

## History, Memory and Trauma: Writing Against Erasure in Han Kang's *Human Acts*

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### Abstract:

This paper explores how Han Kang in her novel *Human Acts* (2014) writes against historical erasure of the Gwangju massacre perpetrated by the state in May 1980. This paper argues that this novel is an attempt to subvert the official historiography of the Gwangju massacre and bring to light the truth about state brutality legitimized in the name of subduing communist involvement from North Korea. The narrative centres around different characters whose lives become inextricably entangled during those fateful days leading to the eventual suppression of the protest through extreme violence by the army. I will also argue that the characters resist official historiography by telling their own history through individual and collective remembrances. The novel critiques the wilful negligence of the then governing officials to acknowledge the violent atrocities committed against the people of Gwangju during the 1980 democratization movement, and the absence of the so called 'conscience' in these perpetrators. This paper will also argue that the novel is a reminder of the deepest wounds of history and to never forget, considering the contemporary South Korean Political scenario. I will also argue that the characters, including the writer are resilient against violence and injustice through their own separate individual efforts. The novel tells a profound story of resilience, human empathy and resistance against state brutality.

**Keywords:** History, Memory, Resilience, Historical erasure, Han Kang, Human Acts

### Introduction:

*Human Acts* (2013) is a novel by the prominent South Korean writer Han kang. Han was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2024 and since then she has emerged to international prominence. The story centres on Dong-ho, a fifteen-year middle schooler, who volunteers to look after the corpses who were killed by the army in the provincial building in Gwangju. The novel is structured in a polyvocal narrative, divided in seven parts, each part narrated by a different character. The Gwangju uprising was a movement led by the students of Gwangju, opposing martial law imposed by the newly formed government under general Chun Do-Hwan, after the assassination of the previous president Park Chung-hee. The country had seen dictatorship under president Park for almost twenty one years from 1961 when he seized power as the leader of South Korea, and committed numerous crimes and violence against its people. In the name of development and industrialization, he had exploited the working-class people by overworking them with meagre pay not even enough to support their basic needs. After

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Chun Do-Hwan came to power in 1979, the people had expectations of change and improvement in their living conditions, but he turned out to be just another one of those dictators. As soon as he came to power, he imposed martial law on the whole country; closing universities, condemning public gatherings and protests of any kind, as well as censoring the press on the excuse that the Communist regime of North Korea could view this political turmoil as vulnerability and attack South Korea.

Gwangju was a secluded region in the southwestern part of South Korea, far from mainland South Korea. When martial law was imposed in the whole country on 17<sup>th</sup> may 1980, the people of Gwangju, mostly students, who came out to the streets on 18<sup>th</sup> may to oppose the law were brutally suppressed by the paramilitary. The protestors were beaten brutally as well as gunned down to death. As the demonstrations continued for a week, more people were killed, women and children raped and tortured in countless numbers. Around two hundred people have been officially reported to have died, but other sources locates the death toll to as far as five hundred, as arriving on the exact number is impossible because the army soldiers burned most of the bodies, and some were buried around the city, some people even went missing and their bodies never discovered. The incident was highly neglected by the officials of the state until 1997, when finally a National Day of Commemoration was declared on 18<sup>th</sup> May every year, as well as the national cemetery built for the Gwangju martyrs were finally complete. The two former presidents, namely Chun Do-hwan and Ro Tae-woo were both finally prosecuted with charges of treason and corruption for their roles in Gwangju massacre after one and a half long decade of denial and negligence. Although Chun Do-hwan never publicly acknowledged or apologized to the people of Gwangju for his crimes back in 1980, he died in 2021 while serving sentence in prison.

The novel *Human Acts* (2014) by the South Korean author Han Kang is based on this tragic incident at Gwangju in 1980. She portrays vivid characters who are willingly or unwillingly caught in the chaos of this movement where hundreds of people peacefully demonstrating against the Chun Do-hwan regime were brutally killed with machine guns and bayonets. Afterwards, the people of Gwangju, consisting mostly of students, took up arms and formed a citizen militia to defend themselves. For Han, writing the novel seems extremely relevant considering contemporary South Korean political scenario. For example, on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2024, South Korean president Yoon Seok-yeol had declared nationwide emergency martial law with the excuse that the opposition party was collaborating with the North Korean Communists, going as far as to apprehend some of the prominent political figures. Yoon had suspended any political activities, gatherings and the press. The people came out to the streets from all over the country in protest against the martial law and after six long hours of protest, the law was finally lifted, and the president was impeached not long after that incident.

