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Veganism, An Elitist Diet? : A Critique

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Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com**ABSTRACT:**

Disrupting the binary of vegetarians and non-vegetarians, vegans emerge as a rather distinct group following a different dietary pattern which excludes the consumption of all kinds of animal products. The term 'vegan' was coined by Donald Watson, the founder of Vegan Society in 1944 by using the first three and last two letters of the word "vegetarian." Veganism is a practice or philosophy which relies upon the principle of preventing the exploitation of animals for food, clothing, medications and entertainment. The term encompasses dietary vegans, ethical vegans, environmental vegans, feminist vegans and the like. For the purpose of this study, the paper focuses in particular on the dietary vegans who strictly follow a vegan diet.

Veganism with its origin in the West and the subsequent stereotyping through media leading to the 'white washing' of vegans often contribute to the perception of veganism as a privilege of the elite. Thus vegans are looked upon as elitists and the vegan diets are often seen as an impossible ideal to follow. This makes the vegan identity problematic. This paper attempts to break the elitist notion attached to the vegans by carefully analysing the evolution of vegans and their diets through the course of time. It analyses the benefits and underlying problems with veganism in order to understand its scope in the future. The paper argues that instead of perceiving veganism as the domain of the privileged, it could be regarded as a practice that abstains people from exploiting animals and hence more beneficial to the environment along with ensuring health.

Veganism, An Elitist Diet? : A Critique

Veganism, more than being a dietary choice and a lifestyle is a term heavily loaded with ideological, philosophical and ethical dimensions. It is traditionally defined as the practice of abstaining from the consumption of all kinds of animal products and is directed against the exploitation of animals for food, clothing, medication, vivisection and entertainment. Alongside this, veganism is often defined on the grounds of intersectionality which makes it a movement against all kinds of oppression and roots it upon compassion for entire humanity.

Veganism is in fact perceived as an offshoot of vegetarianism since it was a small group of people within The Vegetarian Society that put forth the concept of forming a distinct group of non-dairy vegetarians from among the vegetarians for the first time. The idea was relegated by The Vegetarian Society as 'both extreme and antisocial' and

thus a new organisation found its way out which came to be called as The Vegan Society. The coinage of the term 'vegan' was made by Donald Watson, the founder of The Vegan Society in 1944 by using the first three and last two letters of

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the word “vegetarian.” According to the definition of the Memorandum and Articles of Association of The Vegan Society, veganism is a “...philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude-as far as is possible and practicable-all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of humans, animals and the environment” (qtd. in “Definition of Veganism”). Beginning in Britain, veganism gradually spread to America leading to the formation of The American Vegan Society in 1960 by H. Jay Dinshah in New Jersey. It is only in the recent times that veganism emerged as a major discourse proliferating into different parts of the world, gaining more attention and inviting more criticism.

A variegated range of motives can be traced in people's choice of becoming vegans. Grounding it on animal ethics, certain people assert that it is completely wrong to exploit animals and they advocate for animal rights and animal liberation which make them choose a vegan lifestyle. According to Colin Spencer, these ethical vegans “are taking a stand against modern farming and all animal exploitation” (qtd. in Wright 5). There are other vegans like violinist Chrysanthe Tan who commented, “I was neither an animal lover nor a particularly warmhearted child, but eating animals simply did not make sense to me; I found it unnatural, unnecessary, and frankly, repulsive” (qtd. in Wright 21-22). There are people who believe that veganism helps them to take better care of earth's resources and environment and they have come to be called as environmental vegans. Besides these environmental vegans, there are many who pursue veganism strictly for health concerns who are called as dietary vegans. Hence, people are motivated by different reasons for choosing to become vegans. For the purpose of this study, the paper focuses in particular on the dietary vegans who strictly follow a vegan diet.

According to Karen Iacobbo and Michael Iacobbo “Lingering stereotypes and dubious 'facts' plague the depiction of the lives and habits of...vegans” (qtd. in Wright 22) and elitism is one such stereotypical notion attached to vegans and the vegan diet. Veganism is misrepresented as a privilege of the white and the rich. Even though the notion of a strictly plant based diet originated from non-western foundations which date back to centuries, since the term veganism had its origin in the West, white people often claim vegan lifestyle as their own. Along with its origin in the West, the distorted representations propagated through popular media contribute to the 'white profile' of veganism. A. Breeze Harper says, “Popular media ...only centralize white socio-spatial epistemologies of veganism, reflecting the collective history of white middle class people's privileged relationship to consumption, space of power, and production of what is ethical” (159). Veganism which became more visible recently grabbed great popularity through vegan celebrities. But popular media showcased more of white celebrity vegans, thus producing a whitewashed image of vegans. According to Carol Glasser, organisations like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals often normalize the white, thin, heterosexual body as the model of health and the normative image of vegans. Apart from this, the media encouraged vegan cookbooks written by white authors involving white washed recipes. According to A. Breeze Harper, vegan books, blogs and websites often portray vegans as white and economically privileged.

