

5-2021

Into the Abyss: Self-Destruction as Feminist Resistance in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

Camille Bernt
Dominican University of California

<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2021.ENGL.ST.02>

Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Bernt, Camille, "Into the Abyss: Self-Destruction as Feminist Resistance in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*" (2021). *English Literature | Senior Theses*. 5.
<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2021.ENGL.ST.02>

This Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Arts and Education | Undergraduate Student Scholarship at Dominican Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Literature | Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Dominican Scholar. For more information, please contact michael.pujals@dominican.edu.

Into the Abyss:

Self-Destruction as Feminist Resistance in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*
and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

By

Camille Y. Bernt

Dominican University of California

May 2021

A project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts in English Literature

Abstract:

This paper is a comparative literary analysis of two contemporary novels: Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007) and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018). With a focus on self-destruction as a mode of feminist resistance, I explore the two novel's overlapping themes, specifically the ways in which radical transformation offers a means to escape social and cultural oppressions impressed upon women. My inquiry into these processes aims to trace methods of resistance in response to patriarchal and anthropocentric ideologies, through forms of social deprogramming, the embodiment of vegetal and animal alterity and a recuperation of the maternal semiotic as a mode to escape the paternal symbolic. The realistic outcomes of such modes of resistance pose certain challenges, however. Accounting for the damaging potential of self-destructive tendencies, I weigh the possibility as well as the limitations these enactments have to offer, ultimately moving past the concept of survival and demise in order to come to a different perspective on the ways in which female agency is both mitigated and reclaimed in each novel.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to acknowledge and thank my family, my partner, and the entire English Literature department at Dominican University of California for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout the past couple of years. I would also like to give special thanks to Dr. Perry Guevara, for his ongoing mentorship and guidance, Dr. Amy Wong, for her brilliant help with the completion of this project, and to Professor Carlos Rodriguez, for keeping the whip cracking.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Un-docile Bodies | 6 |
| Neoliberal Capitalism and the Self-Improvement Industry | 14 |
| Escape from the City | 21 |
| Returning to the Semiotic | 30 |
| The Figure of the Male Artist | 34 |
| Bibliography | 40 |

Introduction:

The experiences of the unnamed narrator in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and Yeong-Hye in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* are vastly different. Moshfegh's novel follows the downward spiral of its narrator as she actualizes her goal to retreat from life completely by means of self-elected coma, while Kang centers her novel around the mental and physical transformation of Yeong-hye, who, following a haunting and vividly violent dream, aspires to transform from woman to tree. While side by side, the female protagonists in these two novels appear to be worlds apart— one, a wealthy, single, young woman living in New York, and the other, a middle-class South Korean housewife— the themes which tie these two novels together explore the possibility of transformation and empowerment through self-destruction, disrupting anthropocentric, patriarchal social and cultural structures, while also providing a means of questioning the limits of such forms of feminist resistance. Central to both of these novels is a process of self-destruction embarked upon by both protagonists. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*'s narrator not only rejects the perceived “garish and hostile” (Moshfegh 4) world around her, but makes a conscious effort to wipe herself completely from the day to day of existence aided by a mutiny of sleeping pills prescribed by her dubious psychiatrist. Meanwhile, Yeong-Hye's vegetarianism evolves into a desire to transform into a tree, a process which entails a progressively limited diet, eventually rejecting food altogether and resulting in a state of physical emaciation and mental delirium. These self-destructive tendencies figure as forms of resistance for these two women, who find themselves ill at ease in a social and cultural environment which at once overlooks, alienates and constricts their relative positions in the world.

Quoting Jane Austen, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out that “a woman’s only power is the power of refusal” (458). Such power, a refusal that exerts itself as a form of resistance, seeks to renew, reshape and realign one’s self beyond the construct of a feminine identity within a socially constructed (*intelligible/symbolic*) and material body (*useful body*). The practice of such resistance often is manifested and treated as illness, rooted within a long legacy of female malady and madness. As Gilbert and Gubar point out, “surrounded as she is by images of disease, traditions of disease and invitations to both disease and dis-ease, it is no wonder that the woman writer has held many mirrors up to the discomforts of her own nature” (458). These modes of ‘disease and dis-ease’ are easily read in the processes of self-destruction undertaken by the Moshfegh’s narrator and Kang’s Yeong-Hye, whose methods both echo forms of specifically female gendered illnesses, the group of what Susan Bordo describes as “gender-related and historically localized disorders: hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia nervosa.” In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, as the unnamed narrator in Moshfegh’s work retreats further from society day by day, she increasingly leaves her apartment as seldom as possible, and eventually cuts herself off completely from the outside world, not unlike the characteristic symptoms of agoraphobia. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong hye’s refusal to eat meat or any animal product evolves into a refusal to eat period, a characteristic manifestation of anorexia nervosa. While these diseases have often been framed as a response to social and cultural pressure and a means to reclaim a form of control over one’s body, the manifestations of these symptoms within these two protagonists occurs alongside a form of self-fulfillment and a conscious break from the symbolic, rather than an aspiration to assimilate to it. Bordo’s analysis of the symptomatology of agoraphobia and anorexia nervosa examines the ways in which these

diseases perform a subconscious resistance in the form of submission to the demands and ideals of patriarchal culture. The manner in which Moshfegh and Kang's protagonists perform these acts seem to subvert this arrangement: consciously resisting social and cultural pressures and consequentially, repeating the marginalization and muting of women within a masculinist society and turning it inward through a process of self-destruction.

Through these processes, the respective protagonists of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *The Vegetarian* effectively find methods to produce a break from the anthropocentric and patriarchal order. Through altering the structures of their realities, these behaviors strive for the return to a semiotic, pre-paternal mode, where such alterity figures as a means to give room to a space where the desire to retreat, to (r)ect oneself from a social order where concepts of happiness and wellness are intertwined within a web of patriarchal, consumerist and anthropocentric values. However, does the accomplishment of these transformations reach the transcendence these women reach for? Or by enacting methods of self-harm, by destroying the self that is ruled by a masculinist order, does she simply reenact the violence of a patriarchal society, turning it inward— thus resulting in her own demise?

Such questions are perhaps difficult to answer, yet the texts themselves have much to offer, specifically as women's texts which serve to suggest, as Helene Cixous writes of female authored works (*écriture féminine*), "the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (Cixous 1872). As creative pieces, these two works' exploration of the subconscious/unconscious as an avenue of escape evokes of Cixous' musings in her 1975 essay, "The Laughter of the Medusa", where she writes of the possibility of "gaining strength through

the unconscious, and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive [...]" (Cixous 1873). The subconscious as a means of escape from the weight of reality is a theme which contemporary readers seem to latch onto. An overview of critical reviews reveals a perverse envy for the coma-like dormancy Moshfegh's narrator pursues. In an article headlined "Self-Destruction Beats Self-Help in Two of the Most Exciting Books of the Year", Maris Kreizman writes of the "joy to spend[ing] time within a fantasy where a woman can be free of the constant tyranny of self-improvement". For *Stillpoint Magazine*, Jesse Sawyer writes of the way "the book performs itself as a fantasy for our era, one in which the daily nightmares of our historical moment and the shrinking distance between us and the horizon of the anthropocene might be relegated to the stuff of dreams". Here, *The Vegetarian* adopts a strikingly similar approach, specifically in its exploration of the three-way relationship between man, woman and nature in association with a dream-induced fantasy which appears by way of a haunting subconscious.

