

Han Kang: The Vegetarian (Part 2: Mongolian Mark)

"It was almost the first time since his marriage, and definitely the first time since he'd said goodbye to his mid-thirties, that he'd felt such an intense desire."

A man leaves a performance of a sexually explicit dance show, although he is disappointed by what he saw. This is not the first time he's felt like this: for some time he's been 'searching for something'. This man is Yeong-hye's brother-in-law. Married to In-hye, tonight he rides the train past the house he shares with his wife and young son. He has no intention of getting off and instead goes back to his artist's studio.

It becomes apparent that Yeong-hye's brother-in-law has developed an obsession for her, one he struggles to control. Since her time in hospital, Yeong-hye has been divorced by Mr. Cheong and ostracised by most of her family. She now lives in a small apartment by herself, and her brother-in-law uses In-hye's worry as an excuse to ask her to meet him. He wants her to model for him in a new piece of video art that he is imagining. He's like to paint flowers on her body and ask her to pose in sexually explicit ways. At first Yeong-hye isn't sure, but later she considers his request...

Knowledge Check

How well do you know this chapter?

1. What is Yeong-hye's brother in law's name?

- (a) Min-sang
- (b) Ji-woo.
- (c) Yeong-ho.
- (d) His name is not revealed.

2. What is Yeong-hye's brother in law's job?

- (a) Video artist.
- (b) Dancer.
- (c) Interior designer.
- (d) Theatre director.

3. How much time has passed since Yeong-hye was in hospital?

- (a) A few days.
- (b) Three months.
- (c) One year.
- (d) Two years.

4. How old is Yeong-hye's brother in law's son?

- (a) Two.
- (b) Five.
- (c) Ten.
- (d) Sixteen.

5. What stimulates Yeong-hye's brother in law's sexual desire for her?

- (a) Her eyes.
- (b) Her figure.
- (c) Her Mongolian mark.
- (d) All of the above.

6. What is the name of Yeong-hye's brother in law's friend, who shares his office?

- (a) J.
- (b) K.
- (c) Q.
- (d) Z.

7. What fruit he take Yeong-hye when he pays her a visit?

- (a) Oranges.
- (b) Bananas.
- (c) Apples.
- (d) Cherries.

8. What does he ask Yeong-hye to do for him?

- (a) Talk to In-hye.
- (b) Be a model in a video shoot.
- (c) Start to eat meat again.
- (d) Look after Ji-woo.

9. Who's studio does Yeong-hye's brother in law borrow for the video shoot?

- (a) A.
- (b) D.
- (c) M.
- (d) V.

10. What does Yeong-hye's brother-in-law paint on her body?

- (a) Bees.
- (b) Butterflies.
- (c) Flowers.
- (d) Animals.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. What can you infer or discover about Yeong-hye's brother-in-law's art? What is he trying to achieve? Does his art reflect anything about what kind of person he is, or how he feels about his life?
2. How does the brother-in-law relate to his family? What is his relationship to his wife and son? Is there evidence that he has been, or can be, a good father or husband?
3. How does her brother-in-law first approach Yeong-hye? Do you find his methods of persuading her honest or manipulative?
4. How has Yeong-hye's situation changed or developed since part one? Does she seem improved or deteriorated?
5. Compare and contrast the two video shoot sessions in part two. How are they similar or different? How does Yeong-hye react in similar or different ways? Why, do you think?

Important Character: *The brother-in-law artist*

'Passers-by flicked uneasy glances towards this man who looked possessed.'

Yeong-hye's brother in-law provides the narrative viewpoint for the second part of the novel. He is a video-artist while – unlike Yeong-hye and Mr Cheong – his wife is both the caretaker of the family and the primary breadwinner. This is remarked upon by Mr Cheong, who seems to have little respect for his brother-in-law's choices and judges him harshly (by this detail, Han Kang continues a pattern of showing that any person exhibiting unconventional behaviour automatically gains a kind of negative connotation in society. Yeong-hye demonstrated this through her refusal to wear a bra. From the start, her husband disapproved of this 'unusual' choice and her bizarre behaviour causes him intense frustration.)

