing leather, fur, and feathers, not using makeup and household products that have been tested on animals), feminists . . . can directly deny the legitimacy of a patriarchal system that treats sentient individuals as objects to use and profit from. (1993: 83)

Laura Wright has argued similarly: "female vegetarianism constitutes a choice that offers a challenge both to patriarchy and to a dietary norm dependent upon that patriarchy" (2015: 102). There are obvious and overt intersections between sexist and speciesist powers and their abuses.

Both novels plainly show deep analogies and correspondences between domestic violence and violence against animals, but it is in the dreams that plague the women victims that *The Butcher's Wife* and *The Vegetarian* are most able to explore the psychological effects of rape, metaphorical and real. While both novels are radical, both also show the limits of resistance. The protagonists of each have a kind of victory, but in neither novel is the victory unqualified. In neither narrative do the women end up sitting comfortably victorious, sipping tea and reminiscing over their struggles; rather, they go mad, psychologically dismembered by the very system that they have resisted.

DREAMS TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY

The Butcher's Wife and *The Vegetarian* border on the surreal at times, but in very different ways, with their heavy dream content. A dream provides the initiating action of the plot of *The Vegetarian*. Yeong-hye's simple "I had a dream" is a kind of mantra that resounds through and motivates the plot, and it is hard not to hear an echo of Martin Luther King, Jr here. King's "I have a dream" and Yeong-hye's "I had a dream" both have wide social implications and dangerous personal ones. Yeong-hye's dream, however, is a real dream from her subconscious that motivates deeply personal change, not a metaphor consciously designed for inspiring broad social change. Her dreams continue throughout the novel, becoming increasingly surreal as she threads her way into a very different, very nonhuman reality, a reality in which her human existence finally is in question in her mind:

> Had her body metamorphosed into a sturdy trunk, with white roots sprouting from her hands and clutching the black soil? Had her legs stretched high up into the air while her arms extended all the way down to the earth's very core, her back stretched taut to support this two-pronged spurt of growth? As the sun's rays soaked down through Yeong-hye's body, had the water that was saturating the soil been drawn up through her cells, eventually to bloom from her crotch as flowers? When Young-hye had balanced upside down and stretched out every fibre in her body, had these things been awakened in her soul? (Han 2015: 170).

Has she had a total severing from reality, a total psychotic break? Is this the final face of challenging Korea's meat patriarchy? If so, then it is a gloomy one indeed.

While the dreams in The Butcher's Wife are no less symptomatic of a psychosis spawned by patriarchal abuse, and while Lin Shi's breakdown "does not mean any triumph of her self-awareness or self-assertiveness, but a total collapse" (Liu 1986: 73), the sense of hauntings that they generate are far more pronounced in this novel than are the hauntings of The Vegetarian. The narrator explicitly relates the slaughter of animals with hauntings by those very animals: "after years and years of slaughtering countless animals, he [Jiangshui] was visited every night by ghostly pigs bleating on his doorstep. Or so people said" (Li 1995: 11). On his wedding night, he rapes Lin Shi, and "her screams of pain were so loud and lasted so long, according to her neighbors, that some people who heard them

above the whistling night winds took them to be the bleating of ghostly pigs" (13). Moreover, the slaughterhouse itself "had long been portrayed in local legends as haunted" (15). But it is at night when Lin Shi sleeps that her mind becomes the playground for hauntings.

Lin Shi's dreams are both hauntings of the past and premonitions of the future. The dreams are bloody and repetitious, like the work of her husband and of the knife that she eventually uses on him. She tells her neighbors of a dream in which "dark red blood begins to seep from the cracks in the blackened pillars" (10), and they "grew so tired of it that as soon as she opened her mouth, they cut her off with 'Here we go with that dream again. I'm sick of hearing it!'" (11). But it doesn't stop the dreams, and her past haunts her future. So horrific is the reality of what her husband does for a living that it seems patently unreal to her. When she walks into the slaughterhouse, "for a brief moment she truly believed that she had entered a dreamworld and that what she was witnessing now could be nothing less than the hell so often described to her by Auntie Ah-wang" (134). It is so grisly that it is surreal. And then when she enters deeper into that grisly and surreal world by killing Jiangshui, she repeatedly thinks that she must be dreaming. Only then do the haunting dreams stop. After killing him, "she leaned up against the warm foot of the stove and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep" (139).

