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RESEARCH PAPER

Rereading History in Han Kang's *Human Acts*

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Abstract

This paper, "Rereading History in Han Kang's *Human Acts*," investigates the Gwangju Uprising of 1980 in South Korea as depicted in Han Kang's novel. The Gwangju Uprising, a peaceful protest that escalated into a massacre, involved significant civilian casualties. The book narrates this event through diverse perspectives, including children, civilians, soldiers, and even corpses, creating an overarching story of "acts" united by location and time. The significance of this paper lies in expanding comparative studies on Korean literature by examining intertextuality, interdiscursivity, and intermediality in Han Kang's work, an area rarely explored in South Korean writing scholarship. Using a qualitative descriptive research method, the study analyzes how the uprising is represented, employing representation theory to understand how historical events are disseminated as social stories. The findings highlight that discussions of the Gwangju Uprising consistently raise questions about civil society's role in a democratic nation-state. The novel emphasizes history's tendency to repeat, reflecting on the Gwangju Uprising, echoing contemporary civil order collapses in South Korea. Ultimately, the paper concludes that exploring the Gwangju Uprising in modern South Korea is a reciprocal writing process, revisiting a "failed script" through various texts and collective acts of remembrance.

Keywords: Gwangju Uprising, Human Acts, Interdiscursivity, Intermediality, Intertextuality, Representation, Theory, Trauma

1. Introduction

Han Kang's *Human Acts*, a fantastic novel, examines the Gwangju Uprising of 1980, an a massacre and crackdown in South Korea's history. The protest began as a quiet citizen protest against an incoming military dictator and martial law repression. However, in the end, it resulted in massacres and untold civilian suffering at the hands of armed forces. The book describes the plight of civilians; it becomes an inspiration, a courageous defiance against the brutal military machine. The 1980 Gwangju massacre is told through the various viewpoints that swirl around it from children and civilians, to bureaucrats, soldiers, and even a dead body. The two circles intersect to form a single story of "acts" that are one in time and topography, but seen from the opposing viewpoint. The time relays and extends in overlapping circles (earlier actions forecast successive actions), and the various coterminous stories shape such a stand of related actions. Now that we look back on them, these

acts fall away from the groups, as both a bitter curse and a hard realisation affirm.

As a language act, literature is concerned with language and signification. The representation structure in fiction is isomorphic to that of a sign system, which includes the referent and denotation, the extra- and intra-linguistic, the signification, and the how of perception. This literary experiment is evident in the work of Han Kang, in *Human Acts*, where it investigates bodily acts of bodies through and outside of language. In such a language, we found embedded scripting, postponing, and subsequently giving up the meaning to be interpreted.

Contemporary Korean Literature has received increasing attention in recent years, but most available studies have focused on literary style, cultural and social politics, and literature criticism or theory. There has been little investigation into the South Korean cultural intertextuality. This paper thus seeks to broaden the context of



comparative studies of Korean literature, focusing on intertextuality, interdiscursivity, and intermediality in the contemporary novels and lyric prose of Han Kang. The research is framed in a qualitative descriptive methodology that analyses how the Gwangju Uprising is represented within *Human Acts* in terms of the representation theory and how historical events are disseminated to society as narratives through media. The Gwangju Uprising serves as a “historical fact” in the framework of the concept, which considers political-historical context and theories on representation to dissect the text.

2. Findings and Discussions

2.1. Historical Context

The novel *Human Acts* is inspired by the Gwangju Uprising of spring 1980 in South Korea, which lasted from May 18 to 27. Following the 1979 assassination of military dictator Park Chung-hee, a civilian-led push for democracy emerged. However, the students’ desire to end military rule, police brutality, and a longing for safety fueled a violent uprising. Amid pervasive military gloom, propaganda, and societal corruption, the military responded with deadly force against an unarmed populace. This uprising began non-violently with student protests against police actions but escalated into nationwide brutality and suppression (Masruri Harahap & Utami, 2019).

South Korean literature’s exploration of the Gwangju Uprising can be categorised into three phases: first, the event itself and its evidence; second, memorialising Gwangju; and third, cross-medium interpretations. Engaging with history often prompts questions about its truth, particularly concerning the Uprising. While there is a general agreement on the historical facts, differences in political narratives and imaginative representations create varied interpretations. The author’s earlier works address human depravity. In *Human Acts*, the emphasis on bodily suffering highlights unprocessed grief through graphic portrayals of violence and death, revealing the absurdity of such brutality and focusing on what remains of humanity amidst the chaos (Kim, 2019).

Historically victimized bodies and their associated memories persist in the present, highlighting unmet mourning. Trauma remains unclaimed, transforming into a narrative that inadequately reflects profound grief. It has not matured into a fully represented past and eludes complete understanding. In this context, loss underscores historical events’ repeated disregard for human life to suppress it.

