



Living in Companionship with Other Animals as a Feminist Way of Life

A Conversation

Leyla Bektaş Ata, Simten Coşar and Dilek Çiğerdelen

ABSTRACT

Ata and Coşar, members of the *Feminist Asylum* Editorial Collective, talk with Dilek Çiğerdelen about animal rights, veganism, feminism, and activism.

KEYWORDS

Veganism, Feminism, Activism, Animal Rights



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LIVING IN COMPANIONSHIP WITH OTHER ANIMALS AS A FEMINIST WAY OF LIFE

Dilek: I'm 23 years old. I live in Çanakkale [Turkey]. I was born in Bursa. I am a sociology student. My first year. Beforehand I was registered in the Department of Economics; and before that in the Department of Radio and Television. I also attended the Department of Philosophy. I dropped out from all. I decided to continue in the Department of Sociology. Besides my undergraduate studies I try to do all that I can in relation to *other* animals.

Leyla: Would you specify what you do in that regard?

Dilek: I participate in the feeding of stray animals with other members of the association. I am involved in the neutralization of stray animals – so long as we can get appointment. Recently, we held a petition campaign; we tried to get the people to sign a petition, addressing the parliament; we opened a stand at the port side. We were involved as long as we could. Now, as the local elections near I participate in the meetings with the representatives of political parties. I try to be present in those meetings.

Leyla: What I understand is that you are more interested in the ways to cooperate with local administration.

Dilek: Yes, absolutely.

Leyla: I have a question; sorry, if it sounds absurd. You can proceed as you'd like. Would you like to talk about the time when you developed empathy with [other] animals? Is there a specific moment that marks the start of this empathy; or had this feeling always been with you? Is there any specific situation or event that you recall?

Dilek: My grandfather owned a field. We took care of a cat there. I think this started then.



Leyla: How old were you at that time?

Dilek: The cat was there when I was six years old. We used to pick the ticks off the cat with pincers, then. We were not knowledgeable about how to do. (Smiles) I also carried every stray cat that I met to our garden. I insisted on having chicks at home, and the like. I frequently brought into home other animals.

Leyla: What was the reaction at home?

Dilek: Good. They did not react negatively. My mother did not want them in the house; but no problem when they stayed in the garden. My father grew up with other animals in his childhood, and my mother grew up in a village; so they were familiar with living with other animals. Thus, no problem at all.

Leyla: There is a difference between taking care of [other] animals and the life style that is based on living together with [other] animals. How did this develop? Was this all like that; or did it unfold through time?

Dilek: It unfolded. Ömer, the name of my cat. He still lives with me. The transformation started when I stole him from my mother's friend. (Smiles)

Leyla: How old were you then?

Dilek: 19.

Leyla: What happened then? What did Ömer say to you?

Dilek: Great question' (Smiles) We became friends. And there was this, it hurt me a lot: when my mother's friend found Ömer in the middle of the road; what was that, safety island? She found him in the rain, his eyes infected, mouth, nose, too, infected. I was hurt by the fact that his mother was not around, and that he needed human beings to survive. That was a start. I mean, knowing that if I did not have him treated, he would have died... This raised awareness. It started like that.

Leyla: Then it is around four years.

Dilek: Correct.

Leyla: Is there any other animal living with you?

Dilek: Yes. There are three cats living with me.

Leyla: The others, did they come after Ömer?

Dilek: Yes.

Leyla: Well... I'd like to hear about your daily routine?

Dilek: Unfortunately, I wake up very early in the morning. Feed the kids, the cats; refresh their water. I make coffee for myself. Then I read. Afterwards, I watch if there is anything that interests me on TV. Then, I get involved in any matters related to the Association.

Leyla: Let's name the Association.

Dilek: Çanakkale Morpati Derneği (Çanakkale Purplepaws Association). I do Association work, if there is any; if I have class I go there [to the university]. Nowadays, my days are less dynamic.

Leyla: Would you like to talk about your decision to live vegan? How did you decide? How did it affect your life – in terms of both your daily activities and your relation to [other] animals, nature, and to yourself?

Dilek: That was quite a quick decision. I had to move back to my mom's house during the [COVID19] pandemic. There I watched a lot. In fact, I opened myself to this. In the meantime, I was in communication with the Purplepaws. My approach to other animals had changed to an extent. Then I watched the documentary H.O.P.E on Instagram. Especially the parts about milk hit me. Then I moved onto Seapiracy. I had already started to live a vegan life as I watched Cowsspiracy. The things that I saw were so hurting that I why I have not been able to watch it all, yet...

