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Human Acts by Han Kang as a Narrative of Trauma and Human Rights

Tara Kumar Dahal
Tri-Chandra Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal
tarakumardahal@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper examines Han Kang's novel Human Acts as a trauma and human rights narrative, with a focus on the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea. The novel recounts the suppression of a student uprising in Gwangju, depicting the experiences of the boy at the center of the story and those of his acquaintances. The research examines the personal, parochial, and political dimensions of trauma in the narrative, addressing the complex interplay between individual experiences and public history. The study highlights the significance of Kang's work, particularly in light of South Korea's recent history, including the 2014 ferry disaster and the 2017 killings by city authorities, which echo the traumas of the Gwangju Massacre. The narrative's vivid depiction of violence and suffering emphasizes the importance of understanding these events to foster awareness and connection to collective trauma. The research uses literary trauma theory and human rights theory to analyze the novel, examining how Kang's narrative portrays the individual and

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collective trauma of the 1980 Military Coup. It examines the narrative structure, character development, and thematic elements of the novel, with a focus on the representation of violence, resistance, memory, and human rights. The findings suggest that Human Acts effectively convey the multifaceted nature of trauma and its enduring impact on individuals and society. The novel serves as a crucial narrative that contributes to the discourse on trauma, memory, and human rights, highlighting the importance of acknowledging past atrocities and striving for justice and accountability.

Keywords: Human Acts, Trauma, Human Rights, Gwangju Uprising, Narrative, Violence, Memory

INTRODUCTION

Two novels, published in English translation, have garnered both critical acclaim and widespread recognition. Both contemplate the narration of trauma and the complexity of addressing human rights in literary form, but they deal with these subjects in markedly different ways. This text investigates the Korean novelist Han Kang's *Human Acts* as a narrative of trauma and, drawing predominantly on the field of human rights literary studies, as a narrative of human rights.

Human Acts begins with a description of a student uprising and its bloody suppression in the city of Gwangju, Korea, in 1980. At the center of the story is an unnamed boy who returns to the city the following day to assist in caring for the dead and injured. Narration unfolds in seven chapters, from six perspectives—first, second, and third person —and in the second, third, and first tenses. The characters include the boy, the kin of those left behind, a spirit who disappeared without a trace, a prisoner of conscience, a factory girl bereaved by cruelty, the mother of the spirit who now gazes at us, and the bystander who yearns for death, constructing a narrative about bearing and disposing of the dead. In chapters six and seven, the narrative jumps in time to 1985, 1990, 2002, and 2010 and is set in Gwangju, Seoul, Germany, and the United States, explaining the persecution and survival of the prisoner and their kin. The novel asks, "What is the difference between living and dying?" in return for a narrative that will allow the spirit of the boy to disappear.

The narrative of *Human Acts* is conducted at the personal, parochial, and political levels of trauma, presenting the seemingly irreconcilable personal impact of trauma and the public history of a political incident. Consequently, narration concerns symbolism and appropriation as much as it does dispossession and empowerment. Through this narrative, Han Kang argues that the constitutional implementation of democracy cannot, by itself, dispossess a dictatorship of its legitimacy. Creating new symbols does not imply an end to the traumas of the past.

Significance of the Research

Ko Un, one of the most important poets in the Republic of Korea, claimed that Han Kang should be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Since then, her career has gained an international dimension that outreached Korean national frames. In 2016, she was awarded the International Booker Prize for the translation of her short novel *The Vegetarian*, which is part of the same trilogy as *Human Acts*.

The novel *Human Acts* was initially published in 2014 in Korea as a short story spanning 258 pages and was subsequently translated into English and republished in the UK in 2016. This edition prompted significant global media attention and reviews, which continued to praise the novel after its republication in the USA one year later, in 2017. *Human Acts* deals with one of the most traumatic events in the modern history of the Republic of Korea.

The traumatic event, widely known as 'The Gwangju Massacre,' took place on the night of May 18, 1980, ten days after the coup d'état carried out by General Chun Doohwan's soldiers. Soldiers armed by American advisors attacked students of Chosun University, protesting against the coup. Between May 18th and 27th, the South Korean army quashed a vibrant uprising against the military junta policy of terror and dictatorship. As a result of the slaughters, 600 civilian protestors are officially confirmed dead. However, the actual number of casualties is much higher: over 2000 were massacred, wounded, or simply disappeared during the violence used by the army against the civilian population (Kim, 2019, pp. 103–116).

METHODS

This paper examines suffering in Han Kang's narrative of trauma, specifically in the novel *Human Acts*, which deals with individual and collective trauma associated with the 1980 Military Coup in South Korea.

Kang's portrayal draws empathy from readers, inviting reflection on the suffering of the characters amidst the brutality of authority, where hundreds were killed in horrifying conditions. The narrative captures the anguish of discovering friends and family among the dead, creating a profoundly impactful message about exile and loss. *Human Acts* employs a fact-based narrative, structured through questions and responses, to explore the experiences of its characters.

