

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND THE DIALECTICS OF VIOLENCE IN HAN KANG'S "THE VEGETARIAN"

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Abstract: This study analyzes the unique narrative structure and the multifaceted manifestations of violence in Han Kang's novel "The Vegetarian" (2007). The work is a triptych of three interconnected novellas, each employing a different narrative perspective to reveal the protagonist Yeong-hye through the eyes of those around her. This paper explores how this narrative device exposes various layers of violence, illuminates the protagonist's ontological transformation, and ultimately enables a critical reflection on the patriarchal structures of Korean society. Through an analysis of powerful symbols such as the "Mongolian mark" (몽고반점), "Bleeding" (출혈), and "Flaming trees" (나무 불꽃), as well as Yeong-hye's process of "becoming-plant" (식물 되기), this article demonstrates how the novel portrays an individual's micro-resistance against the violent order of society.

Keywords: Han Kang (한강), 'The Vegetarian' ('채식주의자'), narrative structure (서사 구조), violence (폭력).

Han Kang's "The Vegetarian" marks a significant turning point in Korean literature (한국 문학의 중요한 전환점). After winning the Man Booker International Prize in 2016, it introduced Korean literature to the global stage, and its literary value was reaffirmed when the author was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2024. The core question "The Vegetarian" poses is: what is "normality" (정상성), and what violent consequences arise when an individual rejects socially prescribed norms? (사회가 규정한 규범을 거부하는 개인의 선택이 어떤 폭력적 결과를 초래하는가?)

This paper analyzes the novel's narrative structure and the dialectical aspects of violence that unfold within it (서사 전개 과정에서 드러나는 폭력의 변증법적 양상). First, it examines the narrative features of each part, then it explores the multiple layers of violence in Yeong-hye's ontological transformation. It also analyzes how key symbols such as the "Mongolian mark" and "trees" are organically connected to the entire narrative. Ultimately, this paper argues that the narrative strategy of "The Vegetarian" goes beyond portraying a woman's downfall, achieving a fundamental reflection on the patriarchal structure of Korean society and the nature of violence itself.

One of “The Vegetarian’s most striking features is its three-part structure (3 부작 구조). Each part has an independent title – “The Vegetarian” (“채식주의자”), “Mongolian mark” (“몽고 반점”), and “Flaming Trees” (“나무 불꽃”) – and each is narrated by a different character: Yeong-hye’s husband (영혜의 남편), her brother-in-law (형부), and her older sister In-hye (언니 인혜). In Part 1, “The Vegetarian”, the narrator Mr. Cheong (정 씨) initially perceives his wife as “completely ordinary in every way” (뭐든지 뜻대로 되는, 가장 평범한 여자) and someone he can control. However, after she suddenly declares herself a vegetarian and begins to behave increasingly strangely, he feels confusion and anger, eventually admitting that he “never really knew” her (자신이 이 여자에 대해 전혀 알지 못했다). This narrative method does more than objectively describe the protagonist; it reveals the limitations and distortions of the patriarchal gaze (가부장적 시선의 한계와 왜곡).

In Part 2, “Mongolian mark”, the artist brother-in-law (예술가인 형부) becomes the narrator. Obsessed with the Mongolian mark (덩이영의 꽃잎 모양 푸른 점), he experiences turmoil between artistic passion and sexual desire. Here, the narrator is no longer a “victim” but occupies the position of a perpetrator who destroys himself and others through his desire. In the name of art painting flowers on Yeong-hye’s naked body and having sex with her – he commits another layer of violence (예술의 이름으로 또 다른 층위의 폭력을 자행한다).

In Part 3, “Flaming Trees, Yeong-hye’s sister In-hye serves as the main narrator. While caring for Yeong-hye, who has been committed to a psychiatric hospital (정신병원에 입원한 영혜), In-hye engages in a fundamental reflection on her own life and her sister’s choices. Notably, In-hye increasingly identifies with her sister’s fate (자매의 운명과 점차 동일시되는 양상). Although she does not fully understand Yeong-hye’s decisions, she is gradually moved by her desire to “become a tree.”

This three-part structure transcends simple chronological continuity. Each narrator tries to understand Yeong-hye only within his or her own limitations, dramatically portraying the fundamental impossibility of communication between the individual and the community (개인과 공동체 사이의 근본적인 소통 불가능성). At the same time, by ensuring that Yeong-hye never speaks in the first person she remains an object captured by others’ gazes (타인의 시선에 포획된 객체) the narrative paradoxically highlights her resistance even more sharply. The intensity of violence escalates as the narrative progresses through the three parts. In Part

1, psychological and emotional violence dominate. The husband regards his wife's vegetarianism as "strange behavior" (**이상한 짓**), gradually alienates her, and eventually divorces her. The most dramatic scene occurs at a family gathering when her father forces meat into her mouth, leading Yeong-hye to slash her own wrist with a kitchen knife (**식칼로 자신의 손목을 긋는 장면**). This scene transcends mere family conflict, symbolizing how patriarchal order violently responds to an individual who transgresses its boundaries. Patriarchy no longer merely "recommends" but "enforces" its norms (**가부장제는 더 이상 '권고'가 아닌 '강제'의 형태로 그 정당성을 주장한다**).

