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DEBT, PAYBACK, AND THE SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH THE VEGETAL IMAGINATION: ATWOOD'S PAYBACK AND HAN KANG'S THE VEGETARIAN

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Abstract

This paper is a close reading of Han Kang's 'The Vegetarian' centrally in relation to the author's notion of 'innocence' and to Margaret Atwood's notion of 'debt' and 'payback'. Building upon this foundation, Gaston Bachelard's concept of the 'vegetal imagination' will then be incorporated into the paper's broader psychoanalytic context as a means of explaining the protagonist, Yeong-hye's relationship to moral debt. What is important to understand for this paper is that the vegetal imagination embraces contradiction. In this respect, the vegetal imagination can be seen as sympathetic towards both human beings and nature, aiming for sustainability. Actually, Han portrays Yeong-hye as the epitome of someone trying to embrace the victims of a violent history, symbolized in the novel as uprooted trees.

Keywords

The Vegetarian, Payback, Debt, Fantasy, The real, The Vegetal imagination.

1. Introduction: Financial Debt and Moral Debt

At a time when so many of us are mired in debts of the financial variety, it is worth remembering that it is the other, non-financial debts that we owe to the planet, and to each other – that may prove most important.

—William Skidelsky, *Debt shall have its dominion*, 2008—

Han Kang, the South Korean poet and novelist, has gained more popularity since she won The Man Booker International Prize in 2016, and subsequently her surreal novel *The Vegetarian* was selected as one of The 10 Best Books of 2016 by the editors of The New York Times Book Review. Actually, since *The Vegetarian* was published in 2007, it has been translated into other languages such as English and German, developing a climate of sympathy among an international readership. Especially, through her novels, Han calls into question the violence and absurdity, which, I argue, is latent within human nature of her characters.

As recent critical debates about *The Vegetarian* have tended to center around human desire, heteronomous females against male counterparts and trauma,¹ *The Vegetarian* strikingly portrays an aspect of violence, which can be attributed as the main source of traumatic experiences, inflicted by a *close(d)*² family and “focuses on survival in a world that demands conformity” (Clemens, 2016, p.91). This conformity also demands “socially, and especially patriarchally, inflicted definitions of normality” (Suess, 2003, p.81). The novel then explicates how the characters encounter each other traumatically and deal with those experiences, centering on the protagonist, Yeong-hye and her elder sister In-hye. According to Han (2016b) during her interview, in relation to *The Vegetarian*, she portrays Yeong-hye, as a being who tries to return to a state of innocence by avoiding inflicting harm on any other sentient being, through becoming a vegetarian.

One day, out of the blue, Yeong-hye decides to abstain from eating meat. The only reason she gives for her behaviour is a nightmare which she had the previous night. In the nightmare, she sees a blood-soaked image and this image remains with her, resulting in her decision to become a vegetarian. Significantly, the image is of a dog that is killed by her father and eaten by

¹ For more information, see. Mi-Suk Jeong, et al. (2016). *Han Kang, Deep Reading the Vegetarian*. Seoul, SU: The Story.

² *Close(d)* is a coined word by the author of this paper that stands for close but closed minded.

her and the rest of her family (Han, 2015, p.41-2), symbolizing the sense of guilt about the lives taken for other's sustainability, reflected in the gaze of the dog.

Now, crucially, Yeong-hye's desire to become a vegetarian coincides with Han (2016b)'s view that the act of eating meat infers the violence and brutality of human beings, calling our attention to the fact that enjoying meat during supper time unavoidably involves slaughter. Yeong-hye pursues absolute innocence, literally meaning free from sin or guilt. In this sense, it seems that her act of renouncing meat is one of the ways to payback a debt we owe to the lives taken to preserve our own.

In a sense, the concept of paying back shares a great similarity with the epigraph presented on the first page of this chapter. While reviewing Margaret Atwood's *Payback*, William Skidelsky (2008) identifies moral hebetude in the conscience of people, attributing its cause to a life in debt both financially and morally. In *Payback*, Atwood (2008) articulates "some debts are not money debts: they are moral debts, or debt having to do with imbalances in the right order of things" (p. 163). With this in mind, central to this paper's argument are the concepts of moral debt and payback.

However, this paper will not only contend with debt and payback in a moral sense but in a financial sense too. Actually, throughout the course of the human history, human beings have been both inflictors and victims simultaneously of the state-condoned violence which was allowed for conformity within ideologies of: religious, race and gender based identity. The brutal violence on the battlefield is one of the apposite examples. Ironically to preserve the existing law, committing violence has been considered as necessary. This is especially true of the 21st century, where the populace gains approval for another kind of violence, one where the populous is encouraged to be more competitive to accumulate more wealth.

In the wake of former industrialized era, an information society has arisen without the discipline of the factory environment. This form of society encourages individuals to develop creativity and be more competitive and creative. However, this encouragement becomes coercive, forcing people to exercise their faculty of imagination and to become superior at any cost. Amid these continuing tensions of competitive relationships, people are oblivious to their

reality and how they are manipulated by money.³ It is the way the capitalist society maintains itself.

