

Transformation from Innocence in the Novel *The Vegetarian* By Han Kang

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Abstract

The *Vegetarian* touches the most delicate themes with great sensitivity, skill, and insight, and the combination of these three first published in 2007 and translated in English in 2015 by Deborah Smith, won the Man Booker International Prize in 2016 and received international acclaim. Han Kang, the South Korean author, had won several prizes already, including the Yi Sang Literary Prize and the Korean Literature Novel Award, emerging as one of the most significant contemporary East Asian authors. *The Vegetarian* follows the story of a South Korean woman, Yeong-hye, who decides to become a vegetarian after having a series of disturbing dreams about meat. This paper entitled “Transformation from Innocence in the Novel *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang” narrates Yeong-hye’s transformation. *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang is a heart-shattering story which leaves its readers with a rather strong feeling of unease. As it becomes obvious from the name of the book, the plot is focused on a woman who turns vegetarian. However, this story is not about dieting or healthy eating, the novel is more about people’s cruelty and violence.

South Korea is becoming a major player in the world’s literary scene, beginning with last year’s London Book Fair, which spotlighted Korean literature. In particular, the country’s literary scene is making a name for itself with dark, transgressive fiction by female writers, some of which might not feel familiar or likable enough for American readers but they’re well worth the challenge.

The first of Korean writer Han Kang’s books to be widely available to English-speaking audiences, *The Vegetarian* was originally published as three separate novellas, then as the original novel in 2007. Each part is told from the viewpoint of a different character none of whom is the titular vegetarian herself. The first part introduces us to a Mr Cheong, who likes a nicely ordered existence, and was pleased to have found a wife who facilitated that:

The passive personality of this woman in whom I could detect neither freshness nor charm, or anything especially refined, suited me down to the ground. There was no need to affect intellectual leanings in order to win her over, or to worry that she might be comparing me to the preening men who pose in fashion catalogues, and she didn't get worked up if I happened to be late for one of our meetings. (*The Vegetarian* 3)

This paper entitled "Transformation from Innocence in the Novel *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang" narrates Yeong-hye's transformation. "Transformation" into a plant is significant; living as a plant relates to innocence and the ability to entirely avoid cruelty.

The Vegetarian is the story of a South Korean woman, Yeong-hye, who decides to become a vegetarian after having a series of disturbing dreams about meat. As her body increasingly grows limp her "complexion resembled that of a hospital patient" (5). Yeong-hye's family attempts to convince her to start eating meat again. When words do not convince Yeong-hye enough, her family resorts to physical measures, exacerbating her already fragile mental state. But Yeong-hye never quite recovers if anything; she seeks refuge in her own severed reality and finds a kind of distorted comfort in it.

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Mr. Cheong is the first character readers are going to get up to date with and this experience is definitely not going to be pleasant. The most terrifying thing about him is that it is so easy to understand this man. Mr. Cheong depends on a comfortable life. The man hasn't even tried to do something that required him going out of his comfort zone. Not to mention that he is ready to leave his wife as soon as he realizes that she is not going to return to her former self. Mr. Cheong considers Yeong-hye to be self-absorbed, but fails to notice that he is the biggest egoist in their little family.

The novella is based on the idea from a short story she originally wrote in 1997. It is divided into three sections. It is set in contemporary South Korea, giving it the context of a polite society that often denies erotic freedom and demands conformism as well as familial devotion. The tone is often uncomfortable, conveyed through stripped down prose, aligning with its main theme of the potential cruelty of humanity.

The Vegetarian is structured, as a novel, in a slightly unusual way. It is divided in three parts: “The Vegetarian,” told from Mr. Cheong’s point of view; “Mongolian Mark,” from Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law’s, In-hye’s husband; and “Flaming Trees,” from In-hye’s, Yeong-hye’s sister. Yeong-hye is the figure around which all the narratives revolve, but she is almost never the first-person narrator, and we hear her thoughts only in the first section, when we are presented with her dreams, and at the rare times (she is rather the silent type) in which she speaks in the other sections. Throughout the book, Yeong-hye remains a mysterious and ethereal creature which different people, and among them the readers, try and understand in different ways and to different degrees, while being confronted with the existences with other people at very intimate levels as well.

The first part, titled “Vegetarian”, is narrated in first-person by Mr. Cheong, Yeong-hye’s husband. He is a traditional and rigid man. Routine is a big part of his life, and one day, when Yeong-hye declares she’s becoming a vegetarian, this routine is disrupted. Not eating meat is also a cultural more and embarrasses Mr. Cheong. Her choice comes from a recurring and disturbing dream about the brutal treatment of animals in the meat industry. In his narration, Mr. Cheong describes his lack of sympathy and love for his wife. He originally married her because he thought she would be as plain and conventional as him. This held true until she started having the recurring dream, and his controlled lifestyle changes. She rids the house of meat, doesn’t eat out with friends, and has trouble even eating in with her family. Overall, her mental state is becoming more and more unstable as months pass. Mr. Cheong can no longer tolerate it and plans an intervention. At the intervention dinner, her father hits her and tries to force-feed her pork. This disturbs her so greatly that she grabs the knife from the table and

unsuccessfully tries to commit suicide by cutting her wrists. It is later revealed that Mr. Cheong has made preparations for divorce.

