Abstract

This research delves into the profound interplay of silence, mourning, and state-sanctioned violence in Han Kang's *Human Acts*, uncovering how the novel transforms local suffering into a resonant global narrative. The book is anchored in the harrowing context of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising. It scrutinizes the brutal suppression of pro-democracy protests in South Korea, shedding light on the systemic violence endured by factory girls and labor union activists who resisted oppression. By exploring key characters such as Dong-ho, a compassionate boy caught in turmoil, and the nameless factory girls whose resilience embodies collective resistance, this study highlights silence as a counter-hegemonic force and mourning as a poignant act of defiance. Positioning *Human Acts* as a seminal work in global human rights literature, the research contends that Kang's vivid portrayal of local atrocities infused with autobiographical depth transcends cultural and geographic divides, urging readers to confront universal imperatives of dignity, grief, and justice. Engaging with contemporary debates on the ethics of representing trauma and the role of literature as a catalyst for empathy and advocacy, this study illuminates the transformative potential of storytelling. It connects local suffering with international human rights discourse, amplifies marginalized voices, and fosters global solidarity.

Keywords: State Violence, Collective Memory, Censorship, Resilience, Literary Mourning, Post-Colonial Narrative

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Han Kang's *Human Acts* (2016) is a searing and incisive literary work that interrogates the profound human toll of political violence, anchored in the historical context of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea. Through its fragmented narrative and polyphonic voices, *Human Acts* offers a multifaceted examination of the enduring consequences of state-sanctioned violence, exploring how individuals and societies navigate the legacies of collective suffering and historical injustice.

Certain memories defy the natural healing process; they refuse to fade away, stubbornly etching themselves deeper into the recesses of our consciousness. The wounds inflicted by historical events, including the anguish of the Gwangju Uprising, remain raw and unhealed in the minds of many. We cannot retrace our steps through a tainted historical past because the world that witnessed unimaginable torture and massacres will always be beyond our grasp. Against this backdrop, Han Kang's literary masterpiece, *Human Acts*, unfolds its intricate narrative. First published in 2014 and translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2016, it serves as a clarion call for remembrance and acknowledgment of the past, haunting the present of the nation and shaping its future.

1.1 The Author's Life and Influence

Han Kang is a revered South Korean literary figure known for stirring and insightful explorations of human suffering and the human condition (Kim, 2021). Born in Gwangju, South Korea, Kang began her career as a writer in the early 1990s, and 2024 Han Kang became the first South Korean author to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Han was cited by

the Nobel Committee “for her intense poetic prose that confronts historical traumas and exposes the fragility of human life.”

The political events in Gwangju during Han’s childhood and her beginnings as a poet inform her fiction writing. Her prose is often described as experimental and imbued with metaphors, and her work addresses such themes as violence, grief, and patriarchy. In an interview with The White Review (2016), she explained, “The broad spectrum of humanity, which runs from the sublime to the brutal, has for me been like a difficult homework problem ever since I was a child. You could say that my books are variations on this theme of human violence”. Han’s work gives voice to the national traumas, but its reach is universal. “What is humanity?” she asks in *Human Acts*. “What do we have to do to keep humanity as one thing and not another?” (Kang, 2016). Her novels are not just the literature of witness, but acts of radical empathy.

The work for which she is best known is *The Vegetarian* (2015), her first novel to be translated into English. This luridly surreal feminist parable about a woman who gives up meat and believes she is turning into a tree was dismissed as “extreme and bizarre” when it was first published in South Korea in 2007. It is extreme and bizarre, brilliantly so. It won her a devoted new readership and the International Booker Prize in 2016. *Human Acts* (2016) is another work, followed by *The White Book* (2017), an autobiographical prose poem on the death of her sister. Then she wrote *Greek Lessons*, (2023), a spellbinding story of a teacher who is going blind and a woman who has lost the ability to speak.

Now she has returned to the political violence of *Human Acts* to write what she describes as its pair. “It’s not like I decided: ‘OK, I’m going to deal with another massacre,’” Han says of *We Do Not Part* (2021), set during that terrible winter of 1948 when one-tenth of Jeju Island’s population was killed in three months. For Han, writing is

suffering. “When I write, I use my body,” she says in her Nobel lecture (The Nobel Prize. Org, 2024).

1.2 Research Questions:

The main purpose of the writing is to address the following questions:

1. How does the novel depict South Korea’s authoritarianism as a continuation of colonial power structures?

2. How are silence, mourning, and trauma utilized as literary tools to critique authoritarianism and evoke global resonance from a localized experience of violence?

1.3 Literature Review

I'll discuss the contributions of many scholars who have significantly impacted my research. Han Kang’s *Human Acts* stands as a robust literary response to the enduring trauma of state violence, local suffering, silence, and mourning, rooted in the historical tragedy of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea. The novel’s fragmented structure, poetic language, and shifting perspectives give voice to the silenced dead and grieving survivors, transforming localized violence into a universally resonant cry for justice and remembrance. This thematic depth invites an interdisciplinary literary and political analysis through comparative perspectives, including sociopolitical histories, memory studies, and world literature.

The political backdrop of *Human Acts* is anchored in the historic Gwangju Uprising of May 1980, which scholars like Park (2008) and Yun (1997) have identified as a pivotal point in South Korea’s democratic movement. Park’s “Democracy and Social Change: A History of South Korean Student Movements, 1980–2000” examines how student activism over twenty years (1980–2000) shaped South Korea’s political transition, a context deeply embedded in Kang’s portrayal of youth-led resistance and martyrdom. Yun’s 1997 study, “Democratization in South Korea: Social Movements and Their

Political Opportunity Structures", focuses on the 1980s and early 1990s, analyzing how political conditions influenced collective action and the rise of grassroots movements.

Critics like E. Tammy Kim (2016) in "The New Yorker" emphasize how *Human Acts* captures not just the historical record, but the deep psychology. Scholars like Elaine Kim (2018) argue that *Human Acts* contributes meaningfully to transnational narratives of justice, memory, and human dignity, bridging local memory with the global ethical imprint of state violence on individual and collective memory.

"*Atonement and Violence: A Theological Conversation*" edited by John Sanders (2006) also provides a relevant lens to view Han Kang's narrative. The book explores the relationship between violence and the human desire for justice, forgiveness, and redemption. It argues that responses to violence should not simply repeat cycles of revenge or punishment.

Yumi Pak's essay "From Gwangju to Brixton: The Impossible Translation of Han Kang's *Human Acts*" (2020) adds another important dimension to the discussion. Pak explores the challenges of translating a deeply national and historical trauma like Gwangju into a global context. She argues that while translation opens a pathway for international readership, it also risks losing the cultural specificity and political urgency of the original story. Pak's analysis highlights how global readers might engage with the novel in ways shaped by their own political and historical backgrounds, making the novel's meaning fluid yet deeply powerful across cultures.

Another significant contribution to the critical discourse on Human Acts comes from the article "Ghosts of Gwangju: Affective Resistance and Necropolitics in Han Kang's *Human Acts"*, published in the Journal of Historical Studies, (2023, pp. 96–115). This study explores the novel through the lens of necropolitics—the power of the state to

decide who lives and who dies—as theorized by Achille Mbembe. It highlights how Han Kang's portrayal of lingering trauma and spectral presence becomes a form of affective resistance, where the dead continue to confront and disrupt the political authority that tried to silence them. The article argues that the haunting memories and emotional weight carried by the characters are not just signs of suffering but powerful tools of protest against state violence and historical erasure.