Throughout part two, the characterisation of the artist's disregard for social convention becomes more pronounced. He yearns to break boundaries through his art and, more seriously, through his relationship with Yeong-hye. Firstly, he becomes obsessed with a birthmark that Yeong-hye has and becomes intent on painting her in flowers and filming her naked. A sexual obsession with one's own sister-in-law is a powerful social taboo and throughout this part of the novel he repeatedly crosses moral and social boundaries in pursuit of his artistic vision. Han Kang initially presents artistic transgression as part of the novel's broader rejection of convention. The artist is dissatisfied with the routines and expectations that structure ordinary life. He is financially dependent upon his wife, lacks conventional 'salaryman' ambition, and feels awkward in the domestic life that In-Hye has arranged for them. Yeong-hye's transformation fascinates him because he sees in her something that he himself cannot fully achieve: a complete rejection of social expectations. Unlike the struggling artist, whose rebellion yet exists only in his imagination, Yeong-hye acts upon her convictions. Her refusal to eat meat, accept social norms, and act out family obligations gives her freedom he desires. Therefore, he's motivated not simply (or not only) by crude sexual lust. Initially he's genuinely drawn to her spirit of rebellion and may even want to help her. This can be seen in the way he imagines Yeong-hye's body covered in flowers, transforming her into part of the natural world, an idea that chimes with her own way of imagining herself.

However, what began as a challenge to convention ends up crossing ethical boundaries. The poses he prompts may have begun as a challenge to convention, but he ends up forcing her to participate in sexual acts that she is clearly uncomfortable performing. His artistic vision drives him to ever greater excess and he increasingly ignores her identity as an individual being; she becomes nothing more than a blank canvas for him to project his own desires onto. What began as a taboo-breaking attraction becomes more explicitly sexual and he ends up imposing his desires and fantasies on her without her full consent. In this sense he goes from a kindred spirit to another figure attempting to define Yeong-hye according to his own needs.

Activity

Yeong-hye's brother-in-law is a complex character. On one hand he attempts to stand apart from mainstream society. Yet on the other hand his behaviour mirrors other characters in the novel, including Mr Cheong, who seek to define and control Yeong-hye. Create a piece of work that expresses his character contradiction. This could be a character profile of the artist, a quotation hunt, or an oral presentation in which two people argue in turns that one side of his character dominates the other.

Important Symbolism: *Plants, Flowers and Trees*

‘...in the hospital she kept trying to take her clothes off and expose herself to sunlight.’

In contrast to meat, which represents violence, cruelty, and humanity’s capacity to inflict suffering, plants symbolise Yeong-hye’s desire to lead a gentler and more innocent existence. Her action of throwing out all the meat in the house represents an attempt to distance herself from a past that she now associates with violence. She is deeply disturbed by the realisation that she once participated unquestioningly in a system that depends upon the killing of animals. This sense of guilt is conveyed in her recollection of being forced to eat the dog killed by her father, when she reflects: *“But I don’t care. I really didn’t care.”* The repetition of ‘care’ suggests her horror is directed not only at the act itself but also at her former indifference. Looking back, Yeong-hye cannot forgive herself for having accepted violence as normal.

This longing for innocence helps to explain why she agrees to participate in her brother-in-law’s artistic project. Being painted in flowers appeals to her because flowers embody the qualities she increasingly associates with purity, gentleness, and harmlessness. Unlike animals, which can be hunted and slaughtered, flowers exist without causing suffering to other living things. As Yeong-hye becomes increasingly afraid of her own human impulses, she begins to identify more strongly with the passive and peaceful existence that plants represent. Her desire is to avoid violence by transforming herself into something incapable of committing violence at all.

However, Han Kang complicates this symbolism by showing that Yeong-hye’s understanding of the flowers is different from that of her brother-in-law. For Yeong-hye, the painted flowers represent an escape from human cruelty and a movement towards innocence. For the artist, however, they function primarily as an erotic image. He views the floral patterns through the lens of aesthetic and sexual desire, becoming fascinated by the combination of the painted flowers and Yeong-hye’s naked body. As a result, he misunderstands the meaning that the flowers hold for her, projecting his own fantasies onto what she sees as a spiritual transformation.

This misunderstanding leads to a disturbing irony. Yeong-hye embraces the floral imagery because she wishes to become more passive, gentle, and pure, yet these very qualities make her vulnerable to exploitation. Her brother-in-law interprets her passivity and silence as consent. Even when she cries and asks him to stop, he continues to prioritise his artistic and sexual desires over her wishes. In this way, Han Kang suggests that innocence alone cannot protect an individual from harm. Although Yeong-hye seeks refuge from violence in the symbolic world of plants and flowers, she remains trapped in the human world where others objectify, exploit, and control her. The flowers therefore become a symbol not only of her yearning for purity but also of the impossibility of escaping the violence embedded within human relationships.

Activity

Believing that this is the only way to escape the violent impulses that humans inevitably feel, over the course of the novel, Yeong-hye tries to ‘shed’ her human nature and live more like a plant. Draw a timeline (or other visual representation) of her transformation. Include moments from all three parts of the novel which both foreshadow and present Yeong-hye’s attempts to transform into a plant.