

## ***Han Kang: The Vegetarian Part 3 (Flaming Trees)***

*"All of the trees of the world are like sisters and brothers."*

Once again the narration shifts and In-hye, Yeong-hye's sister, takes up the story. She's travelling to a psychiatric hospital where Yeong-hye has been a patient for some time. Throughout her journey to the hospital, and while she's waiting to see Yeong-hye, we find out more about In-hye's life since her husband's infidelity, how estranged she has become from her family and, through flashbacks, see the sisters together both when they were children and during In-hye's previous visits to the hospital.

Eventually, In-hye is able to see her sister, and we realise how far she has deteriorated since the events of part two. She struggles to open her eyes, speaks in barely audible whispers, and doesn't respond when In-hye tries to feed her a plum. The situation is so bad that the doctors decide to move her to a different ward where she can be force-fed. At this point, Yeong-hye awakes and tries to fight back. Eventually she is taken away by ambulance. In-hye sits with her, staring out of the window at the trees which seem to be burning as the sunlight passes through their leaves.

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### **Knowledge Check**

*How well do you know these chapters?*

**1. Where is the psychiatric hospital located?**

- (a) By the sea
- (b) In the center of Seoul
- (c) In the mountains
- (d) On Jeju Island

**2. What is the weather like throughout her journey to the hospital?**

- (a) Bright and sunny
- (b) Raining
- (c) Snowing
- (d) Gale force winds

**3. In-hye increased the frequency of her visits after what incident?**

- (a) Yeong-hye had attacked another patient.
- (b) Yeong-hye was refusing her medication
- (c) Yeong-hye had decided to eat again
- (d) Yeong-hye had run away

**4. What is the name of Yeong-hye's doctor?**

- (a) Park In-ho
- (b) Paing Thu-kin
- (c) Ji-woo
- (d) Son Heung-min

**5. Who is Hee-joo?**

- (a) The bus driver
- (b) A doctor
- (c) Another patient
- (d) In-hye's friend

**6. When In-hye visited before, what was Yeong-hye doing?**

- (a) Dancing and singing
- (b) Steaming potatoes
- (c) Standing on her head
- (d) Writing her HL essay

**7. Which two-word phrase does Han Kang repeat throughout this chapter?**

- (a) In-hye waits
- (b) Time passes
- (c) Dreams dissolve
- (d) Night falls

**8. What does Yeong-hye say she will eat?**

- (a) Peaches
- (b) Plums
- (c) Oysters
- (d) Only water

**9. What is the 'thread' that keeps In-hye connected to the world?**

- (a) Ji-woo
- (b) Her husband
- (c) Yeong-hye
- (d) Her career

**10. What does In-hye see from the ambulance as she leaves the mountain?**

- (a) A black bird flying into the sun
- (b) An owl sitting on a branch
- (c) A dog howling in the trees
- (d) A monkey dropping fruit on the ground

## Understanding and Interpretation

1. What do we discover about In-hye's relationship with her sister? What happened in the past? What has happened to their relationship recently? What are some of the thoughts In-hye has about her sister?
2. How has Yeong-hye's condition changed over the time she has been in the hospital? In what ways is she transforming?
3. What impression do you have of the hospital and staff? How do the doctors interact with the patients? How do they take care of Yeong-hye? Who is Hee-joo and why is she so important in this chapter?
4. Throughout this chapter, In-hye thinks about Ji-woo and her husband. What are some of her thoughts? What role does family play for In-hye? What ideas about family has Han Kang explored through the novel?
5. The novel ends with a powerful image of In-hye. What resolution do you think she has come to? What newfound determination do you think she has made? How do you think she will try and live from here on?

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## Important Symbolism: *Trees*

*“Look, sister... leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands.”*

Throughout the novel, in contrast to meat which represents violence, plants – especially flowers and trees – have symbolised Yeong-hye’s desire to lead a gentler life. She is disgusted with her past self, who was complicit in what she now views as the murder of animals, and her action of throwing out all the meat in the house represents her trying to regain the innocence that her father destroyed when he forced her to eat the meat of a dog he had killed. The desire to lead a less harmful life draws Yeong-hye towards plants and flowers as symbols of gentleness and passivity. In part two, being painted with flowers helped her experience something of the transformation into a gentler being. Unfortunately, her brother-in-law saw the flowers as a sexual symbol and interpreted her passivity as consent to sex. Once again, her innocence was violated by the action of another, even as she cries and asks him to stop.