Lewis's "Laying Claim to the Memory of May" (2002) and Lee's doctoral work "The Gwangju Uprising: A Movement, A Memory, A Myth of Modern South Korea" (2012) emphasize the contested memorization of Gwangju and the tension between state-sanctioned erasure and the survivors' struggle to remember. Kang's novel resonates with these analyses as it constructs a literary archive of memory through the voices of the dead, those left behind, and the broken bodies that resist being forgotten.

Daniel Y. Kim, in his essay "Translations and Ghosting of History: The Novels of Han Kang" (2020), explores how *Human Acts* re-imagines national trauma through what he calls "ghosted history." He argues that Han Kang's novel does not simply recount historical events but evokes their lingering emotional and ethical presence. Kim also emphasizes how translation carries the weight of representing this haunting history to a global audience, making the novel not just a literary work, but a powerful reminder of what official records often erase.

Katsiaficas and Na's "South Korean Democracy: Legacy of the Gwangju Uprising" (2006) argues that the uprising was not an isolated tragedy but a formative event that shaped a national democratic consciousness. Han Kang's narrative, too, transforms individual death into a symbol of collective awakening, portraying mourning as a political process.

Furthermore, the idea of grief as resistance is further expanded in Shin and Hwang's "*Contentious Kwangju*"(2003) , where the uprising is analyzed not only in historical terms but also as a continuously reinterpreted event in public consciousness. Similarly, "South Korean Social Movements: From Democracy to Civil Society "by Shin and Chang (2013) documents the evolution of protest culture and memory politics in Korea, adding to the understanding of how *Human Acts* reflects a broader shift from revolutionary fervor to mourning as a mode of civil discourse.

In addition to historical and political analyses, *Human Acts* invites philosophical and literary comparisons. Kim's (2021) article on "speculative natural histories" positions Kang's work beyond the conventional human rights framework, suggesting that her portrayal of trauma embraces post-human and ecological dimensions.

The film *Sopyonje* (1993), restored and uploaded by Korean Classic Film (2019), echoes themes central to *Human Acts*—particularly the embodiment of *han* through traditional art. The protagonist's expression of sorrow through pansori, a Korean musical storytelling form, mirrors how grief and suffering in Kang's novel are articulated not through direct speech, but through silence, memory, and artistic resonance. Like Kang's prose, *Sopyonje* transforms pain into cultural memory, emphasizing endurance over resolution.

Hyon-U Lee (2011), in "Shamanism in Korean '*Hamlets'* since 1990: Exorcising Han", explores how shamanic rituals in Korean theatre serve as a means to release collective grief and han. This idea parallels *Human Acts*, where mourning and memory become ritualistic acts of resistance. Just as shamanism gives voice to silenced pain, Kang's narrative allows the dead and the grieving to speak through fragmented stories and silence, turning private sorrow into collective remembrance.

Additionally, Han Kang's *The White Book* (2019) complements *Human Acts* thematically, further exploring the aesthetics of grief, absence, and vulnerability. This companion piece underscores the recurring motif in Kang's oeuvre: the subtle transformation of private mourning into a universal meditation on fragility and remembrance. The sparseness of language, the emphasis on white as a color of both purity and mourning and the minimalism of narrative structure reflect her commitment to portraying suffering not through spectacle but through silence.

In an interview with Claire Armitstead (2016), Han Kang described the emotional toll of writing *Human Acts*, stating, "I'm a person who feels pain when you throw the meat on a fire", highlighting her visceral sensitivity to violence and suffering. She admitted that "writing about a massacre was a struggle", underscoring the emotional and psychological cost of confronting South Korea's violent history through fiction. Her words reflect the novel's emotional core—where silence, trauma, and mourning are not just narrative devices but deeply personal experiences.

Similarly, in an interview titled *"*Controversy over May 18 in Textbooks: An Attempt to Turn Back Time" (Interview 365, November 14, 2011), Yoon Bo-Mi critiques the political efforts to distort or erase the memory of the Gwangju Uprising from educational narratives. This aligns closely with Han Kang's *Human Acts*, which serves as a counter-memory to such historical revisionism, preserving the voices of the oppressed and the silenced through literature.

Paige Danielle Bryan in his research "Evolution of Student Movements in South Korea and their Impact on the Formation of Korean Democracy" (Spring 5-18-2019), traces how student activism played a pivotal role in challenging authoritarian regimes and shaping South Korea's democratic trajectory. She emphasizes how these grassroots

movements confronted state oppression, becoming catalysts for broader political change and contributing to the collective memory of resistance.

Sunil Kim and Jonson N. Porteux in "Adapting Violence for State Survival and Legitimacy: The Resilience and Dynamism of Political Repression in a Democratizing South Korea" (2019), analyze how state violence in South Korea evolved as a tool not only for suppressing dissent but also for legitimizing state authority. They argue that even amid democratization, political repression remained adaptable and persistent, reflecting the state's strategic use of coercion to maintain control and narrative dominance.

Kerstin Norris in her article *"*From Colonialism to Neocolonialism: The Yongsan Exchange" (2021), examines the lingering effects of colonial and neocolonialism power structures in South Korea, particularly through the lens of U.S. military presence and economic influence. The study highlights how these dynamics continue to shape Korea's sociopolitical landscape, reinforcing systemic inequalities and external dependencies—offering crucial insights into postcolonial continuities in the Korean context.

A real-life testimony published in the "Hangyoreh newspaper" on February 24, 1989, captures the same shock expressed in *Human Acts:* "We couldn't believe our own soldiers were aiming rifles at us. We thought, 'They must be blanks. They're our army.'" This statement reflects the deep betrayal felt by civilians, mirroring Han Kang's fictional portrayal of disbelief and trauma at being attacked by state forces.

1.4 Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, descriptive approach grounded in literary textual analysis, using Han Kang's *Human Acts* as the primary text. Framed by postcolonial theory, the study critically examines how the novel interrogates enduring structures of imperialism, internal colonialism, state authoritarianism, and systemic silencing within the sociopolitical context of South Korea.

Through close reading, this analysis examines the novel's narrative structure, thematic significance, character socialization, and symbolic motifs. Special attention is given to the literary representation of trauma, memory, and resistance, particularly in how form and language articulate critiques of state violence, enforced amnesia, and historical erasure. The postcolonial lens situates the text within Korea's historical continuum, tracing the legacies of Japanese colonialism, Cold War neocolonialism under U.S. influence, and subsequent authoritarian regimes. The Gwangju Uprising is thus analyzed not merely as a national crisis but as a pivotal moment in broader discourses on sovereignty, subaltern agency, and contested memory politics.

1.5 Theoretical Frame work

Postcolonial theory is a literary theory or critical approach that deals with literature produced in countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries. It may also deal with literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that takes colonies or their peoples as its subject matter. The theory is based around concepts of otherness and resistance.Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2002)from *The Empire Writes Back* defines it as:

> We use the term 'post-colonial', however, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day.

> This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression. We also suggest that it is most appropriate as the term for the new cross-cultural criticism which has emerged in recent years and for the discourse through which this is constituted. In this sense this book is concerned with the world as it exists during and after the period of European imperial domination and the effects of this on contemporary literatures.(2)

Typically, proponents of postcolonial theory examine how writers from colonized countries attempt to articulate and reclaim their cultural identities, often celebrating these identities as a form of resistance against colonial domination. They also analyze how the literature of colonial powers has historically been used to justify colonialism by perpetuating images of the colonized as inferior or subhuman. However, attempts to define postcolonial theory in a singular, unified way have proved controversial, with some scholars and writers strongly critiquing the concept for its limitations and inconsistencies.

