

## ***Han Kang: The Vegetarian Part 1 (to the end).***

*“Why? Why am I changing like this? Why are my edges all sharpening? What am I going to gouge?”*

After being embarrassed by her refusal to eat meat at his company dinner, Mr. Cheong appeals to Yeong-hye’s family to help him put her back on the right path. They organise a family get-together at her mother and father’s home. The family pull together to prepare traditional meat dishes: seasoned oysters, stir fried beef, steamed chicken, and octopus noodles. When Yeong-hye continues to refuse to eat anything, her father becomes incensed, forcing food into her mouth and slapping her in front of the whole family. Unexpectedly, Yeong-hye grabs a knife and slits her own wrists rather than succumb to such treatment.

Part one ends with Yeong-hye in hospital, accompanied by a reluctant Mr Cheong. She has become painfully thin and is kept hooked up to an IV bag. When her mother visits she brings with her a ‘herbal medicine’ made of goat meat and tries to trick Yeong-hye into drinking it. Instead, Yeong-hye vomits it up and destroys the rest of the bag. Her mother gives up and leaves the hospital, ashamed of her daughter’s obstinate behaviour. Mr. Cheong is nearing the end of his patience too, when Yeong-hye disappears...

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### **Knowledge Check**

*How well do you know these chapters?*

**1. In which war did Yeong-hye’s father fight?**

- (a) Korean War
- (b) World War Two
- (c) Vietnam War
- (d) Crimean War

**2. In what month was the family get-together scheduled?**

- (a) June
- (b) July
- (c) October
- (d) November

**3. What is strange about the way Yeong-hye cooks?**

- (a) With her eyes closed
- (b) Topless
- (c) She won’t re-use old pots
- (d) She dances while she cooks

**4. On what floor of their apartment building does Yeong-hye’s family live?**

- (a) Ground floor
- (b) Tenth floor
- (c) Seventeenth floor
- (d) Top floor

**5. What is Mr. Cheong’s nephew (In-hye’s son’s) name?**

- (a) Su-min
- (b) Yeong-ho
- (c) Sung-yoon
- (d) Ji-woo

**6. What food item did Yeong-hye used to like, especially?**

- (a) Seasoned oysters
- (b) Sweet and sour chicken
- (c) Stir fried beef
- (d) Poached fish

**7. What is Yeong-hye’s younger brother’s name?**

- (a) In-hye
- (b) Cheong-seul
- (c) Hwang-do
- (d) Yeong-ho

**8. Who brings Yeong-hye ‘medicine’ while she is in hospital?**

- (a) Her mother
- (b) Her father
- (c) Her sister
- (d) Her brother-in-law

**9. Which character was the first to leap to Yeong-hye’s aid after she harmed herself?**

- (a) Her younger brother
- (b) Her husband
- (c) Her sister
- (d) Her brother-in-law

**10. What does Yeong-hye kill at the end of part one?**

- (a) A cat
- (b) A mouse
- (c) A bird
- (d) A cricket

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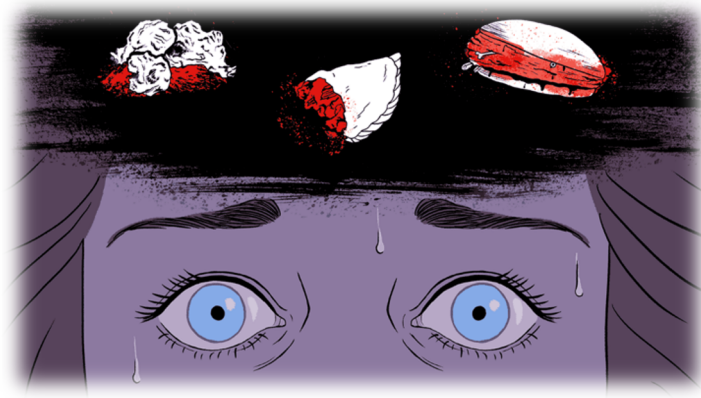
## Understanding and Interpretation

1. What does the reader learn about Yeong-hye's father and their relationship when she was a child? How might this knowledge help you understand Yeong-hye better?
2. As Yeong-hye loses weight, she begins to consider how much she dislikes her own body. What images of the body does the writer develop in this part of the story? Why are Yeong-hye's breasts so important to her?
3. How do different members of Yeong-hye's family react to her refusal to eat meat, and to her father's violence? What do people's reactions reveal about the power dynamic in Korean family society? What interpersonal reactions do you notice as well, which may be worth commenting on?
4. Would you agree that the more support Yeong-hye needs, the less sympathy she seems to get? Support your response with evidence from the story:
5. Part one ends on a very ambiguous **image**; Yeong-hye sits in the hospital garden bathed in sunlight. She is holding a dead bird and her lips are smeared with blood. How do you react to this image? What has happened? What do you think it means?