Nowadays we are exposed to many advertisements for loans, cultivating in a society that encourages the populace to get into debt and, invariably, delay repayment. Moreover, this is more possible with the contemporary banking system because the banks encourage the populace to take out loans and accumulate their wealth through interest, and inversely, the debtors want to make enough money to repay the principal and interest. However, sometimes the ratio of debt is too exorbitant to be repaid. Through the centuries of religious and colonial wars, human beings suffered violence for the attainment of power and economic wealth. Now within a late capitalist society, individuals compete over territory and resources; and, subsequently, the harsh law-preserving violence conditions the populace to be indifferent about their human nature.

With this in mind, this paper will attempt to outline an alternative reading of *The Vegetarian*, employing Margret Atwood's concept of payback and French Philosopher Gaston Bachelard's concept of vegetal imagination, principally in a Lacanian context.⁴ Further still, although, Atwood (2008) illustrates her unique insights into financial debt and *payback*, giving many examples from history, mythology, and literary works, this paper will employ her general ideas on debt and payback in relationship to centrally its socio-cultural aspects.

Therefore, the main focus of this paper will be on moral debt and payback, centering on the characters of *The Vegetarian*, broadening the horizon of understanding about the delayed payback for moral debts through them. Also it will explore the possibility of payback through Yeong-hye's ceaseless pursuit of her desire: to become a tree, conveying sympathy. In this paper, this faculty of sympathy will be clarified in the same vein of Bachelard's concept of vegetal imagination, which is, here, presented as a main mechanism of payback. With this in mind, a close reading of *The Vegetarian* will show us how Yeong-hye pursues pay back her

³ To see related contents, refer to Gilles Deleuze (1992). "Postscript on the societies of control." *October*, 59, p.3-7.

⁴ This paper will draw from two main theoretical backgrounds: in order to elucidate the mechanism of the capitalist society, this paper will use French philosopher Jacques Lacan's concept of the *fantasy* linking it to fractional reserve banking system, in Chapter 2 and to suggest the possible method to pay back our moral debt and keep the sustainability, this paper will integrate Lacanian concept of the Real with Bachelard's concept of vegetal world and vegetal imagination.

moral debt and tries to give us hopeful message to coexist, demarcating awareness of guilt and moral hebetude.

2. Debt and Delayed Payback: How Does the Capitalism Encourages Moral Hebetude

It's about debt as a human construct—thus an imaginative construct—and how this construct mirrors and magnifies both voracious human desire and ferocious human fear.

—Margaret Atwood, *Payback*, 2008—

Throughout the course of history, human beings have extorted the lives and belongings of others under the name of legitimacy. In this sense: “War, barbarism, waste, religious bigotry, conspicuous consumption, greed, environmental degradation, preventable diseases, and patriarchal oppression” (Gilman, 2004, p.ix) can be adduced as apposite examples. According to American novelist, poet and social activist, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (2004), these are “highly unethical” (p.ix) and must be defeated in a healthy society. The human race today is the beneficiary and, at the same time, the victim of these events. This brutality is closely linked to the 21th century Capitalism.

In his essay, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” Gilles Deleuze (1992) defines this world as “the *societies of control*, which are in the process of replacing the disciplinary societies” (p. 4) alluding to Michel Foucault’s concept of societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Deleuze (1992) notes that in this society of control, “Man is no longer man enclosed but man in debt” (p.6). In the disciplinary societies, power pursues conformity, and just as William Blake’s poem, *Jerusalem*, prophetically conveys that the society of discipline does not admit particulars as they are, and categorizes them into generality making them corresponding to the social law.

You accumulate Particulars, & murder by analyzing, that you
May take the aggregate; & you call the aggregate Moral Law:
(Blake, 1982, p.251).

Fundamentally, it seems that the society of this era is not so much different. In this society of control, “the numerical language of control is made of codes” and they control “access to information” (Deleuze, 1992, p.5). In the society of codes, the subjectivity and special circumstances of the individuals are relegated and reduced, and one can be labelled with hyper-objectivity and numerical standards. Deleuze (1992) points out that instead of the disciplines of schools, factories and hospitals in the 18th and 19th centuries, in this society of control, companies overheats competition resulting in experiencing inner split of individuals. One can face difficulties to achieve self-integration, no longer in-dividuals.

Individuals have become “*dividuals*,” and masses, samples, data, markets, or “*banks*.” Perhaps it is money that expresses the distinction between the two societies best, since discipline always referred back to minted money that locks gold in as numerical standard, while control relates to floating rates of exchange, modulated according to a rate established by a set of standard currencies. (Deleuze, 1992, p. 5)

From the above remarks of Deleuze (1992), we can sketch out how the society exhorts the populace to owe a debt and delay payback. A literal meaning of debt is traced back to the famous tale of goldsmiths in 17th century. Alan Shipman (2015) illustrates it effectively in *Capitalism without Capital*. When metals, such as gold and silver, were used in coining money, people deposited their gold in the goldsmith’s vault and took the receipt from the goldsmiths. Due to the portability, those receipts passed as currency within their communities. Instead of just keeping the gold in the vault, the goldsmiths started to loan it to other merchants and made profits with interest which occurred on the loan (Shipman, 2015, p.57-8). Shipman (2015) describes this mechanism succinctly as below.