Postcolonial theory, as articulated by thinkers such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, interrogates the enduring impacts of colonial domination, cultural hegemony, and the struggle of marginalized voices to assert agency and truth in the aftermath of imperialist suppression. In the context of South Korea, this framework is essential for analyzing the nation's trajectory from Japanese colonial rule to Cold War-aligned authoritarianism, where post-liberation identity and sovereignty were complicated by neocolonial dependencies and internal repression. Han Kang's *Human Acts* engages with this discourse by offering a literary meditation on memory, trauma, and resistance in the wake of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising—a moment emblematic of Korea's postcolonial suffering. The novel reveals how state violence and silencing serve as

instruments of historical control, thereby aligning itself with postcolonial critiques of structural domination and erasure.

The theoretical arguments presented reflect the case of Korea, a representative example of a consolidated electoral democracy with high state capacity. Historically, the political violence that occurred following Korea's independence from Japanese colonial rule aligns with the weak state explanation. The government exhibited deficiencies in coercive capacity, political legitimacy, and infrastructural power, leading it to resort to the crude mobilization of private violence to advance its political agendas. After three years of war (1950–1953), the nascent state-building process was nearly complete, and the newly established military regime utilized economic and social development as its primary justification for existence. Consequently, repression—sacrificing civil liberties in the name of modernization and industrialization—became the political norm. This repressive modernization thesis has served as the dominant explanation for the persistence of violent state-society interactions in Korea.

The narrative of *Human Acts* resists linear historiography and state-sanctioned narratives, instead presenting fragmented voices of the deceased, the grieving, and the witnesses. Through this polyphonic storytelling, Han Kang crafts a counter-history that underscores the human cost of authoritarian consolidation. Drawing on the seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" Gayatri C. Spivak asserts that "the subaltern cannot speak." The novel *Human Acts* also explores the silencing of ordinary citizens who are relegated to footnotes in official discourse. The strategic repression employed by the Korean state, as outlined in historical accounts of political violence, serves as the mechanism through which postcolonial anxieties are manifested. The involvement of NGOs, paramilitary forces, and state-sanctioned demolition gangs, as observed in the Korean political landscape, is reflected in the violence depicted in the novel, particularly in the

brutalization of student protesters and civilians. These actions are not isolated incidents but rather expressions of a postcolonial state striving to secure its legitimacy through violence and fear.

Han Kang's literary technique of bodily fragmentation and silence, evident in the recurring motifs of corpses, speechlessness, and disrupted narratives, reflects Homi Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely" (*The Location of Culture*), which describes the feeling of estrangement within one's nation. The characters find themselves caught between mourning and survival, memory and forgetting, underscoring the novel's postcolonial focus on psychological and spatial dislocation. The state not only inflicts physical violence but also colonizes memory, demanding silence as a condition for civic order. This aligns with the history of the South Korean state in repressing dissent through both overt brutality and bureaucratic control, including the purging of opposition figures and the enactment of censorship to maintain the illusion of national unity and progress.

The theory of post-colonialism provides a critical framework for understanding how it transforms local suffering into a globally resonant literary intervention. The novel universalizes the trauma of Gwangju without diminishing its specificity, revealing how authoritarian regimes worldwide employ similar techniques of coercion and erasure under the guise of modernization and national security. The persistence of ghosts in the novel—both literal and metaphorical—demands acknowledgment of a past that has been systematically denied. Edward Said's emphasis on cultural resistance and the reclamation of narrative space is particularly relevant in this context (*Culture and Imperialism*), as Han Kang's novel serves as a site of memory work, reclaiming silenced histories through the aesthetics of grief and resistance.

By situating Han Kang's work within a postcolonial framework, this research highlights how literature serves as a form of resistance against hegemonic amnesia. The

Korean experience is not an anomaly; rather, it is part of a broader postcolonial condition in which the aftershocks of colonialism influence governance, memory, and identity. The state's evolution from a weak apparatus in the post-independence era to a militarized, development-obsessed regime reflects the struggles faced by other postcolonial nations grappling with internal colonialism. The novel critiques this transformation by exposing the ethical failures inherent in the nation-building project that prioritizes economic growth over human dignity.

1.6 Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1

This chapter explores how colonial legacies from Japanese imperialism echo through South Korea's authoritarian regimes. The brutality and censorship seen during the 1980 Gwangju Uprising mirror colonial tactics once used to suppress Korean identity. Students become symbols of resistance, recalling past independence movements, yet are violently silenced by the state. Labor unions, too, face repression, revealing how economic exploitation persists from colonial to postcolonial rule. The novel presents prisoners not as criminals but as truth-tellers punished for defiance. Censorship serves to erase history, silencing collective memory—the voices of the dead challenge this silence, reclaiming narrative power. Han Kang's fragmented storytelling resists the state's attempt to control memory. The novel links colonial violence to modern state oppression, showing how trauma is inherited. In doing so, it mourns both the loss of lives and the loss of truth.

Chapter 2

This chapter explores Kang weaves autobiographical elements into the collective memory of Gwangju, especially in the epilogue. The editor's character reflects the long-term psychological damage inflicted by the uprising, haunted by the violence she witnessed and the guilt of survival. Han Kang, like the editor, carries the inherited trauma, recalling how her own family was affected. The novel explores how those left behind—like the boy's mother—endure prolonged suffering, becoming living memorials of loss. Her quiet grief embodies the pain of a silenced nation. Testimony in the novel is fragmented, marked by hesitations, silences, and unbearable truths. Trauma reshapes memory, making linear storytelling impossible. Han Kang's writing becomes a form of resistance, preserving voices that were meant to disappear. The chapter reveals how both individual and collective identities are wounded by state violence. Through testimony, the dead speak, and the living are forced to remember.

Chapter 2

Colonial Shadows in Authoritarian Violence

This chapter provides a reflective exploration of the deep-seated origins of state violence observed during the Gwangju Uprising, linking it to Korea's colonial and authoritarian history. It does not limit the discussion of violence to the events of 1980 but places it within a larger context of oppression that begins with Japanese imperialism and continues through the authoritarian regimes that followed liberation. By intertwining personal loss with systemic violence, Kang illustrates how colonial methods of control- such as surveillance, censorship, and militarized discipline-were adapted by Korean leaders like Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan to uphold national order at the cost of civil liberties. The establishment of violence through state-backed forces and private militias demonstrates how power evolved with changing political landscapes while maintaining its oppressive nature. Student protesters, often seen as symbols of resistance and hope for democracy, play a crucial role in this chapter, emphasizing the ongoing generational fight against systemic suppression. The lingering effects of colonialism are not just a theme but are woven into the fabric of memory and testimony. The shift from colonial oppression to authoritarian rule is portrayed as a continuum rather than a break, challenging oversimplified views of liberation. Through this perspective, the chapter examines how political violence transforms rather than disappears in the process of state-building, leaving a lasting impact on both collective identity and individual experiences. Han Kang's *Human Acts* defines the root cause of violence in chapter four, "The Prisoner, 1990":

> Is it true that human beings are fundamentally cruel? Is the experience of cruelty the only thing we share as a species? Is the dignity that we cling to nothing but self-delusion, masking from ourselves this single truth: that each one of us is capable of being reduced to an insect, a ravening beast, a lump of meat? To be degraded, damaged, slaughtered—is this the essential fate of humankind, one that history has confirmed as inevitable? (106).

