

CONFORMITY, TRAUMA, AND THE FRAGILITY OF FLESH A CRITICAL REVIEW OF HAN KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN*

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Book title : *The Vegetarian*
Author : Han Kang (2024 Nobel Laureate in Literature)
Translator : Deborah Smith (2015 English Translation)

1. Introduction

When the Swedish Academy awarded Han Kang the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature, they cited her "intense poetic prose that confronts historical traumas and exposes the fragility of human life". As the first South Korean writer and the first Asian woman to receive this honor, Han's recognition represents a broader global shift in the appreciation of Korean literature. This phenomenon is linked to the international footprint and global success of Korean popular culture, cinema, and pop music.

At the center of her global acclaim stands her 2007 novel, *The Vegetarian* (*Chae-sik-ju-ui-ja*), translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2015 and winner of the International Booker Prize in 2016. Expanded from her 1997 short story "The Fruits of My Woman", the novel is a dark, painful, and intensely poetic exploration of human brutality, trauma, and institutional conformity.

2. Plot Summary and Narrative Structure

The Vegetarian details the sudden, radical transformation of Yeong-hye, a completely unremarkable housewife whose sudden decision to stop eating, cooking, or interacting with meat triggers an existential cascade within her family. Her decision stems from a series of visceral, blood-soaked dreams. Far from a simple dietary preference, her extreme vegetarianism expands into a refusal to wear brassieres or leather shoes, signaling a deeper psychological shedding of social rules.

Architecturally, the book is divided into three parts. Crucially, Yeong-hye is never given a direct first-person point of view. Instead, she is entirely objectified, misread, and judged through three external narrators:

1. Part 1: "The Vegetarian" is narrated by her husband, Mr. Cheong, a conventional, self-absorbed office worker who views his wife as an unassuming accessory. He interprets her dietary shift as a direct threat to his domestic comfort and evidence of insanity.
2. Part 2: "Mongolian Mark" centers on her brother-in-law, a struggling video artist. He objectifies Yeong-hye through an aesthetic lens, becoming obsessed with a blue birthmark (the "Mongolian mark") on her body. He co-opts her into an eroticized artistic project, painting her skin with flowers and plants, which Yeong-hye tolerates because she feels a kinship with vegetal life.
3. Part 3: "Flaming Trees" focuses on In-hye, Yeong-hye's older sister. In-hye, the archetypal "perfect woman" who maintains a family and a business, regularly visits Yeong-hye as she physically and mentally wastes away in a psychiatric hospital. By this stage, Yeong-hye has completely abandoned her human status, attempting to photosynthesize and stand upside down to grow roots.

3. Core Thematic Pillars

The conflict in the book stems from society's rigid standards. Yeong-hye's choices—whether rejecting a bra or discarding meat—disrupt the expected status quo of patriarchal obedience. Han uses this fracture to expose how society labels individual divergence as a psychiatric crisis that must be violently corrected.

Han Kang has noted that her stories examine "the broad spectrum of humanity, which runs from the sublime to the brutal". Yeong-hye's transformation is a defense mechanism against systemic human cruelty. Haunted by childhood memories of domestic abuse at the hands of her father, her dreams surface a deep pool of historical and internal violence. To escape this brutality, she attempts to exit the human race altogether.

4. Highlights of the Novel

Depriving Yeong-hye of a direct narrative voice is an incredibly effective stylistic choice. It perfectly mirrors how marginalized individuals are spoken for, misunderstood, and institutionalized. This framework evokes classic modernist structures, such as William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, to show multi-layered domestic collapse.

Drawing from Han's beginnings as a poet, the novel shifts seamlessly between mundane Korean life and haunting dreamscapes. The stark contrast between blood-soaked nightmares and the beautiful plant imagery painted on Yeong-hye's skin yields a highly striking text.

The final segment elevates the book from a simple story about mental illness into a collective cry against societal expectations. By forcing the "successful" sister, In-hye, to see her own suppressed suffering mirrored in Yeong-hye's active rebellion, Han beautifully demonstrates that forced social compliance is its own form of "exhausted endurance".

Because readers only encounter Yeong-hye's thoughts through brief, fragmented dream interludes, some may find the character emotionally inaccessible. She can read more like an abstract symbol for resistance or a passive canvas for others' desires than a fully grounded protagonist.

As noted in the source text, Deborah Smith's translation—while celebrated for the fluid, atmospheric qualities that helped secure the International Booker Prize—has faced notable criticism within literary circles for localized inaccuracies and significant stylistic shifts from Han's original Korean phrasing.

The novel offers little room for optimism. Yeong-hye's pursuit of autonomy through starvation and plant-identity leads to absolute self-destruction. The conclusion leaves the reader with a bleak view of human society, where trying to escape violence requires discarding your own life.

6. Target Audience & Overall Evaluation

This book is highly suited for students of comparative literature, scholars of feminist theory, and readers of existential psychological fiction (such as the works of Franz Kafka, Sylvia Plath, or Kōbō Abe).

The Vegetarian is an exceptionally valuable academic and literary tool. It offers a sharp, uncompromising look at how patriarchal structures govern individuals through bodily expectations. Despite its bleak tone, the brief length of its chapters—honed by Han's skill with short stories—makes it an engaging yet layered addition to modern university courses on international literature, gender politics, and trauma narratives. It stands as a haunting classic on the cost of non-conformity.

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