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Han Kang's Human Acts: Collective Memory and Ethical Obligation in the Face of Trauma and Silence

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Abstract

Based on the historical background of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea, Han Kang's Human Acts (2016) is a potent literary examination of state violence, collective trauma, and ethical witnessing. The novel explores how the brutality of authoritarian regimes shapes both individual and collective memory long after physical violence has stopped, using a fractured narrative structure and multiple points of view. Through the lenses of trauma theory, collective memory, and ethical responsibility, this research paper examines Human Acts and makes the case that Han Kang turns historical atrocity into a moral investigation about humanity, silence, and remembrance. The novel challenges official histories and calls for reader participation as an ethical witness by emphasizing the embodied experience of pain and the persistence of suppressed voices. The study also places Human Acts in the context of international trauma literature, emphasizing its importance as a national and global story of pain and defiance.

Keywords: Gwangju Uprising, Han Kang, Human Acts, trauma literature, collective memory, ethical witnessing, state violence

For a very long time, literature has been used to reclaim suppressed voices and histories. Han Kang's Human Acts, which tackles the Gwangju Uprising of May 1980, one of South Korea's most horrific historical occurrences, is a powerful example of this tradition. Hundreds of civilians were killed when government forces brutally put an end to student-led demonstrations against military dictatorship during this time. Censorship and political repression obscured the truth about these events for decades. This silence is broken by Human Acts, which provides a literary setting where trauma, memory, and moral obligation come together.

Human Acts is organized as a sequence of connected chapters, each told from a distinct point of view.

It was first published in Korean in 2014 and translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2016. The book emphasizes collective suffering rather than a single protagonist, depicting both the living and the dead as trauma bearers. This disjointed structure reflects the breakdown of meaning that victims of severe violence endure. Instead of attempting to reconstruct history in the traditional sense, Han Kang examines the moral and emotional fallout from atrocities.

This study contends that *Human Acts* serves as an ethical witnessing act that calls into question official narratives and forces readers to face the consequences of state violence. The study examines how Han Kang symbolizes physical suffering, silence, and remembrance using trauma theory and memory research. This study emphasizes the function of literature in upholding historical truth and encouraging moral responsibility by analyzing the novel's narrative techniques and thematic issues.

The historical trauma that forms the basis of *Human Acts* must be understood in order to comprehend the book. General Chun Doo-hwan led a military coup that resulted in the Gwangju Uprising in May 1980. Students, laborers, and regular citizens of Gwangju staged protests against martial law and called for democratic reform. In response, the government used extreme violence, sending paratroopers to kill, torture, and attack defenseless civilians. The South Korean government minimized civilian casualties and labeled protesters as rioters while suppressing information about the uprising for years. Because survivors were denied justice and recognition, this forced silence exacerbated collective trauma. According to academic Elaine Kim, "the trauma of Gwangju was not only the violence itself but the decades-long refusal to acknowledge it" (Kim 112).

One must first place *Human Acts* within the historical trauma it represents in order to comprehend it completely. In May 1980, a new military dictatorship in South Korea was overthrown by the Gwangju Uprising. Following the government's deployment of paratroopers who brutally attacked civilians, what started out as student protests swiftly turned into a full-scale uprising. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people were killed, tortured, or vanished over the course of several days.

By reconstructing this history from the viewpoint of the common people who suffered, *Human Acts* intervenes in it. Han Kang gives voice to a teenage boy, a factory worker, a bereaved mother, and other marginalized figures instead of concentrating on political figures or military tactics. By doing this, she reclaims history from the viewpoint of those who suffered the psychological and physical consequences of state violence.

This is an important change in narrative authority. Literature can preserve emotional truth, but official histories frequently sanitize or justify violence. Trauma is not abstract in *Human Acts*; it takes the form of broken families, bruised bodies, and haunted memories.

The novel really shows us what happens to people when they are treated unfairly because of politics. It makes us see that when people get hurt in the past because of things that happened it is always a very bad thing that affects people deeply. The novel is saying that historical violence is a problem that is not just about the past but it is also, about what is right and wrong. The human cost of repression is a big deal and the novel is trying to tell us that.

The idea of trauma theory is really important for understanding *Human Acts*. Cathy Caruth says that trauma is when something bad happens and you cannot deal with it away. So on you remember it in pieces and it is hard to make sense of it. This is what Han Kang shows in her story. She tells the story in parts, each one, about a different person. There is a boy who died during the uprising. Then there are people who lived through it and are still trying to cope with feeling guilty and not talking about it years later. *Human Acts* is a book that shows how trauma affects people in ways.