Political violence is recognized as a critical element of state building, for which state-based supremacy in coercion is of paramount concern. A seminal work by Kathleen Malley Morrison, *State Violence and the Right to Peace* presents a historical account of South Korea as:

> Korea became a unified and independent country in 936 CE (the Koryo dynasty) and maintained its independence into the 20th century. Although Korea proclaimed its neutrality before the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese war in 1904–1905 (during the Chosun dynasty), the U.S. president, Theodore Roosevelt, encouraged the Japanese to take control of Korea while also accepting the U.S. Open Door Policy in China. In 1910, Korea was formally annexed by Japan. (186)

The Korean case leads us to challenge conventional views that systemic political violence disappears as a state's capacity increases, or the withering-away perspective. We also refute the popular understanding that political violence is no more than the state's direct manipulation of physical forces in society, as seen in cases of political assassinations, electoral violence, or the militarization of the state apparatus. Instead, we

argue that political violence has evolved according to the changing socio-political environment and the varying roles of the state.

In Korea, the state's explicit mobilization of street gangsters to suppress opponents at the early stage of state building in the 1950s transformed first into collaboration with criminal organizations in the 1960s and 1970s and then into manipulation of quasi-governmental organizations since the late 1980s.

The authoritarian regimes in Korea were started in 1948 under President Rhee Syngman which lasted for twelve years. Then, Park Chung Hee continued for eighteen years before finally died in October 1979. The death of Park Chung Hee marked the end of his era. Chun Doo Hwan continued to be the next president of the Republic of Korea for seven years. In the transition period between Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan presidency, a big demonstration happened. Unfortunately, the demonstration followed with a chaos or riot in May 1980. Kang explains the dilemma, When President Park was assassinated that October, you asked yourself:

> Now the peak has been lopped off, will the whole pyramid of violence collapse? Will it no longer be possible to arrest screaming, naked factory girls? Will it no longer be permissible to stamp on them and burst their intestines? Through the newspapers, you witnessed the seemingly inexorable rise of Chun Doo hwan, the young general who had been the former president's favorite. You could practically see him in your mind's eye, riding into Seoul on a tank as in a Roman triumph, swiftly appropriating the highest position in the central government. Goose bumps rose on your arms and neck. "Frightening things are going to happen".(124)

The focus on South Korea is specific to its long running history of protest in addition to its transition from soft authoritarianism to formal authoritarianism then finally to democracy. The multiple regime changes allow for better tracking of how each generation of students interacts with the government as none of the presidencies were alike. The potential insights that arise from this thesis is the widespread use of state repression during Park and Chun dictatorships to suppress college students and the evolutionary aspect of the continued protest from democracy.

Kang explains the situation through a situation that shows the horror at that time, “The chief justice will be here any moment now. If there’s so much as a squeak from any of you, you’ll be shot in your seat, got it? You just keep your head down and your mouhths shut until it’s over. Understant?” (Kang 98). This highlights how military forces silenced the voices that were raising against them.

The Gwangju Uprising through a character’s perspective :

> In 1980 I was twenty-two, and I’d just gone back to university after completing my military service. I was planning om getting a job as a primary school teacher after I graduate, and maybe that was why they chose me to be our militia’s leader that night- because I was a little bit older and had a steady head on my shoulders. For the most part, those who’d stayed behind in the Provincial Office were an unruly lot, and there wasn’t much in the way of discipline going around. More like a mob than an organized militia.The majority were still in their teens. There was even one kid, who went to evening classes after his job, who just wouldn’t be convinced that, even if he loaded his gun and pulled the trigger, a bullet would actually come out. (90)

In the past five years, the world has seen an increase in youth activism ranging from climate change, gun violence, national politics, and sustainability. The motivation from students, both college-aged and in high school, to change the nature of politics and social change has re imagined the scope of generational involvement. South Korea has experienced decades of mass protests to express outrage at the government with the key to these mass protests being its relationship to college-aged students.

Han Kan in *Human Acts* uses the characters of students to describe the state violence against student protesters as she writes :

> "Can I help you?" the women in the school uniform asked, pulling her mask down below her mouth as she turned to face you. Her round eyes were her best feature, though ever-so-slightly protruding, and her hair was divided into two braids, from which a mass of short, fizzy hairs were escaping. Damp with sweat, her hair was plastered to her forehead and temples. (13)

Kang explained the factor that triggered the uprising and inspired the students in this manner:

> It wasn't as though we didn't know how overwhelmingly the army outnumbered us. But the strange thing was, it didn't matter. Ever since the uprising began, I'd felt something coursing through me, as overwhelming as any army.
>
> Conscience
>
> Conscience, the most most terrifying thing in the world.(91)

South Korea has experienced a similar level of student-led change on the national scale. Within the country exists a strong protest culture that dates back to the Korean monarchy of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897) through Japanese Imperialism. This history of protesting has made the act of protesting itself benign and factor that many political theorist believe is not enviable. The desire to use public dissidence rather than democratic channels of voting shows a breakdown in the system. Yet Kang explains the condition of innocent students as:

> No, none of us fired our guns.
> None of us killed anybody.
> Even when the soldiers stormed up the stairs and emerged toward us out of the darkness, none of our group fired guns. It was impossible for them to pull the trigger knowing that a person would die if they did so. They were children. We had handed our guns to children. Guns they were not capable of firing.(94)

Looking at each decade after liberation from Japanese imperialism, this thesis seeks to make the claim that student-led protests forced the South Korean government to acknowledge the demands for democracy while opening avenues for other forms of social movements to take root in the nation. Kang in the first chapter " The Boy, 1998" explains through the character Dong Ho as he witnessed the arm forces killing the locals, "Why would you sing the national anthem for people who'd been killed by soldiers? Why cover the coffin with the Taegukgi? As though it wasn't the nation itself that had murdered them."(16)

This study draws on the case of Korea, a consolidated electoral democracy with strong state capacity, to illustrate key institutional dynamics. Historically, political

violence after Korea's independence from Japanese colonial rule largely fit the weak state explanation. The government was weak in terms of coercive capacity, political legitimacy, and infrastructural power, and thus it resorted to the crude mobilization of private violence for political agendas. After three years of war (1950–1953), the nascent state-building process was nearly complete, and the newly established military regime used economic and social development as its legitimizing reason of being. Therefore, repression – sacrificing civil liberties – in the name of modernization and industrialization became the political norm.