2.1.1. The Gwangju Uprising

On May 18, 1980, militias attacked a Chonnam National University dormitory in Gwangju, South Korea, targeting student activists protesting Chun Doo-hwan’s authoritarian rule. This led to widespread protests and an uprising known as the Gwangju Uprising. Demonstrators called for accountability for the *Gwangju* massacre and sought democratization, press freedom, social justice, and local autonomy. Tens of thousands participated against martial law, while government troops were deployed, resulting in hundreds of casualties (Harahap & Utami, 2019, pp. 186-198).

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. Gwangju embodies the tragic contradiction of hope and despair, grappling with the inexpressible horror that challenges language and ethics (Fiaz et al., 2023, pp. 96-115).

The novel features a polytopic structure, illustrating the *Gwangju* massacre’s micro-level violence and the pain of existence during this historical event. It reflects on collective memory and the socio-political changes in South Korea caused by the tragedy. The narrative encompasses the massacre and its remembrance, showing how the victims’ grief remains ungraspable for witnesses and the public.

2.1.2. Political Climate in South Korea

Interest in the literature of the Republic of Korea (ROK) has surged due to globalization, especially for works once deemed untranslatable due to taboo subjects like the Jeju 4.3 incident, the April 16 tragedy, and the Gwangju incident. These books have rapidly become best sellers. ROK’s foremost publishing and translation companies are creating strategies to promote new local productions. Additionally, Korean literature, previously considered taboo, is now a hot topic in literature niche markets and among global distribution platforms. Interest in undervalued writers and marginalized works is rising, revealing previously hidden curiosities (Kim, 2022, pp. 471-494).

The ongoing interest in the abolishment of the *Gwangju* 5.18 cemetery as part of preparations for an international literary festival, in conjunction with translation and distribution work on the 5.18 bereaved families plight of Han Kang’s *Human Acts*, has intensified after the controversies surrounding the Freedom of Expression Convention (2019), the modification of the Gwangju 5.18 Democratic Movement special law, and the burning down of 5.18-related cultural properties. While being swept up in this feverish desire for concealed stories, the tinge of “oppression” still lingers (Vierthaler, 2022, pp. 111–162).

The narrative performance of a novel resembles a variety show with numerous guests, scripts, and episodes, yet the translation and distribution of certain portions remain pending. The in-text obscurities in sections 5.15 and 5.17 highlight this issue. Writers are scrambling for recognition for their contributions while trying to move on from their traumas. Unlike works that collaboratively seek to tell untold stories, the suppressed remnants of past traumas linger in a contested void. This contest creates challenges and prevents growth, leading to a cycle of unfulfilled expression rather than engaging in innovative writing, characterizing genres like sci-fi or fantasy, intensifying the struggle of silence and reflection (Kim, 2019).

3. Themes of Memory and Trauma

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. Memory and trauma, complex issues in post-human and post-modern discourses, are central to the conflicts and violence of the twentieth century. These concepts become vague and problematic when focusing on private memory and loss in a post-modern context.

The trajectory of personal and meta-fictional narratives can challenge rigid historical accounts, raising questions about the possibility of regenerative textuality amid dislocation. As a counter-narrative to history, memory also aligns with this critical track. This cycle of skepticism prompts further inquiry into ethics, especially as memory and history become estranged. The text shifts the debate into a complex direction, encouraging disparate memories to converge into a shared past, forming a real historical foundation amidst exotic memories. This process reveals how a collective reality, like a nation-state, emerges from diverse and conflicting memories, emphasizing the dominance of political and sociological space over psychoanalytic time (Acevedo, 2022, pp. 241–263).

3.1. Collective Memory

In Han Kang's *Human Acts*, the trauma of the Gwangju uprising is examined, challenging self-indulgent narratives to reveal an authentic 'Korean' identity. The work tackles the *Gwangju* Massacre and the Uprising's collective memory, emphasizing memorialization and its distortions. The Korean regeneration movement aimed to counter colonialism and build a national identity, often rooted in the Korean War, which redefined historical representation. For those who once held a unified history, the war represented a critical divide. Mobilizing individual yet collective histories counters the subjective terror of the U.S. imperial era. Concerns about self-indulgent narratives in *Gwangju*-related works highlight the mourning struggles during the turmoil, raising critical challenges in narrating these complex experiences (Lee, 2025).

By broaching concerns about narratibilization, *Human Acts* undertakes to map the collective memory of *Gwangju*. The narratibilization of experience has been a recurrent theme in the 'postmemory-art' era since the fall of the Berlin Wall. This kind of concern has begun to reshape one's understanding of what memory is, as in the case of Girard's seminal work, with the unanimous acceptance of the independent and 'powerful' nature of postmemory in which the present is retroversively 'invested' by the memory of one's kin. The postmemory discourse, hailed as the 'new mourning,' illustrates the quality of collective memory, which accommodates all and allows the story to be shared as equally dramatic.