The first chapter titled “The Boy.1980” begins with Dong-ho, around whom the entire narrative revolves around; the second chapter titled “The boy’s Friend” is centred on Dong-ho’s friend Jeong-dae; third chapter is titled “The Editor.1985” narrated by Eun-sookk, five years after the tragic incident; fourth chapter is titled “The Prisoner. 1990” and narrated by the anonymous student leader who is jailed and tortured inside the cell for many years; the fifth chapter titled “The Factory Girl. 2002” is narrated by Seonju, chapter sixth “The Boy’s Mother.

2010” is narrated by Dong-ho’s own mother, and finally chapter seven titled “Epilogue: The Writer.2013” in which the writer herself intervenes in the story, claiming to have lived there and left just before four months into the massacre. The Gwangju massacre was a highly debated issue throughout the years, a game of shifting blame of who were truly responsible for such brutal acts, not arriving at a closure. As Han had exclaimed in her interview with the Louisiana Channel that she started the book from violence and the human atrocity on other humans, but ended up seeing the solidarity and empathy among the people as they came out together to help other human beings in the times of crisis; long lines of people coming to donate blood to the injured in the hospitals, old women coming out to the streets with food to feed the people. These acts of generosity and solidarity among the people during that time in Gwangju inspired Han to explore this contradictory nature of human beings; the capacity for such acts of violence on one hand, and the human generosity and empathy on the other.

Han Kang is a renowned South Korean author who is known for her creative language in writing and the intense, dynamic portrayal of human experience and suffering. Han speaks for humanity, her works deals with the complications of a society and its issues; and the suffering that people undergo as a result of some oppressive force lurking in the shadows in the form of patriarchy, or oppressive regimes. She had graduated from Yonsei University and briefly worked as a reporter before turning to writing. Han started her literary journey with *Love in Yeonsu* (1995), but gained worldwide fame and recognition for her breakthrough novel *The Vegetarian* (2016), which won her Man Booker Prize, translated by Deborah Smith. Some of her works include *Love in Yeonsu*(1995), *Black Deer*(1998), *My Woman’s Fruits*(2000), *Your Cold Hands*( 2002), *The Vegetarian*(2007), *The Wind Blows, Go*(2010), *Greek Lessons*(2011), *Fire Salamander*(2012), *Human Acts* (2014), *The White Book*(2016), *We Do Not Part*(2021). Han’s works mostly deal with the themes of violence and the complications and paradoxes of being human; the complexities and contradictions of our very own existence. Her groundbreaking novel *The Vegetarian* deals with various issues such as the oppressive force of patriarchy on the lives of women in a country like South Korea, that instils violence on the woman’s body, and draws a parallel between the violence on woman’s body and animal slaughter. Her autobiographical novel *The White Book* explores grief and memory through the colour white, reflects on her older sister’s fleeting existence who died after few hours from her birth, and the author’s reconciliation with the past, while her book *We Do Not Part* again delves into the human atrocities and violence as the narrative reflects on the Jeju Massacre through the character Kyungha.

### **Methods of Discussion:**

This paper will be based on a textual analytical approach, keeping in considerations the thematic concerns, narrative structure, plot etc. This study will draw on the individual and collective memories to examine what role does memory play in resisting an official historiography and the dominant narrative. This study will also draw on Trauma theory to examine the representation of trauma in the text. This paper will look at memory as a vehicle to resist historical erasure and to remind people to learn from the darkest part of history considering the contemporary South Korean political scenario. Through a historical reimagining

of one of the darkest chapters in South Korea's history, the author writes against historical erasure of the Gwangju massacre.