The essay is an attempt to highlight the need for a deeper understanding of this work, especially in light of South Korea's tumultuous recent history, including the 2014 ferry disaster and the killings by city authorities in 2017. In these instances, governmental responses were chillingly inadequate, with public discourse reflecting a persistent tragedy. Famous remarks dismissing accountability for past atrocities linger in public memory, accompanying painful recollections of the Gwangju Massacre. However, incidents remain ingrained in the national consciousness, amplified by social media and public discourse, reflecting a society grappling with its traumatic past. Kang's narrative vividly illustrates violence through poignant sequences, such as Far-Ye's encounter with her father amidst the chaos, which powerfully conveys the loss of human connection in traumatized settings. The graphic depiction of violence leaves an indelible mark, urging readers to comprehend the ongoing impact of such history. The essay ultimately emphasizes the importance of engaging with these narratives to foster awareness and a connection to the collective suffering in South Korea.

Conceptual Framework

The essay examines suffering in Han Kang's narrative of trauma, specifically in the novel *Human Acts*, which deals with individual and collective trauma associated with the 1980 Military Coup in South Korea. Kang's portrayal draws empathy from readers, inviting reflection on the suffering of the characters amidst the brutality of authority, where hundreds were killed in horrifying conditions. The narrative captures the anguish of discovering friends and family among the dead, creating a profoundly impactful message about exile and loss. *Human Acts* employs a fact-based narrative, structured through

questions and responses, to explore the experiences of its characters. The essay is an attempt to highlight the need for a deeper understanding of this work, especially in light of South Korea's tumultuous recent history, including the 2014 ferry disaster and the killings by city authorities in 2017. In these instances, governmental responses were chillingly inadequate, with public discourse reflecting a persistent tragedy. Famous remarks dismissing accountability for past atrocities linger in public memory, accompanying painful recollections of the Gwangju Massacre. However, incidents remain ingrained in the national consciousness, amplified by social media and public discourse, reflecting a society grappling with its traumatic past. Kang's narrative vividly illustrates violence through poignant sequences, such as Far-Ye's encounter with her father amidst the chaos, which powerfully conveys the loss of human connection in traumatized settings. The graphic depiction of violence leaves an indelible mark, urging readers to comprehend the ongoing impact of such history. The essay ultimately stresses the importance of engaging with these narratives to foster awareness and connection to collective suffering in South Korea.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Background of Han Kang and Human Acts

Ko Un, one of the most important poets in the Republic of Korea, claimed that Han Kang should be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Since then, her career has gained an international dimension that outreached Korean national frames. The 2016 International Booker Prize was awarded for her translation of Han Kang's short novel The Vegetarian, which is part of the same trilogy as Human Acts. The novel Human Acts was initially published in 2014 in Korea as a short story spanning 258 pages and was subsequently translated into English and republished in the UK in 2016. This is the edition that prompted significant global media attention and reviews, which continued to praise the novel after its republication in the USA one year later, i.e., in 2017. Human Acts deals with one of the most traumatic events in the modern history of the Republic of Korea. The traumatic event, widely known as 'The Gwangju Massacre,' took place on the night of May 18, 1980, ten days after the coup d'état carried out by General Chun Doohwan's soldiers. Soldiers armed by American advisors attacked students of Chosun University, protesting against the coup. Between May 18th and 27th, the South Korean army quashed a vibrant uprising against the military junta policy of terror and dictatorship. As a result of the

slaughters, 600 civilian protestors are officially confirmed dead. However, the actual number of casualties is much higher: over 2000 were massacred, wounded, or simply disappeared in the course of the cruel violence used by the army against the civilian population (Kim, 2019, pp. 103–116).

Definition of Trauma and Human Rights

Trauma, which refers to an individual's negative experiences, includes the psychological trauma of an event and violence to personal rights (Parr, 2018). Human rights is the ideology that seeks to obtain fundamental human rights, which are based on the equality and dignity of all persons and aim for a world where they are respected and guaranteed (Rickel, 2012, pp. 87–108). These definitions do not remain unquestioned. Trauma is evaluated as suffering both a violent event and the infringement of individual rights. At the same time, it is suggested that the same concept, as well as individual rights, includes not only a violent situation but also everyday violence, after all. In Han Kang's novel, this concept is used with such extensions of the framework. Moreover, it is used interchangeably with assault, which is one of the contexts within human rights. That is because there is no way to defend oneself in front of others' violence, and it includes descriptions that were deprived of a person's healthy life due to the unjust elements of the surrounding circumstances. These narratives analyze the consciousness of the subject regarding violence and its kind and explore the process of understanding the events of violence and how they are remembered and exploited in their own lives. However, literature depicting traumatic events is often based on the stories of victims of traumatic experiences, who then become the standard of what can be considered trauma. Otherwise, they threaten the same fate, turning everyone into hostages of their past. That is why it tries to see and evaluate how research on traumatic events is seen in Han Kang's "Human Acts" novel and how the mechanism of writing trauma is structured and evaluated in the knowledge of trauma theory and competing theories.

