

## **Individual and Collective Trauma in Han Kang's *Human Acts*: An Analysis from the Perspective of the Pluralistic Model of Trauma Theory**

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**Abstract:** The first-wave critics of trauma literature perceived trauma as an unrepresentable experience and reveals the inherent contradiction of language and the experience. However, *Human Acts* by Han Kang is undoubtedly a novel that uses the potential of language to the utmost level for recreating/representing/re-voicing the traumatising experience of the pain, suffering and engulfing bereavement brought by the horrific violence of the massacre of civilians in 1980 in Gwangju Uprising in South Korea. In this novel, Kang grapples with the violence through the perspectives of the victims and the survivors. The Man Booker Prize winner author tells the story from multiple perspectives, and the narration is in the second person, the day in the life of Dong Ho, who tries to get the dead body of his friend, ending up at the help desk to organising and identification of dead bodies of people who were killed in broad day light suddenly turns out even more violent for himself and his life ends before it had started. The novel begins and moves around Dong-Ho, progresses beyond him and tells the tale from other perspectives and includes the tales of those who survived this massacre and those who couldn't. The paper aims at studying the scope and extent with which Kang demonstrates the violence and the resultant trauma. It examines the ways the novel can be analysed from the contemporary trauma theory model that is pluralist and reveals the diversity of values and perceptions that change over time to define trauma's impact. By doing so, the paper also studies the relationship between individual and collective experiences of violence and suffering of the extreme experience at the centre of the novel, which is also of great interest to the cultural studies-oriented approach of the contemporary understanding of trauma theories.

**Keywords:** Trauma Theory, Memory, Pluralistic Model, Literature and Memory, Gwangju Uprising

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 Kwanthung 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.

—(Kang 141)

Trauma and memory theories have been emphasising the fact that traumatic experiences are overwhelming, alienating, amnesiac and, most of the time, far from comprehensive. Therefore, the pluralistic model of contemporary studies in trauma theory focuses on historiographic, testimonial and representational approaches that help reinterpretation, reconfiguration and reconciliation of the blurred and often buried traces of memory and psychological wounds. Moreover, these approaches also add to the understanding of the oppressions of power and the universality of the brutal and cruel suppressions of humanity during historical events which have left generations with wounds in their hearts and souls.

The theory devised on the point of transhistorical trauma upholds trauma as a constant, repetitive and ever-present part of an individual's existence. Transhistorical approach-based trauma theory also focuses on the causal relationship between the event and individual events and the group to study the impact, effects and pathological responses of these tormenting memories. Such approach and analysis also add to the functions of literature of representation, understanding and interpretation of human existence and human relationships. These theories indicate that a massive trauma experienced by a group in the historical past can be experienced by an individual living centuries later who shares a similar attribute of the historical group, such as sharing the same race, religion, nationality, or gender due to the timeless, repetitious, and infectious characteristics of traumatic experience and memory. Conversely, individual trauma can be passed to others of the same ethnic, racial, or gender group who did not experience the actual event. Still, because they share social or biological similarities, the traumatic experience of the individual and group become one. This leads to the claim that trauma narratives can recreate and abreact the experience of those who were not

there-the reader, listener, or witness can experience the historical experience first-hand (Felman et al., qtd. Hartman 544).

Another interesting aspect of transhistorical trauma is that the protagonist is an individual who presents a personal traumatic memory that represents a collective trauma of a group or a generation. The first-wave critics of trauma literature perceived trauma as an unrepresentable experience and reveals the inherent contradiction of language and the experience. However, *Human Acts* by Han Kang is undoubtedly a novel that uses the potential of language to the utmost level for recreating/representing/re-voicing the traumatising experience of the pain, suffering and engulfing bereavement brought by the horrific violence of the massacre of civilians in 1980 in Gwangju Uprising in South Korea. As Michell Balaev says:

We can see that the trauma novel provides a picture of an individual that suffers but paints it in such a way as to suggest that this protagonist is an 'every person' figure. Indeed, a significance purpose of protagonist is often to reference a historical period in which group of people of a particular race, culture or gender, have experienced a massive trauma. (Balaev 8)