Leyla: How about the transition period? Was it difficult?

Dilek: My mother is a considerate person; I was living with her, then. Thus, the arranging my daily food was not difficult. But it was a bit difficult to explain the ethical part of it, to make her understand. This, I noticed recently when talking with a friend. For example, there is this assumption that cows lactate all throughout their life time. But we are mammals, too and we do not lactate unless we give birth, and we feed

only our babies with our milk, right? It was difficult to explain such things. Unfortunately, your morale goes down as your awareness goes up.

Leyla: Is being a vegan a matter of curiosity in your circles? Does it lead to a difference in the ways your friends relate to you? Does it have negative and/or positive implications?

Dilek: Yes, negative ones. Sometimes, you are considered to be "oversensitive". Besides, I think that they are curious, they'd like to ask questions. But they think that if they dig into it they have to face their own realities

Leyla: Perhaps, it is a kind of handling tactic.

Dilek: Yes, certainly. But I have not been bullied. (I think this is also to do about not daring to do so.)

Leyla: Perhaps, it is good this way. Well, then, how about the family, in the house, the acquaintances, the relatives; how is this received by them? Are there reactions like, you are not on the right track; like calling you back from vegan life? You know, this is quite common; this type of attitudes, especially in the traditional families.

Dilek: Not in the nuclear family; but I meet such reactions among the relatives. "Get well soon, god willing you retreat", "What about the protein?"... Such things happen.

Leyla: What is your reaction?

Dilek: I try to explain that this is not a matter of diet; I mean, this is not something that is to be corrected or that will end; this is a life style, an ethical disposition. And if they do not understand, I just tell them, "I want it to be this way; I reject to be a slave to the system", and I leave it there.

Leyla: Are there any cases when you are socialized and do not face reaction or are not forced into explanation?

Dilek: I do not encounter such cases anymore, because I do not socialize. On the other hand, since I do not directly say "Hi, I am vegan"; we happen to build friendship to a certain extent until they learn about it. And since I choose people, I do not get into friendship with people who would judge, find me strange and label me. I have no problem with socialization.

Leyla: It seems as if you rely on an ethical plane, as if you underline your starting point and then meet people...

Dilek: Yes, certainly.

Leyla: I mean, I assume as such. What would you say?

Dilek: Right. The circles in which I socialize, I mean, I meet other members of the Association; their approach to other animals is clear to a certain extent. Or I meet people in the university. I think the latter ones are more open minded, I have not yet had negative experiences with them, either. It is only relatives and neighbors. It is always more difficult with the elderly.



Leyla: Ok. How about Çanakkale, is it a vegan friendly city?

Dilek: Unfortunately, not. It is very difficult to find replacement product. If you'd like to eat outside it is very difficult anything except potatoes or homemade, olive oil dishes. It is hard to find plant milk in the cafés. Last year we had vegan menu in the university; we got these rights by a petition campaign. This year we have no such right. We do not have vegan menu anymore.

[As we were editing the interview Dilek told us that the vegan menu was included again.]

Leyla: Is there a specific reason for the cancellation of vegan menu?

Dilek: We have not yet communicated in this regard. But I assume it is because the demand is low.

Leyla: How do you deal with such things? For, all these efforts also bring in some workload.

Dilek: I try to get ready before I go out. For example, if I tend to go to a café and drink coffee with milk I take my plant milk with me. I ask for the coffee to be prepared with that. Apart from that you are somewhat limited with salad or potatoes or *çiğ köfte* (chee kofta).¹ (Smiles)

Leyla: I assume the city in which we live and the other public spaces we happen to step into determine us to a great extent; what would you say?

Dilek: Yes, I can say that it is and was easier in Bursa.

Leyla: Is it? Is this related to Bursa being a larger city?

Dilek: I suppose so. I mean, the demand is higher there. There is a meat restaurant, *Köşebaşı*. There you might now find vegan replacements.

Leyla: How do you explain this?

Dilek: The demand is particularly effective here. I realized that even just asking whether there is vegan menu has some effect. Some brands do this just for advertisement. For example, Burger King's "Plant-based Whopper". The bread contains egg and they add mayonnaise into the Whopper. And finally, they cook the vegan menu in the same place where they cook meat.

¹ Traditional food in Turkey. Specific to the Southern and Southeastern regions of the country. Until 2008 it was made of raw meat. In 2008 raw meat was banned due to health risks.

