



# Aberrant human behavior in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

**Madhav R. Bodamwad** (Research Scholar)

School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies,  
SRTM University, Nanded 431606 Maharashtra India

[bodamwadmr82@gmail.com](mailto:bodamwadmr82@gmail.com)

**Dr. Pandit B. Nirmal** (Research Supervisor)

Assistant Professor and Head,  
Department of English,

Sant Tukaram College of Arts and Science,  
Basmat Road, Parbhani 431401 Maharashtra India

[panditbnirmal@gmail.com](mailto:panditbnirmal@gmail.com)

## Abstract:

Han Kang's International Man Booker Prize (2016) winning novel; *The Vegetarian* looks at the postmodern life in Korean society and focuses primarily on the odd and bizarre human behavior i.e. uncanny, showing, sometimes unbelievable and strange manners. It is different from that of common and sane people in society. It has breathtaking and strange qualities which are very intelligently communicated by the novelist. Through the lenses of the feminist approach, Han Kang skillfully explores the brutality and fatality of desire, female strength and weakness, male domination, violence, Korean taboos, eroticism and the shocking behavior of human beings. The present paper tries to explore aberrant human behavior and its effects on the life of the protagonist, Yeong-hye.

**Keywords:** Human behavior, aberrant, bizarre, patriarchy, eroticism, Korean taboos etc.

## Introduction:

Han Kang's renowned novel *The Vegetarian*, a South Korean three-part drama novella is based on her short story "The Fruit of My Woman". The novel deals with the protagonist's decision to stop eating meat and its devastating consequences. The novel is divided into three sections which could be read as three inter-linked novellas - *The Vegetarian*, *Mongolian Mark* and *Flaming Trees*. Set in Seoul city of North Korea and presents problems and lifestyle of modern days. One of the unique characteristics of the novel is the ways of strange behavior of its characters. The novelist minutely observes the modern ways of lifestyle of Korean society and culture including love, marriage, sex, lust, suffering, survival and bizarre behavior of people.

### **Connotation of Meat in *The Vegetarian*:**

*The Vegetarian* begins with a startling statement by Mr. Cheong, husband to the protagonist, Yeong-hye, a mediocre employee, about her strange behavior he says, “Before my wife turned vegetarian, I’d always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way” (03). However, he finds life difficult when his wife turns vegetarian and thereafter the drama starts. He feels shocked when Yeong-hye decides to be vegetarian suddenly and she starts behaving strangely. The reason behind it is that she has dreamt a dream wherein she sees dark woods, sharp and pointed leaves of trees, bamboo sticks soaked with blood-red gashes of meat, dropping blood, blood-soaked clothes, barbecuing meat and the smell of it everywhere. The dream is very horrific that she feels like the victim of meat-eating culture. In it, she starts blaming herself for eating the flesh of animals. As in the Hollywood movie, she dreams of falling in the crimson blood and it is the end of her life. She dreams that she has been lost in the dark wood, where the trees are ghostlike; they appear as red barn-like buildings. She finds herself running through the valley, with no place to hide except horrible trees. She feels shocked when she sees her bloody hands and there is blood in her mouth, as she is consuming the meat of innocent animals the roof of her mouth is full of crimson blood.

Yeong-hye firmly decides to be vegetarian after the dream. She thinks that the whole of mankind is guilty of killing innocent animals for their flesh. This nightmarish makes drastic changes in her behavior and lifestyle, which is proven against the society and culture of Korea. Mr. Cheong calls his wife crazy because at midnight she starts throwing pieces of meat everywhere in the home which feels disgusting. The kitchen floor is covered with plastic bags, slices of beef, broken eggs and all stuff makes her husband lose his control. “Are you crazy? . . . What the hell are you up to now? . . . Have you lost your mind?” (9-10).