### Discussion and Analysis:

*Human Acts* was published in 2014 in Korean as *Sonyeoni Onda* which literally translates to English as "The Boy Comes" or "The Boy Approaches", translated by Deborah Smith and published in the U.K in 2016, and in the U.S in the year 2017. Smith had changed the original title to "Human Acts" keeping in mind the thematic concerns of the book. According to Jenny Yoojin Oh, Han's novel acts as historical testimony against erasure: "Narratives of Gwangju combat historical erasure and denial, offering accounts that reimagine those 10 days and continue their legacy" (14). She asserted that the novel "resist a definitive account of the event, instead lingering in an incompleteness—voices cut off, bodies desecrated, and truths that seem to grow unstable over time" through polyvocal narrative "Han depicts Gwangju not as a singular event in our past, but as a wound that continue to mark the present" (Oh 14,15). Lee Ji-eun in her paper argues that Han's narrative diverges from the dominant narrative of the Gwangju event that tends to portray the event in a heroic way, be it media or literary, often portraying the people as heroes who led the country towards democracy through their sacrifice. Han starts her novel from dead bodies, rows of it, and a young boy. The first chapter titled "The Boy.1980" initially deals with Dong-ho, a fifteen-year old middle schooler, who is shot dead by the army while working as a record keeper of the corpses at the Provincial building. The chapter is narrated by Dongho few hours before his initial dead, and introduces the people he encounters there and becomes close with including Jin-su, Eun-sook, Seon-ju, who worked as volunteers for the cause. In the chapter, Dong-ho refers to himself as "You" instead of "I", almost as if pointing to the reader that this person could also be "you" (the reader). By using the second person "you", the reader is almost able to imagine himself/herself in his shoe. The novel begins with Dong-ho in the provincial building as a volunteer, observing the rain and reflecting on how his brother had strictly told him to come home right after. Dong-ho's job in the provincial building was keeping records of the corpses, identifying them and constantly lighting candles on the side of each corpse. According to Tara Kumar Dahal, "Han Kang reveals the spirit of Gwangju, showcasing not just government violence and civilian courage but also the profound suffering, loss, and redemptive love of survivors. This unwritten tragedy stifles understanding, igniting a dialogue of extreme truths and cynicism about memory and history (1414).

### Reclaiming History

Han writes this novel as an act of reclaiming one's history, or coming to reconciliation with that particular event in history, through the polyvocal narratives of ordinary people— Prisoner, factory worker, Editor, etc. telling their part of history that were erased or diminished. The polyvocal narrative structure in the text allows Han to explore the silenced or marginalized voices in history that were excluded from the official historiography. The chapters are divided in different timelines and follows the trajectory of characters as they continue living with the painful memories of that traumatic event in history of the Gwangju Massacre. South Korea tried to erase its darkest event of history such as Gwangju massacre in the guise of rapid development and industrialization of the country. Han Kang suggests that history is not meant

to be neglected or forgotten, but rather to be faced up to, acknowledged and remembered. In chapter I, as the readers follow Dong-ho's narrative, they are also forced to experience the repulsive and gore: dead bodies in a row, faces mutilated, throats slit open, heads smashed open by bayonets, guts spilled out of their stomach. Han didn't show any mercy in describing the type of goriness people tend to look away from. According to Lee Ji-eun in her paper titled *(Dis)embodiment of Memory: gender, Memory, and Ethics in Human Acts by Han Kang*, in Han's novel "traumas suffered by both men and women, heightened by Han's particular narrative style and choices, create intimate and visceral experience for readers that illuminate one searing historical moment"( 361). Han through her writing thus subverts the official historiography of the Gwangju massacre by portraying these different marginalized characters like Eun-sook, Jin-su, Seon-ju, the unnamed prisoner, Dong-ho and his mother etc. and bringing to light their side of story from the margins of history.

