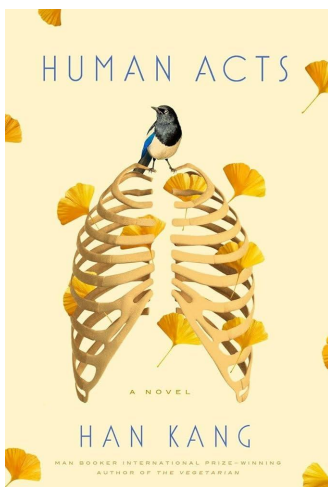


## The Lingering Shadows of Memory and Trauma in Han Kang's *Human Acts*

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Han Kang's *Human Acts* is a powerful and insightful novel that explores the enduring impact of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising on both individual lives and the collective memory of South Korea. The narrative is structured through multiple voices, that together form a picture of loss, guilt, and resistance. One of the most prominent themes of the novel is the intricate relationship between memory and trauma. Through vivid, humanized portrayals of suffering and the painstaking process of remembrance, Kang invites readers to understand how memory acts as both a burden and a source of resistance. *Human Acts* opens with the narrative of Dong- Ho, a fifteen-year-old boy caught in the chaos of the uprising. In the grim setting of an improvised morgue, Dong-Ho's relentless search for his missing friend creates a powerful opening that encapsulates a mood of overwhelming sorrow and pressing urgency, setting the emotional tone for the entire work. This early section of the novel serves as a microcosm for the broader experience of violence and loss. Dong-Ho's personal tragedy is not isolated, it mirrors the collective pain of a community that witnessed the brutal suppression of dissent. His struggle to make sense of the surrounding horror is an instance of how memory is forcibly imprinted upon those who survive traumatic events.

As the novel progresses, Kang employs a fragmented narrative that shifts from one character's perspective to another. This narrative style reflects the broken, scattered nature of memory itself. For instance, one section of the text features a narrator recalling the inhumanity of torture with the words, "Even now, my body remembers. The electric shocks. The blows to the ribs" (Kang 115). This description is not merely about physical pain, it is an articulation of how trauma embeds itself within the body and continues to haunt survivors long after the actual events have passed. This instance illustrates that memory, especially traumatic memory, is both deeply felt and persistently present. Another key example comes from a side character, overwhelmed by guilt and responsibility, reflects on the duty to speak about the past. "If I don't speak, who will?" (Kang 157) becomes a recurring refrain, a poignant reminder of the moral responsibility to remember. This shows how the act of remembrance is an essential form of resistance against the erasure of history by those in power. The narrative suggests that every recollection is an act of defiance, a refusal to let the painful truths be hidden or distorted.

Kang also explores intergenerational trauma through the voices of characters who, though not direct witnesses, carry the scars of history inherited from their family members. For example, Dong- Ho's mother narrates how the stories of loss and violence have seeped into everyday life, colouring family gatherings and personal relationships. This inherited memory highlights the novel's claim that trauma is not confined to the moment of its occurrence, rather it lives on through stories, behaviors, and even physical symptoms that are passed down through generations. The collective memory of Gwangju is further brought to life through vivid descriptions of the city itself. Locations such as the ruins of public spaces and abandoned buildings are filled with the lingering echoes of past violence. One section of the novel describes a once-bustling street now silent, with every corner

holding a whispered story of suffering and defiance. These descriptions serve as sites of memory where the physical environment becomes a testament to the historical trauma endured by the community. By linking memory to place, Kang emphasizes that trauma is not just a psychological phenomenon but is also embedded in the fabric of the world around us. Furthermore, the novel does not shy away from showing how state power attempts to silence these memories. The official narrative of the uprising is one of sanitized history, one that omits the brutal realities experienced by its citizens. Kang's characters, however, persist in recounting their experiences, refusing to let the truth be distorted. This insistence on personal testimony is a recurring motif throughout the novel, reinforcing the idea that memory is an act of resistance against political amnesia.