The bank [the goldsmith vault] is solvent at all times, since each deposit is matched by a loan, and its liquidity will not be troubled provided borrowers repay before depositors return. Then the goldsmiths discover that most depositors return rather infrequently, so that same capital [gold] can be safely re-lent to several borrowers. ‘Fractional reserve’

banking is invented, enhancing bank's ability to finance the growing demand from mercantile and industrial entrepreneurs. (p. 57-8)

Ostensibly, it looks plausible. However, in this system, the banks accept deposits, make loans or investments for getting interest and hold reserves that are equivalent to only a fraction of deposit liabilities. The banks actually lend the money without money. Now what matters is the numbers and code on a written IOU, promissory notes, or bank checks. People actually use every means to imbibe those codes or information as much as possible: *All singing all dancing*, using computerized money. When it comes to fractional reserve banking system, Andrew Gause (n.d.), a monetary historian, said that it is "like a child's game of musical chairs, as long as the music is playing, there are no losers". However, when the music stops, getting a chair must involve the sacrifice of a loser, that is to say, a victim. Throughout the game, the victims increase in number while the winners decrease until there is only one. But, ironically, those losers of the game, who are in reality the debtors who pay the interest for *the empty vault*, sustain the very same capitalistic society that they are failing in.

The game of musical chairs comes to a playful end but the capitalist system of money must continue, and debt is the incessant music. If all the debtors paid back their debts and depositors withdrew all the deposited money at once, there would be no more money in circulation because the banks only reserve a fraction of its deposit. Each and every bank accumulates its wealth with the interest it charges. Therefore, the populace is encouraged to be in debt and discouraged to payback what they owe.

The same is true in other fields of the society. For instance, "the corporation works more deeply to impose a modulation of each salary, in states of perpetual metastability" and "presents the brashest rivalry as a healthy form of emulation" (Deleuze, 1992, p.4-5). Actually, 'metastability' is a terminology in physics and chemistry. In the metastable state, substance is neither stable nor unstable. There is no immediate phase-change, but with just a few external stimulus, the state of metastability easily changes into either the state of unstable or stable. According to Deleuze (1992), "in the societies of control one is never finished with anything" (p.5), resulting in precarious postponement. The companies, the educational organizations and

other social systems are in the states of metastable, “coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation” (Deleuze, 1992, p.5).

In the social context, the society, which maintains our lives, is in states of metastability. The capitalist system pictures the law of the jungle as a healthy form to maintain the society and accumulate the wealth, but it makes the populace postpone their awareness of a true reality and believe they are in a right state. With this process, the structure of the society makes the populace insensitive to losers of the competitions. Gradually, making a scapegoat can be taken for granted. This social phenomena shows us how closely and prevalently the mechanism of capitalism is interwoven within a sociocultural system.

In *The Vegetarian*, most of the characters live in “the limitless postponements of the societies of control⁵” (Deleuze, 1992, p.5) and “hide behind generally accepted ideas” (Han, 2016a, p.35) except Yeong-hye and her elder sister In-hye: Yeong-hye’s father in the Vietnam War defeating enemies, her career-oriented husband, Mr. Cheong, in the corporation, and her brother-in-law eager for success in the arts, respectively. Figuratively speaking, they all inside a circle of chairs in a game, eliminating weak players. In this game, the circle of chairs is like, what Slavoj Žižek (1991) calls, the “nodal point”⁶ (p.129). The boundary of ideology comes to function by fixing “floating signifiers” (Žižek, 1991, p.129) with nodal point, or the mechanism of capitalism.

Moreover, most characters in the novel have also contributed to the society in this way. They have been encouraged to keep doing what they have done, by the name of the Order of Military Merit or by promotion in the company; by these actions they are being unknowingly trained not to consider much about the losers. Through this circle of competition and motivation, the system functions and can be sustained. However, one could assume that this *sustaining life* or *perpetual metastability* is pseudo-sustainability which is in danger of collapse if any external power is added.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze (1992) notes that “in the societies of control one is never finished with anything — the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation”. (p.5).

⁶ Ideology is usually conceived as a discourse: as an enchainment of elements the meaning of which is overdetermined by their specific articulation, i.e., by the way some “nodal point” (the Lacanian master-signifier) totalizes them into a homogeneous field (Žižek, 1991, p.129).

3. Returned Traumatic Memories As Symbolic Debt: The Fantasy and the Real

The return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolization; the dead return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt.