Dong-Ho inner monologue appears to criticize the military power, "But the generals are rebels, they seized power unlawfully. You must have seen it: people being beaten and stabbed in broad daylight, and even shot. The ordinary soldiers were following the orders of their superiors. Hoe can you call them the nation".(Kang, 17)

The unnamed narrator of the fourth chapter, "The Prisoner, 1990," was part of the militia that armed itself with the intentions of making a last stand against the army assault. In the end they found themselves unable to shoot at their countrymen and surrendered without firing a shot. The narrator recalls how they were taken prisoner by a unit of soldiers under the command of the man who shot and killed Dong-ho. The narrator recalls, " we had to sit on the floor of cell for hours at a time, shoulders and back ramrod straight. Eyes front, too, directly at the window" (Kang, 86). Furthermore, the narrator explains the torture inflicted upon them:

> Rather than brutal beatings, our captors now chose more elaborate methods of inflicting pain, methods that would not be too physically taxing for them. "Hairpin torture," where both arms were tied behind the back and a large piece of wood inserted between the bound wrists and the small of the back; waterboarding; electric torture; the method known as the

> "roast chicken," which involved trussing the victim with ropes and suspending them from the ceiling, where they were then beaten while being spun around. Before, they'd tortured us in order to extract the particulars of actual crimes. Now, all they wanted was a false confession, so that our names could be slotted neatly into the script they had already devised.(95)

In chapter five "The Factory Girl, 2002" Kang explains the working conditions of labour from a character's story:

> The work you did as a teenager, though, was different.Those were fiteen-hour days with only two days off per month. "Weekends" were nonexistent.The wages were half of what the men got paid for the same work, and there was no overtime pay. You took pills to keep you awake, but exhaustion still battered you like a wave. The swelling of your calves and feet as morning wore into afternoon. The guards who insisted on body-searching the female workers every night before they went home. Those hands, which used to linger when they touched your bra. The shame. Hacking coughs. Nosebleeds. Headaches. Clumps of what looked like black threads in the phlegm you hacked up.
>
> We are noble.(121)

Human Acts connects this legacy—which Koreans themselves were only beginning to confront at the turn of the millennium with the end of the military dictatorship era—with the events that took place in Gwangju. It also highlights the essentially mercenary dimensions of South Korean involvement in the Vietnam War when the unnamed narrator of chapter four, Jin-su's friend, offers this anecdote: "I once

met someone who was a paratrooper during the Busan uprising. He told me his story after hearing my own. He said that they'd been ordered to suppress the civilians with as much violence as possible, and those who committed especially brutal actions were awarded hundreds of thousands of won by their superiors. One of his company had said, 'What's the problem? They give you money and tell you to beat someone up, then why wouldn't you?'" (Kang, 106). This anecdote leads him to another, which again highlights this economic dimension:

> I heard a story about one of the Korean army platoons that fought in Vietnam. How they forced the women, children, and elderly of one particular village into the main hall, and then burned it to the ground. Some of those who came to slaughter us did so with the memory of those previous times, when committing such actions in wartime had won them a handsome reward. It happened in Gwangju just as it did on Jeju Island, in Kwantung and Nanjing, in Bosnia, and all across the American continent when it was still known as the New World, with such a uniform brutality it's as though it is imprinted in our genetic code. (107).

The source of the "handsome reward" that South Korean soldiers received for such actions was, ultimately, the US. Whatever else it was, the Vietnam War was a US war, and fighting it entailed the participation of soldiers from other Asian countries, for which authoritarian leaders like Park Chung-hee, whose implementation of martial law had engendered the protests at Gwangju were amply compensated.

Rebellions in Gwangju occur for approximately ten days. Rebellion occurred from May 18 to May 27. The bloody rebellion took many victims. Citizens died from gunfire given by the army and some of them also died because of blows given by the army. The

inner monologue of a character from chapter two “The Boy’s Friend, 1980” states,” our soldiers are shooting. They’re shooting at us”.This bloody and harmful event is narrated like this:

> On one occasion, the bodies of ten people they’d just piled up seemed to be missing their heads. At first I thought they’d been decapitated; then I realized that, in fact, their faces had been covered in white paint, erased. I swiftly shrank back. Necks tipped back, those dazzlingly white faces were angled toward the thicket. Staring out into the empty air, their features a perfect blank. (49)

During Gwangju Uprising, there were many parties involved in the rebellion. One of the parties involved in the rebellion is a student. Some of the students who carried out the rebellion often died from fighting the army, but not a few of them became prisoners to be jailed and sentenced. The same thing also happens in the novel. It is narrated like this:

> What I heard was that the soldiers made him get his penis out and rest it on the table, threatening to cane it with a wooden ruler. Apparently, they made him strip and took him out to the patch of grass in front of the guardhouse, where did they tied his arms behind his back and made him lie down on his stomach. The ants nibbled at his genitals for three hours.(88).

The labor member was one of the many parties involved in the rebellion. Some of them died not because of army casualties but depression with what they had been through. Kang explains the brutality faced by union labors for protesting :

> But the men dragged them down to the dirt floor. Gravel scraped bare flesh, drawing blood. Hair became tangled, underwear torn. "*You mustn't, you mustn't arrest us"*. Between these ear-splitting cries, the sound of square cudgels slamming into unprotected bodies, of men bundling girls into riot vans. (123)

Furthermore, from the story telling technique Kang put forward the horrors of resistance :

> Yoon has asked you to remember. To "face up to those memories," to "bear witness to them." But how can such a thing be possible? Is it possible to bear witness to the fact of a foot-long 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? (131)

In conclusion, Kang powerfully unravels the continuity of political violence in South Korea, tracing its roots from Japanese colonial rule through successive authoritarian regimes. By focusing on the Gwangju Uprising and the brutal suppression of student protests, Kang highlights how state power sustains itself through systemic violence, silencing dissent to maintain control. The novel interweaves personal trauma with collective history, illustrating how violence is institutionalized through militarized policing, censorship, and torture, yet is internalized by those forced to endure it. Characters such as Dong-ho, the prisoner, and the factory girl provide deeply human perspectives on national suffering, while the recurring theme of conscience underscores a resistance that transcends mere physical power. Kang's narrative challenges the notion that democratization erases past brutality; instead, it reveals how the legacy of repression

continues to shape identity, memory, and justice in contemporary Korea. Ultimately, the novel demands that history be remembered not only as a collection of facts but also through the scars it leaves behind.

Chapter 3

Trauma and Testimony

This chapter examines how Han Kang's *Human Acts* navigates the intersection of trauma and testimony, focusing on characters like Kim Eun-sook; the editor, Dong-ho's mother, and the writer herself. The characters, shaped by the aftermath of state violence, struggle with the articulation of their grief, revealing the complexities of testimony in the wake of unspeakable trauma. The Editor's fragmented written testimonies and the Mother's silent mourning reflect not only the inaccessibility of language in the face of trauma but also the cultural mechanisms of remembering, such as shamanistic rituals, which emerge as attempts to reconnect with the dead. Similarly, the slaps—moments of physical and emotional violence—become a manifestation of the rupture between the living and the dead, forcing characters to confront the limits of mourning. The Epilogue, told from the writer's own perspective decades later, deepens the narrative of testimony, revealing how the act of writing becomes a form of witnessing and moral remembrance. This chapter argues that, through these struggles, Kang articulates the necessity of testimony as a form of resistance against state violence and historical erasure, thus contributing to the global resonance of local suffering. By weaving together personal grief and collective memory. Therefore, this chapter situates Human Acts within the broader postcolonial discourse on the trauma, silence, and the moral imperative of witnessing.

There is much to say about the relatively short but still ambitious and labyrinthine novel. For one thing, it makes inventive and varied use of a second-person address in several chapters, implicating protagonists and readers in varying ways. The epilogue in which Han steps forward, as it were, to reveal how the massacre at Gwangju shaped her childhood and early adulthood, and how grappling with its troubling significance

ultimately led her to produce a novel about it. “I was nine years old at the time of the Gwangju Uprising”(153). Kang delves into the enduring impact of trauma and the complexities of bearing witness. She reflects on how, even decades later, the memories of the Gwangju Uprising remain vivid and haunting. She recalls, “It was because of the dreams”(160).