Dong-ho is fifteen years old, and he often wonders about things like death and the truth about human souls. In the epilogue, when the writer goes to the memorial site of Dong-ho's grave, she lights three candles each in front of the three boy's graves. In chapter I, Dong-ho lights candles in front of each dead bodies, without letting the candles go out. These candles symbolize the innocence of these children like Dong-ho, burned out in minutes but it did shine, their indomitable spirit and courage shining through to the future, inspiring people to come together in times like this and show resistance against dictatorship. The original Korean title that translates as "The Boy Comes" reflects the idea how the figure of the boy represented by Dong-ho follows these characters into the future to haunt them as evident in the novel as well as to haunt the generation of the author herself. Han in her interview with Louisiana Channels says, "I don't like the word victim, it means some kind of defeat, but I don't think they were defeated, and they refused to be defeated that's why they were killed"( 20:3- 23). According to Lee, by contrasting the cruel and violent inhuman killings and the innocence of the children in their death "the novel exposes human dignity and brutality as a sort of paradox, like two sides of a coin"(363 ). Furthermore, Han also suggests writing this novel was necessary to recover the lost dignity of these young people who were killed; demonized in the public eye by portraying them as "rioters", "leftist radicals" or "pro-communist mobs". While the state-controlled media tried to portray the protestors as evil, or violent hooligans, Gwangju became secluded from the rest of the country as the government had cut off any communication between Gwangju and the rest of the country in an attempt to contain information and bury the truth. One of the militias exclaim these lines: "...we have to make them promise to admit the true facts about what had happened here, so we can recover our honor in the eyes of the rest of the country"" (Han 17). The fact that the Gwangju Massacre largely remained evasive throughout the years, by not commemorating sooner, the shifting blame game of the then officials, Chun Do-hwan's autobiography, Gwangjuites not receiving an apology from Chun Do-hwan etc. aggravates the wound. For Han, writing this novel seems extremely relevant as history tends to repeat itself in the form of dictators, or oppressive Governments, to remind people of the wounds of darkest chapter of history. Almost a decade after Han wrote her novel, the entire nation witnessed a martial law from the Roh Tae-hwan government. But the entire nation came together this time and protested against the law. Immediately after a few hours, the law was finally lifted and the president impeached not after long. This act becomes a

testimony of the powers of the people, especially the youth. By coming together as one and being resilient, South Korea negates yet another Gwangju. This is more than a triumph for writers such as Han, because she was triumphant on reminding people of the wounds of history and the lessons it taught.

### Memory as Resistance against historical erasure

As Haruki Murakami remarked in his novel *1Q84*, “Our memories are made up of our individual and collective memories. The two are intimately linked. And history is our collective memory”. As Chun Do-hwan remains in power until 1987, he tries to bury the truth and suppress the individual and collective memories of the Gwangju massacre through his repressive measures. The novel traces the trajectories of the lives of different characters who survived the 1980 Gwangju, divided in different timelines beginning in 1980. It recounts the memories of these survivors, and their individual memories of this particular boy Dong-ho. Memories are what keeps us going, in other words memories sustains us. Eun-sook who becomes an editor in the year 1985 tries to live her life, she is constantly dragged back to the traumatic memories of Gwangju. As Haruki Murakami said, “Memories warm you up from inside, but they also tear you apart”, Eun-sook also finds solace in her memories of Dong-ho. Eun-sook survived the 1980 Gwangju massacre, and she now currently works as an editor for a publishing company. She is working on a translated manuscript for a stage play that is censored by the state. She is interrogated for working with a translator banned by the state, and slapped seven times on her cheeks. Throughout chapter III, we see the snippets of her past and the traumas that she grapples with. The violence of these slaps on her physical body directly transports her back to the past, her traumatic past. She resolves to forget the seven slaps one slap at a time in a week. As she tries desperately to get the manuscripts approved for the banned stage play, she is met with disappointments when the manuscript is reduced by the censors. The resolution comes for her when the play is finally staged. Instead of trying to forget the remaining two slaps, she goes to see the play being staged. As the play begins in dance, a man and a woman silently pass each other in mourning clothes. Instead of saying the censored words out loud, the actors only mutter the words moving their lips in unison. As the lights begins to dim, one woman mutters these lines invoking the spirits of the dead: “

After you died I could not 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 (Han 69)