Han Kang presents memory as a dual-edged sword in *Human Acts*. On one hand, it is a heavy burden that reminds them of the horrors of the past. On the other, it is an essential tool for resistance and healing. The novel's structure is a collage of fragmented narratives that mirrors the way in which traumatic memories often resurface in incomplete, disjointed fragments. Each narrative fragment is like a puzzle piece. While none offer a complete picture on their own, together they form a comprehensive testimony of the Gwangju Uprising's impact. In *Human Acts*, the recurring sensory memories whether it is the echo of a gunshot or the visceral recollection of physical pain, are indicative of a trauma that refuses to be fully integrated into the conscious self. Instead, these memories resurface as uncontrolled, sometimes violent reminders of past events. This constant re-emergence of traumatic memories is what gives the novel its haunting, relentless quality.

The novel, in addition to its psychological dimensions engages with historical and political dimensions of memory. In Kang's narrative, the physical remnants of Gwangju like the ruined buildings, abandoned streets, and even seemingly ordinary objects becomes the markers of a shared history of violence. These sites are not only repositories of memory but also battlegrounds where the struggle over historical truth is waged. By using these physical spaces as narrative anchors, Kang forces the reader to confront the reality that memory is inseparable from the place where it was formed. Another layer of analysis emerges when considering the ethical imperative to remember. The novel suggests that silence in the face of atrocity is equivalent to complicity. This idea is reinforced through multiple character testimonies that stress the moral responsibility of the individual to bear witness, no matter the personal cost. The act of speaking out about trauma is considered as a way to reclaim agency and validate one's own suffering. By implementing these strategies, Kang's narrative not only documents historical violence but also challenges readers to consider their own role in preserving memory and advocating for truth.

The act of remembering is not only portrayed as crucial for justice and healing but it is also shown to be fraught with pain and isolation. Many characters in the novel are depicted as trapped in a cycle of remembrance, that prevents them from

fully moving on with their lives. The inescapable weight of memory creates a persistent tension between the desire to forget and the necessity to remember. This paradox is central to understanding the human condition as depicted in *Human Acts*. The characters' struggles highlight the reality that while memory can be a source of strength, it can also be an overwhelming burden that stifles the possibility of emotional recovery. Moreover, Kang's narrative strategy of shifting perspectives and non-linear progression mirrors the complexity of how memory functions. Instead of offering a neat, chronological account of events, the novel captures the disjointed, often contradictory nature of recollection. This method not only reflects the fragmented way in which traumatic memories are stored and retrieved but also challenges the reader to piece together the broader historical narrative from individual, sometimes incomplete, testimonies. In doing so, Kang brings out the idea that history itself is a mosaic of many voices, each contributing a unique perspective to the collective memory.

In *Human Acts* Han Kang offers a powerful meditation on memory and trauma, by revealing how individual suffering intertwines with the broader struggle for justice. Through a rich tapestry of voices and experiences, the novel captures the persistent impact of the Gwangju Uprising on individual identities and societal narratives. The detailed instances of suffering, such as Dong-Ho's desperate search amid chaos and the graphic recollections of torture, underscore the idea that memory is both an unyielding chain and a vital instrument of resistance. By drawing on both literary and psychological insights, Kang's narrative forces us to acknowledge that the act of remembering is never neutral. It is inherently political, serving as a bulwark against the forces of historical amnesia and state-sponsored erasure. The repeated moral imperative to speak out, challenges us to consider our own responsibilities toward preserving history and honouring those who have suffered. *Human Acts* is a deeply humane work that confronts the reader with both the healing power of memory and its potential to wound. The novel's unflinching portrayal of trauma, offers a moving testament to the resilience of the human spirit. It reminds us that while the past is painful, the act of remembering is essential if we are to learn from history and build a future free from the shadows of forgotten atrocities.

## Reference

Han, Kang. *Human Acts: A Novel*. Hogarth Press, 2016.