

The Vegetarian

Han Kang — A Study Guide



Author

Han Kang



Written

2003–2007



Setting

Seoul, South Korea



Award

Man Booker Prize





BIOGRAPHY

Han Kang: Brief Biography

Origins

Born in Gwangju, South Korea; moved to Suyuri at age 10. Studied Korean literature at Yonsei University.

Early Career

Poetry published in *Literature and Society* (1993); won the 1994 Seoul Shinmun Spring Literary Contest with her short story *Red Anchor*, which marked her fiction debut. Her first novel was *Black Deer* (1998).

Awards

Yi Sang Literary Prize (2005), Today's Young Artist Award (2000), Korean Literature Novel Award, and the Man Booker Prize for *The Vegetarian*.

Today

Teaches creative writing at the Seoul Institute of the Arts. Wrote *The Vegetarian* entirely by hand due to joint problems.



Plant-Based Source: Han has said she was obsessed in college with a line from Yi Sang: "*I believe that humans should be plants*" – a clear inspiration for *The Vegetarian*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Seoul, Patriarchy & Vegetarianism

Conservative Korean Society

Traditional Korean family hierarchies emphasize patriarchal authority: a husband or father exhibits dominance in exchange for obedience. The family is seen as a unit – an individual's behavior reflects on the whole. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's choice is viewed as disobedience and a poor reflection on her entire family.

Related Works

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Dovey's *Blood Kin*, and Shin's *Please Look After Mom* share thematic DNA with *The Vegetarian*.

Vegetarianism in Korea

Vegetarianism in Korea is on the rise but remains largely niche and difficult to maintain, as most dishes include fish or meat. Communal dining – ordering shared dishes – is a key social bonding ritual. Yeong-hye's refusal to share in the meal at Mr. Cheong's work dinner is therefore seen as a profound social transgression, not merely a dietary preference.

Key Facts

Published October 2007 (South Korea); January 2015 (UK). Genre: Literary fiction. Antagonist: Mr. Cheong. Narrated in three shifting perspectives.

The Story: A Three-Part Descent

Part 1 — The Vegetarian

1

Narrated by Mr. Cheong. Yeong-hye, haunted by violent dreams, throws out all meat and refuses to cook it. Her family stages an intervention; her father force-feeds her pork. She slits her wrist. Found at the hospital holding a dead white bird, she is divorced by Mr. Cheong.

Part 3 — Flaming Trees

3

Narrated by In-hye, two years later. Yeong-hye refuses all food, insisting she only needs sunlight. Doctors attempt to force-feed her via nasal tube. Yeong-hye vomits blood and is transferred to a general hospital. In-hye rides with her in the ambulance, gazing at glinting trees – "as if waiting for an answer."

2

Part 2 — Mongolian Mark

Narrated by the brother-in-law, two years later. Obsessed with painting flowers on naked bodies, he convinces Yeong-hye to model. Their relationship becomes sexual. In-hye discovers a video of them and calls emergency services. The brother-in-law attempts suicide; Yeong-hye is committed to a psychiatric ward.

"It's your body, you can treat it however you please. The only area where you're free to do just as you like." – In-hye

CHARACTERS

Major & Minor Characters



Yeong-hye

Protagonist. Haunted by violent dreams, she asserts bodily autonomy through vegetarianism, sexual refusal, and ultimately refusing to eat at all – seeking the innocence of plant life.



In-hye

Yeong-hye's older sister and narrator of Part 3. Primary breadwinner and caretaker. The most devoted to Yeong-hye, yet herself teeters on the edge of madness from isolation.



Mr. Cheong

Yeong-hye's husband and narrator of Part 1. Views her vegetarianism as obstinate disobedience. Rapes her repeatedly; ultimately divorces her when she becomes a social liability.



The Brother-in-Law

In-hye's husband and narrator of Part 2. A video artist obsessed with painting flowers on naked bodies. His affair with Yeong-hye leads to his complete social destruction.

