

THE VEGETARIAN

Han Kang, Deborah Smith Trans. London: Portobello Books, 2016. 183 pages

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Winner of the Man Booker International Prize 2016, Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* is truly exceptional in its blending of structure and texture. It is evocative, passionate, intelligent, and deeply sensitive. In the carefully structured narrative subtle reversals of known responses disturb the reader and engage the attention till the last page. Also, a significant fact to notice is that the award money of this prestigious prize has been *shared equally* by the Korean writer Han Kang and the translator Deborah Smith. This unique feature of the Man Booker International Prize has been introduced from this year. This is phenomenally significant and a paradigm shift. Recognition of translators to be at par with the original authors has been long overdue. This equality between original author in a particular language and a translator will lead to a much greater output of serious, quality translations.

The very title of the slim novel—*The Vegetarian*—may seem irresistible to Asian cultures, where dietary preferences are often linked to religious beliefs, traditional customs, pride and prejudice, gender discrimination, and violence. However, quite contrary to general expectations, the Korean writer Han Kang's novel is not about the glamour or trials of being a vegetarian. The original novel, written in Korean by Han Kang, was published in 2007. In 2015, it was translated into English with outstanding felicity by Deborah Smith, who significantly learnt Korean just about three years ago.

The novel opens with a powerful one-liner: "Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way." This innocuous and yet provocative beginning leads the reader deeper and deeper into the core of the psychic terrain of each character, an invisible yet vibrant terrain, that has its own set of rules, regimentation, preferences, and pleasures seemingly incomprehensible to the raucous world of

public communication, inter-personal dialogue, and vocal expression.

The silence of the habitually taciturn Kim Yeong-hye therefore exerts itself as the most potent, challenging, and yet enigmatic medium of self-expression in the novel. Her condition is often diagnosed as depression and mental disorder. The novel is not a simple narrative about a young married woman's dismissal of animal products as repulsive (and consequently a triumph for animal activists, environmentalists, vegetarians, and vegans). Undoubtedly it is about the total rejection of flesh food, but increasingly it becomes a narrative that expresses a stolid rejection of all essential and desirable human food, both cooked and uncooked. And yet food is merely a metaphor in this journey for self-regeneration from the claustrophobia of urban life in an Asian society where the modern and the traditional are meshed in a viscous relationship of confusion and miscomprehension.

The novel is divided into three sections which could be read as three inter-linked novellas. The first part uses the first person narrative technique creating a sense of dramatic immediacy as the husband analyses his wife's ordinary identity suddenly changing as she declares that she had a dream—"I had a dream." Short italicized sections in this first part of the narrative reveals the troubled mind of Yeong-hye, as her mind plunges into the depths of being. Images of violence, of murder, and murdering crowd her mind as she is filled with a deep sense of loathing, a sense of suppression that makes her feel breathless.

Despite all its technological advancement and the availability of all sorts of gadgets and clothes, the known icons of globalization, the intrinsic culture and practices of the Asian society within the domestic space is completely patriarchal. In such a social environment an intelligent and sensitive woman can feel a sense of oppression and exploitation, and her mechanical role-playing as daughter, wife, mother, and even sister becomes for her psychologically disturbing. Apart from references to local food items and flora and fauna, urban life in Korea seems significantly homogenised so that there does not seem to be much difference between the middle class in South Korea and South Carolina. The difference however lies within the closed doors of family life.

In the second part of the novel, the husband of Yeong-hye's sister, a struggling artist and videographer, joins Yeong-hye's husband in being

equally insensitive to Yeong-hye as a person. Unlike her callous husband, who abandons her as she ceases to play the role of a wife as domestic worker, her brother in law begins to fantasize a passionate physical relationship with Yeong-hye. The third part is about the two sisters in the psychiatric ward, and the revelation that the sisters were traumatised in their several ways by the abuse and corporal punishment meted out by their persecuting, despotic, and violent father.

Here lie the challenges and provocation for the perceptive reader as the volume of 183 pages narrates the points of view of three young people trapped in familial, kinship, and marital bonds with the central character. Yeong-hye uses her body as a weapon of protest, resistance, and re-invigoration through a deep rooted desire to trace back to her very roots and re-align her selfhood through union and re-union with the silent, deep, systematic, uncomplaining natural environment and the primeval forests. This deep troubled call, an ardent desire to return to the lap of nature, to send one's roots down into the earth and become a part of the vegetation, is also about vegetarianism, so Yeong-hye, entrapped in the psychiatric ward, refuses all food and medicine and merely craves for water. The doctors in the hospital diagnose Yeong-hye's case as anorexia nervosa.

Instead of embracing human food as a source of life, sustenance, and nutrition, Yeong-hye's preference for water and her desire to reverse herself by returning to the vegetative world of course deconstruct the simpler notions of what most people understand as vegetarianism. Demonstrating that she not only identifies herself as a vegetarian but internalizes her overwhelming desire to be a part of the vegetation itself, Yeong-hye says, "[...] I don't need this kind of food sister. I need water."

There can be no scepticism about the fact that the award given to Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is well deserved as it successfully translates into English not just an aesthetically wrought Korean fictional narrative but also the social and cultural parameters that define the unofficial social history and the politics of the domestic space of South Korea.

Biographical Note: **Sanjukta Dasgupta**, Poet, Critic, Translator, is Professor, Dept. of English, Calcutta University, India. Recipient of many national and international fellowships and awards, Dasgupta has travelled widely, participating in seminars, conferences and other academic events as invited speaker and visiting Professor. She was the Chairperson of the Commonwealth Writers Prize, United Kingdom between 2002 and 2004. She was recently invited to be a Translator Fellow at the British Centre of Literary Translations, University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom. This book review was revised from the original one published in the Indian national daily newspaper, the Statesman 8th Day on Sunday July 17, 2016. Email: dasgupta.sanjukta@gmail.com