

Echoes of Identity: Bearing Witness and Resistance in Han Kang's *Human Acts*

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Abstract

Human Acts by the South Korean Nobel Laureate Han Kang is a haunting exploration of the limits of human resilience in the face of unimaginable cruelty. It's a terrifyingly honest portrayal of the Gwangju uprising of 1980 where civilians revolted against the fascist and corrupt government and were brutally suppressed. Kang divides this personal historiography into seven sections: each from the point of view of a different first person narrator whose identity has been indefinitely altered by the legacy of violence. Through a close textual analysis, this paper would analyse these narratives of trauma which document the horrors of an event conveniently erased from the pages of official history and would utilize trauma and memory studies as the theoretical framework. The paper would attempt to employ 'bearing witness' theory as a framework for public validation of trauma that can initiate recovery and social change. The paper would also interrogate how the preservation of human dignity and memory is a form of resistance against state-sanctioned brutality. To conclude, the paper would trace how Kang reclaims narrative as a form of political and existential defiance, allowing identity to emerge not as a fixed entity, but as a continuous act of remembrance and solidarity.

Keywords: Trauma, Violence, Memory, Resistance, Human Dignity

“After you died, I couldn’t hold a funeral,

So these eyes that once beheld you became a shrine” (Kang 106).

Two words from the above quote – “funeral” and “shrine” become tantamount to delve into ideological dimensions of death, memory and the traumatic permanence of it all. *Human Acts* by the South Korean Nobel Laureate Han Kang is a haunting exploration of the limits of human resilience in the face of unimaginable cruelty. It’s a terrifyingly honest portrayal of the Gwangju uprising of 1980 where civilians revolted against the fascist and corrupt government and were brutally suppressed. The Gwangju Uprising, also known as the Gwangju Democratization Movement, was a pivotal pro-democracy protest that took place in Gwangju, South Korea, from May 18 to May 27, 1980. It began as a student-led demonstration against the military dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan, who had seized power through a coup after the assassination of President Park Chung-hee. The protests quickly grew as citizens joined in to demand democratic reforms and an end to martial law. The government responded with brutal force. Paratroopers and military units were deployed, and they used live ammunition, beatings, and torture to suppress the uprising. The novel’s translator Deborah Smith in her introduction mentions “the magnitude of the crime was the violence done to these bodies, and the manner in which they had been dumped or hidden away, meant they were unable to be identified and given the proper burial rites by their families” (Kang 2). For more than a decade the South Korean government was engaged in a twofold act: a systematic erasure of the incident from official history and a deliberate dispersal of distorted information. Chun Doo-hwan’s fascist regime repeatedly portrayed the uprising as an anti-national violent agitation spearheaded by communists and

controlled by North Korea. This false narrative was widely propagated through state-controlled media and textbooks. Smith writes, “It wasn’t until 1997 that the massacre was officially memorialised, and casualty figures remain a contentious issue event today. Disputing the official figures was initially punishable by arrest and, despite being far lower than the estimates by foreign press, these have still not been revised” (Kang 4).

Han Kang, born and raised in Gwangju, refuses the solidification of official history and its essentialist singularity which has both dismissed the devastation as a forgettable, minor event and vehemently denied the existence of alternate narratives. She subverts history with a capital H as a single authoritative narrative and initiates the fertile zone of mini-histories drawn from personal testimony, memory, and unofficial records. Deborah Smith writes, “The past, like the bodies of the dead, hasn’t stayed buried. Repressed trauma irrupts in the form of memory, one of the main Korean words for ‘to remember’ meaning literally ‘to rise to the surface’ – an inadvertent, often hazy recollection which is the type of memory most common in Han Kang’s book” (Kang 4-5). This is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s criticism of linear history as a continuous progression defined by the victors and a tendency to view the past as a sequence of “facts”, rather than contested experiences. According to Benjamin, this view reduces the suffering of the oppressed as dispensable and the only way to understand history would be to redeem silenced voices and challenge the dominant narrative. He discusses "Brushing History against the Grain" which refers to critically analyzing historical narratives, questioning who benefits from them, and uncovering the hidden narratives of the oppressed. Han Kang divides this personal historiography into seven sections: each from the point of view of a different narrator whose identity has been indefinitely altered by the legacy of violence and as Deborah Smith states “Her novel, then, is both a personal and political response to these recent

developments, and a reminder of the human acts of which we are all capable, the brutal and the tender, the base and the sublime” (Kang 5).