Yeong-hye's Father

Strict Vietnam War veteran. Beats Yeong-hye as a child; force-feeds her pork at the family intervention.

Ji-woo

In-hye's young son. The only thing keeping In-hye tethered to reality and sanity.

J

Artist friend who models with Yeong-hye but refuses to have sex on film and storms out.

Yeong-ho / Hee-joo

Yeong-hye's brother (assists in force-feeding); Hee-joo is a fellow patient who helps care for Yeong-hye.

THEMES

Core Themes



The Body, Agency & Resistance

Yeong-hye's body is her only tool of resistance. From refusing meat to refusing sex to refusing food entirely, each act asserts autonomy in a world that treats her body as a commodity. In-hye ultimately recognizes: *"It's your body, you can treat it however you please."*



Humanity & Violence vs. Vegetation & Innocence

Yeong-hye's violent dreams reveal humanity as inherently destructive. Plants – flowers, trees – represent innocence and passivity. Her arc from vegetarianism to literally acting like a tree symbolizes the impossible desire to escape human violence. Han argues this escape is ultimately futile.



Breaking Social Conventions

In patriarchal Seoul, deviation from norms is punished severely. Yeong-hye and the brother-in-law both attempt to escape society's rigid expectations – and both are destroyed by it. Society refuses to let them escape, even through death.



Misunderstanding, Isolation & Madness

Characters constantly fail to understand one another. This misunderstanding breeds isolation, which breeds madness – a self-fulfilling prophecy. Han argues anyone can be steps away from madness when feelings of being misunderstood become insurmountable.

Symbols, in Order of Importance



Meat

The primary symbol of human violence and consumption. Yeong-hye's dreams of eating raw meat become allegories for her fear of being abused and of perpetrating harm. Dead animals – the dog, the white bird – mirror Yeong-hye as a victim of predation.



Plants & Flowers

Contrast to meat: plants represent innocence, passivity, and a life free from harm. Yeong-hye is drawn to the flowers painted on her body. The irony: the brother-in-law sees flowers as sexual, violating the very innocence they represent for her.



Bras

Represent Yeong-hye's resistance to societal convention. Her refusal to wear a bra predates her vegetarianism and becomes a flashpoint at the work dinner – a visible, bodily rejection of the constraints society places on women.

📄 The **Mongolian Mark** – a blue birthmark on Yeong-hye's buttocks – triggers the brother-in-law's obsession. For Yeong-hye it is vegetal and innocent; for him it is sexual. This divergence encapsulates the novel's central conflict.

Chapter 1: The Vegetarian



Theme: Body & Agency

Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is her first assertion of autonomy. She also refuses sex, telling Mr. Cheong his body "*smells of meat*" — linking dietary and sexual autonomy. He rapes her in response, embodying the very violence she is fleeing.

Theme: Social Conventions

At the work dinner, Yeong-hye refuses meat and wears no bra. Co-workers ostracize her. Her father later slaps her and force-feeds her pork; she slits her wrist — not as suicide, but as the only way to stop them. Mr. Cheong divorces her, proving Han's argument: those who break conventions are expelled from society.

Mr. Cheong opens: "*Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way.*" This establishes the conventionality of their lives — and the conflict to come. Yeong-hye's refusal to wear a bra is an early, quiet act of bodily resistance.

After a violent dream of devouring raw meat, Yeong-hye throws out all the meat in the house. Mr. Cheong calls her insane — unable or unwilling to understand her motivations. His labeling becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Chapter 2: Mongolian Mark

Theme: Humanity vs. Vegetation

Two years later, the brother-in-law becomes obsessed with painting flowers on naked bodies after learning Yeong-hye still has her Mongolian mark. For Yeong-hye, flowers represent innocence and passivity — she doesn't want the paint washed off. For the brother-in-law, they represent sexual desire and consumption. He films himself having sex with her even after she cries and says stop.