When the lights are turned off and then turned on, a boy in tracksuit appears carrying a skeleton in his hand, while the older actors surround him moaning and shrieking. The actors slowly stops moving while an old woman stands in the front and the boy suddenly jumps on her back, “like the spirit of someone dead”, while the funeral odes written in scraps of paper suddenly begins falling off the ceiling. Suddenly Eun-sook is reminded of Dong-ho, tears running down her face. But she doesn’t look away, instead she glances directly at the boy: “Scalding tears burn from Eun-sook’s open eyes, but she does not wipe them away. She glares fiercely at the boy’s face, at the movement of his silenced lips”( Han 71) As the boy glances directly at the

audience as if to confront the perpetrators and demand justice: “As though this is the trigger, the boy starts out of his stasis, leaping up onto the stage in a single bound and pressing himself against the old woman’s bent back. Like a child being given a piggyback, like the spirit of someone dead”(Kang 70) The staging of this play showcases their collective attempt to preserve and sustain their collective memory of Gwangju. Memories challenge dominant narrative, and a subjective account of the other side of history subverts the official historiography. According to Maurice Halbwachs, individuals sustain their past by being associated with a particular group that shares the same memory, and they rely on others to reconstruct their memories of the past: “Most of the time, when I remember, it is others who spur me on; their memory comes to the aid of mine and mine relies on them.”( 38) and “...it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories.”(38).

Individual and collective memories are each co dependant on the other to sustain. Eun-sook places herself in the group of people who enact the play even though they are just actors, the others will also come forward to associate themselves with this group and contribute their individual memories to the collective remembrance. According to Maurice Halbwachs, in his work *On Collective Memory*, Individuals depend on social frameworks like family, religion, class etc to reconstruct their past. “The Factory Girl, 2002” tells the story of Seon-ju who was a labour activist, and worked as a volunteer to look after the corpses in Gwangju Uprising. Seon-ju is a member of the labour group, and she used to go into protests alongside them against labour exploitation before the Gwangju event. The exploitation of these factory workers like Seon-ju and Jeong-mi, forced them into back-breaking works for long hours with meagre pay. The chapter “The Factory Girl, 2002) begins with Seon-ju in the present, living a quite life in isolation, trying to forget the trauma of the sexual and physical abuse that she went through after she was imprisoned. After her release from prison, Seon-ju went back to Gwangju in order to die, but she comes across a photograph of Gwangju lying dead, that some students had put up in the wall of the Catholic Center: “What I saw in the photograph saved me. You saved me, Dong-ho, you made my blood seethe back to life. The force of my suffering surged through me in a fury that seemed it would burst my heart.” ( Han 117). Despite everything, Seon-ju eventually goes to visit Seong-hee in the hospital, a friend from the labour group: “One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group and manifests itself in individual memories.” (Halbwachs 40).

Seon-ju’s story also questions the issue of bearing testimony or witness to the traumatic violence that the body and soul endured: “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? Is it possible to face up to my continuing to bleed for the next two years, to a blood clot forming in my Fallopian tubes and leaving me permanently unable to bear children?”(Han 113). The evasiveness of representation of trauma in language is highlighted. The narrative shifts constantly between the present and the past, the fragmentation, the silences, and the gaps are evident of how trauma resists language and representation. Scarry asserts “Whatever pain

achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” as well as that “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”(4)

Jeong-dae’s soul wanders around the place, observing other souls, as they are trapped in this rotting bodies unless they are cremated or burned. He describes the scene as:

“Piled up behind the ticket, our bodies now began to soften in the sun, with putrefaction setting in. Clouds of gadflies and mayflies alighted on those places that were clagged with dried black blood, rubbed their front legs, crawled about, flew up, then settled again.”(Hang 36)