Existing Studies on Trauma Narratives in Literature

Several studies have already dealt with the characteristics of trauma narratives in the form of fictional prose. They essentially seek the respective fault lines and discuss chances of success concerning covering trauma and/or pursuing human rights discourses. What could not be found were approaches that look at trauma and human rights narratives from a meta-perspective, comparing historical narratives to more recent ones of a similar nature.

Trauma-related novels have long been a significant genre within Western literature, tracing their roots back to the 20th century, when survivors of the Civil War, including both soldiers and civilians, began to create narratives reflecting their wartime experiences. Notable examples emerged from the 1970s onward, but a marked resurgence of interest in trauma literature is evident at the turn of the 21st century, particularly after a notable decline during the 1960s and 70s. Since the events of September 11, 2001, this trend has intensified, driven by a prevailing climate of fear surrounding terrorism and widespread destruction. This evolution is evident in the proliferation of new novels from Western authors, with trauma literature increasingly recognized as a valid means to depict the physical and emotional scars of individuals affected by crises. Such works often articulate the themes of wounded bodies, broken allegiances, and lost souls, which become emblematic of traumatic experiences. Moreover, ambitious trauma fiction is seen as a form of cultural memory—an expression of the fractures and silences inflicted by violence and catastrophe. Various classic trauma narratives continue to be analyzed, paving the way for the integration of new trauma models into literary discourse (Caruth, 1996).

Human Rights in Literature

Novelist Y becomes entangled in a political scandal. While customarily liberal, she places the highest priority on the freedom of artistic expression, deliberately attending a demonstration held by conservative groups on the grounds of freedom of expression, which ends in controversy. She is excluded from and rejected by the literary world, which is generally liberal. At a loss, she receives an invitation from a small and distant city, where the joy of reading course students had posted a "headhunting request," and then begins the reading course in this city. In doing so, she encounters an entirely new and "unliterary" world through exchanges with the students in her joy of reading course.

There is little about literature in it, but the human rights narrative required by humans - its small merits will be related to human rights but in unforeseen places and forms. A reader would not have stumbled on the inspiring case of a reading group of mentally disabled people. Reading a collection of essays written by a Nobel laureate in jail who had been sentenced to death makes her rethink the political effect of texts on the body.

Trauma Theory and Literature

Narrative reconsideration of past traumatic experiences characterizes contemporary literature and traumatized individuals. The human act has a complex narrative structure, and thus, a kaleidoscope of different traumatic contents and experiences can be explored in its novel. Methodically, trauma formulations are used to detect personal traumata. Analyzing the textual agency of various narrative instances can define the diversity of this complex narrative assemblage. The narratemes and their respective textual personae perform distinct functions and characterize internally varied traumatic experiences. A numinous sense of the infinite number of ethical decisions and subjective sufferings forms an everyday human basis. Politically, those ethical decisions are corrupted by malevolent structures. Violence is the breaking of stones. It is an attack on the human substance like a virus. Conceptualized traumata is a combination, a compromise of will to violence and violence with another. Some traumata are structurally beyond the human capacity for understanding and treatment. Humans are forgetful. Personal memories are societal constructions, which, when disconnected from society, dissolve. Ephemeral memories are created through narrative discussion and mutual confrontation of mnemonic traces. This social nexus is altered when the witness dies, and with it, access to their memories is lost. Traumatic events break this communal framework as the discussion is stifled or memories are "locked" into protective and enduring mnemonic images. Due to the unsharability of trauma, it is usually prevented from becoming a durable episodic memory, entering personal or collective remembrance. Initially, remembrance of trauma is primarily conveyed through history, and only subsequently is the conversion into narrativity enabled, allowing for the transmission of collective memories. The diversity of historical narrativity reflects the inability to consolidate a shared historical narrative on the causes, course, consequences, and aftermath of the Korean War. Differences in historical narrativity and memorials cause national self-victimization.

Human Rights Theory in Literature

Since the late 20th century, the novel genre has been periodically invaded by traumatic stories, giving rise to what is known as trauma literature. These often treat the experience of severe injury done to the body, but also injury to the soul. Since the turn of the millennium, some of these narratives have also become voices of human rights, thus

writing about the injuries the self has suffered in terms of human rights. In this essay, literary trauma theory is employed to analyze a 2014 novel by Han Kang, Human Acts. This research reads the text as an example of "literature made for human rights" (Schultheis Moore & Swanson Goldberg, 2014, pp. 59–87).

