

The Vegetarian

by Han Kang

“Madness” as a form of protest is far from uncommon in feminist literature — in the works of writers such as Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, or even Luce Irigaray. The psychological unravelling of women — women made vulnerable by the very systems in which they live — is often portrayed not as a manifestation of innate illness, but as a consequence of structural or cultural oppression.

In Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, we follow Yeong-hye, a seemingly ordinary South Korean woman in her thirties. One day she stops eating meat after a disturbing, truth-revealing dream - a dream about which we as readers are only given vague hints - but it is a powerful, almost revelatory dream. The seemingly trivial decision to stop eating meat acts as a catalyst for her gradual withdrawal from the world - a kind of silent revolt that provokes strong reactions. I think the interpretation of Han Kang's novel as a poetically charged allegory of resistance, corporeality and subjectivity in a patriarchal, modernist society holds up well.

Finally, my book club has read and discussed this novel, which is divided into three parts, each told from the perspective of someone close to her: her husband, her brother-in-law and her older sister.

The central male characters in the novel are all unnamed, which reinforces their role as patriarchal archetypes rather than individuals. Mr Cheong (the husband) is a conventionally conformist, compliant, egocentric and small-scale careerist in his mid-thirties. His concern is typically narcissistic, and he doesn't really understand Yeong-hye's situation - or her suffering (if it's suffering at all?).

The brother-in-law, who is married to In-hye, is a performance artist who irresponsibly enacts his dominance: in the second chapter, Yeong-hye is passively drawn into eroticised performance pieces in which he paints her naked body with flowers, filming the process — her body becoming a video medium. Yet it is clearly his own desire being projected, disguised as a kind of Platonic ideal in pursuit of the 'artistic', the sublime, the true form, inspired by a Mongolian mark on her buttock. Or is this, perhaps, simply the essence of all “sublimated” art?

The father, a former military officer, embodies violent patriarchal oppression. His loud and violent attempts to make his daughter obey not only express his inability to deal with a complex human situation, but also function as a metaphor for the discipline to which Korean women are expected to submit. Together, these men form a system of control through everyday norms, aesthetic exploitation and physical domination. In this way, patriarchal objectification and presumed ownership take on three different faces: the father (violence), the husband (utility), the brother-in-law (desire). The sister, In-hye, is herself on the verge of self-effacing exhaustion as she, betrayed by her husband, struggles to make sense of things and keep them from falling apart.

From the outside, Yeong-hye doesn't seem to be doing very well. But how she actually feels remains inscrutable and deeply unclear. Critics have discussed psychiatric diagnoses at length, but diagnosing a literary character is, of course, hypothetical. Yeong-hye's behaviour is described in such a way as to suggest a form of under-symptomatic psychosis - perhaps catatonic schizophrenia, although no explicit diagnosis is given. She displays clear psychotic features: hallucinations, delusions, mutism, social withdrawal and episodes of stupor. Alternatively, her silent passivity, selective refusal to eat and emotional unavailability could be interpreted as signs of dissociative depression with psychotic features - a collapse of the self rather than a distortion of reality. The diagnostic distinction is, as so often in clinical psychiatry, finely nuanced and largely interpretive. In practice, such are often drawn not only phenomenologically but also pragmatically - often retrospectively, based on which interventions or treatments prove effective.

But Yeong-hye's behaviour can also be interpreted as a symbolic refusal – a protest, not a pathological condition. Even if a psychosis might be the most likely explanation from a clinical point of view, it is – from a literary perspective – far more compelling to view her as an existential and political metaphor rather than a “patient”. Seen purely as a psychiatric narrative, the story risks becoming rather banal – like hundreds of other novels before it. As a reader, I prefer to interpret Han Kang's story, and her subtle, finely wrought narrative technique, in symbolic terms – almost line by line.

At the same time, of course, symbolism always carries the risk of turning into a metaphysical sea where everyone can drown – not least lovers of literature. But I sometimes find literalism just as problematic as the claim that “a rose is a rose...” à la Gertrude Stein – as if it-is-what-it-is could somehow guard us against excessive symbolic reading. Or that a line by Joan Miró would be nothing but a line – which, of course, is equally absurd. Everything exists in context. And Han Kang writes about a woman in three chapters, within a context.

In a society permeated by Confucian ideals of female obedience, familial duty, and silent adaptation, Yeong-hye's choices become a self-destructive yet logical extension of the culture's foundational structures of oppression. Yeong-hye refuses – albeit passively – to be there for someone else.

Even though the novel is centred on Yeong-hye, it is clear that it's not just her fate that's at stake. It is about the female body as a site of control – and of personal resistance. Yeong-hye stops eating meat, stops speaking. Her body becomes a passive void, a silent language: the body as refusal.

And whether her psyche has solidified into a corresponding catatonic – perhaps idealised – inner world, we never really find out. It is suggested that she hears, sees, and understands everything – but has simply chosen not to take part. By becoming tree-like, she becomes sexless, rooted, silent – a passive refusal to be an object in a male-dominated world.

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April 2025