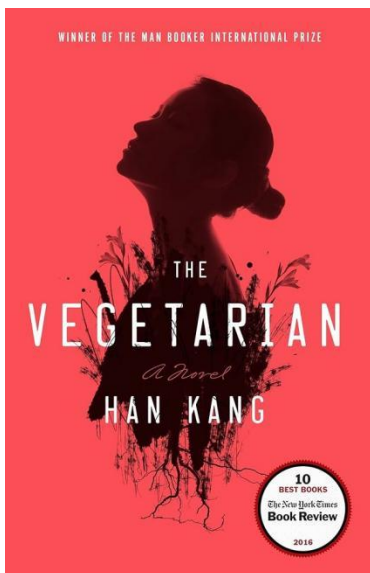


Review of *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang

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Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* sheds light on the often-hidden dark side of human nature. A seemingly innocuous decision to embrace vegetarianism sets off a series of strange and unsettling events. The protagonist, Yeong-hye, embarks on a journey of self-denial, rejecting societal norms, conventions, and what is deemed 'normal' life, challenging the very notion of sanity and prompting readers to grapple with feelings of guilt for adhering to societal expectations of rationality and conformity. The novel is a mysterious chunk of revelation that delves into the enigmatic realms of the human psyche, presenting a surreal landscape filled with uncertainties.

The renowned South Korean writer, Han Kang, is known for her notable literary endeavours such as *Fruits of My Woman* (2000) and *Fire Salamander* (2012), as well as a collection of novels spanning *The Black Deer* (1998), *Your Cold Hand* (2002), *The Vegetarian* (2007), *Breath Fighting* (2010), *Greek Lessons* (2011), *Human Acts* (2014), *The White Book* (2016), and *We Do Not Part* (2021).

The Vegetarian evokes a profound sense of existential ambiguity concerning the human condition. Witnessing the Gwangju Uprising at the age of nine marked Han Kang's formative years, instilling in her a deep-seated fear and disillusionment towards humanity, making her reluctant to identify with it. Being surrounded and protected by books from a very young age, Kang turns to books to find answers to counter violence and cruelty of human nature. Her quest was not sufficed through the book, as they were weak and vulnerable, which compelled Kang to unravel her inner turmoil through her writing.

The protagonists of *The Vegetarian* struggle to conform to societal norms and catalyse profound self-exploration, mirroring Kang's existential journey through which she grapples with her innermost self amid adversity and pain. Kang's vivid visual writing penetrates her readers' minds by bombarding them with contradictory ideas, leaving the reader in a maze where choosing a path becomes sceptical.

Yeong Hye and her husband lead an undisturbed married life solely on each other's terms. Her husband accepts Yeong Hye's receptiveness as his insecurities are safe with her. The first part of the novel is named as "The Vegetarian," which is also the title of the novel. This first part is narrated by Yeong Hye's husband. Their distant relationship remains unaffected until Yeong Hye's decision to become a vegetarian disrupts their equilibrium. As Yeong Hye's condition worsens, marked by drastic actions such as discarding all meat from their home and staying awake for prolonged periods, her husband begins to realise the extent of her rigidity. The revelation of Yeong Hye's struggles occurs to her family when she resorts to self-harm to resist her father's attempts to force-feed her meat. Hospitalised, her husband confronts the reality that he cannot continue to coexist peacefully with her inflex.

In the second part of the novel, titled "Mongolian Mark," the narrative perspective shifts to Yeong Hye's unnamed brother-in-law, a man who shirks his responsibilities as a husband and father. He finds solace in art, using it as a means to escape the complexities of his life. However, buried beneath his facade of

indifference lies a disturbing obsession with Yeong Hye, fueled by his wife's mention of a Mongolian Mark on her buttocks. He envisions her as a muse for his art, objectifying her and feeding his desires through his creative pursuits. He successfully materialises his artistic vision by exploiting Yeong Hye's vulnerability following her divorce. Yielding to his desires, Yeong Hye becomes consumed by his obsession with the floral motifs he painted on her naked form. The narrative reaches its climax when In Hye, discovering her husband's infidelity, interrupts their affair and takes decisive action, leading to Yeong Hye's institutionalisation.

The third section, titled "Flaming Trees," is recounted by In-Hye, whose existence has been irrevocably altered by the preceding events. She pays a visit to Yeong Hye in the hospital, only to discover that her sister's condition has further deteriorated. Through In-Hye's perspective, the narrative unveils the progressive decline in Yeong Hye's mental health as she increasingly identifies herself with the image of a tree. The novel concludes with ambiguity, as Yeong Hye is transferred to another medical facility while hovering on the brink of death.

Kang has crafted the novel in a triptych format, creating an initial impression of simplicity while employing a complex narrative that delves into the intricacies of the human psyche. Touching upon themes of human violence, madness, nature, and oppression, the novel navigates the protagonist Yeong Hye's journey as she defies societal norms. In the first part, her husband unveils her resistance to conforming to societal expectations, such as not wearing a bra even at dinner with his colleagues. A peculiar dream catalyses Yeong Hye's descent into vegetarianism, prompting her husband to recognise that her choice encompasses more than mere dietary preferences. This dream serves as a significant motif throughout the novel, granting Yeong Hye a voice and agency. The gradual revelation of Yeong Hye's past by her sister in the third section provides insight into her present receptiveness. Yeong Hye's reluctance to consume meat mirrors her rejection of societal expectations, highlighting her defiance against conformity.

Kang has revealed the cruelties of patriarchal society through Yeong Hye's rejection of meat. She brings into question traditional beliefs surrounding gender roles and the treatment of women within patriarchal structures. Through Yeong Hye's rejection of meat and her father's oppressive actions, Kang exposes the inherent violence and control embedded within patriarchal norms. Her father's insistence on feeding her the meat of a dog that had bitten her exemplifies his adherence to traditional beliefs, even at the expense of his daughter's well-being. This portrayal serves as a powerful critique of patriarchal systems that prioritise male authority and perpetuate violence against women. Ultimately, Kang's narrative challenges readers to reconsider the validity and morality of entrenched societal norms, urging a re-evaluation of the structures that perpetuate oppression and cruelty.

Nature plays a significant role in the novel, serving as a catalyst that reveals the true essence of the characters, particularly Young Hye and In Hye. Yeong Hye

recedes into nature as she denies her body. She expresses that her internal being is saturated with the meat she has consumed over the years, prompting her to seek solace by envisioning herself as a tree nourished solely by sunlight and rainwater. The enigmatic conclusion of the novel contributes to the intricate layers of complexity woven by Kang. In-Hye, amidst her sister's tribulations, undergoes a journey of self-discovery and is ultimately portrayed as experiencing dreams by the novel's conclusion, suggesting the enduring turmoil within individuals in a society marked by violence.

Reference

Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian*. Hogarth, 2016.