

“NEW WOMAN” IN THE MODERN KOREAN NOVEL "VEGETARIAN" BY HAN KANG

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Abstract: The article examines the position of a woman and her role in society. Society has changed throughout Korean history and contradictions continue to this day. The “New Woman” movement influenced women’s lives and also made adjustments to the role of men, which led to a significant revolution in society and the expansion of the concept of “gender role” in Korea. Under the influence of time, the concept of the “New Woman” acquired new features in the novel “The Vegetarian” by the modern Korean writer Han Kang.

Keywords: Korea, literature, Korean literature, Wotan, man, Nev Wotan, gender roles, feminist, sockets.

Han Kang is *is a South Korean writer*. She was awarded the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature, Nobel Committee chairman Anders Olsson commented: “She has a unique awareness of the connections between body and soul, the living and the dead, and in her poetic and experimental style has become an innovator in contemporary prose.” The novel “*The Vegetarian*” first published in Korea in 2007. Written in three parts, this book follows a protagonist who is a graphic artist and homemaker, and whose decision to become a vegetarian, after a Kafkaesque nightmare, leads to many consequences in her life. We will then move on to *Human Acts*, which revolves around the May 1980 uprising in Gwangju, Korea. [1. <https://centerforfiction.org/group>].

The concept of “New Women” as a phenomenon originates in the early 20th century and penetrates Korea during the period of Japanese colonization. The “New Woman” was a contrast to the traditional female image, which defines her as the most marginal member of society; in the context of Korean society, the image of the “New Woman” was associated with Westernization and a departure from old norms and foundations [4, Kim Y, 45]. The traditional role of a woman in Korea was unquestioning submission to a man: in the home of her parents, the daughter was subordinate to the father, after marriage - to the husband, and in the event of the death of the husband - to the eldest son. This strict hierarchy was dictated by Confucianism, which penetrated into Korea from China and took control of many aspects of society for many years. [3, D.S. Kamina, 7]. A change in vector and the first attempts to “push the boundaries” were made during the Japanese colonization by Korean writers, in whose speeches feminist notes were first heard [5, I. Kwon, 213]. They openly questioned the prevailing Confucian patriarchal structures and traditions of modern Korean society, condemning double standards, men's inhumane treatment of women and their insistence on submission, and women's dependence on husbands and children. But not everyone in Korea liked such radical ideas for that time, so over time, the image of the “New Woman” began to be ostracized and considered a negative consequence of modernization [3, D.S. Kamina, 52]. The image of the “New woman” in the novel “Vegetarian” In the modern Korean novel “The Vegetarian” by the writer Han Kang, the image of the “New Woman” is expressed in the character Yonghe, an unremarkable woman who one day decides to become a vegetarian and with this decision changes her life and the lives of those around her. Yonghe

embodies the “New Woman” through her rejection of traditional gender expectations and her struggle for complete control over herself and her body. In “The Vegetarian”, Yeonghe’s metaphorical struggle is criticized and not taken seriously, which is an allusion to the New Women’s movement during the colonial period in Korea. During the key family dinner scene in the first part of the novel, Yonghe’s father, causing a scandal and hitting her, forces her to put a piece of meat in her mouth [2, K.Han, 50]. This moment of violence represents not only the disapproval of her family and father towards her decision, but also the specific disapproval of her actions by men and, therefore, patriarchal society as a whole, represented by Yonghe's father. The only person not involved in this act of violence is Yonghe's brother-in-law, who carries her to the car after she cuts her wrist [2, K.Han, 50]. But even though the son-in-law does not participate in the bullying, he still does not see her as an individual who is looking for her own way to escape from social restrictions, he only thinks about how different she is from the other women in his life, thereby turning her attempts at self-discovery into his sexual fantasy. Her thoughts “New Women” are perceived not as an act of expression of her own feelings, but as something attractive to him, because he sees her ideas as something perverted and forbidden, and only for that reason - attractive. Early on in the narrative, it is clear that Yonghe's decision to reject the social norm of eating meat also becomes a metaphor for her rejection of gender roles, related to society’s expectations of the female body: “She was drying up every day. Her already prominent cheekbones became unattractively pointed. Without makeup, the skin looked pale, like a patient's” [2, K.Han, 28]. For Yeonghe, vegetarianism is an attempt to regain control over her own body on the one hand, and over her own personality on the other, but she fails over and over again because her personality, as a woman in Korean society, is created under the pressure of external forces. This construct is best represented in the scene when her husband speaks for her at a company dinner, explaining to his colleagues the “acceptable” reason for her vegetarianism. [2, K.Han, 28]. In this case, he deprives Yonghe of her own view and her struggle, creating a new concept that is more correct for society as a whole. This constant intrusion into Ye Nhe's path of self-discovery forces her to concentrate on her physical form in order to gain control and agency over the creation of her own personality. For Yonghe, the embodiment of the image of the “New Woman” comes to its climax in the third part of the novel, when she begins to completely abandon her human form and goes crazy: “I am no longer an animal, sister. Now I can eat nothing at all. I can live without food. If only the sun would shine” [2, K.Han, 156]. Instead of overcoming the boundaries built for women in society, Yonghe chooses to escape from them. She abandons the essence that belonged to her husband, father, everyone, but not hers, and contrary to all norms and foundations, but independently, she begins to think of herself as a tree. Yonghe's journey to self-discovery ends ambiguously, and the reader is left to assume that she has died. The last paragraph of the novel illustrates this, describing the actions through the eyes of her sister: “Quietly, very quietly, her sigh is heard. She peers at the standing trees, at that huge green and exciting fire, burning brightly on both sides of the road, and it seems to her that these trees, like animals, straightening their bodies, are stretching upward. She looks gloomily and insistently, as if she is waiting for an answer. No, it’s like he’s protesting against something.” [2, K.Han, 187]. Inhye seems to be protesting against the world that destroyed her sister with its rules of conformity. The comparison of trees to animals hints that Yonghe eventually reached that point of merging with nature. The rebirth of Yonghe must take place in the form of the death of her earthly body and the merging of her spirit with nature, as she intended. For her, the path to becoming a “New Woman” must end with her having complete control over her body, even if this means its destruction. A study of Yonghe's character

shows that the price of undermining social norms, especially those related to gender, is the complete destruction of oneself. Yonghe's independence came under attack from the old foundations, patriarchy, expressed in the person of the character, those around her, and in order to gain power over herself, she had to stop being human altogether. Through her character, the difficult path taken by the "New Women" to establish themselves in a patriarchal society is illustrated. And even several decades later, the modern Korean woman's path to personal freedom may have become even more difficult; New Women today experience societal violence that is less obvious but just as destructive as what she experienced a hundred years ago.

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