Leyla: Let's talk more about advertising. Would you like to start with social media? Do you think social media affects you? Does it cause changes in your ideas, views?

Dilek: It has changed to a great extent. I let myself be subjected to social media. I followed the accounts of vegan people; seems that I already had a tendency. (Smiles) I subjected myself to it and it affected me a lot.

Leyla: Would you like to share the accounts that you follow and recommend?

Dilek: There is Elif Taştekin. Vegan Earth. Vegan Zülal; Zülal Kalkandelen; Bağımsız Hayvan (Independent Animal). These are the ones that come first to my mind.

Leyla: So you think that such accounts and such contents work.

Dilek: Well, sure.

Leyla: When you look at your own circles, to your friends in the university, for example, is there curiosity among the people toward living vegan or to the ethical planes in our relations with [other] animals? Or is it perceived as a trend, being vegan? Do some tend to give it a try? How would you consider the encounters that you experience?

Dilek: I suppose there is no more curiosity. There are some who perceive living vegan as an intermittent diet for health. They do not have ethical concerns. They go on with plant-based diet for a week or so, for their own health.

But I do not know what is in currency now; since I have not been involved in new circles for a long time. This might also have to do with news. There was news, like, they gave their child lettuce and the child died. Such news as their child was vegan, that is why s/he died.... A woman passed away in recent past, there was news saying that she was eating raw food and she was vegan that is why she died. My parents sent those news to me. But the questions they direct to me decreased in time. I think this is because there is no more curiosity.

Leyla: Perhaps, we all learned. As for now what you know has another dimension: about how to transform this, how to replace that. Would you consider making this knowledge of yours public? Or do you do so?

Dilek: I am not that kind of person who performs activism unless asked.

Leyla: How would you define performing activism?

Dilek: As I reflect, many members of the Association eat other animals' bodies and products. Being among them is some kind of activism on its own. For example, recently we had a press declaration in Istanbul. After the meeting, they ate meatballs, hamburgers. But in the meantime, they were trying to find vegan alternatives for me. I mean, at a certain point I push them to face themselves, just by being there. But I do not have a definite answer to the question of what activism is. Leyla: I think this is a clear response. It is a great response.

Simten: For example, we drive together. I just pass by the pedestrian crossing. A very quiet voice beside me says: "You can certainly let the pedestrian go first. Since s/he has the priority." Thenceforth, I'd do that regardless of Dilek's presence...

Living vegan is a whole different thing, certainly. After I returned Turkey, I stopped this lifestyle. Nevertheless, I try to stay away from other animals' products, like eggs. As much as I can do. For instance, I was as hungry as a bear. I stopped by a patisserie. Smell of egg was all around. I asked, "do you have anything that does not contain egg?" It turned out to be none. In the past for example... Activism for me is as such, touching into the heart of everyday life. Dilek does such simple things, with no anger at all.

Leyla: Even in the Association, those with whom you act together, that they search for alternatives for you... I mean this forms a plane, perhaps for awareness, though I feel uncomfortable with the word sensitivity, here we can use it. Certain sensitivities exist or they can be construed... It also hints at the possibilities to form certain forms of commonalities. That is why, I thought, as you were talking, even this much is valuable.

Dilek: Agreed.

Leyla: Living vegan is not only about the things we eat. How do the other issues proceed? What type of difficulties do you face when buying the things you use?

Dilek: In the beginning it is a bit hard. Every time you have to check whether the product is vegan, whether it is based on experiment.

Leyla: How do you manage this?

Dilek: I use Google.

Leyla: I wonder whether there are applications for this.

Dilek: For the experiments, yes, there are applications. I do not remember its name. But in time you know it by heart. I mean, you know that this brand is experimented, that brand is not. Shoes are more difficult. Because they use other animals' products in the glues. Therefore, I tend to be a free-rider. I rely on the links, provided by the accounts that I follow; I directly opt for the products that have vegan labels or if I shop online, I ask the seller.

And there is Prev. Let me mention a bit about Prev. It is a Turkish, women's entrepreneurship, and vegan. They offer amazing shoes; they make leather out of apples, olives, tea. They also make notebooks, bags, jackets and the like.

Then there is the wool problem. I pay attention to such points when buying sweatshirts. I am especially careful when buying such things. And certainly, there is this Chinese market.

