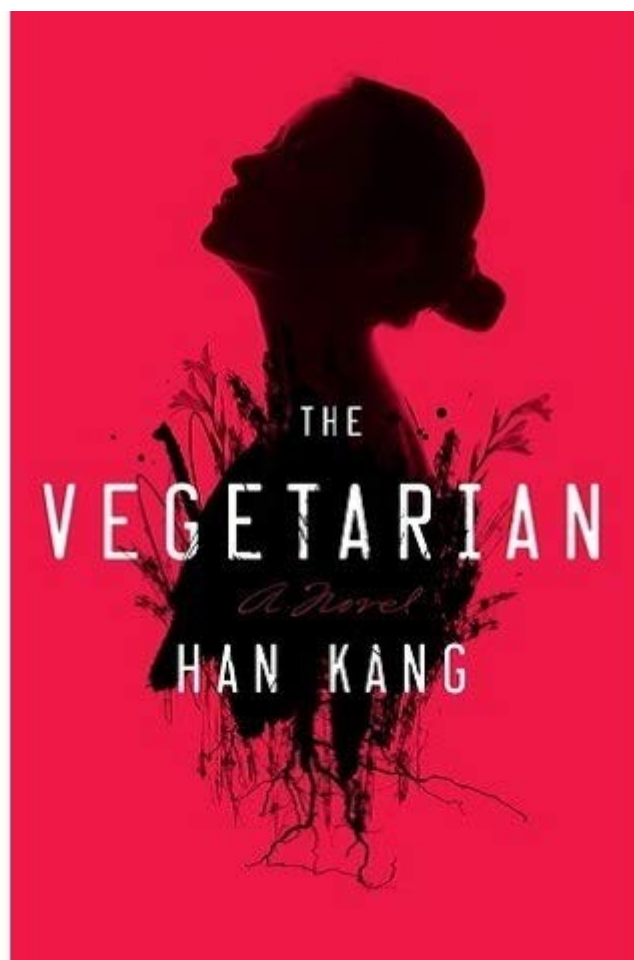


# Club de lectura en anglès

**BIBLIOTECA CENTRAL XAVIER AMORÓS**



**The Vegetarian de Han Kang**  
**Dimecres 19 de febrer**  
**a 2/4 de 7 de la tarda**

## 19/02/20 Club de Lectura The Vegetarian Han Kang

**Han Kang** was born in Gwangju in 1970. Since the age of ten, She grew up in Suyuri, Seoul after her family moved there. She studied Korean literature at Yonsei University. She made her literary debut as a poet by publishing five poems, including “*Winter in Seoul*”, in the winter issue of Munhak-gwa-sahoe (Literature and Society) in 1993. She began her career as a novelist the next year by winning the 1994 Seoul Shinmun Spring Literary Contest with “*Red Anchor*”. She published her first short story collection entitled *Yeosu* (Munji Publishing Company) in 1995. She participated in the University of Iowa International Writing Program for three months in 1998 with support from the Arts Council Korea.

Her publications include a short story collection, *Fruits of My Woman* (2000), *Fire Salamander* (2012); novels such as *Black Deer* (1998), *Your Cold Hands* (2002), *The Vegetarian* (2007), *Breath Fighting* (2010), and *Greek Lessons* (2011), *Human Acts* (2014), *The White Book* (2016). A poem collection, *I put the evening in the drawer* (2013) was published as well. She won the 25th Korean Novel Award with the novella, “*Baby Buddha*” in 1999, the 2000 Today’s Young Artist Award by Culture Ministry Korea, the 2005 YiSang Literary Award with “*Mongol Spot*”, and the 2010 Dongri Literary Award with *The Wind is Blowing*. She was awarded Manhae literary prize for *Human Acts* (2014) and Hwang Sun-won literary award (2015) for the novella *While One Snowflake Melts*. *The Vegetarian* won the 2016 Man Booker International Prize. *Atti umani* (*Human Acts*) won the 2017 Malaparte Prize in Italy

The translator **Deborah Smith** was monolingual until the age of 21. Deciding to become a translator upon finishing her degree in English Literature, with no previous experience in this field, she chose to pursue Korean due to a lack of English-Korean translators and moved to Korea to realise this dream. Her translations from Korean include Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* and *Human Acts*, and Bae Suah’s *The Essayist’s Desk* and *The Low Hills of Seoul*. She recently founded Tilted Axis Press, a not-for-profit publishing house focusing on translations from Asia and Africa.