In order to distract himself from the scene around him, he starts reminiscing back to his days spent with his sister Jeong-mi, and his friendship with Dongho. He tries to search for Dong-ho in the pile of bodies, then sensed that Dong-ho were not there and that his friend was alive which made him feel alone again among these strangers: “...it frightened me to think that here by this strange thicket, surrounded by bodies gradually breaking down into their constituent parts, I was alone among strangers”( Han 37). Jeong-dae represents the hundred others like him who disappeared from existence all at once. Their deaths are rather vague for those families that suffered through the loss of their loved ones as they disappeared without their dead bodies being seen or a proper burial: “It can be said that it is difficult to calculated the number of victims who have not been identified but have been destroyed by burning. The community did not have a definite number of how many deaths are parts of Gwangju Uprising” (Harahap et el 195) This act propels some serious ontological questions about souls and bodies, what happens to these souls that perished without a proper rite, as can be seen in the case of Jeong-dae. The consciousness of the soul that appeared in Jeong-dae before his body was burned and the sudden void that appeared after the corpse was finally burned leaves the questions unanswered previously posed in the novel as what happens to the soul after one dies. This also exposes the state brutality and human rights violation by the Chun Do-hwan regime that tried to bury the truth so hard. This chapter is a direct confrontation with the perpetrators like Chun Do-hwan, who refuses to feel any guilt or remorse over the atrocities committed against the youth of Gwangju: “I forgive no one, and no one forgives me” (Han 103).

For Han, the memories of Gwangju massacre is personal, as she grew up in that town itself when she was little. As she describes in the epilogue that she grew up hearing stories about Gwangju, the hometown she grew up in, and the violence and trauma that her hometown was made to bear. Lee Ji-Eun underscores that “For Han, her inheritance of the memory of Kwangju indirectly but personally, through relatives and acquaintances, was an ethical act that placed her under an obligation to tell and actively respond to pictures and stories of Kwangju”(366). The “postmemory”, to take Marianne Hirsch’s term, that she grew up with is what prompts Han to write on this particular historical event that she considers deeply personal. According to Hirsch, postmemory is the memory that the next generation inherits of the traumatic events of the past through stories, imaginations, and physical manifestations: “Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up.”(106). The writer in the

epilogue clearly describes hearing the elders talk about people being murdered by the military during those days and the stories afterwards the incident. She says: “In my impressionable child’s imagination, I saw a woman in her twenties standing in front of our old hanok’s main gate, her hands on her round stomach. A bullet hole opened up in the center of her pale forehead. Wide as a surprised eye”( Han 135). Han personally growing up with the stories of her hometown Gwangju, and the parallel between her and the boy in the novel, as well as her survivors’ guilt are what prompts her to dig deep into the incident of Gwangju and write a novel reimagining the past. In the epilogue, the writer says : “Break open that moment and out of it will come massacre, torture, violent repression. It gets shoved aside, beaten to a pulp, swept away in the tide of brutality. But now, if we can only keep our eyes open, if we can all hold our gazes steadily, until the bitter end...”(145). Hirsch further emphasizes on the transfer of memory: “Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation.”(107).

### **The Body remembers the violence**

In the chapter “The Prisoner, 1990”, the unnamed prisoner recounts their life in the prison in the aftermath of Gwangju uprising. History doesn’t just disappear when tried to erase or silence, the bodies, and the minds of the people who have went through it remembers, the body itself is the living testimony of truth: “In the novel, she intertwines memory and history, making them intricately connected, while manipulating history through memory. She strives to overcome this discourse by crafting a historical narrative that transforms collective trauma into tangible memories.”(Dahal 1414). The prisoners were subjected to extreme bodily tortures and inhumane treatment inside the prisons. The unnamed prisoner had met Jin.su in prison when they were made to share the meal everyday. As he recounts the various excruciating torture they had to go through including the torture with the pen inside the twisted fingers again and again; hunger, starvation, beatings etc. The prisoner begins the interview with the professor from the physical torture inflicted on the prisoners during those days :

It was just about bearable, at first. But having that pen jammed into the exact same place every day soon rubbed the flesh raw, and a mess of blood and watery discharge oozed from the wound. Later on it got bad enough that you could actually see the bone, a gleam of white amid the filth. They gave me some cotton wool soaked in alcohol to press against it, but only then, only once the bone was showing through”(Han 72).