The next part, titled “Mongolian Mark,” is narrated in third-person by Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law, who is married to her sister In-hye. He is a graphic artist, especially interested in erotic filmmaking. He imagines a scene of a couple having sex painted in flowers. When he finds out that Yeong-hye has a birthmark that resembles a flower, he is convinced fate has connected them and she is the woman from his artistic fantasies. He first creates a series of sketches featuring her. His obsession eventually takes over and destroys his marriage. After convincing Yeong-hye to sleep with a fellow artist, he has another friend paint him in flowers and sleeps with Yeong-hye himself while recording the encounter. His wife finds the tape and reports their actions to “emergency services.” The brother-in-law contemplates taking his own life by jumping off a balcony but remains “rooted to the spot” and is escorted away by the authorities.

For the final part, titled “Flaming Trees,” the narration is transferred to In-hye herself, narrating in alternating present and past tense. In-hye has divorced her husband. In the present tense, she describes a visit to her sister, who now lives in the mental hospital. Her condition is getting worse and worse, where, beyond refusing to eat anything now, she also begins refusing any human interaction. In-hye comes to the realization that Yeong-hye’s actions have all been for the purpose of living an independent life that In-hye herself desires, revealing some of her own tendencies towards depression and mental illness. She believes her sister is courageous.

At the end of the novel, Yeong-hye’s narration reveals that she believes the only way to avoid the cruelty of humans is to become a plant. During her stay at the hospital, she has become more and more plant-like. In an incident where she manages to escape, she is found standing in a forest in the rain, acting as if she were a tree. She later announces that she has in fact become a plant. When doctors attempt to force-feed her, much like the incident with her father at dinner, In-hye bites the nurse holding her down and takes Yeong-hye away with her. As they ride a train together, Yeong-hye looks out the window observing the trees, feeling affinity, love, rightness, truth, and support from them.

In Han Kang's novella, characters struggle to relate and understand those around them. Both desire and shame are evoked from their failed relationships. Although the novella seriously engages with animal cruelty and the meat industry, the title and Yeong-hye's choice to become a vegetarian is more symbolic. The meat industry is an allegory for inflicting violence. Her choice to be a vegetarian represents her understanding of human violence and the power of the body. The choice, which is inherently anti-conformist in Korean society, is part of her desire to establish her own identity.

Yeong-hye's "transformation" into a plant is significant; living as a plant relates to innocence and the ability to entirely avoid cruelty. Plants grow, live in harmony, produce oxygen for the greater good, then die. It is a harmless and innocent existence. Yeong-hye's life crumbles as she accepts the belief that the world is a cruel place, but in many ways, she is free according to her own definition. In-hye's story, on the other hand, is about the inability to find happiness. Her attempts to be a good wife, mother, and sister prevent her from finding her own happiness, or even knowing what that would look like. Her story shows how those who seem to have a "perfect life" are not immune to mental illness, depression, and instability. Ultimately, in their rigid conformist society, it is the women who are denigrated for seeking to establish their own identity.

The Vegetarian touches the most delicate themes with great sensitivity, skill, and insight, and the combination of these three, is what makes the novel worth all its praise. It is not surprising that the book, first published in 2007 and translated in English in 2015 by Deborah Smith, won the Man Booker International Prize in 2016 and received international acclaim. Han Kang, the South Korean author, had won several prizes already, including the Yi Sang Literary Prize and the Korean Literature Novel Award, emerging as one of the most significant contemporary East Asian authors.

One of the work's themes is the stripping down of the human body to the bone and the language reflects this sparseness. Names are rarely used. Relatives are mainly denoted as husband, father, mother, exposing a strictly codified social system in which the individual has little importance and family identity dominates. Although the two sisters are named, In-hye's husband, the catalyst in the story's dynamic erotic drive, is known only as J.

The tension in Han Kang's multi-layered novel is the way in which the author reveals how nature, sex and art crash through this polite society. Violence erupts without warning. It is described almost casually. J tries to jump out of the window when discovered betraying his wife with her sister. At the family meal, Yeong-hye's father beats his daughter and, in front of everyone, brutally tries to force pork into her closed mouth. Yeong-hye slashes her own wrists at the dinner table. She is sent to a psychiatric hospital where medics brutalise her in an agonising description of tubes down noses, blood and vomit.

It is the women who are killed for daring to establish their own identity. The narrative makes it clear it is the crushing pressure of Korean etiquette which murders them. In her remarkable novel, *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang explores the irreconcilable conflict between our two selves: one greedy, primitive; the other accountable to family and society. There is a primal side in each of us, one that disrespects social norms, has needs, makes demands.

"Existence precedes essence" is a central tenet of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy first a human exists and then she creates her essence, the values and meanings that define her as human. *The Vegetarian's* heroine, Yeong-hye, gradually sheds her essence, emotionally isolating herself. She devolves into something that exists without meaning, like a plant or animal, and in doing so she ignores the societal norms that require a suppression of the primal.

Finally, Kang punctuates our erroneous faith in the ability to understand one another by silencing Yeong-hye and instead allowing her story to be told by her husband, her sister, and her brother-in-law. Their inability to "know" Yeong-hye creates frustration, disillusionment, and isolation. Only In-hye, who, in the midst of her own personal crisis, rejects the temptations of the primal, ultimately finds some meaning in Yeong-hye's choices. Kang's provocative novel calls into question ones reliance on others for emotional sustenance when the primal side of ones nature remains always unpredictable, always incomprehensible

Workscited

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