### **Sexual Harassment of Yeong-hye:**

Sexual relationship is the base and boon of marital life, one cannot lead sexless life after marriage if one wants children. Yeong-hye starts avoiding a nuptial relationship with her husband and does not enter their bedroom until around five or early in the morning. On the contrary, she falls asleep during the daytime to be awakened at night. In the beginning, as Mr. Cheong tells, she was the first who used to initiate actively. She used to make the first move and now she moves away from him and feels disgusting while having sex. When he tries to force her, she says, “Your body smells of meat” (17). She starts hating non-vegetarian items so much so that she starts refusing milk products. Having been embarrassed and betrayed, he starts using force to get what she wants. It is strange for a husband to force his wife into sexual intercourse. Sexual relations in married life should be mutual; a force may be the reason for divorce. However, refusing sex to one’s own marital partner can lead to marital termination; law

courts can permit it on the basis of sex refusal because the conjugal relationship is right. Mr. Cheong behaves very inhumanly with Yeong-hye, he does not understand her feeling and problems nor respects her dignity. Though she is too feeble and underweight, he tries forcing her into sex. He says, “I grabbed hold of my wife and pushed her to the floor. Pinning down her struggling arms and tugging off her trousers, I became unexpectedly aroused” (30).

### **Korean Patriarchal Society: Male Violence and Female Resistance:**

Yeong-hye’s decision of being vegan is objectionable not only to her husband but also to her parents and brother who go against her. At the family party, when they come to know, they all force Yeong-hye to eat meat without knowing the reason behind her refusal. Even her parents do not care about their daughter’s decision and do not try to understand her problem. Initially, her mother tries to convey her to change her decision and enjoy non-vegetarian items there, but Yeong-hye rejects them violently. However, her father and brother are hot-tempered; her father shouts at her, before the guests gathered for the party, without respecting her emotions. It is very strange that a father forces his daughter to eat meat against her decision in front of her husband. Very abruptly, he commands her “Eat it!” (38). Yeong-hye silently rejects his order saying, “Father, I don’t eat meat” (38). He calls his son and son-in-law, Young-ho and orders him to “Take hold of Yeong-hye’s arms” (39). He mashes the pork on her lips, she struggles in agony, but all in vain, he struck her in the face in front of all guests insulting her. Being insulted and not able to slap her own father, she, in anger, cuts her wrist with a fruit knife. Very quickly from the main artery, her blood splashes over the floor. In this regard, Joseph Amato in his *Victims and Values* remarks,

“ . . . in traditional cultures a woman is expected to suffer well in matters of sexuality, reproduction and child rearing, yet she is exempted from having to suffer other types of pains, like those resulting from a blow, with equal dignity” (15).

Even her mother forces her to, without consoling her daughter. It is universally expected that a mother is a person who understands her daughter better than any other relative. However, unfortunately, she provokes her husband to be crueler to Yeong-hye. Her brother too grabs her arms to help his father in his wrong deed. A brother is not the one who joins to instigate the troubles of his own sister. Mr. Cheong, her husband, cannot utter a single word against his father-in-law to stop him from beating and insulting his wife. Generally, a husband is one who takes care of his wife in difficulty, and does not bear someone beating his wife in front of him; however, he just observes the drama and fails to be a good partner. Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law, an unnamed person and narrator of the second section of the novel, does not stop his father-in-law. Rather, he misbehaves with her by taking disadvantage of her predicament and does not notice when Yeong-hye goes mad. Only her sister, In-hye, feels sad but cannot stop her father because of fear. Yeong-hye is somewhat responsible for her pathetic condition, because she, too, behaves strangely. Initially, she used to enjoy eating meat but suddenly changes herself in an unacceptable way. About such patriarchy Raman Selden in his *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, quotes from Kate

Millette's *Sexual Politics*, where she announces her view of patriarchy is, "a systematic overview- as a political institution. Patriarchy subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as inferior . . . in civil and domestic life to constrain women" (Raman Selden, 133).

### **The Unnamed Narrator: Immoral Behavior:**

The unnamed narrator of the second section "Mongolian Mark" and Yeong-hye's brother-in-law is an obsessive video artist. He proves to be a bad husband and father and earns no penny to support his family. He has only an appetite for carnality and is always in search of a woman who has a *Mongolian Mark*, a birthmark on her back or buttock. In order to find it out, he invites Yeong-hye to his studio for a naked performance. A naked woman's body and sex are the only fascinations of him. "The naked bodies of the men and women were brilliantly decorated . . . straightforward about the ways in which they were having sex" (58). When he comes to know that his sister-in-law has such a mark on her back, he springs his prolonged desire. Initially, his only motto was to make a video of men and women applying flower petals on their naked bodies, and desired to be an artist. However, his idea of art for art's sake turns into lustfulness. He crosses the moral boundary by seducing her for illegal sex. Here Yeong-hye is raped by her own sister's husband by taking disadvantage of her helpless condition. As a man of lustfulness, he imagines spreading his sperm to many women. He goes mad for his own sister-in-law, and feels strongly dissatisfied, for "these days, every time he looked at her" (63). Thus, Han Kang tries to share nasty and characterless people who ruin the lives of other innocent and decent people through their shameful acts.