Published in 2014, *Human Acts* begins with the incident of mass murders of students that took place in South Korea. The Gwangju Uprising took place a year after General Park's assassination. By May 1980, there was a rising clash between the authoritarian regime and people demanding greater democratisation. This clash reached its peak when students of Jeonnam University decided to a silent protest, authorities responded brutally, and students were beaten and fired upon. This resulted in greater outrage among civilians, and people across the city protested and took to the streets. Special forces were sent to contain the situation; however, these soldiers perpetrated more horrible brutalities and went on a killing spree. The protest that began on 18<sup>th</sup> May 1980 was oppressed and deflected by 27<sup>th</sup> May 1980, leaving the city with dead bodies and wounds in the hearts of the survivors. The official figure of the people killed during this uprising was declared to be 200. However, according to the foreign press, it was more than 2000 people who were killed in the open firing by the

militia. Han Kang centres her novel on this historical event to voice out the pain and suffering of the dead, the trauma of the bereaved, and other survivors and the painful shadow of the memories and wounds of this brutality of 1980 that looms large on the consciousness of the people of South Korea till date. Her representational and multi-perspective approach to the trauma also enables the reader to reimagine, reconcile and reinterpret the historical fact that has affected a people for generations.

In this novel, Kang grapples with the violence through the perspectives of the victims who lost their lives and the survivors, some who were imprisoned and some who lost their friends and family during the massacre. The novelist employs and engages with all aspects of contemporary trauma theory through her craftsmanship in various manners. We can list them as follows:

The diversity of extreme emotional experiences through the innovative narrative is a striking feature of the novel. The rich language, metaphors and graphic details of violence, pain and suffering are employed to capture the essence of the extreme emotional experiences each characters go through.

Some memories never heal. Rather than fading with the passage of time, those memories become the only things that are left behind when all is abraded. The world darkens, like electric bulbs going out one by one. (Kang 140)

The graphic memories etched in the minds of survivors traumatise them continuously. The characters are shown living with the trauma every day; the effect and the efforts to deal with these memories are shown manifesting with each passing day. The pain is presented through pristine language and Kang seamlessly switches the narrative in first, second and third view. These shifts in view also enhance and enable the rendition of experiences ranging from highly subjective and personal to distant and objective. Her language is unflinching and emotionally charged yet never melodramatic or bordering on sentimentalism. Her storytelling is gut-wrenching yet engaging and empathetic. The innovations in her narrative style enrich the trauma's rendition and enhance the inclusion of various interpretations.

The graphic details of the events are provided by a novel use of different narrators. They are also introduced as the Boy, the Boy's Friend, the editor, the prisoner, the factory girl and the boy's mother. The point of view also shifts accordingly, which also keeps shifting the subjectivity and agency of the narrator. Thus, these multi-narrator aspects of the novel functions as a provider of knowledge through trauma, similar to Geoffrey Hartman's suggestion in "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies." He says that through trauma theory, "We gain a clearer view of the relation of literature to mental functioning in several key areas, including reference, subjectivity and narration" (Hartman 547).

One can certainly observe that Kang provides such a clearer and sharper view of the reference, subjectivity and narration through her use of various narrators and viewpoints in the novel. Different narrators help provide multiple perspectives of such historical events of violence on different individuals. The dead describe the kind of pain and suffering they felt while dying, their unfulfilled desires and dreams, the way death engulfed their body, the distorted bodies and the sense of helplessness all are captured through the dead who describe the event after they are dead.

The survivors like Eun Shook and Kim not only narrate the incidents from the third person perspective but also provide the missing links of the plot and missing facts about the event and even what happened to these dead and their friends and relatives after they were dead. Thus, these seemingly jagged narratives narrated through different narrators make the incident and the trauma more comprehensive and multidimensional. Each survivor has taken a different approach and is shown managing, failing and struggling to survive or return to the everyday life, which often happens to a generation that has seen, witnessed and suffered such historic traumatic experiences. Deborah Smith aptly sums up the craftsmanship of the author in this context, "The novel is equally unusual in delving into complex background of the democratisation movement, though Han Kang's style is always to do this obliquely, through the experiences of her characters, rather than presenting a dry historical account" (Smith 3).

The novel begins with Dong-Ho, a teenage boy volunteering for the identification and handing over of the dead bodies, and introduces us to various characters whose lives intersect or connect with Dong-Ho and the uprising. This profoundly complex and poignant novel spans across generations through a web of stories by the narrators whose lives were lost/changed/affected/altered due to the Gwangju Uprising.

Another technique used by the novelist to represent the trauma that can be viewed from a pluralistic model of trauma theory is the use of a nonlinear plot. This technique is also a manifestation of the nature of traumatic memories. Moreover, they provide a kind of multi-dimensional understanding and extent of suffering from three references of time—one moment before the massacre, the moments of the massacre and the plight of the survivors and the relatives after the massacre with a hindsight and perspective of all the players and characters in these points of time. The trauma theory focuses on the abreactive model of trauma, which is used to assert the position that traumatic experience produces a temporal gap and a dissolution of the self. This also is well explored and well represented through this nonlinear plot where the self is continuously torn between present and past. This nonlinearity of events is a representation of a trauma survivor's mental state. The flashbacks, hallucinations, fears, associations and denial manifesting in the survivors are also well captured and represented through this deviation from the linear time frame in the novel.