In part three, we see an intensification of plant imagery. Trees are frequently associated with Yeong-hye’s physical form; as her body changes it becomes more plant-like, and she eventually attempts to become a tree, even so far as to try to plunge her arms into the ground like roots. Trees cover the mountain around Ch’ukseong psychiatric hospital; at one point, Yeong-hye runs deep into the forest seeking refuge from the treatment she thinks is harming her. Even In-hye is drawn to the profound nature of the trees, observing the woods *‘like a huge animal suppressing a roar.’* Previously all the animals in the novel have been killed and turned into meat – but in this wild place In-hye senses the primal spirit of animals contained by the woods. Something of this fierceness transmits itself to In-hye who stares out of the window *‘fiercely’* at the trees.

### Quotation Hunt

Skim and scan part three of the novel (Flaming Trees) and find quotations that you think are significant in terms of the **symbolism of plants and trees**. Record your findings here, making comments about the significance of the quotations you’ve chosen. Compare your findings and ideas with others:

Quotation	Comment

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### Important Theme: *Misunderstanding leads to madness*

*“No one can understand me... they don't even try to understand... they just force me to take medication and stab me with needles.”*

Throughout *The Vegetarian*, characters are constantly in a position where they cannot understand one another. Sometimes, as in the case of Mr Cheong when his wife gave up eating meat, there is a lack of effort; on other occasions, characters attempt to understand each other, but are unsuccessful. In each case, the pattern is the same; misunderstanding leads to accusation and isolation. Both Yeong-hye and her brother-in-law are labelled as ‘crazy’ and both are ostracized from society.

Kang shows that it is exclusion from society that is the real first step towards madness. Devoid of support, characters try to escape their circumstances through constructing fantasy worlds. This tendency was seen even in more normal times; ignored by her husband and left at home by herself, Yeong-hye would seek refuge by reading in her room, where her books symbolise the fantasies in which she sought escape. Her brother-in-law took refuge in his art; and now, in part three, we discover In-hye is having dreams of her own. Therefore, the equation of the novel can be expressed as: misunderstanding leads to isolation, causing the madness that others suspected was already there.

In-hye's relationship with her husband is a case in point. Each is isolated from the other, unable to understand the other's thoughts and motivations. When her husband arrives home late (p63), he examines In-hye *‘the way one might look at a complete stranger.’* On her part, In-hye wonders: *‘had she ever really understood her husband's true nature?’* Flashbacks throughout part three emphasize the growing distance and silence between them, described like *‘a heavy mass of rock and the tenacious resistance of rubber’* (p132). Lack of understanding and mutual isolation is one of the reasons he begins to fantasise about Yeong-hye, culminating in him being unfaithful to his wife. This action leads to In-hye calling the emergency services on him – at which point he tries to kill himself out of shame, proving to others that he really is mad. In other words, the label of ‘mad’ became a self-fulfilling prophecy!

*Flaming Trees* is told from In-hye's perspective, giving further insight into this theme. On the surface, In-hye is a successful woman who can run her own business while taking care of her young son and supporting her husband at the same time. But in part three we discover that she feels isolated and misunderstood – and, like her sister and husband, she feels her own tenuous sanity slipping away. After being coerced into letting her husband have sex with her, she admits that she *‘wanted to stab herself in the eyes with chopsticks, or pour the boiling water from the kettle over her head’* (p164). She admits to having suicidal thoughts at other times in her life: after undergoing a gynaecological procedure she was standing on the platform at the train station and felt *‘afraid that something inside her would make her throw herself in front of the solid mass of the train’* (p162).

### Analytical writing practice

Write a discursive paragraph about Yeong-hye in part three. In what ways is she misunderstood and isolated? How does she retreat further into her fantasy world? Is she really ‘mad’?