The way *Human Acts* is written makes you work to understand what is going on. You have to put the pieces of the story yourself because you are only getting parts of what happened.

Human Acts is like how we remember things as a group. We do not all remember things the way and it can be hard to agree on what really happened. Human Acts shows you that remembering can be difficult and that people can have different ideas, about what occurred.

One of the things about trauma is that it is really hard to put into words. Theorists, like Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub say that trauma is too much to handle when it happens. So it does not really sink in away. Trauma comes back to haunt you on in little pieces like flashbacks or sometimes there is just silence. The book Human Acts shows this by jumping in its story and using simple language to describe some really tough emotions. Trauma is something that Human Acts deals with in an unique way.

Silence is a part of this story. A lot of characters have a time talking about what they saw. Some people are too scared to talk others feel too guilty. Then there are those who just do not know what to say because what they went through was so bad. So silence is not about not speaking it is a sign that someone is really hurt inside and that is what the trauma of the experience does to the characters it makes silence a sign of the traumas depth and the trauma is what makes silence so important in this structure and, in the lives of these characters silence is a big deal.

Human Acts by Han Kang does not tell a story in a line. It does not give us a timeline of events. Han Kang gives us memories and voices that are all mixed up. This is like what happens when people experience something bad. It can be hard to think clearly about what happened. Human Acts makes the reader work to understand what is going on. We have to put the pieces of the story ourselves because we are only getting parts of it. This is similar to how people remember things as a group. Human Acts is, like that. It is a bit confusing and people might not agree on what it means.

Trauma is something that's really hard to put into words. People like Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub think that this is because trauma is too much to handle when it happens. You cannot really understand it at the time. It comes back, to you later in pieces, like memories that flash into your mind or times when you just cannot talk about it. The book Human Acts shows this by jumping in time and using simple language to describe really big emotions.

Silence is really important in this story. A lot of characters have a time talking about what they saw. Some people are too afraid to say anything some people feel too guilty. Some people just do not know what to say because what they went through was so bad. Silence is not just, about not talking it is also a sign that someone is really hurt inside. The silence shows how deep the pain of the trauma is. Silence and trauma are closely linked in this situation. The silence of these characters is a sign of the trauma they experienced.

Human Acts shows us that being silent can hurt us and also be a way to fight back. When people in power make others be quiet they can get away with things.. When people choose to be silent, on their own it can be a way for them to hold on to what they really think and feel when nobody else is listening or caring. Han Kang is not saying that being silent is a thing but she does see that it can be a complicated way for people to survive and cope. Human Acts makes us think about silence and how it can be used in ways.

The trauma that people go through is really evident on their bodies. People who survive these things have scars that you can see and scars that you cannot see. When people die they are not even treated with respect. There is a part where some volunteers work hard to take care of the dead bodies and try to make them look like people again. They do this to fight against the people, in charge who want to make everyone forget who these people really were. The volunteers are trying to remember the trauma and the people who suffered from the trauma.

Our body is like a store where memories are kept. When people try to forget what happened to them their body still remembers the feelings, like pain, fear and numbness. This is what trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk means when he says that our body remembers things that happened to us. He says "the body keeps the score" of these events (van der Kolk 21). In the book Human Acts people cannot escape the memories that their body keeps which shows that traumatic things are hard to forget and get over. The body remembers trauma. This is why trauma is so hard to deal with.

Silence is really important in Human Acts. The characters in Human Acts often do not talk about what they have been through. They are too afraid or too ashamed. They are worried about what might happen to them if they speak out. This silence is not something that happens with one person. It is something that the whole society does. The people, in charge want everything to seem okay even if it is not.

Han Kang shows that silence can help people survive. It can also hurt them. When people are silent they can become alone and it is like they do not exist. Silence is a part of Human Acts and it affects the characters in many ways. Han Kang writes about how silence can be very violent and how it can make people feel invisible.

At the time the novel Human Acts looks at how language can or cannot show trauma. Sometimes words do not do a job of showing how much people suffer but being silent is not enough either. The novel Human Acts deals with this problem by using writing that points to things that are hard to talk about without saying it can totally capture them. The way the novel Human Acts is written, which is simple and not too flashy shows that it knows language is not good enough when something bad happens.