Laurie Vickroy, in “Voices of Survivors in Contemporary Fiction,” writes about how contemporary fiction writers represent trauma deliberately within socio-political and economic contexts to highlight the narrative. Fiction enables the writer to depict how numerous and multiple are the responses of human beings to one particularly shocking experience. “The various traumatic responses beyond the notion of the unspeakable cultivate the subtleties of experience, which are expressed through behaviors, bodies, provisional identities, and survival strategies” (Vickroy 130). Vickroy discusses that the social milieu is imperative in not only the construction of the traumatic event, but also, how it may or may not figure as a therapeutic or remedial measure. She also comments on how trauma narratives disrupt the traditional linear plot structure keeping in mind the essentially fragmentary and unutterable nature of traumatic memories. Han Kang’s trauma narratives highlight the overwhelmingly brutal nature of the uprising, situating it clearly in the socio-cultural domain of contemporary South Korean history. The complex chronology of the narratives recalls Vickroy’s fragmentation with constant slippages between past and present. In fact, the original Korean title of the novel can be translated as “Here Comes the Boy” or “The Boy is Arriving” – claiming an act forever enshrined in the present, referring to Dong-ho, the boy who threads the narrative and as Yumi Pak explains, “Dong-ho is the ghost in Avery Gordon’s formulation, ‘not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure’...the haunting accompaniment to the material changes occurring in Korea post-1980 and in the lives of the characters” (10). She reads Dong-ho as “as a metonymic of traumatic and traumatized time” (11) and as a symbol of fractured national identity. Kang’s Dong-ho is a fifteen year old middle school student, racked with guilt for

abandoning his best friend in the midst of indiscriminate firing on unarmed civilians and repenting by becoming the caretaker of decomposing corpses, all brutalized to different degrees: “Stab wounds slash down...gaping gashes where the raw flesh shows through. The right side of her skull has completely caved in...and the meat of her brain is visible” (Kang 12). He quietly maintains a death register, lights candles by the ‘silenced corpses’ to ward off “that horrid putrid stink” and wonders “when the body dies, what happens to the soul?” (13). He interrogates the farce of wrapping the corpse in the National Flag and playing the National Anthem “As though it wasn’t the nation itself that had murdered them” (18) – a seemingly hollow way of dignifying the dead, a ritual of erasure, a spectacle that mystifies the true source of violence.

Kang’s harrowing second testimony belongs to that of a tormented soul of another school student, awakened to find his body stacked on a mass grave, biding time and watching flesh and bones slowly disintegrate, “Our bodies are piled on top of each other in the shape of a cross” (50), the heretical distortion of Christianity, and the transformation of the “tower of bodies” into the “corpse of some enormous, fantastical beast, its dozens of legs splayed out beneath it” (52), an image of the fragmentary Frankenstein monster, once again created by ‘human acts’. The beast is symbolic of the monstrous government’s brutal suppression and erasure of basic human rights by building a pyre of human bodies to effectively conceal their atrocities. In one of her interviews, Kang comments, “Violence is part of being human, and how can I accept that I am one of those human beings? That kind of suffering always haunts me” (Lee 64). By making a soul speak so eloquently, Kang’s trauma narrative brings to mind Vickroy’s argument that that storytelling can be a therapeutic and transformative act. In her view, when survivors of trauma narrate their experiences—whether through writing, speaking, or creative forms—they begin the process of “working through” the trauma. For Vickroy, trauma narratives are not just cathartic—

they can help both the individual survivor and wider communities acknowledge, witness, and begin to address the emotional and psychological wounds left by violence or loss. By identifying a mass grave, effectively obliterated from history, Kang's harrowing testimony offers: a reminder of state sponsored brutality and national trauma, an opportunity for further discussions and empathy to all those families whose loved ones went forever missing.

The trauma narrative meanders its way into the third chapter, sectioned into seven slaps delivered "over and over in the exact same spot" by the inquisitor of editor Eun-sook, so hard that "the capillaries laced over her right cheekbone burst, the blood trickling out through her torn skin" (69), her crime – being seen with a translator deemed to be a traitor to the regime. Benumbed and humiliated, Eun-sook "begins the process of forgetting the seven slaps. One per day, then it'll be over and done within a week. Today, then, is that first day" (69). The bruise on her face anchors her to the place of trauma; each slap becomes a form of remembrance and retelling. Her broken bloodied skin, then, is transformed into what the French historian Pierre Nora calls 'a lieu de mémoire' – a tangible reminder, a physical place or object which acts as container of memory. The human body and its visual scars become the physical and symbolic manifestation of the horrors of collective memory of the nation as a whole. Nora writes:

Our interest in lieux de memoire where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn-but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. (7)

Through Eun-sook's attempts to suppress the physical and psychological trauma she has suffered, even as she remains tethered to the memory of Dong-ho and the symbolic weight of his disappearance; the act of forgetting is shown to be intrinsically linked to an enduring

remembrance, and echoes the desperate attempts of similarly traumatized citizens. Nora states, “Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived” (8). The more Eun-sook tries to forget, the more terribly she remembers. Paul Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) discusses forgetting as a positive reinforcement for emotional healing, enabling individuals or societies to move beyond trauma and resentment. However, the premature suppression of memories, can silence trauma and prohibit emotional healing. Eun-sook’s failure in forgetting is in direct contrast to the government’s convenient forgetting: “This forgetfulness, even when methodically controlled by critical history, is equivalent to forgetting the victims. It is then up to the work of recollection to correct this systematic forgetfulness of the victims and to encourage the writing of a history of the victims” (Ricoeur 22).