Due to its fairly recent publication (2007), and even more recent English translations (UK 2015, US 2016), *The Vegetarian* has garnished very little academic scholarship. Alix Beeston's 2020 article "The Watch-Bitch Now", published in University of Chicago's acclaimed feminist journal *Signs*, is among the first to take on a critical approach to Han Kang's novel. Beeston's research explores how historically, the natural world has been used as a realm to locate the boundaries between feminine and masculine orders of existence, "within the the vast workings of Western culture, this opposition of passivity and activity, of natural women and unnatural men," and the way this phenomena "comes to appear as natural, the proper of the proper", and, quoting Rousseau, the "order of nature" (Beeston 680). By comparing second

wave feminist's approach to the problematic associations between woman and animal— notably Helene Cixous's allegory of the sphinx in "Castration or Decapitation?" (1981) as a "ready made" yet problematic symbol between the two— and the more contemporary scholarship within the realm of ecofeminism and critical animal studies which, paradoxically, "emphasize[s] the cognate oppressions of women and all other natural entities" (681), Beeston's work evaluates the potential and limitations of animal alterity as a mode of resistance. These considerations pave the way for Beeston's guiding question: "Does a woman's (re)turn to nature offer a meaningful route for defying the natural order of masculinist and anthropocentric society?" (681). Female narratives such as these two works do not propose a general likeness to each other which bonds them through plight or suffering or what have you, but instead aim to locate and illuminate structures of oppression/suppression, and to create new sites of possibility by means of opening the barriers to the subconscious by enacting the impossible/ unthinkable and shattering forms of rationality that uphold restrictive notions of success, wellness and happiness.

Un-docile Bodies:

Armed with the force of renunciation, both female protagonists respond to the pressures of their social and cultural contexts through methods of retreat, abandoning the roles which mediate their place within society. To achieve these means, both women take on radical projects which entail the destruction of a central focus of patriarchal oppression, the female body, and thus, the 'self' in both women. Self-destruction figures as means to eliminate sources of oppression, and function as the negation of modes of operation which culturally and socially dominate concepts of selfhood.

With a focus on feminist discourse, Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* examines the use of the body both as a "direct locus of social control," and as a "medium of culture," a "surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body" (Bordo 2006). Such means are achieved through common practices, automatic habits that reproduce and support culturally and socially curated standards. Through the use of theories offered by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, Bordo argues that the 'docile body,' socially regulated and conditioned, poses a threat to the conscious pursuit of political or social change, through the "betrayal by the life of our bodies" (2007) — this docile body— the body which directly contradicts the "instinctual," see animal, body. In these two novels, Moshfegh and Kang explore the break with such practices, bodies rendered "un-docile," offering literary contexts which provide means to weigh the possibilities and limitations of such experimental methods. The social rupture of the two protagonists is signaled at the beginning of each novel through a break with socialized routine, specifically those habits which "habituate external regulation, subjection, transformation,

'improvement' [...] the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress— central organizing principles of time and space in the day of many women" (2097).

The disruption to the narrator in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*'s structured existence is manifested through the relinquishing of these practices: "I took a shower once a week at most. I stopped tweezing, stopped bleaching, stopped waxing, stopped brushing my hair. No moisturizing or exfoliating. No shaving" (Moshfegh 2). While the narrator is able to consciously abandon manners of female grooming, other forms of cultural practices remain deeply ingrained within her psyche, as Bourdieu describes, laying "beyond the grasp of consciousness...untouchable by voluntary, deliberate transformations" (qtd. in Bordo 2097). These lingering tendencies take shape through the narrator's somnambulant activity, actions which expose a continued investment in a dominantly capitalist culture entangled within the economy of beauty and appearances: "I'd wake up to find voice messages on my cell phone from salons or spas confirming appointments I'd booked in my sleep" (Moshfegh 1) and the "occasional package from Barney or Saks [...] with things I couldn't remember ordering — cashmere socks, graphic T-shirts, designer jeans" (2). As the novel progresses and the narrator becomes increasingly invested in her project, her methods of dissociation take on such imaginative forms as sealing her cell phone in tupperware and sending it off to sea in a bathtub full of water (74). However, the narrator's continuous interjections concerning her appearance mark the lingering persistence of a deeply ingrained investment in status within an economy of appearances: "It did comfort me to see that I was still pretty, still blond and tall and thin" (92). Though the narrator comes to her own conclusion that, "being pretty only trapped me in a world that values looks above all else" (35), and goes on to express that "since adolescence, I'd vacillated between

wanting to look like the spoiled WASP that I was and the bum that I *felt* I was and should have been if I'd had any courage" (35), the narrator is hard-pressed to shed her status as 'pretty and elite.' Her self-assessment reappears through the various stages of her self-destruction, later reporting, "I slapped my cheeks and dug the sleep out of my eyes. I still looked pretty" (120), and in the final stages of her ongoing drug use, "the mirror hanging on the wall above the mantle showed a frozen corpse, still pretty" (224). The narrator's appearance, however, also appears to be a driver of her alienation from those around her: "Think of your beauty as an Achilles heel," her ex-boyfriend Trevor reminds her in a flashback, "You're too much on the surface. I don't say that offensively. But it's the truth. It's hard to look past what you look like" (35). Though the narrator's hold on her appearance appears as a form of vanity, she also clings to her 'prettiness' as a defense mechanism which protects her from appearing vulnerable— a technique which she undoubtedly picks up from her own mother, which the narrator notes of her on the mother's deathbed as her organs shut down: "Even with a tube down her throat, a machine taped to her face to keep her breathing, she was still pretty" (151). Like her mother, who's premature death comes at the hands of a downward spiral into drugs and alcoholism— thus also performing a form of self-destruction, the narrator is never able to achieve the monstrous appearance that matches the monstrous way she feels on the inside. Whether she desires to or not, her appearance as a 'pretty girl' keeps her locked within the male gaze of the symbolic order, despite her best efforts to sever herself from the paternal.

In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's decision to change her diet marks a distinct rupture with the structure her life is governed by, notably the marital structure of a dominant husband and submissive wife . At the beginning of the novel, Mr. Cheong describes his wife's personality as

“completely unremarkable”, a “passive...woman in whom I could detect neither freshness nor charm” who “suited me [Cheong] down to the ground” (Kang 9), and the type of woman who lacked any of the qualities which would have “served to disrupt my carefully ordered existence” (10). One night, Cheong awakes to find his wife eerily standing in the kitchen before the soft glow of the open fridge. This scene marks the beginning of Yeong-hye’s transformation—having just experienced the dream she claims as the source of her change in behavior. Cheong immediately perceives a shift in his wife. Shocked at her lack of reaction when he calls out to her, he is further dumbfounded when he comes to the realization that “she simply ignored me” (13). Having overslept his alarm the following morning, rather than helping him prepare for work, Cheong finds his wife cleaning out the fridge of all meat products, “still wearing her nightclothes, her disheveled, tangled hair a shapeless mass around her face” (15). In his attempt to intercept her strange behavior, he is “stunned to find her fiercely tugging back at me” (16) before physically overpowering her. Perplexed and befuddled, Cheong scrambles to get his person in order before leaving for work late, lamenting, “this was the first time I’d had to go to work without her handing me my things and seeing me off” (17). As he reflects on the morning in the train to work, he finds himself at loss to make sense of his wife’s behavior, “her face flitted by— her face, but unfamiliar, as though I was seeing it for the first time” (17) and noting his bewilderment at “the very idea that there should be this other side to her, one where she selfishly did as she pleased, was astonishing” (19).