The death of Dong-Ho sets the novel into motion, and it is the same incident around which Kang sums up her story and ends the novel. But within these two points of time, Kang takes readers to a span of time that transcends generations. From the heap of bodies lying to rot in the heat at a gymnasium in 1980, the novel shifts to the phase of the authoritarian and strict militia regime narrated through the editor's experiences in 1985. Following next are chapters of the novel that narrate the story of a character that describes his life in the 1990s when he relives the torture of his prison experiences immediately after the uprising. His fractured psyche is further jolted, and his self is further tormented when he becomes a part of academic research. The prisoner had suffered physical and emotional torture during the imprisonment and had been forced to live and behave like an animal with his fellow

cellmate. The horrors of the past and his self-hatred are compounded by his guilt for having survived that massacre where his friends and comrades had died. The letter from the researcher who had interviewed the survivor also deepened many wounds for the prisoner. His emotional and cognitive chaos, represented through his disjointed sense of self and his mental state, sums up his division of consciousness that remarkably represents the traumatic experience and memory. Through this narrative, Kang also provides us with the length and depth of the scars such incidents leave on the survivors and the continuous emotional and psychological terrors experienced after such catastrophes. The chapters set in 2002 on the character of the former factory girl reveal the continuation of brutality against people who demand democracy and rights. Her struggles and the brutality she suffered represent the struggles of humanity. Her estrangement and loss of self and identity represent the effects and outcomes of trauma that disrupt and dissolve self and identity.

From this point, Kang takes a leap in the novel and the concluding chapters are set in 2010, where Dong-Ho's mother and brother narrate their personal loss, the need for justice and the painful memories associated with the catastrophe. These narrators also represent the trauma of a generation that had witnessed the massacre and their daily struggle to reconcile with the loss and failure to find a closure to their loss and wounds.

There is a continuous play with time and place in the novel, which also keeps the reader challenged and engaged. This compression of time and place is an exact representation of the state of the trauma where the victims lose or fail to keep track of time, and they constantly manoeuvre their lives in terms of shifting between past and present. The novel deals with various references of time, namely 1980, 1985, 1990, 2002 and 2010 which are also important years in the history of the nation. But these references to time keep intermingling and sliding back and forth according to the mental state of each narrator and often manifest in the style of stream-of-consciousness narratives. Because the memories of these characters do not allow them to be where they are in a steadfast manner, they are continuously pulled and pushed into the past and the present. Because,

“Some memories never heal. Rather than fading with the passage of time, those memories become the only things that are left behind when all is abraded. The world darkens, like electric bulbs going out one by one” (Kang 140).

Those who have survived were tortured so brutally that their lives are devastated, their bodies stamped with scars, emotions reduced to a dark abyss, and psychologically, they all are fractured and fragmented. The kids who survived these tortures are shown continuously in a state of fright, haunted by nightmares and unable to have any social-emotional anchors. Yoon’s letter to Kim indicates that two out of ten survivors have already committed suicide, and the remaining eight are continuously shown thinking about death and the memories of the dead. Kim says, “I wait for death to come and wash me clean, to release me from the memory of those other, squalid deaths, which haunt my days and night” (Kang 141).

Graphic and upsetting details of death are a towering feature of the novel. This novel is about death, destruction and devastation. Gwangju Uprising is the central event of the story, and it entails the murky history of mass slaughter in 1980. Appreciating Kang’s exposition of the novel, Deborah Smith says:

Shoot-outs, heroism, David and Goliath-this is the Gwangju Uprising as it has already been told in countless films, and a lesser writer might have been tempted to start with such superficially gripping tropes. Han Kang starts with bodies. Piled up, reeking, unclaimed and thus unburied, they present both a logistical and ontological dilemma. (Smith 2)

The decaying bodies in the gym, the dumping of dead bodies by soldiers after they take over the city, the exact description of slow decomposing observed and painfully described by Jong De’s soul with clinical precision and poetic poignance, the episodes where relatives later on find their dead and at the time when those missing bodies that have been reduced to mere skeletons were exhumed, identified and reburied add to the function of representation of suffering and pain during such mass slaughter and the trauma that it creates. Language functions as an artistic expression, and Kang



provides voice to the scars and the suffering of even the dead who are left with no voice when Jong De's soul says:

I think of the festering wound in my side,  
Of the bullet that tore in there.  
The strange chill, the seeming blunt force, of that initial impact,  
That instantly became a lump of fire churning my insides,  
Of the hole it made in my other side, where  
It flew out and tagged my hot blood behind it,  
Of the barrel, it was blasted out of.  
Of smooth trigger.  
OF the eye that had me in its sights  
Of the eyes of the one who gave the order to fire. (Kang 61)

Dead and death constantly haunt the ones who are left behind. There is a constant lingering sense of shame and guilt for having survived those torture while others died in the mass execution or afterwards. The sense of pride for being part of such a revolution is completely missing due to the trauma and memory that have engulfed the lives of the survivors.