> In one dream I was being chased by a gang of soldiers. My breathing grew ragged as they gained on me. One of them shoved me in the back and knocked me onto my front. As soon as I rolled over and looked up at my attacker, he thrust his bayonet into my chest, smack bang into my solar plexus. At two o’clock in the morning I jerked awake, sat bolt upright, and placed my hand on my breastbone. I spent the next five minutes struggling to breathe. When I passed my hand over my face my palm came away glistening; I hadn’t even been aware that I was crying.(160)

Furthermore, it illustrates how trauma can remain dormant yet ever-present, poised to resurface unexpectedly. This lingering pain complicates the act of bearing witness, as she confesses:

> I find myself standing alone at the intersection by Gwanghwamun Station. The vast streets are deserted. Of course, because it’s only the time that changes. And I’m in Seoul, not Gwangju. I’d set the date to May so it ought to be spring, yet the streets were as cold and desolate as certain days in November. Frighteningly still.(161)

The novel powerfully expresses the hesitation and guilt that often accompany attempts to testify to collective suffering. Yet, despite these doubts, the imperative to

remember persists, and ultimately, Han reveals how literature itself becomes a space for both resistance and remembrance.

> She would have agreed to meet you without a second's thought. She would have sat you down and made you listen to Dong-ho's story all the way through to the end. You wouldn't have been able to stop her if you'd tried. She lived thirty years with those words inside her. But I'm not like her, I can't dredge the past up again the way she would have.
>
> Permission? Yes, you have my permission, but only if you do it properly. Please, write your book so that no one will ever be able to desecrate my brother's memory again.(166)

Kang captures the inexplicable yet resolute will of survivors to remain amid chaos, as reflected in their shared response to why they stayed, "When asked why they stayed behind when they knew they were staring defeat in the face, the surviving witnesses all gave the same answer: I'm not sure. It just seemed like something we had to do".(168)

In doing so, the epilogue offers a meta-testimony—an act of bearing witness not just through content but through the very form of storytelling—emphasizing that literature remains one of the few avenues through which the silenced can speak and the wounded can be heard.

This research chapter also focuses on the chapter, titled "The Editor, 1985," in which a third-person narrator recounts how the quotidian routines of its titular character are punctuated by the workings of a police state that has only become more intrusive in the five years since the massacre. Eun-sook, was a high school senior when the demonstrations began. She is drawn into the uprising after participating in a blood drive for injured soldiers. During this time, she works with Dong-ho, a fifteen-year-old middle

school student who is the novel's central protagonist, in a gymnasium that had served as a makeshift morgue where the corpses of those killed by soldiers were collected, cleaned up, identified when possible, and given improvised funereal rites. Dong-ho is killed by soldiers in a final assault on the protesters, and Eun-sook herself survives.

The events she experienced at Gwangju—and particularly the brutalized bodies she cares for—seem to engender her vegetarianism. The narrator's account of her revulsion for meat, which actually centers on the cooking of it, suggests how that process recalls for her what had been done to human bodies at Gwangju:

> It wasn't so much eating meat that Eun-sook disliked; what really turned her stomach was watching it cook on the hot plate. When the blood and juices rose to the surface, she had to look away. When a fish was being griddled with the head still attached. That moment when moisture formed on the frozen eyeballs as they thawed in the pan, when a watery fluid flecked with gray scum dribbled out of its gaping mouth, that moment when it always seemed to her as though the dead fish was trying to say something. She always had to avert her eyes. (59)

Here we see an elaboration of the suggestion that Han had made in the interview : "I wonder if my thoughts about vegetarianism, my guilt towards eating meat, might be connected to the Gwangju Massacre I experienced indirectly as a child"(KOREAN LITERATURE NOW, 2016). Moreover, a fountain, as I will explain momentarily, emerges as a focal point of Eun-sook's memories of that event and its aftermath. When the third chapter begins, Eun-sook has just been interrogated by the authorities, who are seeking the whereabouts of a translator with whom she had worked. The book he translated was

> A nonfiction treatise examining the psychology of crowds. The author hailed from the UK, and most of the examples she had selected were from modern European history. The French Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War. The translator had himself elected not to include the chapter on the 1968 student movement, believing that it would only serve to jeopardize the rest of the book in the eyes of the censors. He'd still translated this chapter, though, for inclusion in a full and revised edition at some point in the future.(76)

While the attention of the authorities apparently stems from the potential resonances of the study's central thesis—that crowds can either amplify "the courage and altruism"(76) of the individuals comprising it or intensify their "barbarism" (77)—their more pointed concern is with locating its translator, whom they regard as a threat. Because she is known to have met with him recently, Eun-sook is brought in, questioned about his whereabouts, threatened with death, and slapped several times, hard enough to leave her face bruised and swollen so, the chapter proceeds accordingly in sections titled "Slap One," "Slap Two," and so forth. What Eun-sook comes to realize over the course of this chapter, however, is how the past five years of her life have already been shaped by a desire to forget troubling past events.

Thematically this chapter's concern is with what lies beneath the veneer of normalcy that characterizes everyday life in the years after the massacre—how most ordinary citizens go about their business without seeming to acknowledge the violence that has taken place at Gwangju and what their society has become. This is a world in which an editor working for a small publishing house can be taken into custody, interrogated, threatened with death, and repeatedly slapped by an "utterly ordinary" looking man who might be mistaken for a "run-of-the-mill company manager," only to

return to an office where nobody can quite bring themselves to acknowledge the visible marks of the violence that has been inflicted upon her.

She recalls the last time that she had tried in a small way to crack the veneer of normalcy that had been constructed after Gwangju: one month after the massacre, classes resumed and the semester was extended well into the summer to make up for the days that were missed during the uprising. During a bus ride home from school, she becomes quite upset to find that the fountain in front of the Provincial Office had been turned back on.

> Eun-sook called the Provincial Office's Public Inquiry Department every single day, from the phone booth next to the bus stop. It's not right for the fountain to be on, for God's sake make it stop. The handset became sticky with the sweat from her palm. The staff at the department responded patiently, assuring her that the matter would be discussed.(78)

In front of that same fountain, as she makes her way home the morning after the final assault, she sees soldiers piling up bodies. After reiterating her complaints in several more phone calls, she eventually stops, seemingly prompted by a sympathetic woman who tells her: "I'm sorry, but you need to stop calling. There's nothing we can do about the fountain. You sound like you're still in school, no? It's best you forget, then, and concentrate on your studies" (79).

Memories return to Eun-sook in 1985. It's clear how many of her life decisions have been made in adherence to such urgings to forget, deepening her awareness of how she too has been complicit in this papering over of a troubling past and present. In leaving for college in Seoul, she had tried to put behind her the carnage she had witnessed in Gwangju, and in leaving college to take a job in publishing, she had sought to turn away from the brutality she saw inflicted upon her student demonstrators by the authorities.

While she had hoped that attending university far from Gwangju would provide her "a safe haven," she quickly learns that "plainclothes policemen were a permanent feature of campus life. . . . Life was a constant skirmish" (69).

