

Han Kang's Nobel Prize and Her Narrative Perspective

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The 2024 Nobel Laureate in Literature, Han Kang, was born in 1970 in Gwangju, South Korea, into a literary family. Her father and brother have both authored and published numerous novels; her younger brother graduated from an arts university majoring in creative writing, and her husband is a professor of media and literary arts at an online university as well as a literary critic. Han Kang graduated from the Department of Korean Literature at Yonsei University. She initially entered the literary world by writing poetry and later transitioned to novel writing with her work **Red Anchor**. She has since received various domestic and international literary accolades, including the Yi Sang Literary Award, the Dongri Mokwol Literary Award, the Hwang Soon-won Literary Award, and the International Booker Prize. During Park Geun-hye's administration, Han Kang was placed on an official blacklist in the cultural and artistic sectors due to her novels such as **Human Acts**, which depicted the Gwangju Uprising. Her major works include **The Vegetarian**, **White**, **Greek Lessons**, **Human Acts**, and **I Do Not Say Goodbye**.

The Vegetarian is widely regarded as Han Kang's representative work and was a major factor in her receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature. The novel portrays a seemingly tranquil married life that is disrupted when, one morning, the husband wakes to find that his wife, Yeong-hye, has removed all the meat from the refrigerator and thrown it away. Her justification: "I had a dream last night." From then on, Yeong-hye becomes a vegetarian. Her husband informs her parents, but despite their pleas and even coercion, Yeong-hye refuses to eat meat, ultimately attempting suicide by slashing her wrists. Her condition deteriorates: she progresses from vegetarianism to anorexia, hallucinating that she has become a plant. She claims she no longer needs food—"With sunlight, I can survive"—and begins fasting, watering herself, sunbathing nude, and eventually dies tragically.

What exactly was the dream Yeong-hye had that night? The novel never makes it explicit. At the end, the narrator suggests: "Perhaps this was all just a dream." This resonates deeply with me. Everything we experience in life—was it ever truly real, or merely an illusion? I often ponder this, especially recalling an incident from my childhood when I nearly drowned while swimming in a village pond. Since then, I've sometimes questioned whether I actually survived that day, and whether everything since has just been a vivid dream. Who can prove they are truly alive? Perhaps all the joys and sorrows of life are nothing more than dreams. As Zhao Yuan writes in the postscript of **Extraordinary Times**: "Those

sunlit days in memory feel so vivid, yet I often wonder whether they ever really existed, whether that blue dress with white flowers was ever truly mine.” Such thoughts make one truly awake.

Returning to **The Vegetarian**, the novel deals with themes of gender and politics, body and control, freedom and repression—imbuing it with a clear feminist character. Yeong-hye’s refusal to consume meat symbolizes a silent protest. In Western cultural tradition, silence and fasting are often forms of resistance for the powerless, aligning with contemporary progressive ideologies and “political correctness.” This raises the question of whether Han Kang’s Nobel win was due purely to literary merit or was also influenced by political factors. According to the Swedish Academy, she received the award “for her poetic language, which confronts historical trauma and reveals the fragility of human life.” Indeed, poetic language and human vulnerability are central themes in this novel. As Han Kang herself has explained: “**The Vegetarian** is the most tragic of my novels. I’ve moved on from that world and am now approaching life more closely. If readers think of it as an allegory—not looking for answers, but for questions—it becomes easier to understand.”

Although **The Vegetarian** is widely seen as the key work behind Han Kang’s Nobel win, it was **Human Acts** that left the deeper impression on me. However, due to its sensitive historical parallels, the media may have downplayed its significance. **Human Acts** centers on the 1980 Gwangju Uprising and graphically portrays scenes of death, which are both impactful and disturbing. These depictions are not gratuitous; they serve to denounce the mechanisms of state violence and bring readers into the historical scene. But they are emotionally taxing—much like the torture scenes in Mo Yan’s **Sandalwood Death**, which forced me to pause reading multiple times. Similarly, Han Kang’s graphic depictions in **Human Acts**—such as dismembered corpses—are harrowing. Should literature, unlike visual media, have unrestricted license to depict gore? Her descriptions of cruelty also appear in **The Vegetarian**, such as the scene of dog abuse, the portrayal of forced feeding through a nasogastric tube leading to stomach bleeding, and the psychiatric institutionalization of Yeong-hye. These scenes evoke profound discomfort. Life is already a struggle; reading such works doubles the burden.

Perhaps the Nobel criteria need reevaluation.

Han Kang’s Nobel win is not solely due to the thematic complexity of her works or her identity as a female writer. Her innovative use of narrative perspective likely also played a role. One key distinction between modern and traditional novels is the innovation in narrative technique. Since the 20th century, Western authors have moved away from the omniscient third-person narrator, opting instead for multiple perspectives, thereby enriching the reader’s understanding of complex psychological landscapes. Han Kang’s novels reflect this modernist trend, frequently employing multiple perspectives to explore psychological nuance. For example, in **Greek Lessons**, the narrative alternates among “you,” “I,” and “he,” leaving readers bewildered yet intrigued.

Human Acts features Han Kang's most representative use of narrative perspective. The first chapter, "The Boy—Dong-ho's Story," is written in the second person—a rare choice among both Chinese and Western writers. The second chapter, "The Black Breath—Jeong-dae's Story," switches to a first-person narration by a deceased character, a ghost. Whether inspired by Faulkner's **As I Lay Dying** or not, this choice is powerful, as it exposes crimes with undeniable clarity. A ghost's perspective can be even more haunting than an omniscient narrator's. The third chapter, "The Boy's Sister—Eun-sook's Story," employs both third-person (main) and second-person (secondary) perspectives. The fourth chapter, "The Prisoner—Jin-su's Story," returns to the first person, this time narrated by Jin-su's former cellmate, now a taxi driver. The fifth chapter, "The Epilogue—Seon-ju's Story," once again uses second-person narration. By this point, readers realize Han Kang's consistent use of the second person is deliberate—a method of engaging in dialogue with the dead, mourning them profoundly. As the novel's translator remarked: "This unique narrative technique not only brings readers back to May 1980 in Gwangju but also reveals the lasting trauma from multiple survivor perspectives."

In **The Vegetarian**, Han Kang also demonstrates narrative sophistication. The novel comprises three parts—"The Vegetarian," "Mongolian Mark," and "Flaming Trees"—each centered on protagonist Kim Yeong-hye but narrated through the perspectives of her husband, brother-in-law, and sister. All are delivered through a third-person limited omniscient perspective, allowing the psychological complexity of each character to unfold fully. This narrative relay not only maintains coherence but also offers multi-faceted character dissection.

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