3.2. Personal Trauma

Once more the scene which has been sucked down into the darkness that surrounds the plants, the cement bricks, the cracked wall, the roof, thousands of nights long gone by, untold. Do blooms remember the scorch on their leaves, or the gargantuan bulge on the beech trunks bent there for an eternity like captive slabs of marble? Hidden, hidden, deep in the stones or the heart of

bricks, minting all this an enormous treasure lies buried, hidden, hidden under the cracked earth (Graddon, 2023).

As a second-generation victim, a witness, or simply a member of today's tribe, should he have tried harder? Should he have taken every possible route to be able to approach her? How many questions added to his guilt? Moreover, how many start to sweep through his veins? The walls began accumulating old, dispatching dejections along their lower and upper parts, till memory was extinguished and the recognition of one's companions and oneself was lost entirely. Lost were what tinted the days of August, like white capsule-shrinking clouds in the remarkable milieu.

"Had that image not been sold, tarnished rocks would have returned simply to the children and the insects, nothing striking or traitorous wasted, just celebrating their shifting essences and revealing properties." Cane fields burned, soot came raining, cages drilled their tautness with no use, and abandoned souls pawed around. No one could be sure if ever there lay underneath the sods or in between one of those stones a fishbone, still specked with glistening flesh, nostalgically recalling the august sun at the eastern brooks (Collins, 2022).

4. Narrative Structure

Han Kang's *Human Acts* is a fragmented narrative featuring multiple perspectives, each presented in various styles. The novel acknowledges the complexity of historical truths, which are influenced by discourse, ideology, time, and power relations. These factors shape our understanding, limiting any interpretation's claim to ultimate truth. The socio-political forces involved render simplistic historiographic approaches inadequate. Therefore, a plurality of personal narratives is crucial to fully grasp the intricate aspects of the Gwangju Uprising, which remains an ongoing process open to continuous reexamination and revision (Huang & Lee, 2022).

The first chapter explores Dong-ho's final struggles before his death, where he transforms into a spectre, a shadow waiting for recognition. A prehistoric black hole engulfs human actions in darkness. The second chapter examines his dead body as central to evolving narrative styles, where fragmented matter speaks and recalls history, highlighting the objectification and alienation of *Human Acts*. This delayed recognition of a body emphasizes the perpetual failure of history's emergence. The third chapter is a letter born from a stronghold of sorrow and rage, addressed to boyish fingers and erased from maps, where both writer and recipient vanish.

The novel explores how tangible memories become bearers of the past, revealing unspoken stories. An actor seeks sites of pre-historical significance, pondering whether neglected places have hidden tales. Places embody traces of narratives that remain unrecorded, echoing the final days of recent political upheaval and the consequences of scholarly repression. The actor's journey intertwines with the Gwangju Democratization Uprising, presenting history as a means to honor unfinished stories, subtle as

handprints on dusty railroad tracks and the unheard voices lost in time.

4.1. Multiple Perspectives

The novel presents multiple perspectives, with various characters recounting trauma. These voices reveal the horror, absurdity, and injustice of the experience, as the bodies themselves narrate the trauma due to the impossibility of recounting it fully. While the nation acknowledges the significance of the May Events, opportunism threatens to turn recognition into mere fixation on trauma. Unremembered events risk repetition, but excessive remembrance traps the storyteller in sorrow. Writing and recalling trauma becomes a double-edged sword. The politics of remembrance—what and how to record—echo in *Human Acts*. As memories of trauma remained painful during its writing, the novel explores how to articulate trauma while fostering hope for healing (Mountz et al., 2024).

Human Acts recalls the May Events with ironic distance while addressing the trauma in a painful tone. Written within South Korea's traumatic culture, it is the bodies illustrating the trauma that narrate the experience instead of a traditional recount. The nation has recognized the May Events' historical significance, and the trauma is extensive in number and meaning. May 18 is seen as a monument and a day of national uprising against authoritarianism; however, it also represents a failed uprising and tragic heroism. The stories are counterfactual yet nostalgic, akin to impossible love for something irretrievable (Kim, 2019).

4.2. Non-linear Narrative

The two novels are structurally different, although they cover the same period, leading to the May 18 Gwangju Democratic Uprising of 1980. The *Vegetarian* concludes with the protagonist's systematic death, while *Human Acts* documents the Gwangju Uprising and its significance, presenting the protagonist's death as a collective trauma surpassing individual experience.