The Wanderer at the beginning of Beowulf, W.G. Sebald's narratives, and Salman Rushdie's Salman, along with accounts of contemporary conflict and its ensuing trauma, such as Chris Abani's Becoming Abigail, Hubert Klimko-Dobrzaniecki's Xieńka, and Primo Levi's Se questo è un uomo, represent an exterior manifestation of an internal wound. These works function not as confessions or legal testimonies but as urgent cries for justice. They articulate essential truths necessary for healing or, at the very least, for the act of remembering. Presented by those who have suffered, these haunting experiences carry an air of mystery, as the unspeakable necessarily evokes a realm of the unknown. This unknown can be both literal, where the limitations of shared language fail to capture the inexpressibility of events, and symbolic, where the enigmatic nature of brutal actions resonates with the reader. This transfer of knowledge can be profoundly damaging, as it transforms the trauma into a pervasive stain of destruction that lingers. As noted by Aretxaga (2000), "the act of narrating trauma reveals the complexities of memory and the struggle for meaning in the aftermath of violence" (p. 220).

Historical Context

The novel begins shortly before the coup d'état when Gwangju is still a tranquil city in the southern part of the peninsula. Fear of police and military conflicts is akin to a rumor originating from a distant land. The story unfolds around Dong-ho and his friends Jeong-dae, their chief and boss, Tae-ok, and a girl called Jeong-mi; around some of the dead and their pasts; around Dong-ho's family; his mother, who is doing a doctoral thesis on Han clan Genealogy, and a little brother who is in his final year at elementary school and just does not know how to defend himself when he is beaten after the torturing and rapes in a gruesome sight; and around the woman seen at the chaotic scene, lying with a daughter whose leg has been amputated. Han Kang employs a kind of "laughter to keep from crying" in the scene that follows the burial of the dead. Laughter and crying are inextricably linked to grief and alienation from the ruling political economy (Rickel, 2012, pp. 87–108). A similar scene is found in the collection of short stories. In the Vietnamese village, where

the men go temporarily berserk after a soldier dies. They then move out to the center of the village, destroying and burning houses—indirect revenge on the girl-ambush attacker. It starts with lighting the first match, and then the others join in painting torches of incandescent satire. They turn it into something absurd, even comical, to watch, as if they think life is so easily swayed. A strange kind of defiant kinship is born out of a demented will kinship, in a sense, that they would never have experienced had they stayed at home or were it not for this peculiar arrangement of events. Ultimately, neither the dead forms nor any goal remains. This disoriented wandering on the road suddenly speaks of the essential absurdity of the world—voices hanging in the air seeped in its absence.

South Korean History and the Gwangju Uprising

On May 18, 1980, during the Gwangju Uprising, a fifth-grade student named Han was living in Seoul, the capital of South Korea, with his family. At that time, Han spent most of his days playing badminton and riding his bicycle around the neighborhood. When the rebellion broke out in Gwangju, Han was largely unaware due to the government's control over the media; the television at his home displayed a blank screen, making watching TV a risky activity. He only learned of the events after arriving at school, where his classmates discussed a television program that depicted the demonstrations in Gwangju. Many people had gathered to demand that the president either inspire them or step down. Han's first impression of the demonstration was that it was an immense gathering of individuals filling the streets. During break time, instead of focusing on his workbook, a classmate read aloud the details of the events while Han merely listened, lacking a complete understanding of what had transpired. The protests were marked by violence; a student from Chonnam University was reported to have been wounded by a soldier's bayonet, an act that highlighted the brutality of the situation. This horrific scene left a profound impact on Han and his friends, who struggled to comprehend the cruelty of the world around them. Despite being in a school near Chongro, where many demonstrations occurred, the distance from Gwangju shielded Han from the reality of the uprising. The Gwangju Uprising became an indelible part of Han's consciousness, buried deep yet simmering with anger and frustration as he grappled with the depressive aftermath of such historical trauma. It would take years for Han to articulate his experiences, and by then, the media censorship had lifted, allowing writers to narrate fictional accounts of the rebellion. This period was significant, marking a turning point in the student-led movement for democracy against decades of military control in South Korea (Kwon, 2021, pp. 141-167).

Narrative Analysis

This situation encapsulates not only a complex web of human actions during a pivotal historical moment but also a profound moral dilemma. In early 1980, a clash arose between a police officer and a nurse in a hospital situated in a conflict-ridden city as they debated the best way to assist the victims of a mass revolt. By that time, military forces had already been deployed, implementing repressive measures against local citizens following the declaration of martial law. The police were aligned with the military's aggressive tactics, lacking official orders to aid the injured citizens suffering from the effects of tear gas and brutal confrontations. In the aftermath of these violent suppressions, residents were subjected to harsh military oppression, which included the withdrawal of medical care and food supplies, the clandestine disposal of countless corpses, and the detention of pro-democracy leaders, including university students and civil servants. Consequently, rumors began circulating among survivors, alleging that police officers and hospital staff had refused to assist the wounded, either threatening patients with death or betraying their identities to the military (Baker, 2018, pp. 498-514).