While the disruption to Cheong’s carefully ordered and structured existence marks the onset of Yeong-hye’s willful resistance, other markers of disruption accompany this defining shift. Like in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Yeong-hye’s transformation notes a similar break

with conventional grooming methods, which her husband reprimands her for as they prepare to make an appearance at his business dinner: “What’s wrong with your lips? Haven’t you done your makeup?” he exclaims, “Were you really going to go out looking like this?” (25). Yet Yeong-hye’s lack of conventionally feminized social practice is most evident in her refusal to wear a bra. The absence of her undergarment is first noticed by her husband, who at first interprets her bralessness as sexually suggestive, yet quickly recognizes her ongoing decision to forego the garment as a matter of preference, and as a break from conventionality. Rebuking the bra’s constraining sensation, Yeong-hye never comes around to wearing the bra full time; instead, her husband notes, occasionally letting it rest under her blouse with the clasp undone. Her husband bypasses the conflict, yet when she arrives at a business dinner with his upper management, he is ill-suited to contend with the judgemental glances his wife’s unharnessed bosom receives from the attending guests. Yeong-hye’s disruption is silent and passive, the outline of her breasts underneath her blouse creating a mounting tension among the dinner guests. Yeong-hye’s dismissal of the social cues which unfold around her mark the start of an increasingly awkward evening. As meat dishes arrive at the table, Yeong-hye’s refusal to eat meat becomes central to the conversation, provoking discussions surrounding the acceptable rationales associated with vegetarianism, where empirical logic intervenes as a way to rationalize the incomprehensibility of Yeong-hye’s behavior. Yeong-hye’s perceived cluelessness towards the discomfort experienced by the dinner guests and her husband, and the discomfort her husband believes that she *should* experience yet shows no sign of, illustrates Yeong-hye’s appropriation of passivity as an expected and valued feminine trait, employed here as a disruptive state of being which transgresses conventional social behaviors. By neglecting to wear a bra and

refusing to consume meat, Yeong-hye's docile presence is turned un-docile, her autonomous choices interpreted as forms of provocation by polite society.

Though central to the plot, Yeong-hye remains a marginalized character in the setting of the novel, and her presence as a passive character is underlined within the narrative format, which almost never accords her direct agency in her own story. The three-part multifocal narration describes the direct thoughts and actions of those present within Yeong-hye's inner circle: her husband, Mr. Cheong, her brother-in-law, Yeong-ho, and her older sister, In-hye. As previously mentioned, the plotline revolves around Yeong-hye and her descent into physical and mental destruction, yet the lives of those closest to her spin equally out of control as they are forced to contend with the wake of Yeong-hye's demise. Told through the perspectives of these three characters, Yeong-hye is never accorded agency throughout the telling of her own story. Even in those moments of direct speech, Yeong-hye's words and actions are always reported through a narrative lens which begs empathization with a different character and which keeps Yeong-hye's inner world severed from the reader's experience. Those moments of focalization which appear at the beginning of the novel provide limited insight into Yeong-hye's thoughts, experiences, memories and trauma, and these cracks in the narrative ultimately come to an end following Yeong-hye's first instance of institutionalization. Following this event, Yeong-hye's non-focalization runs in accordance with her form of resistance. By adopting a mute passivity, she readopts a characteristic of male idealism as the silent uncomplaining female, yet does so on her own terms, turning to her body as a location for self-expression.

Parallel to Yeong-hye's realization of potential resistance is the realization of the potential violence of her own body. The violent dreams Yeong-hye claims as a source of explanation for

her change in diet are described by Yeong-hye through first-person narration, interjected within the first part of the novel narrated by Mr. Cheong. Yeong-hye describes one of these violent dreams in the moments leading up to a family lunch, arranged by Mr. Cheong in hopes that her family will be more successful than him in ‘correcting’ Yeong-hye’s behavior. “Dream of my hands around someone’s throat,” begins Yeong-hye’s dream sequence, “my fingers flexing to kill...I become a different person, a different person rises up inside me” (Kang 38). Yeong-hye’s transformation takes on a more symbolic meaning in these sequences, shedding her earlier passivity and moving towards a more weaponized version of herself: “Why am I changing like this? Why are my edges all sharpening— what am I going to gouge?” (39). When the family lunch she and her husband later attend evolves into violence as Yeong-hye’s father attempts to force feed her a piece of pork and repeatedly strikes her in the face, Yeong-hye takes a knife to her own body, lacerating her wrists, and answering to her own question, “what am I going to gouge?” — what she gouges is herself (Beeston 688).

The undoing of the methods of social and cultural practices which operate as means of oppression mark the onset of the transformative processes of the protagonists in both *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *The Vegetarian*. Self-destruction figures more literally in *The Vegetarian*, as Yeong-hye’s resistance progresses from passive resistance, signified by the abandonment of social authority and convention— rendering her physical presence ‘un-docile’, to the physical weaponization of her body, as her restrictive diet literally sharpens her edges. Eventually, she reproduces the violence she experiences in her dreams, turning it against herself as a way to interrupt the patriarchal abuse and oppression she experiences at the hands of her husband and father. In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, the narrator’s self-destruction figures as

more self contained, and is characterized by a lack of personal regard for her own health or well-being. Understanding herself to be the manufactured product of patriarchal oppression, the narrator opts to undo the cultural markings of her appearance through the abandonment of the practices which place her on the pedestal of capitalist and patriarchal culture. While Yeong-hye violently severs herself from the patriarchal symbolic order, the narrator of Moshfegh's novel struggles to overcome her ties with a culture which is deeply ingrained within her sense of identity. Despite these contrasts, both point out the devastating impossibility in the success of such methods, each demonstrating the outcomes and limitations of the use of self-destruction as modes of feminist resistance.

Neoliberal Capitalism and the Self-Improvement Industry:

Both novels explicitly reference the ways in which economically-driven beauty industries operate to oppress women in each work's specific cultural context: the United States at the turn of the millennium, in the process of contending with the political shift towards neoliberalism and entering into the presidency of George W. Bush, moments before the global effects of the 9/11 attacks; and a more current South Korea, also experiencing a transition from American neo-colony to modern economic empire. As works of contemporary literature, each novel responds to female anxieties surrounding the paradoxical nature of an industry which at once highlights the issues with— while conveniently providing the solution to— that problem which is 'to have a female body.' The relationship between women and their bodies within an economy of self-improvement, a term which functions at once to offer the potential of self-empowerment, while also functioning as a device of self-debasement and self-objectification, is critiqued through the subversive methods of self-destruction observed in both Moshfegh and Kang's novels. In both *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *The Vegetarian*, the protagonists' missions of self-destruction are foiled by their close female relationships: the narrator's 'friend' Reva in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, and Yeong-hye's older sister In-hye, in *The Vegetarian*. While Moshfegh's narrator and Kang's Yeong-hye both resist the cultural practices which tend towards capitalistic self-improvement, their counterparts, Reva and In-hye, counterbalance their self-destructive tendencies by playing into the socio-cultural demands set forth by a consumer-based beauty economy. Through these parallels— docile bodies operating in proximity of and along side bodies defiantly rendered un-docile through the processes of renunciation and self-destruction engaged in by the two protagonists, the novels generate a

critique of the promises promoted through the economically fueled self-improvement industry and which responds to an increasingly global version of neoliberal capitalism which demands consumer participation.