Theme: Breaking Conventions

The brother-in-law progressively abandons his obligations as husband and father. When In-hye discovers the video, she calls emergency services — her misunderstanding of the situation prompts the brother-in-law to attempt suicide. Like Yeong-hye, he is not permitted to escape society even through death. He goes into hiding; In-hye refuses him contact with Ji-woo.

"Didn't I say you wouldn't understand?" — Yeong-hye

Chapter 3: Flaming Trees



In-hye narrates. Yeong-hye has been found in the forest, standing still among the trees. She tells In-hye the trees are *"brothers and sisters"* and that she only needs sunlight and water. Her desire to become a plant is now fully embodied.

Theme: Misunderstanding & Madness

Yeong-hye tells In-hye: *"No one can understand me...they just force me to take medication, and stab me with needles."* The doctors' refusal to understand her only deepens her isolation and resistance.

Theme: Body as Last Refuge

When doctors insert a nasal tube, Yeong-hye violently resists. In-hye bites a nurse trying to stop them. Yeong-hye vomits blood and is transferred. In-hye thinks: *"It's your body, you can treat it however you please."* In-hye herself admits she has been close to madness — only Ji-woo keeps her tethered to reality.

Quotes in Chronological Order

- “*Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way.*”
- **Mr. Cheong, Ch. 1, p. 9** | Theme: Social Conventions, Misunderstanding
Establishes the conventionality of their lives and Yeong-hye's inscrutability — she is seen only through others' eyes, never her own.
- “*Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood.*”
- **Yeong-hye, Ch. 1, p. 18** | Theme: Humanity & Violence
One of the rare glimpses into Yeong-hye's perspective. The visceral dream is the root of her vegetarianism and her desire to escape human violence.
- “*The meat smell. Your body smells of meat.*”
- **Yeong-hye, Ch. 1, p. 22** | Theme: Body & Agency
Links dietary and sexual autonomy. Yeong-hye refuses to consume or be consumed — Mr. Cheong responds with rape.
- “*Didn't I say you wouldn't understand?*”
- **Yeong-hye, Ch. 2, p. 96** | Theme: Misunderstanding & Isolation
Yeong-hye recognizes she will always be misread. Her laughter is melancholic — she has accepted her isolation.
- “*No one can understand me...they just force me to take medication, and stab me with needles.*”
- **Yeong-hye, Ch. 3, p. 160** | Theme: Misunderstanding & Madness
The doctors' violence mirrors the family's force-feeding. Being misunderstood drives Yeong-hye to ever more extreme resistance.
- “*It's your body, you can treat it however you please. The only area where you're free to do just as you like.*”
- **In-hye, Ch. 3, p. 179** | Theme: Body & Agency
Han's central argument, voiced by In-hye at the climax: the body is the last refuge of agency for a woman stripped of all other freedoms.
- “*I have dreams too, you know...but surely the dream isn't all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don't we?*”
- **In-hye, Ch. 3, p. 185** | Theme: Social Conventions
The novel's final moral: society's rigidity is cruel but inescapable. It is better to live within it than be destroyed trying to escape it.

Why *The Vegetarian* Still Matters

Bodily Autonomy

Debates over who controls a woman's body — in diet, sexuality, and medical decisions — remain fiercely contested globally. Yeong-hye's struggle resonates with contemporary movements for reproductive rights and bodily self-determination.

Mental Health & Misdiagnosis

The novel challenges how society pathologizes nonconformity. Yeong-hye is labeled insane not because she is, but because no one tries to understand her — a critique of how mental illness is weaponized against those who resist norms.

Patriarchy & Punishment

The mechanisms by which patriarchal societies punish women who disobey — divorce, institutionalization, force-feeding — mirror real-world systems of control that persist today across cultures.

Environmental Consciousness

Yeong-hye's desire to live as a plant — to consume without killing — anticipates contemporary anxieties about meat consumption, environmental violence, and humanity's destructive relationship with the natural world.

She looked at the trees glinting in the sunlight — *"as if waiting for an answer. As if protesting against something."* — Han Kang