### ***The Vegetarian***

is a South Korean three-part novel written by [Han Kang](#) and first published in 2007. Based on Kang's 1997 short story "The Fruit of My Woman", *The Vegetarian* is set in

modern-day [Seoul](#) and tells the story of Yeong-hye, a part-time graphic artist and home-maker, whose decision to [stop eating meat](#) after a bloody, nightmarish dream about human cruelty leads to devastating consequences in her personal and familial life.

Published on 30 October 2007 in South Korea by Changbi Publishers, *The Vegetarian* was received as "very extreme and bizarre" by the South Korean audience. "Mongolian Mark", the second and central part of the novella was awarded the prestigious [Yi Sang Literary Prize](#). It has been translated into at least thirteen languages, including English, French, Spanish, and Chinese.

*The Vegetarian* is Han's second book to be translated into English. The translation was conducted by the British translator [Deborah Smith](#), and was published in January 2015 in the UK and February 2016 in the US, after which it received international critical acclaim, with critics praising Kang's writing style and Smith's translation. In May 2016, it won the 2016 [Man Booker International Prize](#). *The Vegetarian* thus became the first recipient of the award after its reconfiguration in 2015, prior to which it was awarded to an author's body of work rather than a single novel. It is considered as Korean translated literature's biggest win since [Kyung-Sook Shin's \*Please Look After Mom\*](#) won the closing [Man Asian Literary Prize](#) in 2012. Prior to it winning the prize, *The Vegetarian* had sold close to 20,000 copies in the nine years since its first publication. In June 2016, [Time](#) included the book in its list of best books of 2016

*The Vegetarian* tells the story of Yeong-hye, a home-maker who, one day, suddenly decides to stop eating meat after a series of dreams involving images of animal slaughter. This abstention leads her to become distanced from her family and from society. The story is told in three parts: "The Vegetarian", "Mongolian Mark", and "Flaming Trees". The first section is narrated by Yeong-hye's husband Mr. Cheong in the first person. The second section is narrated in third person focusing on Yeong-hye's brother-in-law, and the third section remains in third-person but focuses on her sister, In-hye, while sporadically speaking in the present tense.

### **"The Vegetarian"**

Mr. Cheong, considers his wife to be "completely unremarkable in any way". He explains that when he first met her, he was not even attracted to her and that suits him just fine. Mr. Cheong is content meandering through life; it seems as if his only

goal is to live a conventional, unremarkable life. He chooses to marry his wife since he thinks she would prove to be a good, dutiful wife who would fit nicely into the kind of lifestyle he seeks. After several years of relatively normal marriage, Mr. Cheong wakes up to find his wife disposing of all meat products in the house. He demands an explanation, and Yeong-hye replies vaguely that "I had a dream." Mr. Cheong attempts to rationalize his wife's life decision over the next few months and to deal with vegetarian meals at home, but eventually calls Yeong-hye's family and an intervention is scheduled. While around the dinner table, Yeong-hye's family attempts to convince her to eat meat; her father, who served in Vietnam and is known for his stern temperament, slaps her when she refuses. Her father then asks a reluctant Mr. Cheong and Yeong-hye's brother Yeong-ho to hold her arms while he force-feeds her a piece of pork. Yeong-hye breaks away, spits out the pork, grabs a fruit knife, and slits her wrist. The incredulous family rushes her to a hospital where she recovers and where Mr. Cheong admits to himself that she has become mentally unstable. As the section ends Yeong-hye manages to walk out of the hospital and when she is tracked down, she reveals a bird in her palm, which has a "predator's bite" in it, and she asks "Have I done something wrong?"

### **"Mongolian Mark"**

The husband of Yeong-hye's sister In-hye, whose name remains unstated, is a video artist. He imagines a love-making scene between two people, with their bodies decorated by painted flowers and, upon learning that Yeong-hye has a birthmark shaped like a flower petal, he forms a plan to paint and record her in order to bring this artistic image to life. It is revealed that he is attracted to Yeong-hye, especially after checking up on her—the narrator reveals that Yeong-hye has been served divorce papers by Mr. Cheong—and finding her unabashedly naked in her apartment. Yeong-hye agrees to model for him and he paints flowers across her body in a studio rented from an art professor in the area. He follows up this project with a second piece of art, which involves recruiting a fellow artist to join Yeong-hye in a sexually-explicit film. When the brother-in-law asks if the two will engage in actual intercourse, his friend becomes ashamed and leaves. Yeong-hye, who had become aroused during this sequence, claims it was because of the flowers painted on the man's body. The brother-in-law asks a friend to paint flowers on him and visits Yeong-hye, where the two engage in a recorded moment of intercourse. When his

wife discovers the film, she calls "emergency services", claiming that both he and Yeong-hye are mentally unwell. He contemplates jumping off of the balcony, most likely to his death, but remains "rooted to the spot" and is escorted out of the building by the authorities.