In her essay "Sourging the Abject Body", Estella Tincknell considers the 'makeover paradigm' (Gill & Scharff 5), evaluating the ways in which the female body has become a central focus of hyper-commodification, and privy to a form of pathologization within a culture which claims "that physical and spiritual renewal are both necessary to femininity and wholly dependent on appropriate forms of consumption in a world which consumer culture looks like rescue" (Tincknell 85). Tincknell adds, "this is a society in which the 'never good enough girl...must perpetually observe and remake herself,'" where she is constantly "finding herself and her behaviour relentlessly pathologized in the therapeutic language of self-esteem" (Tincknell, Harris). The 'never good enough girl' is directly embodied through the character Reva, the narrator's emotionally needy and insufferably trendy best friend. Reva is the girl who "studied *Cosmo* and watched *Sex and the City*," and who "came from Long Island, was an eight out of ten, but referred to herself as a 'New York three'" (Moshfegh 13). Her presence within the novel functions as a direct foil to the emotionally detached and, in her own words, "effortless[ly] beautiful" (10), narrator. Not only does Reva buy into the depreciating culture of female self-objectification, but she also voraciously consumes self-help culture as a remedy to fill the void of insecurity she experiences: "Reva was partial to self-help books and workshops that usually combined some new dieting technique with professional development and romantic relationship skills, under the guise of teaching young women 'how to live up to their full potential'" (Moshfegh 15). The narrator makes it abundantly clear she has little respect for her

friend, “I found her desperation especially irritating,” she quips, “it made it hard for me to respect her intelligence” (9). Yet despite the narrator’s disapproval of Reva, their equal sense of self-loathing and loneliness creates a form of comradery which maintains their relationship: “‘We’re all alone Reva,’ I told her. It was true, I was, she was. This was the maximum comfort I could offer her” (12). While Reva pipes on about self-help, seasonal fashion and dating tips, the narrator also reveals Reva’s ongoing battle with bulimia, her unacknowledged drinking problem and her borderline obsessive affair with her married boss— behaviors that are at once destructive, yet tragically accepted and even expected of young women; as Tincknell writes: “these progressive narratives [are] always accompanied by [their] monstrous siblings” (Tincknell 83).

The narrator’s project instead appropriates culturally sanctioned methods of self-improvement: the ‘diet’, the ‘makeover’ or the ‘cleanse,’ choosing sleep instead as a form of regenerative process: “My hibernation was self-preservational. I thought that it was going to save my life” (7). The destructive byproducts of the narrator’s self-annihilation read as strikingly similar to the symptoms of Reva’s pathological self-improvement: weight loss due to decreased food intake, a growing substance dependency, and persistent black-out calls to her toxic and soon-to-be-married ex-boyfriend.

Returning to Maris Kreizman’s review of Moshfegh’s novel, it is precisely the juxtaposition between these two characters which lends appeal to self-destructive path of the narrator and which highlights the superficiality of self-help’s culture as a method of empowerment for the modern woman: “How glorious it is to actively choose not to be a Reva,” she writes, “Reva [...] whose striving to better herself would most likely never get her to a place of personal satisfaction” (Kreizman). Referring to the absurd methods of empowerment

promoted through modern day self-improvement culture, Kreizman recognizes the manner of resistance that is at play within the narrator's decision to pursue her sleep project: "At a time when modern-day women are encouraged to use skin care as a coping mechanism, to do detoxes and cleanses, to cry at SoulCycle, that [this] character chooses such bizarre, disconcerting ways of coping is in itself a rebellious act" (Kreizman).

Within this context that attaches/connects beauty and wealth to happiness, wellness and personal satisfaction, Moshfegh's narrative of a woman who checks off all of the above boxes yet experiences deep dissatisfaction and suffers from extreme detachment not only disrupts the messages promoted by an economically driven beauty industry, and, as Tincknell describes, a the projection of the illusion that "'wholeness' for the female human subject [...] can only be a temporary and contingent condition achieved through her participation in consumer culture" (Tincknell 86), but also subverts the entire concept of the "makeover paradigm". The before picture of the narrator already meets the ideals and standards of Western beauty culture, and her "makeover" seeks self-improvement and regeneration by cleanse through undoing, rejection, withdrawal, and annihilation.

In *The Vegetarian* as well, the novel relies on the use of a foil character against which the notion of "successful" (see culturally promoted and socially sanctioned) femininity is measured. Yeong-hye's sister, In-hye, checks off all the areas of supposed conventional femininity Yeong-hye lacks: she is the successful business owner of a cosmetics shop, a mother, and physically, has a "nicely filled out figure" and "big double-lidded eyes" (Kang 40). The references to In-hye's double eyelids and her business operation within the sphere of cosmetics, while subtle details, connect the context of the novel to greater issues surrounding globalization

and the politics of a consumer-based, economically driven beauty industry. In her essay “Beauty Between Empires,” Sharon Heijin Lee examines how “beauty is mediated through variously structured fields of power specific to geopolitical context,” with special attention to “transnational feminist practice” and a large focus on plastic surgery and the discourse pertaining to blepharoplasty, the cosmetic procedure colloquially referred to as ‘double eyelid.’ This cosmetic process involves the creation of a second crease above the eye, a modification which is commonly argued as a means of appealing to a Westernized standard of beauty. As Lee points out, this argument is both problematic— highlighting the entanglement of both patriarchal and racial oppression as well as a rising anxiety over the decreasing hegemony of the United States in the face of the rising economic emergence in South Korea, and revelatory— as a means of commodifying the female body by altering one’s appearance through plastic surgery, “a form of ‘body work’ that encapsulates both work performed on the body through surgeries and the work the altered body is readied to perform, or perform better, in a national market economy” (Lee 10). While it is not explicitly stated that In-hye has undergone cosmetic surgery, this detail about her appearance, as well as her successful status within the economy of the beauty industry, profiles her as the modern Korean woman who belongs within the sphere of Korea’s rising position within the global economy.

Alternatively, while In-hye is introduced as a model of that which Yeong-hye lacks, Yeong-hye’s husband noting of his sister-in-law who “resembled my wife quite closely but her eyes were larger and prettier, and overall she was much more feminine” (33), Yeong-hye is observed through a similar lens by her brother-in-law, who praises Yeong-hye as the negative of her sister, stating “it was only when he was introduced to her sister that he realized what it was

his new wife was missing” (Kang 69). On one hand, the polar distinctions between the two sisters function to illustrate their positions inside and outside the social systems of order; In-hye as a person of productivity, use and rationality, and Yeong-hye, as an outsider, increasingly outcast from society both by means of her mental diagnosis and her own desires to run from the city and escape to the natural world.

On the other hand, paradoxically, while In-hye and Yeong-hye are presented as ‘negatives’ of each other, there is an interchangeability at play between the two women which appears through the cross-attractions between the two couples (In-hye and her husband, the brother-in-law, and Yeong-hye and her husband, Mr. Cheong). Both spouses express explicit sexual desire for their wives’ sister. Mr. Cheong notes, “[In-hye]’s voice as it sounded over the phone [...] never failed to send me into a state of sexual arousal” (Kang 33). Meanwhile, the brother-in-law’s sexual desire for Yeong-hye proves to be much more complex, yet his desire for Yeong-hye does go so far as to transcend an episode of sexual intercourse with his wife: “He pushed himself toward the image of *her*, finding it there in his wife’s nose and lips, the child-like curve of her neck, all outlined vaguely in the darkness. [...] he shut his eyes, and tried to block out his wife’s face” (Kang 87). The sexual violence evoked in this scene between In-hye and her husband reproduces the same type of marital sexual violence which occurs earlier in the novel between Yeong-hye and Cheong. These repeated instances of sexual aggression towards women, whether they have assimilated within a quasi-utilitarian economy, or whether they are marginalized figures in society, point to the conclusion that women remain objectifiable subjects of desire despite their position within social arrangements, marriage included.