—Žižek, 1991, p.23—

“Without memory there is no debt” (Atwood, 2008, p.141). According to Atwood (2008), writing is “a form of memory” (p.141). When people challenge repression of the system, they often object to the record. This theme is well portrayed in *The Vegetarian*. Throughout history, “whenever there’s been a tax-and-debt-inspired uprising, one of the prime targets has been the tax and debt records” (Atwood, 2008, p.141-142). Of course, in this process, the dominant hegemony has tried to reconstruct the memory of its victims, as well. In this respect, Han Kang’s works are memories of debt which we as human beings owe. To play down or distort the painful memories that each individual owns is like an attempt to burn a written record of debt with the intention of avoiding clear-cut payback for the debt.

In *Payback*, Atwood (2008) poses the question “Are we in debt to anyone or anything for the bare fact of our existence? If so, what do we owe, and to whom or to what? And how should we pay?” (p.1). It can be said that *The Vegetarian* is the story about moral “debt as a human construct” (Atwood, 2008, p.2) and about Yeong-hye’s struggle to payback through purging herself of sin. According to Atwood (2008), debt is “like air, it’s all around us, but we never think about it unless something goes wrong” (p.9). Yeong-hye also tried to live an ordinary life inside the circle of chairs. As part of her normal life, she considered eating meat as normal, perhaps even indispensable for sustaining her life. Eating meat becomes an onerous task, after she has a dream:

Across the frozen ravine, a red barn-like building. Straw matting flapping limp across the door. Roll it up and I’m inside, it’s inside. A long bamboo stick strung with great bold-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down....In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth,

slick with crimson blood....Chewing on something that felt so real....Familiar and yet not...that vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling. (Han, 2015, p.12)

It seems that the disquietude and agony she feels after the dream represents her guilt she feels as a human being. In *The Vegetarian*, the images of the “dream can be regarded as the textual unconscious screened through such linguistic mechanisms” (Kang, 2012, p.267). In her dream, the “red raw mass” (Han, 2015, p. 12) “return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt” (Žižek, 1991, p. 23). In a Lacanian context, dreams become an object of what Lacan calls the fantasy⁷, “the leftover of the real that enables us to ‘pull ourselves out,’ to preserve a kind of distance from the socio-symbolic network” (Žižek, 1991, p.128), as well as to endure and re-structure the traumatic experience. In this sense, Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism and the fantasy of becoming a tree can be read as a way of sustaining her existence in a narrative world where brutal violence is a source of the Real.

Yeong-hye’s eccentricity is thought to be the onset of madness, especially by her male counterparts, father and husband, Mr. Cheong, who are too practical to understand her situation. Her father actually responds with physical violence towards her. When the family members gather for dinner with the intention of getting Yeong-Hye to eat meat, her father strikes Yeong-hye in the face, knocking her mouth open. Subsequently, He tries to stuff pork into it despite her obstinate resistance, just like her husband tried to insert himself. It seems that such behavior is tantamount to another sexual assault. Her younger brother persuades her at least to *pretend* to eat meat and her father says if she eats once she’ll eat again. Just as her husband thinks after his forced copulation; “After this first time, it was easier for me to do it again” (Han, 2015, p. 31). Furthermore, in the text, we learn from In-hye that Yeong-hye had suffered her father’s brutality

⁷ According to Lacan, as the subject enters into the Symbolic Order from its primordial state, it is inescapably subjugated to the socioeconomic structure resulting in an unbridgeable gap between reality and primordial satisfaction. Fantasy is derived by this gap. To be exact, Lacanian concepts of the fantasy and the Imaginary order are different from the faculty of human imagination. Bachelard distinguishes reverie from fantasy or illusion, and insists that selfless reveries on image and elements lead us to the esemplastic power of imagination (Lee, 2015, p.183). In a sense, fantasy is essential for human life, but as what Lacan says, the subject must traverse the fantasy and pursue the real. In this regard, this paper argues that through the vegetal imagination, Yeong-hye tries to traverse the fantasy and encounter the painful real that she is both the victim and offender of violence.

since her childhood. During her childhood, the family home subjugated Yeong-Hye to her father's violence.

Only Yeong-hye, docile and naive, had been unable to deflect their father's temper or put up any form of resistance. Instead, she had merely absorbed all her suffering inside her, deep into the marrow of her bones. (Han, 2015, p.157)

The judgement for this violence is delayed and these male characters do not feel humiliation for what they did. For Yeong-hye, home is not a place of tolerance and embracement, but the place which is as strained and cruel as a capitalist society is. Subsequently the experience of repression materializes a certain symbolic debt persisting beyond physical expiration" (Žižek, 1991, p.23).

However, encountering this violent image, Yeong-hye does not hide behind the general acceptance anymore, and decides to abstain from eating meat. Although being a vegetarian, she does not attribute "a connotation of 'right' and 'wrong'" (Gilman, 2004, p.1) on other's dietary habits, or force the people around her to renounce eating meat. However, when she herself became a vegetarian, it seems like "the whole world tries to compel her to eat meat" (Han, 2016b) by involving her in their ideological world. They would not let her be herself, instead, binding her to their own territory as a daughter, sister and wife, as far as she is in control.