### **Bizarre Incidents: Exploitations of Women:**

The novel is a series of bizarre incidents in which women constantly become weaker and weaker by the exploitations of their male relatives. In one of the incidents, Yeong-hye's brother-in-law seduces and demands carnal pleasure. She blames her present condition saying, "I wish I were dead" (107), he without empathizing with her he says, "So die" (107). It is because if she is not of any use to him, he wishes her to go to hell. However, when he gets her to catch her in his clutches, he gets his desire fulfilled. "As soon as he was naked he pushed her legs wide apart and entered her. . . . when he realized that these noises were coming from him, he shuddered; he'd never made a sound during sex, had always thought of it as the preserve of flirtatious young women" (112). She is exploited by every male relative without any resistance, as she cannot face their anger. About male dominance Luce Irigaray says, "I have so often heard men getting angry about women only" (David Lodge, 432).

### Aberrant, Barbaric and Uncivilized Behaviors of Characters:

Due to familial torture, physical and mental violence, Yeong-hye goes mad in the third section, “Flaming Trees”. The strangest thing in the novel is that no relative, except her sister, In-hye, remains close to her, nor do they even worry about her physical deterioration and mental agony. They prove themselves uncivilized, barbaric and wild animals in the image of human beings. In the city lunatic asylum, she is treated, but no relative meets her even her mother and father including her brother. Despite of husband, parents, brother, sister and brother-in-law and other relatives, she continually finds herself in solitude. With their torture and lack of rapper and healthy communication Yeong-hye is driven to mental agonies. She, in sleep and wakefulness, goes missing far from the asylum in the wood in a dreadful condition. In one of her monologues, she says, “leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands . . . I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread them wide” (127). These words indicate that she has gone out of her mind. Sometimes she pretends of hearing distorted animal sounds. Her mental and physical health in the third section is no less than the strange heroine of a Hollywood horror movie. The following expression proves it clearly: “. . . blood was trickling from her left eye. She quickly reached up to wipe the blood away, but somehow her reflection in the mirror didn’t move as inch, only stood there, blood running from a staring eye” (128). In the hospital Yeong-hye loses her mental sense, unable to recognize her own sister. She is even unaware of In-hye’s presence and surrounding people including doctors, nurses and paramedical. She loses her eating habit, she suffers from the disease of anorexia nervosa and she is underweight. “ ‘Yeong-hye.’ No reply. ‘Yeong-hye. What are you doing? Stand up.’ She reached out of hand” (147). The horrible thing is that towards the end Yeong-hye gives eating even vegetarian items too. “ ‘You don’t have to bring that stuff now. . . I don’t need to eat any more’ ” (147). About her one of the nurses says, “Yeong-hye might die” (150), because she does not eat and vomits blood. In such conditions, there is no guarantee of life. Nowadays she just lies on the bed and sometimes it seems that she gazes from the window, but actually, she does not look at anything and it is very strange and horrible. Because of ill health and insomnia, she is skeletal-like; she has barely any flesh on her limbs. Her coccyx and pale blue *Mongolian Mark* are clearly visible because now she has no sense of clothing. Her trauma indicates to what extent she has been suffering from mental agonies. Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* quotes Freud as, “. . . the positive symptoms, flashbacks and hallucinations and the negative symptoms, numbing, amnesia and avoidance of triggering stimuli” (Caruth: 130).

At the end of the novel when In-hye comes to know that her husband had done an unforgivable crime with her sister, she hands him to the police for imprisonment. But she sees in his eyes neither regret nor resentment. Her menstruation period has stopped for a long time now, she is below thirty and there is nothing left even on her breast.

**Conclusion:**

Han Kang's remarkable novel, *The Vegetarian* is not about the glamour or trials of being a vegetarian. In spite of it, the novel explores the oppression and exploitation of the protagonist, Yeong-hye in the patriarchal society. The novelist portrays the different layers of aberrant human behavior and its effects on the life of protagonist, Yeong-hye. She faces verbal, physical, and sexual violence throughout her entire life because of her vegetarianism. All the characters except her sister In-hye never behave normally with her or they do not seem sensible to her. They prove themselves uncivilized, barbaric and wild animals in the image of human beings.

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