Both novels include foil characters which serve to characterize the social deviance of the two protagonists. In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Reva's emotional desperation and die hard subscription to manufactured versions of self-empowerment directly contrasts the narrator's emotional voidness and her severance from society as an alternate means of self-preservation. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's marginal existence is measured against In-hye's success, and inversely, In-hye's conventionality is measured against Yeong-hye's alternative edge. While these character duos function to display a contrast in behaviors, they all share a common subjectivity as women within oppressive frameworks, regardless of whether they strive to adhere to, or reject the principles of social and cultural success and assimilation. These parallels unfold within a global cultural context rooted in the commodification of women and the capitalization of the concept of self-care and self-improvement. By at once contrasting and conflating experiences of self-empowerment and self-destruction, these narratives expose the paradoxical nature of an economic and cultural industry which at once promotes self-love, while simultaneously stimulating a sense of self-loathing, and where female objectification, whether at the hands of one's self or the masculine other, still reigns supreme.

Escape from the City:

As previously described, the plot of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* follows the evolution of Yeong-hye, a docile house wife whose violent and carnal dreams lead to her resistance to carnivorousness, and eventually, a desire to transform into a tree. Her initial refusal to eat meat marks a shift in her behaviour from passive to resistant, a change which is immediately perceived by her husband, Mr. Cheong. This power shift from Mr Cheong's ordered existence to Yeong-hye's willful resistance and the abandonment of her prioritization of his needs mark an exit from what Cixous deems "the realm of the proper", as quoted by Beeston, "the precinct of masculine law" where "man— transcendent, rational, free— wrests cities of forests and makes meals of animals" (Beeston 679). In this context, the consumption of meat serves as a literal metaphor for anthropogenic violence and the destructive relationship between man and nature, where man is akin to social order and nature is approximated with the feminine "other". This cultural normalization of violence and aggression under the guise of traditionalism is explicitly detailed in a later scene, where Mr. Cheong and Yeong-hye attend a business dinner with the husband's partners:

"Well, I must say, I'm glad I've still never sat down with a proper vegetarian. I'd hate to share a meal with someone who considers eating meat repulsive, just because that's how they themselves personally feel...don't you agree? Imagine you were snatching up a wriggling baby octopus with your chopsticks and chomping it to death— and the woman across from you glared at you like you were some kind of animal. That must be how it feels to sit down with a vegetarian!" (Kang 30)

This statement, uttered by Mr. Cheong's boss, intends to describe the absurdity of the practice of meat-eating as an act of violence, yet at once, inadvertently exposes the connection between the two. The imagery borrowed in this rhetorical scenario places the violence in a context which is both gendered, of male violence and female horror, and anti-natural, through the consumption of the young in the face of a female, and thus potentially maternal, figure. This latter configuration violates both natural law and fundamental moral and ethical codes generally unrefuted by human standards, and thus highlights the instability of the moral grounding within the realm of the paternal, questioning practices which, as another guest describes are "a fundamental human instinct, which means vegetarianism goes against human nature," which leads her to the conclusion that vegetarianism "just isn't natural" (29).

While Yeong-hye's budding desire to metamorphose into vegetation evolves over the course of the novel, the earlier markers of her transformation display more animalistic tendencies. Yeong-hye's animalistic alterity begins to surface within the dreams she describes towards the beginning of the novel. In the first dream sequence she describes, the lines between reality and recollection are unclear. Her husband yells at her for "squirming" and "being squeamish" as she chops meat for dinner. The pace of action quickens, and subject and object become blurred as the tension between her and her husband rises: "My hand, the chopping board, the meat, and the knife" (25). In this heated moment, Yeong-hye cuts herself; her flesh becomes the flesh that is being chopped on the cutting board, "the knife slicing cold into my finger" (25). She continues her account by describing her husband's rage later that day as he finds a shard of the knife's blade embedded within his dinner. Yeong-hye's flesh conflated with the meat on the cutting board and the onset of her rejection of the patriarchal standards, embodied in this scene

through her husband's aggression, performs an act of retaliation. The animal that has been slaughtered, chopped and prepared, transformed into a form of consumption for man, becomes weaponized, armed with shrapnel, holding the potential to tear the consumer apart from the inside. This initial dream sequence foreshadows Yeong-hye's later act of self-laceration. Her dreams become increasingly violent, the lines between perpetrator and victim progressively blurring: "dreams of murder. Murder or murdered...hazy distinctions, boundaries wearing thin. Familiarity bleeds into strangeness, certainty becomes impossible" (33).

Following Yeong-hye's breakdown, after her husband's account of the events surrounding her act of self-harm and her family rushes her off to the hospital, the narrative detaches from the drama of the incident and plunges once again into Yeong-hye's (sub)conscious, this time venturing into her childhood repressions. The sequence describes the process of "running a dog to death" as a mode of slaughtering a dog to be prepared as a feast for Yeong-hye's family and their acquaintances. The dog in question, once revered in the village of her youth, is sentenced to death after having bit Yeong-hye. Under the pretense of a slightly skewed version of the idiom 'the hair of the dog that bit you', this tradition involves consuming the meat of the animal, rather than the hair alone. The dog is attached by a rope to Yeong-hye's father's motorcycle and brutally dragged by the neck until its death, because "he heard somewhere that driving a dog to keep running until the point of death makes the meat tender" (47). Yeong-hye recalls the scene in horrifying detail, and describes her cold dissociation as she later "scoop[s] up a mouthful for [her]self. No, in fact...an entire bowlful with rice" (47). In her work on psychoanalysis and the abject, *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva poses the question "'I am afraid of being bitten' or 'I am afraid of biting'?" as a means to arrive at the core of fear as a manifestation of the active drives

of desire and aggression. Yeong-hye poses a strikingly similar question: “Bad dog, you’d bite me?” (47). In consideration of these dynamics, Kristeva offers the following interpretation: “Fear and the aggressivity intended to protect me”, in the novel’s scenario, the violent murder of the dog that bit her, “from some not yet localizable cause are projected and come back to me from the outside: ‘I am threatened’” (Kristeva 39). Kristeva further condenses this relationship in the following statement: “I am not the one that devours, I am being devoured by him; a third person therefore (he, a third person) is devouring me” (39). This complex network of fear, desire, aggression and violence is reciprocated within Yeong-hye’s ‘dream’. Recognizing at once the threat of the animal that bit her and the violent repercussion of the patriarchal figure, her father, the subject finds herself backed into a corner, where animal and human pose equal threat, and ultimately, is forced to contend with the fact that neither provides the safety she seeks—within the realm of the Symbolic, she is either the devourer or the devoured.

The second major shift in Yeong-hye’s transformation occurs in the second part of the novel, narrated by her brother-in-law. Learning of Young-hye's lasting birthmark, a Mogolian mark on her buttock, her brother-in-law forms an increasing obsession with his sister-in-law which evolves to form an artistic vision: “he was struck by the image of a blue flower on a woman’s buttocks. In his mind, the fact that his sister-in-law still had a Mongolian mark on her buttocks became inexplicably bound up with the image of men and women having sex, their naked bodies completely covered with painted flowers” (Kang 65). As his obsession grows and his artistic vision feverishly impassions him, the brother-in-law eventually pursues his project, arranging to paint Yeong-hye’s body entirely in flowers and capture it on film. After their first session, the brother-in-law reaches out to Yeong-hye to discover she has kept the painted flowers

on her body: “I didn’t want it to come off...so I haven’t washed my body. It’s stopping the dreams from coming” (105). The flowers painted on Yeong-hye’s body represent a form of protective barrier, as a layer of paint which lies between her body and the exterior world, and as a solution to the problem posed by the necessary violence involved when occupying either the human or animal world. Vegetation offers a peaceful realm for Yeong-hye where she is able to remain passive, rather than be forced into a position of the devourer or the devoured.