Narrative Structure in Human Acts

In a departure from the structure of 'Human Acts,' I offer an analysis of Han Kang's novel from a narrative perspective, tracing how the form of human rights and trauma testimony relies on absent human-animal distinctions in a reading that draws cues from Animal Studies and Critical Posthumanism. 'Human Acts' engages with the literary and affective strategies by which human rights narratives have expanded environmental witness narration across species boundaries (Rickel, 2012, pp. 87–108). Testimony concerning state violence is borne by (or in the name of) nonhumans who do not have symbolic means of human speech. It follows that the nonhuman characters' status must be considered within the text, especially when there are no counterfactual plotlines involving human interpersonal relationships. Specifically, the essay engages with the cited passage in Han Kang and proceeds to a close reading of the pig-monkey, examining how the play both thematically stages and narratively involves the novel's pet and the consuming human bodies. In his recently translated novel 'Human Acts,' Han Kang stages the readerly encounter with a state-initiated trauma event from the macrocosmic 1980 Gwangju Uprising to the microcosmic death of a fifteen-year-old boy, Dong-ho. In the wake of Dong-ho's execution for tending to wounded student protestors, the true nature and the

extent of national violence are uncovered through the nine subsequent narrative fragments that loosely coalesce around the victim's soul. Resisting chronological linearity, each chapter follows different generational participation in the incident, including the discovery, cleaning, mourning, memorialization, and writing of bodily residue shattering. Through her raw aesthetics, Yooni laments the damage done to the barely recognizable Dong-ho: "Push against his face. Maw of ruin. Eyes without light. He was human. Hair black."

Character Development and Trauma

This section expands the inquiry into how we should interpret the representation of the bodies of traumatized characters in works of fiction, considering additional elements such as literary expressions of visual witnessing, cultural capital, and the discourse between humanism and posthumanism. Throughout the narrative, all central characters undergo bodily incursions and manipulations, which contribute to the development of their respective character arcs. The analysis aims to explore the implications of reading the text through the lens of bodily sequestration, the dehumanization of particular bodies or facets of personhood, and the nuances of corporeal experience. Understanding the corporeal dynamics within narratives can offer deeper insights into the complexities of trauma representation in literature (Zembylas, 2021, pp. 157-179).

The boy participates semi-involuntarily in the demonstration in Gwangju after trying to deliver a box to the Teacher. His name is given as Dong-ho later in the narrative. Due to the peaceful intentions of both his box delivery and the narrative mention that he later became active in demonstrations after his friend was killed, it can be assumed that Dong-ho was not part of the original demonstration. It might indeed be argued that the narrative's focus on the mutilated bodies of this, in a way, reluctant victim and the first body the Boy came across in his search for Jeong-mi serves to underline the systemic, state-abetted nature of the guerrilla suppression. The narrative presents trauma as a shared condition, but it also renders an individualized, subjective experience of it that resists observational knowledge. This takes place in part through narratives that are pocked with painful and often non-representable emotions: people love in different ways; he sometimes relentlessly and amorphously misses them; things he did not know he carried have left him forever. This raises the question of what the difference between the general one and the singular loss could be to a subject who, before and since, fluctuates on a semi-regular basis.

Themes in Human Acts

In this thesis, Han Kang's Human Acts was argued to be a narrative of the traumatic events that followed the Gwangju Uprising in South Korea in 1980. The theoretical framework of trauma experiences is based on. Trauma is initially inaccessible to consciousness - images, experiences, and thoughts are not entirely held; they fragment and return repeatedly in involuntary and often painful ways. Focus on character analysis, particularly in the individual descriptions or responses to the traumatic events in the novel. The individual trauma experiences were shown through character analysis from chapter to chapter, from the boy who died for free from the pain in his way, the brutal death of young girl's older sister, Eun-so and Koo, to the last chapter of the tingling-come-out-wanting-to-dig-up-the-corpse of life of Dong-ho who tried to remember the boy's smiling face who already decayed (Masruri & Utami, 2019, pp. 186-198).

Imperialism severely repressed student demonstrations and other democratic movements that emerged following the assassination of Park Chung-hee. Reports indicated that hundreds of individuals were killed, sexually assaulted, or forcibly disappeared as news circulated about the arrival of volunteers from Kwangju. Literary texts, serving as both representations and critiques of societal conditions, can play a crucial role in instigating change and reevaluating the past in a post-democratization society. The literary domain, whether it reflects or critiques contemporary social phenomena consciously or unconsciously, can act as both a mirror and a bellwether for that society. The interplay between power and literature is underscored both by distinctions and dependencies (Said, 1978).