To some degree, all the characters in the novel are in debt to the victims who lost their chairs in the game. Her father once served in Vietnam War and is "never tired of boasting about having received the Order of Military Merit" (Han, 2015, p.29). He is presented as a man with a hot temper and "strongly fixed ideas" (Han, 2015, p.29). Putting on the medal has never put him in the shoes of those killed in the war. Actually, as The Biblical Book of Daniel says: *Numbered, numbered, weighed, divided* (as cited in Atwood, 2008, p.166), Yeong-hye's father should be aware that there comes a time to pay back what he owes to his daughter and other lives, he took for his own sustainability. Keeping a debtor/creditor account balance by an exact calculation is important. But one should remember that a correct calculation is not only essential for a balance sheet but also for memory; and, further still, for the story about the victim/offender "twinsip" (Atwood, 2008, p. 162). According to Atwood (2008), "in order for a mental construct such as

‘debt’ to exist....there are some preconditions...the notions of fairness” (p.15). Without this “we wouldn’t recognize fairness of paying back what we’ve borrowed” (2008, p.13) and, according to Atwood, the dark side of this is “the sense of unfairness” (Atwood, 2008, p.13). For Yeong-hye’s father, it is fair to kill the enemy during war and to enjoy patriarchal authority over the female members of his family, just as it is fair for Mr. Cheong to have a docile and demure wife, especially when they eat out with his boss and work colleagues and their wives. In the restaurant, it is fair and normal for him and the colleagues to eat meat and to feel uncomfortable due to Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism. Finally all the people in her life, except for In-hye, think it is unfair to have Yeong-hye as a daughter, a wife or someone who they share a meal with. Their modulation of fairness pursues “perpetual metastability” (Deleuze, 1992, p.4) which the society requires and sets to dominant discourses not to the loser of musical games or special circumstances of the individuals, that is to say, the one outside nodal point. For the most people around Yeong-hye, even including her mother, what matters is not vegetarianism but ‘Yeong-hye’s difference’ from others.

Furthermore, Mr. Cheong fails to distinguish between “taking” and fair “trading”, invoking what Jane Jacobs says (as cited in Atwood, 2008, p.49). In *Systems of Survival*, Jacobs puts “hunting, fishing, gathering, looting during war, acquisition of territory by force, robbery, rape, forcing people into slavery and gunboat diplomacy” under “taking” (as cited in Atwood, 2008, p. 49). Mr. Cheong tells his father-in-law about Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism and turns her personal matter into a public issue. Although he thinks that he can “get by perfectly well just thinking of her as a stranger, or no, as a sister, or even a maid, someone who puts food on the table and keeps the house in order” (Han, 2015, p. 30), he satisfies his sexual desire while inebriated despite her strong resistance.

Once that had happened, she lay there in the dark staring up at the ceiling, her face blank, as though she were a ‘comfort woman’ dragged in against her will, and I was the Japanese soldier demanding her services. (Han, 2015, p.30)

When it comes to a moral debt, the life without awareness is that of a slave. The Code of Hammurabi of Mesopotamia says a man in debt could pawn his wife, his kids and other

members of his family as debt slaves to a merchant in return for money (Atwood, 2008, p. 56). Just like this, Yeong-hye's family keep trying to force her to be a meat-eater and make her one of the conspirators unknowingly. As shown in the case of the family gathering earlier, all the family members acquiesces in the repression of Yeong-hye, trying to make her eat meat. Yeong-hye is marginalized and dismissed as 'abjection'⁸, since the family members cannot bear her existence as a vegetarian, her peculiarity.

During the Black Death, "there were many attacks on out-groups suspected of being plague agents....Jews....group suffering an estimated three hundred and fifty massacres" (Atwood, 2008, p.185). Just like the people in that past, the members of the society now commit violence towards both her mind and body, soliciting compliance from each other, for fear that they may contract *a disease of vegetarianism* from her. But it is the exact opposite. They try to propagate the soul of capitalism: "the brashest rivalry" (Deleuze, 1992, p.5), enmity between individuals, and indifference to each individual in the disguise of care. As for playing in the musical game, Yeong-hye's family does not realize that the music is the fantasy and, furthermore, "by being a creditor of such magnitude in the financial sense [and social standing], he himself has become a debtor in the moral sense" (Atwood, 2008, p.171).

Especially, would Yeong-hye's father and husband feel "[they] needed to pay a moral debt to [their] fellow men, or would he come to realize that there were other kinds of debts to be paid by [themselves] as well?" (Atwood, 2008, p.173). The mechanism of capitalism is so immanent in them that they think that they will be always be in music and dancing time while the play goes on; the fantasy.