In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, female “otherness” is conflated with the violent relationship between anthropocentric systems of value and the natural world. While Kang’s novel observes this same relationship through the act of consuming meat, Moshfegh’s novel focuses rather on symbols of high culture and capitalist elitism, and the means by which shallow cultural norms and vapid human consumerism are carried out at the expense of the natural world. At the beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to its unnamed narrator following her recent unemployment from a high end New York art gallery, where she was employed as a concierge with minor duties. In her own words: “I was the bitch who sat behind a desk and ignored you when you walked into the gallery, a pouty knockout wearing indecipherably cool avant-garde outfits. I was told to play dumb if anyone asked a question. Evade, evade” (Moshfegh 37). During her time at the gallery, the narrator’s presence is treated rather as a symbol, an elitist icon within a high brow cultural setting, a body paid to accent the cryptically intellectual, devastatingly hip and consciously condescending atmosphere the gallery space strives for. The collection which occupies the gallery during the narrator’s description of her final weeks of employment is a showcase of pieces which combine the corporeal object with blatant and cliché symbols of capitalist culture, ironically titled “Body of Substance”. The collection includes “a

huge white carpet from Crate and Barrel with bloody footprints”, “a Big Mac and fries and cheap plastic rosaries”, “the artist’s baby teeth and Christmas colored M&Ms” and “toy monkeys made of human pubic hair” (Moshfeqh 38-9). The highlight of the show is artist Ping Xi’s “dog pieces”, taxidermied canines rumored to have been frozen to death to retain their life-like air, their corpses electronically wired to emit red lasers from their eyes. At once horrified and disinterested, the narrator continues with her tendency to nap in broom closets during work hours, a type of coping mechanism and the seedling of her project to use sleep as a manner of escapism. The habit eventually results in the termination of her employment at the gallery. As she locks up at the close of her final shift, the narrator is struck with a sudden urge which she allows herself to indulge in:

I pulled a few Kleenex from the box on my old desk, flipped the power switch to turn on the lasers, and stood between the stuffed black Lab and sleeping daschund. Then I pulled down my pants, squatted, and shat on the floor. I wiped myself and shuffled across the gallery with my pants around my ankles and stuffed the shitty Kleenex into the mouth of that bitchy poodle. (Moshfeqh 50-1)

In this moment, the narrator does more than vindicate the termination of her employment. The act of squatting and shitting, in the same way a dog crouches to defecate on a sidewalk, embodies the animal that has been frozen, stuffed, displayed and price tagged, and returns life to its corpse by performing the act of elimination, a necessary and vital function, that of refuse— the ultimate in corporeal abjection, a word which uncoincidentally works as a verb which signifies willful rejection. Her revenge rebelliously returns life to the bodies “whose objectification and violation is the source of the power wielded by the similes and symbols used to insult women: nag, bat,

cow, bitch” (Beeston 681), where “violence against women is imbricated with its violence against nonhuman life forms” (Beeston 683). Indeed, in this moment, she reclaims the term “bitch” — approximating the abject corpses with her own body, muted, vacant and on display within a context of superficial intellectualism and morally questionable filth disguised as cultural luxury.

The narrator of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*’s bestial transmutation is a recurring theme in the novel. Following a blackout at the hands of Moshfegh’s imaginary pharmaceutical “Infermiterol”, the narrator awakens on a train draped in a brand new fox fur coat. Other items on her person bring her to the assumption she has indulged in a shopping spree in the midst of her somnambulism, yet she remains perplexed by the coat:

[...] the white fur coat was interesting to me. It had personality. How many foxes had to die, I wondered. And how did they kill them so that their blood didn’t stain their fur?

Maybe Ping Xi could have answered that question, I thought. How cold would it have to be to freeze a live fox? (Moshfegh 159)

Though the narrator refers to ‘personality’ as a form of fashion expression, her pondering of the animal’s death raises a different type of consideration towards the statement that the coat makes. The term ‘personality’ takes on a dual meaning, referring at once to the personality a fashion choice represents, as a symbolic, and thus cultural, definition of status, as well as a form of anthropomorphism for the dead animal. Again, the narrator conflates herself with the animal carcass, a living being whose physicality has been appropriated through capitalist value systems, underlining the exploitation of the natural world at the hands of anthropocentric orders. In a cultural context, the image of a woman in fur is often associated with the suggestion that a

woman's sexuality can both be likened to and arouse animalistic instincts. The image evoked by the narrator shifts the focus away from sensuality, provoking a more disturbing image, a careful and precise method of scalping which recalls the methods employed by Ping Xi in his earlier "dog pieces", a form of sterilization of the animal's inherent abjection in order to commodify its outer appearance. The conflation of luxury and wealth and the brutal reality that the curation of such symbols entail is evoked once again in a later scene:

“ [Reva] took off her coat and draped it over the back of the sofa next to my fox fur. Two pelts. I thought of Ping Xi's dead dogs again. A memory arose from one of my last days at [the art gallery]: a rich gay Brazilian petting the stuffed poodle and telling Natasha he wanted a 'coat just like this, with a hood.' My head hurt.” (Moshfegh 200)

The narrator's experience with the likening of high culture and sickening violence is directly remedied through a form of escapism which figures through her subconscious dreamscape. As she begins to toe the line between waking and slumber, she imagines the dead animals personified, as she and her friend Reva, in an imaginary (and impossible) pastoral scene, evoking a sense of comfort, refuge and survival:

“I pictured the fox and the beaver, cozied up together [...] the beaver's buck teeth, its raspy snore, the perfect animal avatar for Reva. And me, the little white fox splayed out on its back, a bubble gum pink tongue lolling out of its pristine, furry snout, impervious to the cold.” (Moshfegh 201-2)

The survival of these two creatures is ultimately unsuccessful. As the narrator embarks on her solo mission to sleep her way to a new life, she leaves the beaver version of Reva out to freeze; and the narrator's fox too, by agreeing to part take in Ping Xi's creative undertakings that are to

be put on display at the same gallery she used to work at, becomes immortalized, like his dog pieces, a “frozen corpse” (224). Through animal and vegetal alterity, both women find ways to contend with bodies that are othered through processes of commodification, objectification, and abjection.

Returning to the Semiotic:

Involved within the process of self-destruction is the carving out of new space, a liminal area that is born out of the compromise between active functionality within the confines of a social order and complete extinction of being (death). For Yeong-hye, this space exists, to readopt the imagery Alix Beeston borrows from Helen Cixous in her exploration of animalism and alterity, “outside the city”. To answer her desire to escape, she must change form, into a tree. Her aspiration for vegetal metamorphosis describes a desire to shed her body, human and female, and occupy a new space, among the docile vegetation that surrounds the violence and turmoil of the city. This return to nature signifies a return to the maternal realm, where nature is gendered as feminine, defined by both passivity and as a source of life. This return is not a docile venture into the beauty of the natural world, but rather a difficult, if not impossible, return to a world that is cut off to her. Yeong-hye’s desire to return to the maternal nature signifies rather, a desire to return to the primordial, the pre anthropocene, pre-lingual, maternal. Her undoing is in this sense a journey which seeks a form of rebirth. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*’s narrator becomes somnambule, with an increasing desire to hide from the world. She finds solace first in the broom closet in the art gallery where she works, and later, makes arrangements to stay completely confined within the walls of her apartment. Her mutiny of sleeping pills do not represent a threat to her life, but rather, a solace or solution to the threat that life poses to her, hence her desire to crawl back into these small confined and womb-like spaces. This reaction comes as no surprise given her recent loss. Having witnessed the demise of her mother following her father’s death, also a self-destructive dive into alcoholism and drugs, the narrator’s dive into the world of pharmaceutical drugs does not stray too far from her mother’s path. But perhaps it

is in this semi-reenactment that the narrator is able to regain proximity to her mother, to follow in her footsteps and remain coddled in the womb like spaces she finds, hoping for purification, for rebirth, and thus, a second chance at life.