Violence and Resistance

A profound change looms over society, yet the world seems unable to accommodate it, turning away as the names of the deceased fade from memory. Their bodies lie forgotten, and those who remain are no longer entirely their own. The overwhelming reality is difficult to comprehend; it engulfs us. Anger and pain propel us forward like crawling creatures, desperately seeking healing for our wounds, only to find ourselves trapped in a cycle of suffering, revisiting these horrors repeatedly. This recurring nightmare has begun to seep into our conscious lives. Public expressions of outrage and mourning have only just begun, with communities displaying hollow signs of grief that place the blame elsewhere. We remain unable to uplift those who have fallen, weighed down by despair and confusion.

Who overlooks the impoverished neighborhoods, and what system perpetuates their existence? We face a cycle of hatred—recently born yet destined to endure. A similar sentiment is articulated by international scholars, who emphasize the systemic nature of such social issues (Santos, 2021, pp. 45-67).

In a strip of land, this narrow strip, the named and the unnamed dead lie together, with the marks and remembrances that belong to them. Beside them, all the shadowed living and what dread, what silent dread, makes a home in them now. The water is said to be more precious than oil for the jihad it is leading in another time and place; here, it is barely the slurry of such wars that fills the cup to sip what thankful mouth can take—turned then upon their kind—rats such as these. Vermin. And the birds of the sky, they too. How many more summers will this last for them, living their lives as they pass from memory? Why did all this begin? Were it for land, or enterprise, or liberty, such answers as if they were comfort enough?

I will vividly recall each morning, a morning that continually reflects how this war, in its incremental nature, overtakes countless places, saturating every horizon like the grasses in a twilight haunted by demons. The shoots bow low as if burdened by the weight of the deceased, and above them, the stars shatter the suffocating dark while the moons—oh, the moons—are numerous and eternally descending, drowning in sorrow. There are whispers from various souls, muttering, 'We must go on, we must go on,' even though progression seems impossible. They are acutely aware of their footsteps, burdened by the weight of their existence. A chorus of melancholic voices arises, lending them a weariness that permeates their torn, disheveled, and endlessly blood-soaked bodies. However, they continue to press forward, for retreat is no option. As noted by Agamben (1999), the struggle to move forward in the face of despair reflects the complex intersection of memory, war, and the human condition.

Memory and Forgetting

Trauma often eludes naming and communication. Traumatic events can be so painful that they fail to assimilate into one's broader life narrative, instead remaining repressed as a sort of non-experience. In contexts of mass trauma, particularly during genocides, not only do the original traumatic events become relegated to the realm of the non-experience, but the stories that emerge from them are also often considered unworthy of acknowledgment or remembrance. This reluctance to engage with the traumatic memory of mass atrocities

aligns with the tendency for survivors' narratives to go unheard, positioning them as minoritized against more dominant historical accounts of such traumatic events. In response to this culture of forgetfulness, silence, and the distortions fostered by prevailing narratives, various strategies have been implemented to articulate and convey stories of human suffering, thereby facilitating remembrance (Bultmann, 2018, pp. 45-67).

Human Acts will be examined as a literary and cinematic endeavor aimed at addressing the continuum of unnameability and displacement, signifying and dismantling the experience of traumatic mass violence. This analysis expands the understanding of narratives suitable for contextualizing events such as the Gwangju Mass Killing. The discussion will incorporate various narrative elaborations alongside a mise en scène, focusing on a translated script from the movie Human Acts. This script captures the intertwined dispositif and dispositio of synthesized narratives of unspeakable lives alongside efforts to communicate traumatic pasts relevant to human rights, specifically in the context of the Gwangju narrative. As these narratives are inherently both individual and collective, the strategy will also encompass the broader witnessing efforts in Korea, which seek to combat forgetfulness, censorship, trivialization, and the displacement of the preventable human violence inflicted during the Spring of Democracy (Moon, 2018, pp. 45-62).

Human Rights in Human Acts

In "Human Acts," Han Kang explores the intricate themes of human rights through the recollections of Nam, a translator who reflects on the suffering endured by his friend Dong-ho during the 1980 Gwangju Democratic Uprising. Nam meticulously compiles news articles and conducts interviews with the victims' families, members of a university student volunteer group, and a young factory girl imprisoned during the military crackdown. As he weaves these various testimonies into a cohesive narrative, he grapples with a sense of frustration due to his lack of personal memories of Dong-ho and the contrasting fates of the families involved, which oscillate between troubling obscurity and equally troubling fame. Ultimately, years later, Nam discovers a previously unacknowledged aspect of Dong-ho's life—his potential unspoken affection for an older boy (Kang, 2017).