Ricoeur’s “history of the victims” is what Kang is attempting through her narratives of trauma. The brutal and recurring destruction of the human body is the theme in the next two chapters featuring a political prisoner and a factory girl. Kang’s descriptions of excruciating torture – “That my life had been taken entirely out of my hands, and the only thing I was permitted to do now was to experience pain. Pain so intense I felt sure I was going to lose my mind, so horrific that I literally did lose control of my body...” (111) – lack any element of sentimentality and are laid out as mundane reality, probably to evoke the barbaric limits of cruelty which human beings are capable of – “a uniform brutality...imprinted in our genetic code” (141).

The factory girl, similar to numerous torture survivors, has numbed beyond recognition, the walking dead, just a thin film over the raw, pulsating, eternal wounds: “In the quiet corners of your conscious mind, memories are waiting. What they call forth cannot strictly be called nightmares” (169), “the moment when you are forced to acknowledge that what you experienced was no mere dream” (174). The request to record her “testimony”, “to face up to those memories, to bear witness to them” (174), is an insurmountable task for her. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub emphasize that trauma testimony reveals the “crisis of witnessing” — a paradox where the survivor must attempt to speak about an experience that resists representation. The factory girl quietly seethes:

Is it possible to bear witness to the fact of a thirty centimeter wooden ruler being repeatedly thrust into my vagina, all the way up to the back wall of my uterus? To a rifle butt bludgeoning my cervix? To the fact that, when the bleeding wouldn't stop and I had gone into shock, they had to take me to the hospital for a blood transfusion?...Is it possible to bear witness to the fact that I ended up with a pathological aversion to physical contact...? Is it possible to bear witness to the fact that I ended up despising my own body, the very physical stuff of my self?” (174).

Trauma theorist Geoffrey Hartman's idea of the “after-image” refers to the lingering, intangible chokehold which traumatic memory has on the survivor's self, how it resists any attempt at articulation or representation and yet continues to haunt individual and collective consciousness. “After-image” thus, becomes a symbol for the nonlinear and haunting traumatic memory. It foregrounds the limits of representation, the persistence of the unspeakable, and the ethical demands of witnessing. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena”

(Unclaimed, 11). The concept of trauma in the modern world arises not only from a pathological point of study but also in an understanding of the psyche's relation to its immediate reality.

Cathy Caruth in her essay 'Traumatic Awakenings' describes this idea of modern day trauma:

...trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering, suggests a certain paradox: that the most violent seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it, that immediacy paradoxically may take the form of belatedness. (89)

This sense of belatedness linked with the desire to return to the event for a more comprehensive understanding forms the basis of all trauma narratives. Caruth explains that massive trauma precludes all representation because the ordinary faculties of consciousness and memory are temporarily destroyed as one goes on through the traumatic experiences. Instead what get embedded in the psyche are fragmentary flashes of information which resurface in the form of nightmares and flashbacks. The factor girl "stare (s), mute, at the shapes formed by Seong-hee's mouth. As though your mother tongue has been rendered opaque, a meaningless jumble of sounds" (Kang 178) – trauma creates what Hartman terms 'unspeakability' – the natural human ability to use language coherently is stalled. It is interesting that Kang does not name either the prisoner or the factory girl – through the depiction of their inconceivable trauma and unremitting torture Kang not only highlights the experiences of numerous such survivors, but also bears witness to immeasurable human resilience and courage.

Kang has effectively employed 'bearing witness' theory as a framework for public validation of trauma that can initiate recovery and social change. In "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of

Listening” Dori Laub writes about the indispensability of a listener in constructing the trauma narrative, “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (57). As his self gets embroiled with the experiences of the survivor, he too experiences the “bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels” (58). The listener bears the weight of the victim’s memories and has to “feel the victim’s victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony” (58). Survivor testimonies should not be simply assumed as mere factual recalling; they are crucial for subversion of official historical records and systematic historical erasure. Han Kang’s phenomenal novel bears witness to all those silenced and repressed voices and experiences so as to combat social amnesia by compelling the conveniently forgetful capitalistic society to confront harrowing historical truths. The trauma narratives become essential for preservation of human dignity and memory is a form of resistance against state-sanctioned brutality. To conclude, Kang reclaims narrative as a form of political and existential defiance, allowing identity to emerge not as a fixed entity, but as a continuous act of remembrance and solidarity.

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