

The Vegetarian: Part 3 (In-hye's Story)

"As a child, In-hye had possessed the innate strength of character necessary to make one's own way in life."

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.

As In-hye spends time with her sister, she is forced to confront questions about her own life and identity. Throughout the novel she has appeared practical, responsible, and resilient, dedicating herself to supporting both her family and her struggling sister. However, her visits to the hospital gradually reveal the emotional cost of meeting the expectations of others. As she reflects on her failed marriage, her strained family relationships, and her exhausting responsibilities, she begins to question whether her own apparent stability has come at the cost of suppressing her true self. In this way, the final part of the novel not only charts Yeong-hye's decline but also becomes a journey of self-discovery for In-hye.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know this chapter?

1. How does In-hye get to the psychiatric hospital?

- (a) By bus
- (b) By taxi
- (c) She walks
- (d) By helicopter

2. Where did In-hye first meet her husband?

- (a) At school
- (b) At an art exhibition
- (c) In her shop
- (d) On a blind date

3. What is the age gap between In-hye and Yeong-hye?

- (a) 2 years
- (b) 3 years
- (c) 4 years
- (d) 5 years

4. What is the name of the doctor In-hye talks to in part three?

- (a) Park In-ho
- (b) Kim Yeong-ho
- (c) Jit-Shuen Liew
- (d) Son Heung-min

5. What did In-hye's husband used to say before they were married?

- (a) I'm going to make us all happy
- (b) I don't deserve you
- (c) It will all be okay
- (d) I'm secretly attracted to your sister

6. Which of these words best describe Ji-woo?

- (a) Confident
- (b) Robust
- (c) Sickly
- (d) Talkative

7. Which of these things has In-hye NOT imagined doing?

- (a) Stabbing herself with chopsticks
- (b) Throwing herself in front of a train
- (c) Pouring boiling water on herself
- (d) Slitting her wrist with a fruit knife

8. What does In-hye bring her sister to 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. In the third part, the narration shifts again so that Yeong-hye's sister In-hye takes up the story. After reading part 3, how would you describe In-hye's character and personality?
2. In-hye is Yeong-hye's older sister. In what ways is her attitude towards her sister similar or different to other members of their family?
3. Is there a sense that In-hye's attitude towards or feelings about Yeong-hye shift across the chapter? Does she come to understand her better? Or is there still a distance between them?
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?

Important Character: *In-hye*

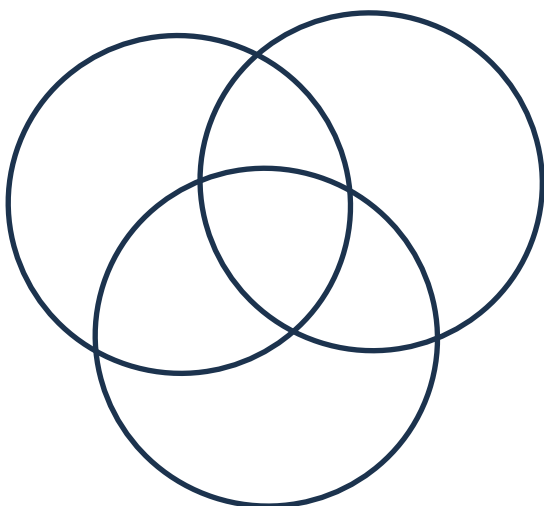
“As a daughter, as an older sister, as a wife and as a mother, as the owner of a shop... she has always done her best.”

In-hye provides the narrative viewpoint for the third and final part of the novel. Unlike the other narrators, she represents neither conformity nor rebellion, but a strange mix of both. Throughout the novel, she has fulfilled the roles expected of her by society: she runs a successful business, cares for her son, supports her husband, and attempts to preserve relationships within her family. In many respects, she embodies the conventional ideal for a modern Korean woman. However, by the beginning of part three, this outward stability has begun to unravel. Her husband's infidelity has destroyed her marriage, Yeong-hye has been institutionalised, and her relationship with her parents has become increasingly strained.

Throughout part three, the characterisation of In-hye grows increasingly complex as she begins to question the life she has built for herself. Unlike Yeong-hye, who rebels publicly, In-hye's dissatisfaction has remained hidden beneath years of responsibility and self-sacrifice. Flashbacks reveal that even as a child she often felt responsible for protecting her younger sister, a role she continues to perform well into adulthood. She has spent much of her life caring for other people while suppressing her own needs and desires. Her visits to the psychiatric hospital prompt a growing awareness of her own unhappiness forces her to confront uncomfortable truths about herself and her family. Gradually, In-hye starts to recognise that the life she has lived according to society's expectations has not brought her the fulfilment or security she was promised. While Yeong-hye's actions initially appeared irrational and self-destructive, In-hye begins to wonder whether her sister understood something that she herself has never been able to grasp.

As she reflects on her failed marriage, her difficult childhood, and the burdens she continues to carry, she realises how much of her identity is not really hers. In this sense, In-hye's journey mirrors Yeong-hye's while also contrasting with it. Both women reject the roles imposed upon them, but they do so in different ways. Yeong-hye withdraws from human society entirely, while In-hye begins the more gradual process of understanding herself as an individual rather than simply *“a daughter,” “wife,” “mother,”* or *“older sister.”* Han Kang shows us how In-hye doesn't fully embrace her sister's rebellious outlook. Unlike Yeong-hye, she remains firmly connected to reality and committed to caring for others. By the novel's conclusion, In-hye emerges as arguably the novel's most important character, representing the possibility of questioning social conformity without completely abandoning the human world.

Activity



Now that you've encountered all three of the novel's major narrative viewpoints, consider how Han Kang uses each narrator to develop the novel's themes and ideas. Create a mind-map, Venn diagram, or comparison chart showing your thoughts about Mr Cheong, Yeong-hye's brother-in-law, and In-hye. What are their roles in society, their relationships and dealings with Yeong-hye, their views on conformity and rebellion, the challenges they impose on society – or the ways they uphold social norms? As you compare, think about what each reveals about the novel's wider themes and concerns.

Important Theme: *Misunderstanding leads to madness*

“Had she ever really understood her husband’s true nature, bound up as it was with that seemingly impenetrable silence?”

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 many cases, the pattern is the same; misunderstanding leads to accusation and isolation. In extreme cases, such as Yeong-hye and her brother-in-law, a person is labelled as ‘crazy’ and ostracized from society.

Kang shows that it is exclusion from society that is the real first step towards true 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 and manga artwork 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, 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.’* Lack of understanding and mutual isolation is one of the reasons In-hye’s husband 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’ becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The novel’s third part, *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’*. 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’*. None of this is successfully communicated to, let alone understood by, members of her own family or other characters in the novel.

Activity

Mind-map moments in the novel that demonstrate misunderstanding, failure of communication, accusation of madness, or similar. You might like to consider supporting characters like Yeong-hye’s mother and/or doctors for this activity as well as the novel’s narrators.