She watches some of her fellow students hang up banners that read "DOWN WITH THE BUTCHER CHUN DOO HWAN," (69) and hold rallies, she witnesses some of them being brutally beaten by plainclothes policemen. She leaves school the following year to take an editorial position because she realizes that "she would have ended up ineluctably drawn into that scrum of students" (70). She hopes—and wrongly, as it turns out—that the publishing world would be the "safe haven"(69) that academia was not. By the end of the chapter, Eun-sook realizes that, for her at least, any attempt to just forget about what happened will prove futile. For in trying to forget the slaps she had just received, earlier traumatic events keep returning to her. She starts to remember the night of the final assault, when Dong-ho was among a handful members of an in formal civilian militia that armed themselves in a likely fatal attempt to defend the Provincial Office. She recalls that she decided not to join them because she was afraid:

> Having seen and handled so many new literary dead, she'd imagined she would have become inured to it all, but on the contrary her fear had increased. She didn't want her last breath to be a gasp from a gaping mouth, didn't want translucent intestines spilling out through a gash torn into her body" (71).

Eun-sook, however, comes to another, contrasting realization by the end of the chapter, that hidden among the everyday acts of complicity that people around her have performed in order to survive are also covert acts of rebellion—minor gestures of revolt. She comes to an awareness that the surface/depth disparity so evident in the ordinary looking interrogator who repeatedly struck and threatened to kill her and in the placid

demeanor of Chun Doo-hwan has its counterpart in others who strive, in their own small but significant ways, to resist their power. There is, for example, the polite, sickly, and "somewhat timid" translator who is a "wanted criminal," perceived by the state to be a threat to its security (57). There is, also, her own boss who endeavors, in his own way, to perform modest though still perilous acts of resistance. Eun-sook has suspected that he had given her name to the authorities and was therefore responsible for why she had been singled out for interrogation. As a result, she is stunned when the first copies of the British study of crowd psychology arrive in the office. Looking at the cover, she sees that "there, where she had been expecting the name of the fugitive translator, she discovered that of the boss's relative, the one who had emigrated to the United States" (75). This leads her to reappraise the man she had suspected of having betrayed her:

> From close up, his open, unguarded eyes seemed unaccountably tinged with fear, and the lines circling his neck were deeper than one would have expected for someone his age. Eun-sook found herself wondering why someone so timid and feeble would maintain close relationships with writers who were under the scrutiny of the authorities, why he kept on translations and ghostings of history publishing precisely those books that earned the censors' attention" (76).

Eun-sook becomes aware of the minor heroism of her boss's subterfuge on the sixth day after her interrogation, in the penultimate section of the chapter, titled "Slap Six."(74) Perhaps inspired by her boss's example, she resolves that "there would never be a day when she would forget the seventh slap" (79).

Eun-sook's refusal to forget takes shape in the final section of the chapter, which is titled not "Slap Seven"(79) but rather "Snowflakes"(79). Disclosed under that rather innocuous title is a remarkable performance of resistance, one that makes evident the

violence of the state by bearing witness to its mutilation of language. In it she discovers that Mr. Seo, a rather unassuming theater producer, is, like the translator and her boss, another surprising member of the resistance. Mr. Seo had commissioned Eun-sook's press to publish a collection of plays, and she had worked closely with him in editing the manuscript.

> The initial plan had been to publish the play this week and ensure that a review appeared in the newspapers' literary sections the week after. That would be a good way of publicizing the stage performance, which in turn would offer an opportunity to promote the book; they had also decided that, during the run, Yoon would sell copies of the play at the entrance to the theater. But now that the censors had made publication impossible, even performing a play based on that eviscerated script was off the table.(75)

The censorship was one of the things that also triggered a rebellion in Gwangju. The government through the army-imposed restrictions on the dissemination of information related to the occurrence of the rebellion. When Eun-sook retrieves the manuscript proofs from the government censor's office, however, she discovers that the vast majority of it is blacked out, many of the pages blotted out in their entirety with an ink roller. "These saturated pages," the narrator recounts, "have left the manuscript bloated and distended," making it resemble the mutilated and decomposing corpses Eun-sook had helped care for during the uprising (64).

The last section of this chapter describes what Eun-sook watches that night as a member of the audience. The description of the performance begins in media res, with the stage lights coming up slowly to reveal "a tall woman in in her thirties, her white hemp skirt recalling the kind of homespun item worn by mourners" (79). Eun-sook notices four plainclothes police officers in the audience and is quite worried about what will transpire:

"What is Mr. Seo going to do?" she wonders to herself: "When those men hear the lines that the censors scored through coming out of the mouths of these actors, will they jump up from their seats and rush onto the stage?" (80). Two figures walk slowly toward the woman from either side of the stage, both of whom are carrying life-sized skeletons on their backs. They pass each other, and the woman wordlessly, "as though forbidden new literary history to acknowledge the other's presence," and recede into the wings (79). The woman then begins to move her mouth, but the words it shapes are left unspoken. "Yet Eun-sook knows exactly what she is saying," the narrator notes, because "She recognizes the lines from the manuscript, where Mr. Seo had written them in with a pen" (80). A man walks down the aisle toward the stage, but, instead of reciting the lines that had been written for this character, the actor merely emits "a high-pitched sound,"shrieking." The woman mouths a silent reply to which he responds with further unintelligible "shrieking" (81). Again Eun-sook is the only member of the audience who knows the lines the actors would have said, were it not for the mutilation of the script by the authorities.

The houselights come up, and Eun-sook sees a boy standing in the aisle "clutching a small skeleton to his chest, hugging it to him as though he is cold" (81). He is dressed like Dong-ho was the last time she saw him, wearing "a white tracksuit and gray sneakers" (81). As the boy begins walking toward the stage, "a group of actors emerge from the darkness at the end of the aisle and follow on behind, stooped at ninety-degree angles and with their arms dangling down, looking like four-legged animals" (82). These men and women are "mumbling, shrieking, and moaning," which causes the boy to slow down and look behind him, "flinching back at what he sees" (82). The group overtakes the boy, reaching the stage before he does. The man at the back of the procession takes the skeleton from the boy and passes it along until it reaches the elderly woman at the front, who embraces it and walks up to the stage, where she continues to move inexorably slowly. As if snapping out of a trance, the boy suddenly jumps up on to the stage and

"press himself against the old woman's bent back" (82). The performance ends with scraps of silk fluttering down from the ceiling, upon which funeral odes have been written, and the boy turning to face the audience and mouthing another silent "soliloquy" (82). The chapter ends with Eun-sook crying as "she glares fiercely at the boy's face, at the movement of his silenced lips" (83).

What is remarkable about this performance is that the shrieks emitted by the actors as well as their silences draw attention to the violent force of the state, underlining the spaces from where urgent expressions of grief and outrage over what happened at Gwangju have been voided. The narrator leaves largely unsaid how or whether the other members of the audience make sense of the production, noting only their response to the woman's initial unvoiced monologue: "After the initial wave of perplexity has swept through the audience, they subside into cowed silence and gaze with great concentration at the actor's lips" (81). They do seem entranced by the highly stylized movement of actors' bodies and the mimicking of speech they perform, which give anguished expression to grief without providing the linguistic anchors that would attach them to their specific origin. In the end, though, what the audience actually makes of the play they are watching is left unsaid. The lines that Eun-sook alone knows because she has memorized them in the course of editing the manuscript:

> After you died I could not hold a funeral,
>
> And so my life became a funeral. (80)
>
> Oh, return to me.
>
> Oh, return to me when I call your name.
>
> Do not delay any longer. Return to me now. (81)

After you died I couldn't hold a funeral,

So these eyes that once beheld you became a shrine.