It seems that Atwood (2008) provides a very appropriate allegory here:

.....in tales about visits to the land of the Fairies, the gold they're given is traditionally found to be lumps of coal once the sun rises—leading us to wonder how many of these tales arose from experiences people had while under the influence of hallucinogenic

⁸"Abjection appears as a rite of defilement and pollution in the paganism that accompanies societies with a dominant or surviving matrilinear character. It takes on the form of the exclusion of a substance (nutritive or linked to sexuality), the execution of which coincides with the sacred since it sets it up. Abjection persists as exclusion or taboo (dietary or other)". (Kristeva, 1982, p.17)

substances. The wrong kind of wealth, we are shown, is a similar kind of intoxicated illusion, and vanishes with either of (a) death or (b) waking up in the morning with a terrible hangover. (p. 93-4)

The people around Yeong-hye seem never to face up to the real - the empty vault -those actions that have taken their spirits or lives during the course of the life. As the life as a debtor is exhorted and payback is delayed for sustaining the system, the lack of their morality is promoted under the name of competition and normality and the payback is continually postponed. But now, maybe it's time for us to think about it differently (Atwood, 2008). According to Atwood (2008), "maybe we need to calculate the real costs of how we've been living, and of the natural resources we've been taking out of the biosphere" (p. 203). We should be awakened to the fact that "saving a species from extinction also has a date stamp on it, just like debt and mortal life" (Atwood, 2008, p. 173).

Therefore, now the contention of this paper is about the balance, namely payback. "Debtor and creditor are two sides of a single entity, one cannot exist without the other" and "exchanges between them....tend toward equilibrium" (Atwood, 2008, p.163). This equilibrium is explained by the mechanism of payback and it is time for us to think about payback. However, the concept of payback should be distinguished from the purpose of revenge. In *Payback*, Atwood remarks that one of the darkest sides of debt is vengeance, and in some aspects "...to revenge yourself upon someone is to re-liberate yourself, because before doing the revenge, you aren't free" (Atwood, 2008, p. 150).

Nonetheless, Yeong-hye's payback has nothing to do with vengeance. Rather, she laments her former self because she condoned the vengeance and the violent aspect of humanity itself.

...the dog that sank its teeth into my leg is chained up to Father's motorcycle....He [father] says he heard somewhere that a driving a dog to keep running until the point of death [makes its meat tender]The motorcycle engine starts, and Father begins to drive in a circle. The dog runs along behind....Without moving a muscle I stand just inside the gate watching Whitey, eyes rolling and gasping for breath, gradually exhaust himself.

Every time his gleaming eyes meet my own I glare even more fiercely. Bad dog, you'd bite me?Seven laps and while waiting for the dog to come into view, Father looks behind and sees that it is in fact dangling limply from the motorcycle. I look at the dog's four juddering legs, its raised eyelids, the blood and water in its dead eyes....That evening there was a feast at our house. The saying goes that for a wound caused by a dog-bite to heal you have to eat that same dog....I did scoop up a mouthful for myself....I remember the two eyes that had watched me, while the dog was made to run on, while he vomited blood mixed with froth, and how later they had seemed to appear, flickering, on the surface of the soup. But I don't care. I really didn't care. (Han, 2015, p. 41-2)

This image of the dream “*still stick stubbornly to*” (Han, 2015, p.49) her insides, as does the meat she has eaten. It becomes “a psychic debt...a wound to the soul” (Atwood, 2008, p.150). “No matter how deeply she inhales, she is not able to get the lump inside her to go away” (Han, 2015, p. 49), being too “mired in debts” (Skidelsky, 2008). However, she decides to become innocent from the violence and payback “the real costs of how we've been living, and of the natural resources we've been taking out of the biosphere” (Atwood, 2008, p. 203), and of the lives we've take both consciously and unconsciously throughout history. Then how do we begin to pay back what we owe? Where should we start? (Atwood, 2008, p.203).

In this regard, Yeong-hye tries to pay back her moral debt by becoming a tree. Put another way, she believes that her only way to pay back moral debt and coexist with other beings in this world, is to become a tree, as a tree just needs sunlight and water, and does not need to take other's lives for its own sustainability (Han, 2015, p. 148 &154). In this respect, it seems that the image of solidarity and understanding is what she truly wants, and this vegetal image is in line with one of the concepts of Bachelard, the vegetal imagination. Therefore, in the next chapter, this paper will postulate Bachelard's concepts of reverie and the vegetal imagination as the mechanism for payback and discuss them in depth.

4. Pursuing the Real: Payback through the Vegetal Imagination

We cannot remain untouched by the sight of a tree on a mountain whipped by the winds: the sight reminds us of man, the pain of the human condition, and a host of other unhappy

thought.

—Théodore Simon Jouffroy (as cited in Bachelard, 1988, p. 203) —

In a Lacanian context, the Real⁹ emerges from the chasm of the fixed structure of our society when the *Symbolic* fails. As discussed above, the dancing time of the musical games, the empty vault of the goldsmith, and the Order of Military Merit granted to the violent patriarch, work as fantasy that “hides and oppresses one’s deep-seated desire” (Kim, 2015, p.240). The Real can be “the limits that we encounter in the experience of the visible [the society we belong to]” (Lacan, 1998, p.72). Encountering the Real can be painful, but it can be the foundation to be re-rooted in the new society since “canceling out the real, the symbolic creates [new] ‘reality’” (Fink, 1997, p. 25). By pursuing the Real, we can realize that how we have been controlled to be in moral debt and ignorant about inner truth: “the costs of how we’ve been living” (Atwood, 2008, p.203) and payback for what we owe.