BREAKING POINTS

The novels importantly show that breaking points (psychological and environmental) are often utterly unpredictable and that once breached, the results can also be devastatingly unpredictable; yet, we should have seen it coming. *The Butcher's Wife* is a novel, as is *The Vegetarian*, but the problems each portrays are themselves hardly novel. The patriarchal abuse that men such as Jiangshui and Mr. Cheong represents is a long-standing virus, a sociological weed. The invasive species that kills the crop must be taken at the root, not just plucked out on the surface; otherwise, it will return to haunt us and learn us its lessons.

At the core of both narratives is meat and the problems it poses. The narratives are about individuals, but the implications are wide. What we choose to eat is the most consequential decision we can make in the Anthropocene: "no daily choice that we make has a greater impact on the

environment," and "when we change what we eat, the world changes" (Foer 2009: 74, 260). For Marc Bekoff, "it is essential that we recognize that we are making a difference by helping one individual at a time" (2010: 21). The localized violence of *The Butcher's Wife* and *The Vegetarian* produce shocks that ripple far and wide, reaching very broad audiences—and reaching broad audiences is necessary, if there are to be any changes in how the world eats. Bekoff has explained that in his writing, he seeks "to appeal to people who don't agree with [him], rather than preach to the converted, because that is where change occurs" (11). What makes these two novels particularly compelling is the fact that readers sympathize with the women victims and with the animals for whom they act (either directly or indirectly) as advocates. Readers recognize the coldness and cruelty of the men and the unsustainable food systems that they represent. For Yeong-hye's father, a dog has no rights or feelings, but for her, the killing of a dog when she is a child haunts her for her entire life. Indeed her affective engagement with the suffering of the dog is the very source of her decision to stop eating meat, and she is unable to forget "the two eyes that had watched [her], while the dog was made to run on, while he vomited blood mixed with froth" (Han 2015: 42). Rather than dismissing the event, Yeong-hye is fundamentally changed by it. Her father obviously is able to dismiss it and carry on as if nothing happened.

Similarly, for Jiangshui, pigs are nothing. The only time he feels for them is at the moment when a pregnant sow looks at him as he is about to slaughter her: "the extraordinarily sad look he thought he saw in the sow's eyes he quickly dismissed as a figment of his imagination" (Li 1995: 121) because, as famed primatologist Jane Goodall has written, "it is easier to do unpleasant things to unfeeling objects—to subject them to painful experiments, raise them in intensive factory farms, and hunt, trap, eat, and otherwise exploit them—than it is to do these things to sapient, sentient beings" (2007: xiii). The moment that the pregnant sow becomes a sapient, sentient being for Jiangshui is the moment that everything changes for him. It is his breaking point (and he backs away from it), but it is a threshold that is much closer for the audience—110 pages earlier, to be precise, when we first see this man who, "after years and years of slaughtering countless animals" was said to be haunted by "ghostly pigs" on his doorstep (Li 1995: 11). Likewise, Mr. Cheong's narrow-mindedness is unlikely to garner much sympathy among the readers. For him,

> the only reasonable grounds for altering one's eating habits were the desire to lose weight, an attempt to alleviate certain physical ailments, being possessed by an evil spirit, or having your sleep disturbed by indigestion. In any other case, it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as [his] had done. (Han 2015: 14)

The idea that a person would stop eating meat for ethical reasons is beyond both his comprehension and his ability to accept. Like Jiangshui, Cheong backs away from this threshold. He files for divorce. Meanwhile, the patriarchal structures continue to press upon the women protagonists of each novel until they reach their breaking points—Yeong-hye becoming a plant, Lin Shi becoming a murderer. Both novels are about how the unsustainable patriarchal culture of meat leads to breaking points—a timely topic, given that we are, as I write, in the middle of a pandemic that came from unsustainable carnivory habits.