Then again the next day when the wound hasn’t been healed, the same process with the pen continues. In the interrogation room, no matter what the answer was, beatings followed: “rifle butt to the face. I couldn’t fight the instinct that made me shrink back against the wall and shield my head with my arms, even though that only ever made things worse. When I fell down, they stamped on my back with their army boots.”(Han 73) The inhumane treatment that these prisoners had to go is beyond imaginable and an abuse of human rights: “that my body was no longer my own. That my life had been taken entirely out of my hands, and the only thing I was permitted to do now was to experience pain. Pain so intense I felt sure I was going to lose my

mind, so horrific that I literally did lose control of my body, peeing and shitting myself”(Han 73). According to Elaine Scarry physical pain evades language and representation, and isolates one who had experienced it as it is ineffable to describe in words. The torturer inflicts immense pain on the body in order to establish control and to solicit confessions: “The goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, emphatically and crushingly present by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice, absent by destroying it.”( Scarry 49) *Human Acts* is a trauma narrative; the fragmented memories of trauma of enduring immense bodily pain reappears in survivors like Seon-jae and the unnamed prisoner. Elaine Scarry asserted the irony of inflicting physical pain and torture on the subject by pointing out the power dynamics between the torturer and the tortured as co-dependant. Scarry gives the instance of the aftermath of 9/11 in America. In the aftermath of 9/11, America subjected extreme tortures to countless suspects, including random people, in prisons like Guantanamo, with painful torture methods that were inhumane. According to her tortures are meant to solicit confessions by inflicting pain on the body. As pain evades language, the words solicited from the prisoner proves meaningless. Philosophically, the victory is on the side of the tortured, as the torturer, by revealing his own desperation through him being dependant on the other(tortured) to feel powerful and manufacture truth. The torturer is dependant on inflicting pain and soliciting words for victory, as the words are mere compliance to the power regime, the solicited words from the tortured into submission proves nothing but mere utterances that evades meaning.

Traumas revolve around memory, in fragments, and silences or gaps replaying repeatedly: “The interrogation room of that summer was knitted into our muscle memory, lodged inside our bodies. With that black Monami Biro. That pale gleam of exposed bone. That familiar, broken cadence of whimpered, desperate pleas.”( Han 86). Nevertheless, it exposes the truth about state brutality and terror, the prisoner represents hundred others like him whose voice was once silenced or rendered voiceless. Jin.su according to the narrator was subjected to more extreme tortures than the other prisoners which broke his soul completely. Jin.su had committed suicide eventually leaving behind a photograph that captured Dong-ho and three other boys shot dead on the ground. Jin.su dying beside that photograph is his final act of resistance which eventually exposes the truth behind the photograph through the unnamed prisoner; that those boys that lay dead in a row were shot dead while surrendering with their hands behind their heads: “Now do you understand? The kids in this photo aren’t lying side by side because their corpses were lined up like that after they were killed. It’s because they were walking in a line. They were walking in a straight line, with both arms in the air, just like we’d told them to.” (Han 91). By writing a fictional account based on real figures, Han Kang writes against historical erasure of those people, depicting the humanity that they never forsake, preserving their memories through fiction: Please, write your book so that no one will ever be able to desecrate my brother’s memory again.”( Han 144).

### **Conclusion:**

The seven individual chapters of the text feels like the seven slaps to the readers’ face, each chapter with its own force of slap with its extremity of violence, by the end the readers also end up just like Eun-sook, with capillaries and cheekbones broken, and blood running down the torn skin. *Human Acts* narrates a profound story of courage, resilience, and the fragile nature

of human beings. Human souls, as Jin.su observes, are just like the shards of glasses, that breaks so easily. This novel is a direct confrontation with the perpetrators, and looks straight into their souls, to ask and confront them about their sins against humanity itself. The boy, by consistently arriving haunts the lives of the characters, but it also gives hope. As the prisoner says “Some memories never heal. Rather than fading with the passage of time, those memories become the only things that are left behind when all else is abraded.”(Han 91). Furthermore, for Han, writing this novel is an act of remembrance, challenging erasure. *Human Acts* reminds us that we, as human beings are capable of both violence and empathy. Through a contrast between extreme violence of the perpetrators on one hand, and the profound empathy and solidarity among the people of Gwangju, the author critiques the perpetrators’ lack of conscience: “Conscience, the most terrifying thing in the world”(Kang 79). Through a reimagining of the fateful days of the Gwangju massacre, the writer retains the dignity and humanity of those people that were silenced, marginalized, or erased from history.

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