These ears that once heard your voice became a shrine.

These lungs that once inhaled your breath became a shrine. (81)

The flowers that bloom in spring, the willows, the raindrops and

snowflakes became shrines.

The mornings ushering in each day, the evenings that daily darken,

became shrines. (81)

After you died I couldn't hold a funeral, so my life became a funeral.

After you were wrapped in a tarpaulin and carted away in a garbage truck.

After sparkling jets of water sprayed unforgivably from the fountain.

Everywhere the lights of the temple shrines are burning.

In the flowers that bloom in spring, in the snowflakes. In the evenings that

draw each day to a close. Sparks from the

candles, burning in empty drinks bottles. (83)

Eun-sook provides the words that enable the readers to see how the effects of rage and grief, discernible in the shrieking and silence of the performers on stage, are connected to the events she had witnessed at Gwangju. She provides novelistic closed captioning, translating what might register as strange, inarticulate outpourings of emotion

into poetic form. We become an audience to Eun-sook's performance of the words that the playwright has written, words that give voice not only to grief but also to the inability to grieve.

The last chapter, "The Boy's Mother. 2010" featuring Dong-ho's mother presents the Mother as a shaman. Like the shamans, she too experiences a tragedy with the loss of her youngest son. She recalls her memories of Dong-ho from the time he was a child, her sorrow and frustration at the regime, and how the trauma continues to loom over her family suggesting a continuation of trauma over time. The last line of the chapter, where she quotes a young Dong-ho asking why they are in the dark echoes the transcendence from the suffering that the survivors in the book are looking for.

> Let's walk over there, Mum, where it's sunny, we might as well, right? Pretending that you were too strong for me, I let you pull me along. It's sunny over there, Mum, and there's lots of flowers, too. Why are we walking in the dark, let's go over there, where the flowers are blooming.(15)

Kang captures the quiet endurance of grief through sparse yet searing prose. As the mother grapples with the loss of her son, her pain is not only emotional but embodied—each action in her daily routine becomes an act of survival. Her words reflect the raw, physical weight of mourning: "The thread of life is as tough as an ox tendon, so even after I lost you, it had to go on. I had to make myself eat, make myself work, forcing down each day like a mouthful of cold rice, even if it stuck in my throat".(148)

As the chapter draws to a close, the mother's voice trembles with unresolved grief and unanswered questions. Her reflections pierce through the layers of political ideology and historical narrative, laying bare the raw, maternal anguish beneath.

> I'll never understand it. The militia with their faces pale and resolute, did they really have to die? When they were just children, really, just children with guns. And why did they refuse to let me in? When they were going to die such futile deaths, what difference could it possibly have made?(146)

In conclusion, this chapter investigates how Kang transforms individual suffering into communal testimony, amplifying suppressed pain through the blend of fiction and memoir. The epilogue, rooted in Han's own memory, blurs the line between the personal and the historical, illustrating how trauma resonates across generations. The editor's fragmented life reflects the psychological wreckage left by political violence, showing that silence is not healing but haunting. Her story is not isolated—her pain reverberates globally, echoing the suffering of those who survive atrocity without receiving justice. The figure of the boy's mother intensifies this sense of loss, becoming a symbol of stoic, ongoing sorrow, one that society refuses to acknowledge. Her pain embodies a quiet, internal resistance to being forgotten. By presenting the novel as testimony, Kang rejects erasure and demands that memory be preserved. The trauma depicted here is not only Korean; it speaks to a global audience familiar with state violence. Through silence, absence, and fragmented speech, *Human Acts* bears witness to the shared human toll of violence. The novel never offers closure but leaves open a space for witnessing. In doing so, it restores dignity to both the dead and the living.

Conclusion

This research has examined how *Human Acts* by Han Kang negotiates the relationship between localized historical trauma and broader postcolonial concerns, particularly through the depiction of systemic violence and inherited silence. Informed by the theoretical frameworks of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, the analysis has highlighted how the authoritarian practices within the narrative echo the structural logic of former colonial regimes. What emerges is not merely a recounting of national trauma but a narrative that actively resists historical erasure and interrogates the continuity of power beyond formal decolonization.

The repressive mechanisms depicted in the novel—censorship, imprisonment, and institutional violence—have been interpreted not as isolated national events but as symptoms of a larger postcolonial condition. These are systems through which the state re-inscribes the colonial legacy of domination and control, where they assert that the postcolonial state often mimics the very structures it once resisted. The positioning of dissenting voices as "other" aligns with Bhabha's notion of ambivalence and hybridity, whereby power is simultaneously resisted and reproduced through mimicry and internalized authority.

This thesis has also shown the reactionary violence that the authoritarian regimes of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan relied on to quell student dissidence. The use of state violence in turn showed that student-led protests were a credible threat to the stability and longevity of the regime. With the collapse of the Fifth Republic in 1987, this threat became came to a reality.

Trauma in the text has not been treated solely as a psychological consequence but as a narrative method—fragmented, disrupted, and silenced—to engage with the politics of memory and resistance. The silences that surround the characters function as both the

evidence of authoritarian violence and as literary devices that challenge linear historiography. As LaCapra suggests in his writings on trauma and historiography, such ruptures in narrative form compel the reader to confront the incompleteness of memory and the ethical imperative to bear witness. Han Kang's use of testimony—both fictional and autobiographical—situates the novel within a global discourse of mourning, in which the personal is inseparable from the political.

Human Acts, challenges established ideas about identity and individuality, prompting the reader to scrutinize the repressive structures of authority that restrict human freedom. Amidst the scars, both physical and emotional, the characters grapple with shattered identities, bearing the weight of trauma's enduring tendrils. Yet, affective resistance emerges as a symphony of souls united. Bound together by shared tribulations, they forge a fortress of solidarity. Their acts of defiance harmonize, an ensemble of protests, elegies of mourning, and the audacity to remember, defying the dehumanizing machinery of violence and proclaiming their inherent right to exist, to be seen, and to be heard. The novel also poses haunting inquiries about the essence of our humanity. Beneath the veneer of societal conventions lie the capacity for both unspeakable cruelty and profound compassion. Through the stories atrocities are committed in the name of power, while the embers of empathy and solidarity also flicker resolutely in the characters. The legacy of such struggles endures to this day, reminding us that the true revolution is not a singular moment in time but a continuous process of vigilance and action (Lorde, 1982).

One of the reasons Kang wrote this novel was that he wanted to dedicate this novel to the victims, who died and survived the uprising in Gwangju, South Korea, in 1980. Then the writer expresses his regret towards the victims by writing this novel. The incident of the rebellion in Gwangju, which is where the previous writer lived, left a feeling of guilt in his heart, even though he did not directly deal with the incident. Still,

indirectly the incident left its trauma in the writer. In addition, by writing this novel, the author wants to answer about human violence. In writing his novels, Kang always starts from the questions that arise from him. And with this novel, he wants to express his question about the violence committed by humans so far.

In conclusion, *Human Acts* serves as a powerful postcolonial literary intervention that resists the erasure of subaltern memory through aesthetic form and thematic focus. By invoking concepts of otherness, resistance, and testimony, the narrative articulates a collective reckoning with the past that is both historically situated and globally resonant. Through its formal innovations and ethical commitments, the novel demonstrates how literature can function not only as remembrance but as resistance—an act of reclaiming silenced narratives in the face of continued structural violence.

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