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## Important Symbolism: *Eating Meat*

*"Dreams of murder. Murderer or murdered..."*



You will no doubt have noticed that some sections of the opening chapter of the novel are written in *italic font*. These passages intersect with the main narrative and are narrated from Yeong-hye's point of view. In fact, these are glimpses into Yeong-hye's dreams. Through these passages, Han Kang mirrors Yeong-hye's fragile and fractured psyche by writing in fragmented sentences and phrases. She reveals: Yeong-hye's fear of violence; her feelings about being the victim of abuse by her father; her worry that she too will harm other living beings.

The novel begins when Yeong-hye starts to have dreams in which she is devouring bloody meat, torn apart with her own hands and teeth. These images become **allegories** (a kind of **metaphor**) for Yeong-hye's feelings of being violated and the victim of violence. The dreams are graphic and nauseating, full of **imagery** such as: "*long bamboo sticks strung with great blood-red gashes of meat... Blood in my mouth, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin.*" Visceral language like this establishes both her horror at the thought of eating meat and her realization of the role of human violence in its production. In another dream Yeong-hye remembers an incident in which she had been attacked by a dog; as punishment, her father ran the dog to death through strangulation. Yeong-hye is haunted by the graphic and bloody image of the dog's body; and how she was made to eat its meat afterwards. Through incidents such as these, she has come to believe that all humans – even herself – are capable of appalling violence. This is why she is compelled to become a vegetarian. Therefore, throughout the novel, **meat is a symbol of violence**. On the other hand, vegetables, plants and flowers symbolise the opposite of violence – a non-harmful way of living in the world.

### Analytical Writing Practice

Select some words, phrases, and images from Yeong-hye's dreams as she recounts them throughout part 1. Write an analytical paragraph about the presentation of Yeong-hye's dreams. Choose a strong idea: what insights do they give into her state of mind? How do Kang's descriptions impact the reader?

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## Important Theme: *Agency and Autonomy*

*'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.'*

*The Vegetarian* takes place in modern-day Seoul, a society rooted in conservative Korean values. Traditionally, Korean family hierarchies emphasize **patriarchal authority**, wherein a husband or father exhibits dominance and protection over the women in the family in exchange for obedience and love. The story begins with Yeong-hye's choice to become a vegetarian before tracking the fallout of this decision on Yeong-hye's relationships with her family and husband. Unfortunately for Yeong-hye, it is not so much the fact that she no longer wants to eat meat that disturbs her husband and family; rather it is the fact that she suddenly wants to have **autonomy** over her own life. Up until now, she has been a deferential person. Her newfound sense of authority troubles those around her greatly, as they expect her to be obedient to her husband and father. For example, Mr Cheong believes: "*it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as mine had done.*"

When the rest of Yeong-hye's family hears about her decision, they too view it as an insult, believing that her disobedience reflects poorly on how they brought her up. In particular, Yeong-hye's mother and father (along with her brother Yeong-ho, who plays no further part in her life after this incident) coax her to eat meat. The family meal scene illustrates how her family feel as though they have the right to decide what Yeong-hye eats – in other words, that they have the right to decide what she does with her own body. Yeong-hye's father believes this so deeply that he tries to force-feed her meat; when she continues to refuse, he punishes her physically by slapping her, using superior size and strength to deny her own choices.

However, by now Yeong-hye has realised that her body is the greatest weapon she possesses to fight against the dominance of her father and husband. Although the men in her life continue to try to determine what she can and cannot do, she turns her body into a tool of resistance. At the meal, Yeong-hye feels so violated by her father's actions that she slits her own wrist with a knife; you might like to consider that this is not so much a suicide attempt as a way to publicly demonstrate that, if they will not let her choose how to use her body (for example, by dictating what she must eat), then she would rather harm her body than let them control it. Previously, she avoided having sex with Mr. Cheong because she says that his body "*smells of meat.*" Mr. Cheong, however, views this as another absurd and unnecessary form of disobedience, and so he pins her down and rapes her on several occasions. Therefore, Han Kang establishes Yeong-hye's body as a tool for her resistance against **patriarchal authority**, ultimately suggesting that **bodily autonomy** is the only way for a person – especially a woman in a society dominated by men - to maintain any **agency** in her life.

### Activity

Research the issue of marital rape. (You can begin with the wider reading available on the class blog.)

What light does your research shine on the importance of Han Kang's novel? Give feedback in a short oral presentation to the class or write a reflection for your Learner Portfolio.