Our unsustainable eating habits are killing us. How much better would we have dealt with Covid-19 if there had been a more widespread awareness of the scientifically well known fact that "the greatest threats before us today [have] everything to do with the health of the world's farmed animals" (Foer 2009: 127)? Our uses of animals have been central to the spread of pathogens that have *really* hurt us, and it is critical at this juncture to remember that Covid-19, like the Black Death before it, *is* an environmental event—one made possible in part by our changing culinary habits and the increasing global reliance on animals for resources, companionship, food, and so on. It is as though the world has become haunted by the animals people have exploited, and we do well to keep in mind that animals used for food are the core origin of the Covid-19 pandemic, as they were for the swine flu and the avian flu (and their lethal subtypes). *The Butcher's Wife* and *The Vegetarian* won't stop pandemics, but they do resist unsustainable traditions that enable them.

CONCLUSION

Many environmental ills (swine flu, avian flu, Covid-19, deforestation, fresh-water mismanagement, methane pollution, and so on) owe their existence in part or in whole to humanity's unsustainable fondness for meat, a fondness that often pushes (and sometimes breaks) environmental limits; it is not only environmental limits, however, that meat pushes to

the breaking point, and recent literary depictions of the enmeshment of meat-eating attitudes with unsustainable patriarchal ideologies in South Korea and Taiwan are indeed revealing. Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Ang Li's *The Butcher's Wife* each, in very different ways, expose the strands of "meat and gender" enmeshments in Korea and Taiwan respectively. In both of these short novels, carnivorism and patriarchal power are mutually interdependent, and challenging one means challenging the other. So deeply rooted are the entangled strands of carnivorism and sexism that contesting them (either together or apart) means dismantling the very definition of human corporeality: in *The Vegetarian*, this means that a woman becomes a plant; in *The Butcher's Wife*, it means that a man becomes the very cattle he has spent his life slaughtering; in both, questioning meat is a very dangerous affair. In both novels, the challenge comes from a woman, and the narrative perspective is clearly feminist. Both novels plainly show deep analogies and correspondences between domestic violence and violence against animals. The violence of meat-eating portrayed in *The Vegetarian* and *The Butcher's Wife* is both physical and psychological, involving dreams and madness. Normalcy is male, deviance female. Order is meat, chaos vegetal. These novels show how unsustainable food practices result in the breaching of psychological and environmental limits, with effects that are both devastating and unpredictable. This is a point that is not lost, one would hope, on a readership living through a zoonotic pandemic—that is, a pandemic whose origins are with diseased and exploited animals that feed and are the product of an unsustainable culinary ethics.

Notes

[1] Kim writes "채식주의자」는 아내가 병원 분수대에서 상체를 벌거벗은 채 새를 물 어뜯는 이상행동을 하는 것으로 마무리된다. 치료를 위해서 입원한 공간 인 병원에서 자기파괴를 행하고 있는 셈이다. 특히 아내가 작은 새를 물어뜯는 행위는 이제껏 육식을 거부한 행동을 역설적으로 보여준다. 아내 에 의해 물어뜯긴 작은 새는 아버지에 의해 잔인하게 죽어간 흰둥이와 등가를 이룰 수 있기 때문이다" (2009: 276). [*The Vegetarian* ends with Yeong-hye acting strangely at a fountain in the hospital—biting a bird, with her upper body naked. This act is tantamount to her self-destruction in the hospital, where she is being treated. Especially, the act of biting a little bird paradoxically contradicts her refusal to eat meat up to this point. The small bird bitten by the wife is analogous to the dog her father cruelly killed. (translation mine)]. Kim's reading is invalid, not least of all

because neither the English translation nor the Korean original actually identify Yeong-hye as the source of the bite.

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