Leyla: You list many things even when you note that there is not much left. These are the things that might never cross my mind. Now, since you had already internalized, the knowledge that has become common for you is not that common for everyone. Thus, you'd rather not do injustice to the power of the knowledge that you have (We all smile). We live in such a period that on the one hand you can access everything or you can see everything, the diversity and the limitless options there. On the other hand, you have an ethical stance and this frames your relations with products. I mean, it is as if there is really a frame. There are a lot of points about the products that you will buy. Perhaps, you learn the brands in a while. But it seems that the individual is too lonely, here. I mean, you have to sort everything out on your own. You have to find those social media accounts on your own, and there are so many issues about the products that you can buy and which you have to dig into. For example, you have to find the social media accounts on her now. How did this process unfold? Have you thought about this, did you ever question the necessity to know in this universe of shopping, as a person, as Dilek so many things in detail? In this world of consumption, [dealing with] everything one by one, as chemical engineer, food engineer...

Dilek: As I stepped into this path during the pandemic... There were groups then. We attended online meetings, online workshops. That is why I did not feel alone. Besides, my boyfriend supported me. But you are right, aside from this, there is a frame; and that you face with difficulties. But at the end of the day, the difficulties do not mean as much as the life of someone. Or, rather than involving in the suffering of someone I'd rather not buy that lipstick, or wear that shoe. Thus, I do not think that my freedom is restricted.

Leyla: You told that you buy certain goods by clicking on the accounts that you follow. I wonder whether there are such accounts which are vegan and share shopping links all the time.

Dilek: No. At least not that I know.

Leyla: This is good.

Dilek: I guess the opposite would be quite paradoxical.

Leyla: That's right. I mean, inciting so much consumption would not go well with veganism and the related ethical stance. For, there are certain accounts, for example, they might be people whose worldviews or the lifestyles they represent or present, you might like. But they share so many links and they somewhat affect your shopping practices. And you buy. I do not think that we are fully independent decision-makers. And, that lifestyle does not match sharing that many links. In fact, this is an issue that we, again, as individuals have to deal with. That's why I asked, is it possible to share that many links when having such concerns.

Dilek: No. There is not that many link-sharing at least in the ones that I follow.

Simten: I agree. And thank you, Leyla. This is a great point.

I do not follow vegan accounts that regularly; but in the vegetarian groups that I see there is not that many advertisement-like sharing. Restaurants make their own advertisements, as vegan ones, vegetarian restaurants. But vegetarian, vegan groups do not do so. They give information about where to eat. And this is good. They help you navigate. The link you note is different.

Leyla: But this is good, I think. For, it is not possible to find everything on our own. They can have advertisements for this. And I am not advertisement regulatory unit. (We smile) I assumed as such, tough.

Simten: On Facebook, they monitor our age, our weight and the like and they bring up webpages, links ... I have not met vegetarian or vegan links, ever.

Leyla: Isn't this info processed? Is its market share small?

Simten: If you do not consume meat, you fall out of the market. Let me stop here. (Smiles)

Leyla: So, are vegans bad consumers? What would you say, Dilek? Are they somewhat killjoy?

Dilek: Certainly.

Leyla: About this killjoy disposition, if you define it as such, would you like to comment? Let me ask this, first.

Dilek: Well, it might not be a killjoy disposition. (Smiles).

Leyla: Ok, you might ask who designed the game. (We smile)

Dilek: Yes, from that perspective it is about killjoy. It is a revolt against the order of things.

Leyla: Then, what we have is an activist, killjoy life even though you do not do anything particular. At the end of the day, you do not need to do anything special; because whatever you do is itself *special* in this order of things. I mean, anything you do, the labor, time you spent in searching for the material of the penpoint are part of visible, measurable work force.

Dilek: There is an application. It is like the Vegan Twitter. You enter the year, the date you start your vegan life. And it tells you, the animals that you rescued, the forests you rescued.

Leyla: How do you feel, using it?

Dilek: As if I am not alone. And there is this slight feeling of pride, certainly, not necessary. Because I am doing what I have to do...

Leyla: Is it motivating?

Dilek: A lot. I also feel like I am one with everything. I mean, there is no difference between me and a stray cat; no difference in terms of the ability to feel, or how I can say, in terms of consciousness.

Leyla: Considering your relation with non-human living beings, non-human animals and nature, would you like to talk about what this plane of equation brings into your life?

Dilek: I feel as one. Alas, I have not yet overcome the hierarchy in my relations with human beings. But in relation to the non-human animals... It is also very painful. Many sad things happen, every day.

Leyla: And how do you come to terms with this?