The return to the maternal occurs in a form that, borrowing from Bordo, produces acts of “protest and retreat in the same gesture”. This avenue proves to be problematic. Bordo comments as well on the issues that persist through methods of resistance which further forms of female othering and lack of agency:

Functionally, the symptoms of these disorders isolate, weaken, and undermine the sufferers, at the same time they turn the life of the body into an all absorbing fetish, beside which all other objects of attention pale into unreality. On the symbolic level, too, the protest collapses into its opposite and proclaims the utter capitulation of the subject to the contracted female world. The muteness of hysterics and their return to the level of pure, primarily bodily expressivity have been interpreted, as we have seen, as rejecting the symbolic order of the patriarchy and recovering the lost world of semiotic, maternal value. But at the same time, of course, muteness is the condition of the silent, uncomplaining woman— an ideal of patriarchal culture. Protesting the stifling of the female voice through one’s own voicelessness— that is, employing the language of femininity to protest the conditions of the female world— will always involve ambiguities of this sort (Bordo 2105).

Indeed, Moshfegh’s narrator and Yeong-hye’s protests beg the question of efficacy, as Yeong-hye’s eventual demise points to an unpromising outcome. And while the narrator of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* seems to undergo a process which results in a shift of perspective,

noting a sudden relief from the weight of the material and a foreboding towards the fleeting present, the novel ends with the image of her friend Reva falling to her death from the top floors of the World Trade Center: “there she is human, diving into the unknown, and she is wide awake” (Moshfegh 289). How then are these passages from the material to the natural, the symbolic to the semiotic, to be interpreted? A form of ultimate demise seems to take place as the solution to these women who seek to escape a life that is inevitably caught up in the domination of the oppressive paternal. If the natural offers freedom only at the cost of demise, then how does the issue of female agency mitigated by anthropocentric and patriarchal structures find successful avenues of escape?

In line with this thinking, it is worthy to note that the likeness of the feminine with the natural world is a point of contention within feminist discourse, with the denouncement that such associations function to strengthen oppressive hierarchies rather than resolve or subvert them. Julia Kristeva’s differentiation between semiotic and symbolic orders of existence, gendered as female and male, or rather, the maternal as that which lies outside of paternal culture, order and rationality, has garnered criticism which rests upon this very problem. In her essay “At the Limits of Discourse”, Ewa Ziarek examines the opposition between these two positions and aims to deconstruct the controversy which lies at the root of such claims: “On the one hand, her theory of semiotics opens up a specifically feminine point of resistance to the phallogocentric models of culture. On the other hand, because semiotic is associated with the *prediscursive* libidinal economy, the grounds and the effectiveness of that resistance appear problematic at the very least” (Ziarek 91). Ziarek raises questions which echo the concerns towards the efficacy of destructive modes of resistance:

Does Kristeva, in spite of her intentions, blindly repeat the traditional cultural gestures that relegates women to a precultural, prediscursive position? Can her maternal source of resistance lead to any significant transformation of cultural paradigms? Does it empower the female speaker? Can it address the issue of female agency? And finally, does her elaboration of the maternal outside the symbolic order boil down to a crude version of essentialism, if not a mute biologism? (Ziarek 92)

Ziarek defends Kristeva's theory of the semiotic as a maternal space that is non-confining by underlining her arguments as non-binary, and insists on the overlap between the positions of the semiotic and the symbolic, where the relationship is not polar or oppositional, but rather interwoven and dependent of each other. Specifically, Ziarek argues that Kristeva's "semiotic chora" does not function "as an alternative, more authentic origin [...] nor as an alternative independent position within the symbolic, but as traces of alterity and heterogeneity operating *within* the linguistic and psychic economy" (Ziarek 98).

The Figure of the Male Artist:

If the Semiotic exists as a pre-lingual, pre-cultural, and perhaps even pre-conscious, state of development, it exists principally in relation to modes of culture. The co-dependence of these two spheres, then, must exist mutually in order to define each other, and inevitably exert influence upon each other. This relationship, the tension between the material, the cultural, symbolic paternal and the feminine is embodied in both novels through the figure of the male artist. In her essay “Seductive Canvasses,” Linda Nead dissects the position of the male artist as a producer of culture who exudes a specific type of identity which draws from both the masculine and the feminine: “genius...described in terms of male sexual energies; but at the same time, genius was also likened to emotional qualities such as sensitivity, intuition, irrationality, etc. which were defined as feminine attributes...artistic identity can be seen to a certain extent as the attempt to control and contain the feminine connotations of creativity” (Nead 61). The effeminate male artist figure is embodied by the “pubescent-looking twenty three year old” (Moshfegh 37) Ping Xi in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, and through the brother-in-law in *The Vegetarian*, who’s masculinity is foiled by the extreme and traditional patriarchal figures of Yeong-hye’s father and her ex-husband, and who suffers from a form of demasculinization through the bread-winning role his wife occupies in his marriage.

While Yeong-hye’s vegetal transformation responds to the cultural perception of the decorative woman, the dynamic between Yeong-hye and the brother-in-law extends this concept through the relationship between artist and muse, and a fetishized version of the creative process through the metaphor of the woman as canvas. Linda Nead’s essay pays special attention to this “conflation of the painted canvas and woman” and the process through which “woman as sign

becomes a central symbol in the construction of artistic identity” (Nead 1995, 59). Additionally, Nead frames the artist as a figure of “cultural production”, where the “artist likens his relationship to his work (woman) to being: ‘father, lover, God’...evok[ing] the central metaphors through which artistic creativity has been and continues to be represented, with the work envisaged as the *creation* of the artist, enacting a fantasy of what may be called male autogenesis” (Nead 1995, 59). This description of the multiplicity of masculine roles embodied by the artist as well as the artist’s role as creator, where “the rhetoric of genius stresses artistic creativity as an act of labour, resulting in the ‘birth’ of the work of art” (Nead 61), captures the complex dynamic which unfolds between Yeong-hye and her brother-in-law. The evolution of the brother-in-law’s role moves across the lines of these specific relationships.