Out of the novel’s three narrators, Yeong-hye’s husband, Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law and In-hye, Mr. Cheong, Yeong-hye’s husband, always goes by the principle of markets. “The operation of markets is now the instrument of social control and forms the impudent breed of our masters” (Deleuze, 1992, p.6). In the principle, if something/someone is no good for “being sold or marketed”, then it is useless. In this context, it seems natural that abandonment of his own wife does not give Yeong-hye’s husband much sense of culpability. Although Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law’s character portrayal seems to be more ambiguous towards her, he, too, controls Yeong-hye in the pursuit of his artistic goal, painting flowers onto her naked body and subsequently having sexual intercourse with her. Seemingly, it seems that he tries to pursue hidden truth, the Real, breaking the law of the fixed symbolic order without forgoing his desire, as “man is a creation of desire, not a creation of need” (Bachelard, 1964, p.16). But I argue that

⁹ According to Lacan, the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary are on one continuous side like Mobius strip. From the Imaginary (dyadic relationship between a child and a mother), a child enters into the Symbolic and explores his own desire by questioning others’ desires. But the desire is insatiable, and there is always a lack within the subject. In turn, the child sets up fantasy to compensate for this lack, but residing in fantasy alone is a passive aspect of the subject. One should face and admit that their sense of fulfillment is just fantasy, and encounter the Real. Invoking Lacan’s elucidation, ‘the Real is the impossible’ (Lacan, 1998, p.280), therefore, the subject has to actively transform the Real into the new symbolic order.

he actually confuses desire and ‘need.’ He does not really pursue the truth and, unlike Yeong-hye, his imagination is too “filled with facile fantasy” (Bachelard, 1998, p.221). His artistic desire is contaminated by his need to succeed. After he is caught in the scene by his wife, he also abandons Yeong-hye, just like Mr. Cheong. Therefore, he, too, is one of the manipulators. Hence, *The Vegetarian* seems to take the same steps to the fall of the subjects.

However, in contrast, In-hye tries to explore and interpret her own experience of violence, in tandem with what Yeong-Hye suffers. After witnessing the unfaithful copulation between her husband and Yeong-hye, and her self-reproach for having not been able to prevent the violence Yeong-hye underwent during their childhood, In-hye suffers from pain and insomnia. She realizes that “she had never lived...but endure[d]” life (Han, 2015, p.162). She has a nightmare of her reflection in the mirror with blood running from a staring eye (Han, 2015, p.128), symbolizing her ignorance of the Real just as Oedipus the King stabbed his own eyes in despair. In this state, In-hye refuses to bare witnessing to anything. She wishes “if only one’s eyes weren’t visible to others [...] if only one could hide one’s eyes from the world” (Han, 2015, p.150). But with the gradual growth of her consciousness, she refuses to be “bent and broken” (Dickens, 1999, p.358), and she lifts her head and witnesses the truth.

When she lifts her head, the face she sees reflected in the mirror is wet. Eyes from which so much blood has spilled in her dreams. Eyes from which that blood always refuses to be wiped away, no matter how fiercely she scrubbed at it with her hands. But the woman’s face is not crying, not now. (Han, 2015, p.177)

After going through all these turbulent moments, at last, In-Hye tries to transcend her own pain by protecting her sister from the coercive treatment of the nurses and doctors at the mental hospital. Notably, in the ambulance, sitting beside her sister, In-hye “brings her mouth right up to Yeong-hye’s ear and carries on speaking, forming the words carefully, one by one” (Han, 2015, p.182).

‘I have dreams too, you know. Dreams...and I could let myself dissolve into them, let them take me over...but surely the dream isn’t all there is? We have to wake up at

some point, don't we? Because...because then....' (Han, 2015, p.182)

Here, In-hye feels sympathy for Yeong-hye and urges her to escape from the fantasy. In this respect, In-hye seems to be an affirmative character within the text. However, this consciousness change only happens, at the story's denouement, after Yeong-hye had already suffered. In other words, In-hye realizes that she used to acquiesce in the pain that Yeong-hye goes through, but she cannot be indifferent anymore, facing Yeong-hye's pursuit of the limits: the hidden chasm of the *Symbolic*. Furthermore, In-hye sensitively reacts to the oppression imposed on Yeong-hye.

Yeong-hye eventually avoids consumption not only of meat but of everything except sunshine. It seems that eventually she considers all kinds of food production to be violent. Actually, in addition to meat production, *plowing* can also be perceived as an aggressive act, especially as a component of sexual aggression (Bachelard, 1991, p. 217). Therefore, she rejects eating in spite of the danger of starvation. According to the author, she does not care about her own happiness (Han, 2016b): she is eager to return to a state of innocence, by buying back the freedom of her soul at the cost of her physical existence (Atwood, 2008, p. 59).