This text reevaluates Nam's narrative work by exploring the interconnected issues of trauma and human rights, questioning the cohesion of various elements within the testimony. This inquiry is particularly relevant in light of the increasing academic critique

surrounding the literary and cinematic interpretations of trauma, as well as the Korean nationalist perspective on rights consciousness during the 1980s Gwangju democratization movement. Consequently, analyzing Nam's narrative strategy will not only clarify the novel's formal techniques but also provide insight into diverse interpretations of trauma, remembrance, and suffering. Regarding human rights, it is essential to closely examine the complex process of translation between the victim's "voice" and the subject's "attestation" in both Han's novel and Nam's works. This focus will facilitate a deeper understanding of the complicated relationship between the national state and the global human security paradigm as contextualized within the broader spectrum of Asian legal and cultural history. Ultimately, this analysis aims to shed light on overlooked dimensions of Han Kang's fifth narrative, which examines the divide between the private and the collective, the living and the deceased. It also aspires to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse regarding the challenging interplay between nationalism, witnessing, and the contemporary documentation of bodies as vulnerable texts (Park, 2018, pp. 683-704).

Violence Against Protesters

A state-affiliated research institution estimates that approximately 6,000 individuals were killed during the Gwangju civil uprising, which lasted from May 18 to May 27, 1980. In a gun report for squad management piece No. 1615 released by Mayor Maeng Joon, a comprehensive list acknowledges 5,019 deaths, with data detailing the exact times of death. Despite some overlap with other investigation results, particularly in classification by sex and age, this report marks the first time such an extensive death toll has been disclosed. Maeng described this day as "the most unfortunate day for Gwangju," although his use of the term "unfortunate" downplays the severity of the events. The revelations in the gun report, however, fail to capture the whole truth of what transpired in Gwangju. According to scholars, the events in Gwangju exemplify the need for historical accountability and transparency (Lee, 2019, pp. 133-157).

In Gwangju, President Chun Doo-hwan issued no shoot-to-kill order, and there are no records to suggest that such an order was sanctioned, even informally. It remains unverified whether the munitions used by troops during the incident were intended for recreational purposes. However, the events can be interpreted as acts of brutality perpetrated by assailants against individuals who were defenseless, with evidence showing that victims were intentionally targeted for sniper attacks rather than depicting a government-led

massacre of the populace. This situation suggests that the actions taken can be categorized as willful murder rather than mass slaughter. Casualties were documented on a single-name list, with most of those shot on May 21, 22, and 27 succumbing within three days (Bae, 2020, pp. 245-265).

Role of the State

It has been four years since Han Kang received the Man Booker International Prize for her novel *The Vegetarian*, celebrated for its "lyrical and lacerating prose." Its successor, *Human Acts*, delves into more profound subjects, specifically the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea, during which an estimated two hundred students, factory workers, and a taxi driver lost their lives. Similar to *The Vegetarian*, this work examines the theme of death occurring far too early and resonates with consequences that are difficult to encapsulate from a singular viewpoint. *Human Acts* is narrated through the perspectives of multiple characters and unfolds in the context of the uprising, which sanctioned or necessitated the torture and execution of numerous leftist sympathizers. Survivors must traverse through haunting sites and transitions that "bathe an indigo light over hundreds of hopeful people," where hope becomes as urgent and elusive as "doctors and nurses, basements, corpses intended for autopsies (as though these could unravel a mystery)." These encounters and experiences are not uniformly accompanied by empathy, illustrated by a clairvoyant who treats the injuries of a grieving mother in a bid to provide closure. According to Thomas (2016), the novel powerfully illustrates the intersection of personal trauma and historical violence, highlighting the struggle for understanding in the aftermath of societal upheaval.

The nomination for the "Man International Prize" provides a platform for Kang to explore the essence of humanity at its core. A brief analysis of *Human Acts* reveals Kang's significant focus on the psychological and sensory aspects of the human experience. This is not an isolated observation; the review compilation of *The Vegetarian* similarly delves into its "potent, sensory prose and a clarity and restraint that leave a deep imprint." However, such editorial choices create tension when considering a work as multifaceted as *Human Acts*. The reading experience oscillates between a clinical detachment and a visceral engagement, reflecting the harsh realities that Kang's narratives and characters must confront. The text occasionally requires the reader to suspend judgment and examine the systemic injustices that occurred during the events in Gwangju in the late 1980s. Kang's

literary ambition is vividly evident in her figurative language, which conveys the brutalities of violence: “breach[es] in their clothes, soaking up a river of heat, confusion, and blood,” revealing the harsh instruments of cruelty, such as "curved bamboo canes filled with lead balls," wielded against vulnerable bodies, manifesting as sudden, overwhelming pain that becomes embedded within. The notion that literature serves as a vital medium for conveying human experience and trauma (Lee, 2020, pp. 15-32).