The brother-in-law first appears in Yeong-hye’s life as a protective and paternal figure. He heroically sweeps her up off her feet following her self-inflicted injuries during the luncheon at he and his wife’s home, and displays genuine concern for her well-being as he reflects on the tragic nature of the events. Later, the Mongolian mark which arouses his interest in Yeong-hye takes on particular significance as a mark which symbolizes youth, which places his obsession with Yeong-hye, the mark rendering her a symbol of child-like infancy, in a context of pedophilistic fetishization. Following the trail of his obsession with the mark, he takes Yeong-hye out to ice cream after visiting her at her apartment, at which point he raises the subject of his art project. Sensing Yeong-hye’s discomfort at the idea of posing nude for him, he coerces her through a bond of secrecy, a situation which reads as uncomfortably close to the forms of coercion which take place between victims of sexual abuse and their abusers. Additionally, Yeong-hye does not explicitly agree to the project, and her consent is loosely

interpreted by the brother-in-law through her silence rather than any verbal agreement: “She gave no sign of assent, but none of refusal either” (Kang 85). The brother-in-law’s paternalistic relationship with Yeong-hye is simultaneously underscored by his sexual arousal, experiencing an erection at the sight of her naked body when he enters her apartment, and later, struggles, as he paints her nude body, to make sense of his growing sexual desire: “He stood there completely motionless, frowning as he struggled to identify the source of the roiling confusion inside him, which the sight of her prone body had stirred up” (89). The entanglement of the emotions the brother-in-law experiences as he paints Yeong-hye, sexual arousal as well as a sense of fatherhood in his role as both a source of creation, and in the context of Yeong-hye’s infantile disposition, are concretized through the metaphor of the painter’s brush, as he describes “a thrilling energy [which] seemed to flow out quietly from some unknowable place inside his body and collect on the tip of his brush” (Kang 93), reading simultaneously as a phallic instrument, that which inscribes and penetrates the female canvas (Nead 59), as well as “a kind of umbilical cord, channelling creativity to the nascent work of art in a passionate, reciprocal relationship” (Nead 61). The sexual energy which begins to overtake the brother-in-law occurs by way of the subconscious. Following his initial session with Yeong-hye, he dreams of “a green sap, like that which oozes from bruised leaves,” which “began to flow out from her vagina when he entered her. The acrid sweetness of the grass was so pungent he found it difficult to breathe” (102). Infected by his desire for Yeong-hye, the artist finds himself suffocated by the female energy he attempts to mitigate. The disintegration of the paternal in these moments by way of female sexual energy illustrates the inevitable non-totality of the symbolic order, and the inability of the paternal to achieve total renunciation from the semiotic.

In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, the creative process appears through a similar metaphor of ‘creative labour’. As the narrator finalizes the necessary details to carry out her hibernation, she employs Ping Xi as a form of caretaker, hired to provide her with the bare necessities for survival without leaving her apartment, in exchange for the use of her body as a subject for his creative visions. The narrator’s full retreat from society at this point in the novel signifies the pinnacle in the cycle of her rebirth. Her period of dormancy serves as a metaphor for fetal growth, where her apartment serves as a womb, and Ping Xi as the provider, serving as her sole connection to the outside world; as well as the creator, as he manipulates the narrator in her sleep to providing her with nutrition as she develops in the new person she seeks to become. Ping Xi then takes on both the roles of the paternal, as producer of culture through means of his artistic project, as well as the maternal as the source for the narrator’s biological survival. In Ping Xi’s work as well, his creative production within the symbolic is imbricated with traces of the maternal, his paintings of the narrator “printed with...Coca Cola and Pennzoil and Chanel and Absolut Vodka logos,” condemned by art critics as “a product of Oedipal lust,” and including a video piece where the narrator is dubbed with “long, angry voicemails Ping Xi’s mother had left him in Cantonese” (Moshfegh 104).

An afternoon following the emergence from her period of drug-induced rest, the narrator visits the Met. As she contemplates a still life, the narrator experiences an epiphanic moment which seems to momentarily shatter the barriers which uphold the binaristic structures which mitigate concepts of relationality: of self and other, of thought and the material, pain and pleasure, present and past. In a brief moment, these structures seem to implode before the narrator’s eyes, and, as a validation of her present experience, reaches out with her hand and

“placed my whole palm on the dry, rumbling surface of the canvas, simply to prove to myself that there was no God stalking my soul. Time was not immemorial,” she realizes, “things were just *things*” (286). The conclusion of this moment breaks the rationality of the paternal symbolic, stripping away the eminence of culture through the simple and non-lingual act of touch. The piece of art reduced to its mere physicality liberates the narrator and delivers her finally from the reign of the symbolic order— allowing her the freedom to act on her own accord, free from the ruling notions which circumscribed her sense of identity throughout the novel.

The life of the artistic pieces which use both women as subjects mirrors the outcome of the protagonists transformative processes. While Ping Xi’s serie of the narrator, “Large Headed Pictures of a Beautiful Woman” (282), receives a fair amount of critical acclaim, the narrators newfound relationality successfully transcends the contention between cultural representation and concepts of selfhood, and she is finally able to operate independently from the confines, yet successfully from within the symbolic. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye’s outcome may read as tragic— as the conclusion of the novel indicates her ultimate demise as she is rushed off to intensive care in an ambulance. The brother-in-laws erotic films, too, are destroyed, never to be recuperated. Yet while Yeong-hye’s fate may read as tragic, her disintegration into a vegetal state symbolizes the very freedom she strives to achieve. While Yeong-hye is the central character of *The Vegetarian*, the wake of her transformation serves to ultimately liberate her sister, as she reflects in the final pages: “If...Yeong-hye hadn’t smashed through all the boundaries, if everything hadn’t splintered apart, then perhaps she would have been the one who would have broken down, and if she’d let that happen, if she’d let go of that thread, she might have never found it again” (Kang 185). Yeong-hye’s self-destruction thus returns a form of agency to the

feminine, to the maternal, although at her own expense. The novel ends: “The trees by the side of the road are blazing, green fire undulating like the rippling flanks of a massive animal, wild and savage” (187), recalling the insistent and unharnessed power of the natural, returning agency to the silent through her own unwavering and insistent protest.

Bibliography:

- Beeston, Alix. "The Watch-Bitch Now: Reassessing the Natural Woman in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things*." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2020, vol. 45, no. 3, The University of Chicago, pp. 679-702.
- Bordo, Susan. "Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body." *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism*, edited by Cain, William E., Finke, Laurie A., Leitch, Vincent B., McGowan, John, Sharpley-Whiting, T. Deanen, Williams, Jeffrey J., 3rd. Ed., 2018, Norton & Company, pp. 2096-2111.
- Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism*, edited by Cain, William E., Finke, Laurie A., Leitch, Vincent B., McGowan, John, Sharpley-Whiting, T. Deanen, Williams, Jeffrey J., 3rd. Ed., Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 1869-1886.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Gubar, Susan. "Chapter 2: Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship." *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism: A Norton Reader*, edited by Gilbert, Sandra M. and Gubar, Susan, 2007, Norton & Company, pp. 448-459.
- Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian*. Translated by Deborah Smith, Hogarth, 2015.
- Kreizman, Maris. "Self-Destruction Beats Self-Help in Two of the Most Exciting Books of the Year." *Buzzfeed*, July 20th 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mariskreizman/ottessa-moshfegh-melissa-broder-wellness-self-help>, accessed December 12, 2020.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, 1982.

Lee, Sharon Heijin. "Beauty Between Empires: Global Feminism, Plastic Surgery, and the Trouble with Self-Esteem." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 2016, Vol. 37, No. 1, University of Nebraska Press, pp. 1-31.

Moshfegh, Ottessa. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Penguin Books, 2019.

Nead, Lynda. "Seductive Canvases: Visual Mythologies of the Artist and Artistic Creativity." *Oxford Art Journal*, 1995, Vol. 18, No. 2, Oxford University Press, pp. 59-69.

Sawyer, Jesse. "Fiction Review: *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Moshfegh," *Stillpoint Magazine*, <https://stillpointmag.org/articles/fiction-review-my-year-of-rest-and-relaxation-by-ottessa-moshfegh/>, accessed February 12 2021.

Tincknell, Estella. "Scourging the Abject Body: *Ten Years Younger* and Fragmented Femininity under Neoliberalism." *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, edited by Gill, Rosalind, Scharff, Christina, 2011, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 83-95.

Ziarek, Ewa. "At the Limits of Discourse: Heterogeneity, Alterity, and the Maternal Body in Kristeva's Thought." *Hypatia*, 1992, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 91-108.