The seven slaps to Eun Shook-the editor and her struggle to erase that memory from her mind only lead her back to the tormenting memory of the night of the student uprising. Through her character and detailed introspective recollection, Kang shows how the suffering and pain of such events become unending and the memories, instead of healing or fading, constantly gnaw at the living. Thus, trauma and traumatic memories are manifested through a series of complex and painful memories of the survivors and the dead. "I 'm fighting, alone, every day. I fight with the hell that I survived. I fight the fact of my own humanity. I fight with the idea that death is the only way of escaping the fact" (Kang 142).

The survivors are also shown often deprived of the expressions, and they find their language failing them when it comes to the expression of their experiences. At one point, the novel highlights

this old concept of trauma theory, which views trauma memories as indescribable through language. “As though your mother tongue has been rendered opaque, a meaningless jumble of sounds” (Kang 178). The play, the script, and the heavy-handed censorship of the publication of the script that Eun Shook’s chapter is woven around also show the power of language and expression through art, which any suppressive regime has always warded and constantly stamped upon.

Thus, through individuals, Kang creates a kaleidoscopic view that captures the trauma in individuals and in society. She also brings in her own story and how she was connected and witnessed this catastrophe. Dong-Ho’s house was the same house where she had lived before her family moved to Seoul. Though none of her family or close relatives was lost in this uprising she had overheard about the uprising and the death of Dong-Ho whose family had bought Kang’s house in Gwangju. Towards the end, wherein she meets Dong-Ho’s mother and brother, the reader is able to see her connection to the story of the boy. Through this story, Kang also ruminates on the questions of the nature of violence and war, the resilience of the human spirit, the effects of memories and trauma and the terrible price of atrocities. This remarkable rendering of the trauma in her novel is aptly appreciated by Aram Mrjoian in the following words:

Through eloquent prose and meticulous attention to detail, the author explores the deeply rooted psychological trauma that persists long after the physical wounds have healed. Han Kang examines the concept of memory and its role in shaping individual identities, posing fundamental questions about the nature of human existence and resilience in the face of profound loss. (Mrjoian)

Thus, the Man Booker Prize winner author tells the story from multiple perspectives and the narration is in the first, second and third person through various narrators: the day in the life of Dong-Ho, who tries to get the dead body of his friend ends up at the help desk for organising and identification of dead bodies of people who were killed in broad day light suddenly turns out even more violent for himself and his life ends before it had started. The novel that begins and revolves around Dong-Ho progresses beyond him and also tells the tale from other perspectives and includes the tales of those

who survived this massacre and those who couldn't. Through this, Kang demonstrates the violence and the resultant trauma in a succinct and shocking way. As discussed, the novel engages and employs various aspects of the contemporary trauma theory model that is pluralist and reveals the diversity of values and perceptions that change over time to define trauma's impact. By doing so, the author also unfolds the relationship between individual and collective experiences of violence and suffering of the extreme experience at the centre of the novel which is also of great interest to the cultural studies-oriented approach to contemporary understanding of trauma theories. More importantly, the novel, like all trauma narratives, shocks and disturbs with an intense yet soft cry to ponder over the perils and destruction created by such historical events driven by megalomania, power hunger and greed of the leaders across the history of the world and raises a moot question, "Bearing that in mind, the question which remains to us is this: what is humanity? What do we have to do to keep humanity as one thing and not the another?" (Kang 100).

To sum up, one can say that *Human Acts* is an artistic answer to the horrors of the history. The novelist has successfully created a narrative that voice out the shock and sorrow her hometown was subjected to by the military law in 1980 massacre and which was not even memorialised till 1997. One of the purposes of trauma theory and literature is also to represent and reinterpret individual and collective trauma to make life more meaningful and enhance understanding about humanity. Literature and art is also a tool of resilience and reconciliation during the troubled time. *Human Acts* performs this role of representation, resilience and reconciliation achieving an artistic surfeit reclaiming life. Kang's work reiterates the negative capability of songs, here, literature as:

"In the dark times

Will there also be singing?

Yes, there will also be singing.

About the dark times."

— Bertolt Brecht motto to *Svendborg Poems*, 1939

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