Memory in Human Acts is not something that one person has it is something that a lot of people share. The book shows how bad things that happen can affect families, communities and even people who are born later. People who live through things take those experiences with them into their relationships and that changes how they feel love how they feel fear and how they talk to each other. Even people who were not, in Gwangju when everything happened still feel the political effects of it. This way that Human Acts shows memory as something that a lot of people experience together makes us question the idea that the past's really over. In Han Kang's view what happened in the past is not something that we can just forget about. Human Acts shows that it keeps shaping what is happening now. Human Acts and the way it talks about memory makes us think about how history's not just something that is over it is still a part of our lives. Forgetting is therefore not a neutral act but a moral choice—one that risks repeating injustice.

The thing that really gets to people in Human Acts is how bad things that happen can make people feel ashamed. The people who live through these things often feel bad because they lived and others did not. They start to believe what society says about them that they are

reminders of something that happened. Not talking about it is a weight but it is also a safe place. Some people in the story do not talk about what happened because they are scared of being made fun of or of getting hurt or of falling. Other people, in the story do not talk about what happened because they do not want to hurt the memory of the people who died by talking about their suffering. Human Acts is a book that shows how trauma produces shame. Trauma is a part of Human Acts.

Han Kang writes about the times people face in a very gentle way. She does not blame the people in her story for not being able to talk about what happened to them. Han Kang shows how the bad things that happened to them make it hard for people to connect with others. Han Kang also says that people need to find a way to talk about what happened even if it is hard to do. The novel Han Kang wrote says that we should listen to people who went through things in a kind and gentle way. We should respect what they went through. Make sure we do not forget what happened. Han Kang wants us to remember the past so we can learn from it.

Human Acts is like a book that remembers the past. It is different from buildings or museums that can feel old and stale. Books, like Human Acts let people feel like they are living through history. That is a very powerful thing. Human Acts is a way to remember the past and think about how it affects us today. When you read the novel you think about the people who were hurt in Gwangju over again. The novel makes you remember the victims of Gwangju every time you read it.

The bad things that happened in Gwangju cannot be fixed by talking about them.. Human Acts says that it is better to remember what happened than to forget.. When we talk about what happened it is a way of making things right. Human Acts is important because it tells us that remembering is what we should do. Human Acts is a book that is really connected to history.. It also talks about things that people all around the world can understand, like how governments can be violent and how that affects a lot of people.

You can compare Human Acts to books like Toni Morrison's Beloved. This book is about the things that happened because of slavery and how those things still affect people today. Human Acts is also similar to the things that Primo Levi wrote about the Holocaust. His writings are, about how important it's for people to talk about the bad things that happened so we do not forget Human Acts and the Holocaust and other bad things. Human Acts is a book that makes you think about Human Acts and how it affects people.

Human Acts is a book that shows us how important it is to remember things even when people do not want to admit they happened. What makes Human Acts special is that it talks a lot about the body and about being quiet and it does not try to make everything okay in the end. The book does not give us an answer to the problems it talks about and that is because it knows that the bad things that happened in the past cannot be easily fixed by just telling a story. People from around the world have read Human Acts and they think it is a very important book. They like how it talks about violence and sadness and about doing the thing. Human Acts is a book that people can relate to no matter where they are, from. The novel is about an event that happened in the past but the moral issues it talks about are not limited to one country. The novel's moral concerns are bigger than that. Affect people everywhere not just in one place. The moral issues in the novel are important for people, over the world because the novel's ethical concerns go beyond national boundaries and that is what makes the novel's ethical concerns so important.

Han Kang's *Human Acts* is a deep book that thinks about bad things that happen to people what they remember and what we should do about it. The story is told in pieces, which shows how people suffer. It also talks about the things that are not said. The book looks at how violence from the government affects people and communities for a time. *Human Acts* does not give us an answer to everything. Instead it makes us keep thinking about the things that happened in the past and it says that we have to remember these things because it is the right thing to do. *Human Acts* is, about remembering. It is important for us to think about *Human Acts* and what it says about people and their memories.

Han Kang is doing something important with her writing. She is making people think about how they feel when they hear about things that have happened. *Human Acts* is a book that makes you think about what you believe in and how you feel about people who have suffered. This book does not tell you what to think. It makes you think about what is right and wrong. Han Kang is showing us that stories can help us remember what happened and honor the people who died. She is also showing us that stories can help us understand what it means to be human and to be treated with respect. *Human Acts* is a book that makes you think about human dignity and how important it is. In a world where historical violence is often denied, distorted, or forgotten, *Human Acts* stands as a powerful reminder that memory is an ethical act—and that to bear witness is to affirm the value of human life against all forces that seek to destroy it.

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