In Part 2, violence takes a more insidious and dangerous form. The artist brother-in-law disguises his desires as artistic passion (**자신의 욕망을 예술적 열정으로 포장한다**). He paints flowers on his and Yeong-hye's bodies, films them, and eventually has sex with her. This is not overt physical violence but a concealed violence legitimized under the names of art and desire (**예술과 욕망이라는 이름으로 정당화된 은폐된 폭력**). When In-hye discovers them, the brother-in-law attempts suicide, worsening the situation.

In Part 3, violence reaches its most extreme form. Hospitalized in a psychiatric ward, Yeong-hye persistently refuses food and medication. Medical staff forcibly insert a tube through her nose (**코에 튜브를 삽입당하는 의료적 폭력**) – a form of medical violence committed in the name of "treatment" (**치료라는 명목 아래 행해지는 신체적 폭력**). [14,135] As one study notes, violence and suffering form the central axis of Han Kang's literary world (**한강 문학 세계의 중심축**), through which the author explores the essence of human existence. In "The Vegetarian, violence is not merely a plot device; it functions as a philosophical instrument that forces reflection on the fundamental conditions of human being. The most powerful symbolic system in "The Vegetarian" is undoubtedly "becoming-plant" (**식물 되기**). Yeong-hye does not simply stop eating meat; she gradually becomes obsessed with the delusion that she is turning into a tree (**자신이 나무로 변해간다는 망상**). She says she can survive on "sunlight and water" (**햇빛과 물만 있으면 살 수 있다**), attempting to sever all relationships with human society. This transformation can be analyzed on several important levels. First, it symbolizes an extreme resistance to patriarchal violence (**가부장적 폭력에 대한 극단적 저항의 상징**). The vegetative mode of existence she pursues means a total negation of the violent order of human society (**인간 사회의 폭력적 질서에 대한 완전한 부정**). Second, it represents a form of ontological transformation (**존재론적 변환의 형**

식). Recent scholarship argues that Yeong-hye's bodily withdrawal is a radical rejection of normative human subjectivity, interpreted not as madness or passivity but as an intentional strategy of ethical disturbance (의도적인 윤리적 교란 전략). That is, if she can no longer live as a human, she chooses to become something other than human (더 이상 인간으로 살 수 없다면 인간이 아닌 것이 되겠다고 선택하는 것이다). The narrative function of "becoming-plant" also connects to the unique way Yeong-hye's voice is represented. Throughout the novel, she never appears as a first-person narrator (결코 1 인칭 서술자로 등장하지 않는다). Her thoughts are revealed only intermittently and indirectly, through dream sequences or poetic insertions (꿈의 환상이나 산문적 삽입 형태로 간헐적으로 드러날 뿐이다).[18,] This signifies that she has been robbed of the voice to tell her own story about her own body and life (자신의 몸과 삶에 대한 결정을 스스로 이야기할 수 있는 목소리를 빼앗겼음을 의미한다). At the same time, the fact that she is revealed piecemeal through others' eyes dramatically portrays how women's experiences are always "defined" and "explained" by others in a patriarchal society (가부장적 사회에서 여성의 경험이 항상 타자에 의해 '규정'되고 '설명'되는 방식). Despite this structural contradiction, Yeong-hye persists in her choice through silence and action (침묵을 통해, 행위를 통해 자신의 선택을 관철해나간다).

"The Vegetarian" is not merely the tragedy of one woman (한 여성의 비극적 파국을 그리는 작품이 아니다). It is a record of the fierce struggle between patriarchal power and the individual body that opposes it, a philosophical fable showing the fundamental conflict between social norms and individual freedom (사회적 규범과 개인의 자유 사이의 근원적 대립을 보여주는 철학적 우화). As this study has demonstrated, the three-part structure is not a narrative convenience but a device that effectively reveals the different gazes of characters surrounding the protagonist and the multiple layers of violence they represent (주인공을 둘러싼 다양한 인물들의 시선과 그들이 표상하는 폭력의 여러 층위를 효과적으로 드러내는 장치). Each narrator tries to "define" Yeong-hye in his or her own way, but eventually encounters limits and either perishes or gains insight. Moreover, the central symbol of "becoming-plant" is not a simple psychotic delusion; it can be interpreted as the most extreme form of resistance strategy against patriarchal violence (가부장적 폭력에 대

한 가장 극단적인 형태의 저항 전략). Unable to live within the violent order of human society, Yeong-hye makes the radical choice to transform her very mode of being (자신의 존재 형태 자체를 변환시키는 급진적 선택을 한다).

Despite its despairing ending, “The Vegetarian” functions powerfully as a narrative of resistance. It forces readers to fundamentally reflect on how arbitrary and violent the boundaries between “normality” and “madness” are, and how helpless and oppressive society can be in the face of an individual’s free choice. In this respect, “The Vegetarian” transcends the novel form to become a sharp diagnosis of Korean society and modern society at large, as well as a deep philosophical inquiry into the human condition (한국 사회와 현대 사회 전반에 대한 예리한 진단이자, 인간 조건에 대한 깊은 철학적 탐구).

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