When it comes to the vegan diet, media presents it as something that is not economical and stresses that only the rich can afford it. There are several corporate advertising campaigns that persuade people that meat, dairy and poultry products are essential elements of a healthy diet, and it is impossible to follow a vegan diet. Also, vegan diets are interpreted as unrealistic because of the assumption that alternatives for meat are beyond the accessibility of the people of low economic status. Thus, veganism in general and vegan diet, in particular, are entangled in the notion of elitism. Veganism should not be criticised as a choice of the privileged and therefore such an elitist model has to be deconstructed.

Contrary to all the popular notions propagated by media and the people, veganism and vegan diets are not elitist. A plant based diet is not a brand new concept that originated in the West, but it goes back to many of the eastern religions including Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism and Rastafarianism which developed in Jamaica and Taoism in China. Hence, a vegan diet is not a first world white privilege. A closer look at the vegan celebrities who accelerated the visibility of

veganism reveals that there is a handful of famous figures of all races who follow a vegan diet. The list includes renowned tennis player Serena and Venus Williams, Oscar winning actor Jared Leto, American Senator Cory A. Booker, Hollywood actor Toby Maguire, dance-musician Moby, American political activist Angela Davis and many more. In the case of vegan cookbooks, there is a wide range of books written by non-white authors including Afya Ibomu, Richa Hingle, Bryant Terry, Terry Hope Romero, Miyoko Nishimoto Schinner and so on. Thus, not all vegan celebrities are white and not all vegan cookbooks are authored by the white.

In order to make veganism free from the elitist notion, a closer analysis of the constituents of a vegan diet is necessary. Vegan diet completely avoids animal products including eggs, dairy items, meat, fish, bee products like honey, animal based ingredients like gelatin, casein, lactose and the like. Since this dietary choice is radically against the normative practice of eating, people often find it expensive, unhealthy, inaccessible and impossible to follow. Soy foods, tofu, grains, seitan ('mock meat'), legumes, broccoli, various fruits and vegetables find their way into a vegan diet. Even though certain food items like soy foods, packaged vegan foods and mock meats are slightly costlier, the staple food items like rice, other grains, most vegetables and fruits are affordable and easily available for everyone. Hence, without spending too much money in buying the expensive vegan ingredients, one can go for the reasonable vegan foods.

Vegan foods are not usually presented as tempting and palatable. In the book *How It All Vegan! Irresistible Recipes for an Animal-Free Diet*, Tanya Barnard and Sarah Kramer say, "There is a popular belief that by removing animal products from one's diet, food will become necessarily boring, a life of dining on grass and shrubs. But let us assure you: vegan food is fabulous food..." (11). Vegan foods have sufficient variety and deliciousness and there are umpteen dishes consisting of soups, starters, snacks, cakes, meringues, desserts, pizzas, burgers, noodles, sushi and much more. Vegan cookbooks to a particular extent helped to improve the status of vegan recipes. In Kornfeld's *The Voluptuous Vegan*, she describes her recipes as "unequivocally rich in taste and attractive in presentation" (2). Sass's *The New Vegan Book*, Geiskopf-Hadler and Toomay's *Complete Vegan Cookbook*, Robertson's *Vegan Planet* are some of the major books that share appetizing illustrations of vegan recipes and make vegan food more luscious. In her book Sass describes bean, carrot and caramelized shallot puree as "an attractive, pale, autumn orange colour. Caramelized shallots add earthy depth and balance the carrot's sweetness, while beans contribute their buttery smooth texture" (87). Such descriptions made even the non-vegans try out the recipes, and thus vegan cookbooks in fact loosened the stereotypical notion that vegan diets are 'dull' and 'undesirable'.

