

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...

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

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?

Literary Context: *Korean Social Convention*

“My word, so you’re one of those “vegetarians”, are you?”

The Vegetarian takes place in modern-day Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, and depicts a society rooted in conservative values. For example, Korean family hierarchies emphasize patriarchal authority, wherein a husband or father perform traditional roles such as leading the family, earning money, and dominating in social settings. Women are provided for and looked after - in return they are expected to demonstrate obedience and love.

From the outside, Korean families are seen as a unit, so the behaviour of one member of the unit impacts on the way the whole family is perceived in society. These dynamics can be strongly felt in part one of *The Vegetarian*, beginning when Mr. Cheong and the rest of Yeong-hye’s family see her choice to be a vegetarian as disobedient. They are worried about the poor reflection of Yeong-hye’s choice on the entire family. In fact, outside the pages of the novel, vegetarianism in Korea is on the rise; but it is nevertheless largely viewed as a niche diet. Most Korean dishes contain pork, beef or seafood and there is some confusion in Korea as to how to serve vegetarian dishes, which may still contain ‘lighter’ meats such as chicken or fish or may have been cooked in a way that is non-vegetarian, such as adding beef broth for flavour.

While vegetarianism is a personal decision, the novel shows how this choice can create tension and produce awkward social scenes such as when Mr Cheong takes his wife to a company dinner at a nice restaurant. Unlike in the west, where individual diners order for themselves, in Asian countries like China and Korea it is normal for communal dishes to be shared among members of a family or group. Traditionally, the father – or boss of a company or leader of a group – will order for everybody. This communal bonding opportunity becomes awkward if members of the group cannot participate. Therefore, Yeong-hye’s decision not to eat any dish with meat is viewed with distaste by Mr. Cheong’s co-workers when they go out to dinner – and her vegetarianism causes him considerable personal embarrassment.

This embarrassment connects to a wider idea of social shame in Korean culture. In a society where family and group identity can be particularly important, an individual’s behaviour may be judged not only as a personal matter but also in terms of how it reflects on their family, workplace or wider social group. Maintaining social harmony and avoiding public embarrassment can therefore become powerful pressures on individual behaviour. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye’s family are disturbed not simply because they disagree with her decision, but because she refuses to behave in the way that other people expect. Her vegetarianism becomes visible evidence that Mr Cheong cannot control his wife and that her parents have failed to produce an obedient daughter. The family gathering in Part One makes this especially clear: Yeong-hye’s father attempts to force her to conform in front of the assembled family, turning her private decision about what she puts into her own body into a public struggle over obedience, authority and family reputation. Han Kang therefore uses vegetarianism as a symbol of Yeong-hye’s refusal to conform, exposing how the fear of social shame can be used to pressure individuals, particularly women, into accepting the expectations placed upon them.

Analytical Writing Practice

Using details from Part One, create an argument that Yeong-hye’s decision to turn vegetarian represents a refusal to conform to expectations placed upon her by family and wider society.

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.