### **"Flaming Trees"**

In-hye remains the only member of the family to support Yeong-hye after her mental and physical decline. She has separated from her husband after the events of the previous section, and is left to take care of their son in addition to her deteriorating sister. As Yeong-hye's behavior worsens, she is admitted to a mental hospital at Mount Ch'ukseong, where, despite receiving high-level treatment for mania, she behaves gradually more plant-like. On one occasion she escapes the hospital and is found standing in a forest "soaked with rain as if she herself were one of the glistening trees". In-hye, who constantly ruminates about the pain of dealing with her divorce and the care of her child and who throughout the chapter shows signs of her own depression and mental instability, visits Yeong-hye regularly and continues to try to get her to eat. Yeong-hye has given up food altogether, and when In-hye witnesses the doctors force-feeding her and threatening sedation to prevent vomiting, In-hye bites the nurse holding her back and grabs her sister. In-hye and Yeong-hye are driven to a different hospital by ambulance, and In-hye observes trees as they pass by

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What is the relationship between Yeong-hye, "the most ordinary woman in the world," and her husband, Mr. Cheong. Why is her refusal to eat meat, so shocking to him?
2. The novel is structured in a tryptic format, with each section narrated by a family member who reacts to and interacts with Yeong-hye. As the three narrators confront her deepening madness, each also comes face to face with his/her own desires. What do they each come to understand about themselves and what they want from life? In what way are they transformed?

3. Talk about the way in which the author positions Yeong-Hye's vegetarianism—as a feminist choice and revolt against patriarchy. Are there another way to look at it?
4. The book is suffused with a mix of sex and violence. Do you find the physicality disturbing, shocking, repulsive, or something else? Why is there so much sex and brutality in this work; what might its purpose be?
5. What are your feelings about vegetarianism? Do you know vegetarians, or are you yourself one? What are the reason for eschewing meat? Is it a matter health, morality, religion, or basic distaste? If you are a meat eater, do you sometimes feel like the dinner acquaintance in the novel, who comments: "I'd hate to share a meal with someone who considers eating meat repulsive, just because that's how they themselves personally feel....don't you agree?"
6. Trace the stages of Yeong-hye's state of mind. Talk about her thoughts and the language which reflects them—as the passages range from journal-like entries to disconnected, abstract, almost impressionistic images.
7. The novel ends on an ambiguous note. What do you envision as the outcome? What do you think happens to Yeong-hye?
8. What is this book about anyway?
9. How much did you know about South Korea before you read *The Vegetarian*?
10. What do you think of their attitudes to vegetarianism and strict moral codes?
11. Think of the role of the translator – what do you think the challenges would be in translating this novel?
12. Which one question would you ask Deborah Smith?
13. What are the linguistic differences between this and a book written originally in English?
14. Do you get a sense of the source language in the writing?
15. Can you imagine this story happening in the UK? If so, how would it be different?
16. How well did the book give a sense of place?
17. Did you feel transported to the setting of the book?
18. Which book would you compare this to if describing it to a friend?
19. What did you think of the book in general?
20. We never get to hear directly from Yeong-hye except in brief snippets of dream

and memory. Why do you think the author tells her story through the lens of other people? Do you think this is effective?

21. Yeong-hye says she stopped eating meat because she had a dream. What do you think the dream was actually about?

22. Vegetarianism and fasting has been used as a form of social protest in the past, particularly among women (see, for example, "[The Awakened Instinct: Vegetarianism and the Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain](#)" by Leah Leneman and [The Sexual Politics of Meat](#) by Carol J Adams). Do you think this is what Yeong-hye is doing? Is she refusing to eat meat in order to stick it to [the goddamn patriarchy](#)?

23. As the story goes on, Yeong-hye seems to be transforming into a plant herself (or at least wanting to). Is this an art-imitating-life situation? It seems like her husband treated her as little more than a plant to begin with

24. Yeong-hye's brother-in-law may seem more sympathetic to her than her husband, but is he?

25. There's a surprising amount of violence, both sexual and physical, in this book. Why do you think that is?

26. There are a lot of themes in the novel: obsession, dreams, conformity and acting "normal," choosing to act morally and choosing not to. Which of these themes stood out for you the most?

27. What did you think of the ending? Does it negate the previous sections of the book?