Comparative Analysis

Following the end of a cruelty-driven military regime in South Korea, Han Kang confronts the raw nerve of the nation-state in her first novel, “The Vegetarian.” “Human Acts” goes a step further than almost all contemporary Korean novels in the degree of distance from any easily legible historical actuality, “The Vegetarian” perhaps arcing over the reality of the Kwangju massacre and of the military regime itself. However, how can a novel so reflective on the historical “event” and so experimental in narrative construction engage with general questions of human rights and activism? The religious tale of the crucifixion of Jesus highlights portrayals of the voluntary suffering of innocents by contrasting the responses of passivity and activism. While the other parts feature different forms of “writing through the trauma” in an almost post-national mode, this third part, although still articulated by the suffering of innocent individuals, exhibits a particular liminality, practicing both fiction and dialogical reality. Like the novel, the Kwangju incident is not so much a unique event as an almost normative consequence of something fundamental and structural in the political anatomy of the modern South Korean state formation. Indeed, the event resembles, in its temporal narrative, the (proto-) modern-capital narrative form of “exposition, development, completion.” However, the event’s narration can hardly be consumed immediately. How does this “effect of the untransmitted” form the very element of political education calling for continued questioning? Furthermore, how are the various experimental forms of its narrative envisioned within the “Human Act”?” After Poetic Justice, questions of literary justice often merge with vengeance. However, the straightforward response that violence should be met with violence — a concept that, from Aeschylus to The Dark Knight, has been of central concern to both philosophy and art—is given complex form in narrative (Rickel, 2012, pp. 87–108).

Comparison with Other Trauma Narratives

Over the past few years, trauma has been making its mark on the discipline of literary studies. Many scholars have responded by theorizing the concept and investigating its relationship to literature. There seems to be a consensus that the two share concerns, characteristics, and strategies. This scholarship often asks what literature can teach us about trauma, especially since psychoanalysis and psychiatry have tampered down the theorizing in the wake of the Holocaust. In this current climate, work focused on that event continues to be published and celebrated. With trauma theory's current popularity and the widespread interest in reinterpreting traumatic historical events. However, as a field, it has been accused of such a focus on white male Holocaust survivors that it has ignored the majority of the world's suffering. Cognitive science can explode this conversation by circumventing trauma theorists' tendency to privilege the minds of privileged Western elites and by providing a broader framework for considering how trauma affects memory, the body, society, and literature. Evidence from cognitive neuroscience, in particular, gives researchers purchase into the ways trauma erodes cognition and offers an explanation for what has traditionally made it so difficult to represent trauma in narrative. Because of this, a focus on how non-white trauma survivors or, more accurately, the descendants of survivors—narrate their traumatic experiences and attempt to seek redress plays to these weaknesses of literary trauma theory (Rickel, 2012, pp. 87–108).

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates how Human Acts can be interpreted as a narrative of trauma and human rights. Han Kang's novel addresses not only individual trauma resulting from violence but also the broader nature of violence within specific instances framed in the discourse of human rights. The study examines the paralysis that biopolitical violence imposes on human rights, arguing for a connection between the violence depicted in the novel Gwangju Uprising and the biopolitical violence prevalent in contemporary South Korea. By examining the relationship between Han Kang and the narrator through the lens of the dictator and biopolitical subjects, the research reveals trauma as a somatic experience crucial for understanding infirmity. The narrative's curation of the politics and economy of trauma illuminates trauma as a somatic experience, highlighting the trauma of the hidden aspects of disease, aging, and death within the broader polity.

Implications for Literature and Human Rights Discourse

This reading of Han Kang's Human Acts in terms of post-trauma discourse, especially about biopolitics, has reformulated both the notion of trauma itself and the social context of trauma narrative, which has generally been conceived of as personal trauma. The relationship between Han and the narrator is read as a dictator and biopolitical subjects, and subsequently, everybody's state is naked. Through the blinds of his wounds, the boy can see the blink of everyone's, and through the quivers of myriad bodies that precede their death, he senses as could. The politics (and economy) of trauma, as curated by the narrative, in this sense, shed light on trauma as a somatic experience necessary to understand infirmity. The embeddedness of Evil and Pain in Economic polarity illustrates the trauma of the "flesh" and alludes to the trauma of the hidden disease, aging, and death in the broader bio-polity. Furthermore, the somatic, living, and contagious trauma gained louder echoes at places of aggregation. The presence of victims ensures the remembrance of misfortune, the witness of the fall; conversely, places of prosperity maintain the oblivion of that pain, the silence of economic politics.

This text, the echo of the silent trauma, demonstrates the persistent or hung trauma of the unmountable bodies. The tension between mutated structures and habitual activities denotes the negotiation of the different fronts of the trauma. The description of the house, with Time cleaning the blood and the wall mounting memories as priceless, iterates the practice of mourning and manifests the impossibility of ever-rest. This contemplation of time-images, where everything continues incessantly in its being, is brought forward with the rage of reworking sleepless nights, crying endlessly beside the boy is still body while it shivers in terror, and whilst the boy finally falls into the internal darkness, never to be awoken again - eternally vegetates.

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