Her need for redemption starts from the profound reveries of the images in her dream: the bloody flesh, "the blood and water" in dog's dead eyes (Han, 2015, p.42), the lives still stick stubbornly to her insides (Han, 2015, p.49), and the victims of violence through the history of the individuals and the states including her own. However, she is also the victim of the violence of her male counterparts her father and husband. With this in mind, those images of the bloody flesh and a dead dog can be thought of as symbols of violence, in the same way that violence can be seen in the image of uprooted trees; hence, both symbolize human violence in the narrative. One can expand one's own reveries of trees, and interpret 'uprooted tree' as the victims of violence, invoking what Bachelard says: "Uprooting calls for violence, provocation, and shouts" (Bachelard, 1991, p. 218). Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is both her condolence for those uprooted trees and her resistance to violence. Employing Bachelard (1991)'s terms, Yeong-hye is a "suffering image", "a kind of root that has lost its tree" (p. 219). She is a dreamer "on the way to transcending absurdity" (Bachelard, 1991, p. 220).

In the novel, at the end of the first part, 'The Vegetarian', after attempting to commit suicide, Yeong-hye was sent to the mental hospital, where she is moved by the reverie of a bird, in the garden: half-naked she holds "a small white-eye bird, with feathers missing here and there ... [with] vivid red bloodstains" (Han, 2015, p.52). According to Bachelard (1991), the image of birds are like the leaves of trees: birds are like "innumerable wings" (p. 203) of trees. Moreover, the brutally wounded bird in Yeong-hye's hands is like an 'uprooted tree', which she needs to salvage. Now, through this process of imagination, her reveries converge on the imagination of a tree. It has an esemplastic faculty through reciprocity between the very opposite twinship: branch in the air and roots in the earth. According to Bachelard, "the tree holds the whole earth in the grasp of its roots and that its rising toward the sky has the strength to uphold the world" (Bachelard, 1988, p.220). The tree embraces and sympathetically unites the opposites. In this respect, the imagination of the tree is that of sympathy. Therefore this metaphor of the tree is harmonious with the characters in the novel, Yeong-hye and In-hye, in particular. Finally, by becoming a tree herself, it seems that Yeong-hye wants to embrace all the sufferings of society and prove that "the root is not buried passively: it is its own gravedigger, burying itself and endlessly continuing to bury itself", inferring a kind of active synthesis of life and death (Bachelard, 1991, p. 22). Put another way, she pursues to re-root herself in the new order of the world by paying back, morally as well as ecologically, her debt to the uprooted victims.

Nevertheless, fundamentally, Yeong-hye does not have her own voice within *The Vegetarian*. She is merely portrayed by her husband, brother-in-law, and In-hye. According to Han (2016b), the intention of this narrative structure is to let the readership dynamically deliberate on the protagonist and pursue the truth on their own; it seems that her purpose has been fulfilled successfully. Through this literary work, Han Kang has successfully transplanted a new faculty of imagination into the readers, broadening the horizon of thoughts on history and the nature of humanity. She permits the reader to metamorphose into the tree which is "like a sensitive antenna" (Bachelard, 1988, p. 216) in a storm; and experience the world by embracing suffering as it is, just as In-hye's reaction to Yeong-hye. Actually, Yeong-hye is "seeking refuge in the vegetal world," (Luce & Marder, 2016, p. 119) but not escaping from it and hiding herself. It "leads toward[s] the edge of another world" (Luce & Marder, 2016, p. 121). She tries to "find

refuge in the absolute exposure” (Luce & Marder, 2016, p. 120) and re-root herself in the new symbolic order.

According to Bachelard (1991), “there are no contradictions” (p. 224) in the life of the vegetable world and “vegetable reverie is the slowest, most tranquil, most restful of all reveries” (Bachelard, 1988, p.203). What is more, he identifies this in the tree, especially, because “the tree unites and organizes the most disparate elements” (Bachelard, *Air* 204), going on to state that because a tree has both root and bough, “living between earth and sky” (Bachelard, *Air* 219), it becomes a driving force in exerting ‘esemplastic power’ over the Symbolic Order, in sympathy with ‘disparate elements.’ In other words, the imagination of the tree is the imagination that embraces opposites: reason and emotion, wholeness and “special circumstances” (Eliot, 1994, p.403) of each individual. As Sigmund Freud points out, through this process of imagination, one can “combine components that are strange to one another” (as cited in Jackson, 1998, p.8).

In this respect, what Bachelard calls the imagination of the tree can be conceptualized as the ‘sympathetic imagination’, being of both nature and humanity. In Yeong-hye’s case, she tries to embrace the uprooted trees, that is to say the victims of a human history, by becoming herself a tree. Upon this point, the author broadens the readers’ vegetal imagination of trees, re-rooting themselves within this symbolic order, towards a new social structure where the populace sustain their lives, by paying back what they owe to others.

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