Dilek: Hoping that this might change or telling myself that I do everything I can. Even on my own I can ring a bell in some people. But the world, unfortunately, is as such and we will struggle until the last cage is broken. "We have the youth."² (We smile)

Leyla: Let me connect to the question I asked before. Well, you have partly answered this question, but... What is the cost of being a killjoy? What does it cost you?

Dilek: Good or consumption aside, I have to be selective. I feel like it. I cannot communicate with people with whom I could communicate in the past or with those I got pleasure in communicating. This state of affairs affects my past relations. Because we stand on different planes. There is distance between us. Their awareness and life concerns do not meet with mine. I mean, there are not many intersection points. Apart from this, certainly, when I meet new people... First, the things that are important for me: what is important for me? Does s/he think harming other animals? Then, to what extent s/he harms? Is it just another animal on her/his plate, or does s/he harm the stray ones? I get close accordingly. Therefore, I have to be more selective. That way, I have a very small circle.

Leyla: How do you feel about that small circle?

Dilek: It feels secure.

Leyla: Great definition. It is also a good wrap up.

Simten: Would you tell more about feeling secure?

Dilek: As you told, you can be yourself when you are with those who are 'sensitive' to your 'sensitivities', when you have only them in your circles. I am not afraid of being myself. I can tell what I feel immediately. Besides, we have a common ground with the people around me. Thus, sharing with them gives pleasure. I mean, being a killjoy might be related to being young; but it taught me well about not staying where I do not want to be, or not staying where I cannot be myself...

Leyla: Such early awareness.

Dilek: (Smiles) Is it? I am 23 years old...

Leyla: Let's not dig into this; we might feel bad. (We smile)

Simten: I have a question. My relation with Dilek is part of a learning process, feminist learning process. I mean, the process of learning that is derived from within life itself, that we talk with you [Leyla]; that touches me, and probably the ones around... How would you relate this to the university? Or would you like to relate it to the university?

Leyla: Yes. Because, as the departments, fields change Dilek changes, too. Her ethical disposition changes, too. Do these changes unfold in parallel to each other? Does one change trigger the other? What happens there?

Dilek: They trigger each other. Once you do, you develop the courage to do it again. It also encourages you in relation to life. This is about not staying where you are not happy whatever the cost is. The reason I left the Department of Radio and Television was about my concerns for future. But the reason I left the Department of Economics was totally about my character. Because I would either work in bank, or in finance or become an accountant; and none of these would make me happy. For, they all have consumption as a constant. And, as someone reflecting on consumption and capitalism I did not want to be educated in economics; I did not want to do that, considering the conditions in Turkey. That is why I decided to continue in the Department of Sociology. I mean, the reason is not that deep.

Leyla: I think it is deep enough. What else should you do? You leave the departments without hesitation. Not many people can dare to do so.

Simten: None of us would dare to do so.

² Ekrem İmamoğlu, used the expression 'we have the youth' in his campaign speeches in the electoral campaign (2019) for İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality (e.n.)

Dilek: Simten, didn't you do the same.

Simten: I did. But for once. I left the Department of Management, and continued in Political Science. But I never lost hope in political science, until resignation. As you know, these decisions come from within life.

Leyla: Perhaps, you would like to talk about being vegan and feminism; how they meet.

Dilek: Last night there was exchange in the group about this. About ecofeminism, I mean we noticed that – Simten and I. But at least, we opened the way for the members to inquire about it. I referred to *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. I do not know what else I can say. All chains seem to be the same for me.

Leyla: When did this awareness come about – the awareness that all chains are the same? What kind of reading, reflecting, and discussion plane did you build it? Tell us the path you travelled.

Dilek: I have been open to be identified as a feminist since early childhood. This might be to do with the milieu where I grew up. After I started vegan life, I realized that it is the females who are most exploited. And, there is this that I was deeply affected: there was a stray dog nearby my first house in Çanakkale, her name was Yarmagül. She was overweight; she could move hardly; she was in bad condition. Then I learned in my conversations with the neighbors that her body was full of shots; and the reason ... I mean, the way they reason it was that all male dogs chased her when she was not neutralized, and that the male ones fought each other for her. Thus, the people preferred to shoot Yarmagül, to make the male dogs go away. This affected me. Why female ones all the time?

Leyla: This awareness about intertwining is quite valuable. When I say it as intertwining, it might sound as if there are two different categories – different mentally. I mean, the way you relate to feminism and with the non-human animals.

Dilek: Let's use the term together. Both veganism and feminism trigger the order of domination. Being slave to some other people, superiority of some. Both are a revolt against this unjust order. No one was created for some other living being, and no one is superior to the others.

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