Many of the dietary vegans follow the plant based diet solely because of health concerns. Thus it is important to identify the advantages and underlying problems inherent in a vegan diet. Such a scrutiny of the diet can reveal how far a vegan diet could concur with people belonging to different economic backgrounds. There are many misconceptions that keep ordinary people away from the vegan diet. Bringing out those false assumptions can further the scope of veganism as a more accessible and healthy dietary choice. There is a popular belief that vegan diets are unable to provide essential nutrients, minerals and vitamins because of being a restrictive diet. Since vegan diet completely excludes meat and eggs which are often considered as protein-rich foods, it is often believed that people who follow vegan diet need protein supplements. But vegan alternatives including tofu, seitan and tempeh, seeds like hemp, chia and flax seeds and algae like spirulina, chlorella are rich sources of protein. Nutritional yeast, spelt, amaranth and quinoa also increase the amount of protein in vegan foods. It is also believed that the avoidance of dairy products rich in calcium leads to brittle bones and causes other health problems. In a vegan diet, there are calcium fortified plant milks and yogurts which could supply adequate amount of calcium. Alongside, soy foods stimulate the growth of bones and prevent bone fractures.

Vitamin B12, zinc, iron and riboflavin are often seen deficient in a vegan diet. But the consumption of fortified foods including soy beverages and nutritional yeast could provide considerable amount of vitamin B12. Even though ample quantity of zinc is consumed by vegans through legumes, cereals, nuts and nut butters, the bioavailability of zinc

from plant foods is reduced by the presence of phytate which is rather high in legumes and cereals, and thus decreasing the absorption of zinc. Fermented soy foods and whole grain breads have only less amount of phytate and incorporating these foods into the vegan diet can solve the deficiency of zinc. Studies suggest that “because of these effects on phytate content of foods, zinc absorption may be higher than expected in vegan diets that utilize more leavened bread and fermented soy foods” (“Iron”). At times, sprouted, fermented and properly cooked beans, lentils and peas can improve the nutrient absorption.

Another concern regarding the vegan diet is the decreased amount of iron intake which can lead to anemia. Among heme and non-heme iron, which are two different forms of dietary iron, heme iron can be absorbed from animal food and the latter is absorbed from plant foods. Also, the absorption rate of non-heme iron is far less compared to that of heme iron. Thus, in order to compensate for the heme iron, a vegan diet should include more food that could provide non-heme iron. Also, vitamin C which is abundant in fruits and vegetables enhances the absorption of non-heme iron and thus consumption of more vitamin C helps vegans to increase the iron intake to a great extent. Riboflavin or vitamin B2 which is found often lacking in a vegan diet can be supplied with the vegan alternatives like nutritional yeast, almonds, soybeans, leafy green vegetables, avocados and mushrooms.

Since a vegan diet abounds with fruits and vegetables, fibre which is extremely good for health enters the body of a vegan more easily. But in the case of omega 3 fatty acids, a vegan should be more careful to include chia, hemp seeds, flaxseeds and walnuts which are rich in omega 3 fatty acids. Thus in general, the vegan diet should include a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes and fortified foods to have essential nutrients, minerals and vitamins required for a healthy living.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) asserts that veganism leads to increased strength and stamina. Vegan diet maintains the cholesterol level by ensuring a lower intake of calories and saturated fats and thus lessens the threat of obesity. Vegan diet seemingly reduces the chances of cancer and cardiovascular diseases.

In spite of having umpteen dishes providing essential nutrients which ensure health, vegan diets are not devoid of inherent dangers. Even a slightly unbalanced vegan diet could damage the health, especially that of children. Soy, the important meat alternative in a vegan diet is modified genetically and Warkentin says, “genetically modified organisms, designed to be grown according to unsustainable, monocrop practices, which are chemicals- and fossil-fuel-energy-intensive and environmentally destructive” (qtd. in Wright 15). Alongside, the soy dust often causes allergic reactions and asthma in people. Thus vegan diets have risks as well as health benefits.

On the other hand, people find it often difficult to get access to the fortified foods that are not easily available in the grocery stores. And eating fortified foods and mock meats in large quantities can cause health problems. Since the vegan dishes are new to the people, it would take more time to get familiarised with the recipes and consequently the cooking time will be high. Also, following a vegan diet requires more awareness about the vegan products.

Disrupting the binary of vegetarians and non-vegetarians, vegan diets emerged as a new dietary pattern with inherent benefits and potential dangers. Veganism and vegan diets are not the privilege of the elite and domain of the white. It is a choice that anyone can make in accordance with their ethical beliefs, moral faith, taste preferences and health concerns. The benefits and feasibility of veganism will largely remain sidelined unless the elitist notion attached to veganism is shredded off from the psyche of common people.

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