The two novels greatly differ in narrative form and style while sharing a connection through intense moments at various levels. They emphasize the protagonist's death and the examination of flesh and silent suffering across humans, plants, and animals. This powerful strategy encourages readers to reconsider the history of atrocities that marginalized beings face in society.

Examination of the stylization and reasons that make these moments so "heavy" can help overcome challenges posed by the textuality and find a new way of reading them. However, what could also be challenged is: could this "really" be read as a history of national community? Did this audience try to listen "in silence, with responsibility, return, and restitution?" Could silence in their rereading be a space of redemption through their hope for love? Answers to these questions cannot be conducted within texts but should be searched in contexts and elsewhere (Kim, 2019).

Although the Eating of Meat was a choice to resist the complete socialization against the protagonist's will, the *Vegetarian's* strangeness persisted and grew to sickness. Insistence on her rejection of flesh and the active fanning of her madness deepened

and prepared her entry into "silence." How did this passionate re-reading of the "impossible" offer a radical shift, making silence a space of "redeeming?" Would this silence be re-silenced again and again, or during the process of re-telling? In addition to guilt and regret, what else could the site offer to love?

5. Character Analysis

Human Acts employs multi-layered narrative approaches, using metaphorical imagery and historical facts to turn fluid memories of various characters into a literary event that prompts social discourse and reveals cultural impacts beyond their historical context. It encompasses a range of historical incidents, chaos, and trauma through the interpretations of characters who experience them, becoming less and being renewed through their phenomenological journeys. The narrative's distinctive subjectivity, formed by various characters with a compassionate aim, encourages readers to revisit their narratives and a traumatic past.

Human Acts integrates chaotic historical micro-memories with conflicting representations of macro-history, shaped by the author's and characters' perceptions. This creates a unique literary space where the chaos of cultural discourse transforms into textual discourse. Such elaborate contextualization occurs only in a post-traumatic society where diverse representations of history coexist, marked by empathy and hostility. Here, the character's painful memories and the narrative of minoritarian desire gain visibility and articulation through the general character and readers, reflecting a broader, diverse society grappling with its unrepresentable traumatic past.

The narrator's retrospective reading of the umbilical cord that imparts and yet forever severs a bond with its mother hints at the stinking historical shame of betrayal from the breadth of the closed readership and the possibility of a new current in both cultural reading and discourse. The contention of such a post-traumatic communal horizon however lies in its open yet far broader societal horizon; the sue at a fallen commemorative statue of both anguished and anguishing cries that is simultaneously both an impersonal watchdog over the traumatic past becoming befallen and an expression of its representational impossibility stands as a double-edged sword in both reprimanding a socio-cultural specter and threatening it as its agent.

5.1. The Protagonist's Journey

When a character is a war victim, it can be very challenging for writers to reach readers and deliver various messages. Writers must find instruments to express what the victim has lost and how hard it is to bear the trauma throughout their lives. The novel approaches this theme through the journey of a young boy, Dong-ho. By bringing to life the tragedy of the Gwangju Uprising, the author enables readers to see the horror of state violence from different perspectives.

Dong-ho's story spans before, during, and after the uprising and covers events over a few years. After introducing the event, a boy finds a body in a cemetery. Then, through Dong-ho's eyes, the narrator describes Gwangju, the boy's family, and the beginning of

the uprising. As a victim, he feels the distant rage, which spreads gradually among citizens. After that uprising, Dong-ho and the people became victims. During the chaos, state police shoot at Dong-ho's father in front of him. This is the moment that pains Dong-ho the most. Searching for him is more complex than at first because seeing the dead body feels too real. The journey starts from home and deepens a family's tragedy and horror.

The first part of Dong-ho's journey takes him from the cemetery to the city square. Death and decay are introduced through vivid images: a grazed white shirt, the mottled skin of cut flesh, and unrecognizable corpses covered in white cloth. These descriptions create a sense of urgency for him to identify the corpse. Gwangju is an ordinary rural city with a mixture of urban structures. The family owns a bakery shop, which indicates economic prosperity and warmth. However, killing civilians ruins the peace. The peaceful city is overturned as darkness and bloodshed invade freely and disturbingly. The last moment, where Dong-ho wanders alone on the cold ground, is bound to freeze the reader's heart (Shin et al., 2024).

5.2. Supporting Characters' Roles

Expand on the supporting characters' roles in the protagonist's journey and the themes in the work. Some suggestions are as follows: how the representation of Sooni deepens the themes, how Ho Dong and the portrayal of family life expand the themes, and how aspects of the Park family illuminate the themes. In "*Human Acts*," Han Kang layers supporting characters onto the protagonist's resilient journey through trauma to emphasize harmonizing individual and national histories as the key to healing. Set against the June Democratic Movement in South Korea, Han conveys the complexity of human experiences surrounding violence and reflects the collective grief of society through fragmented perspectives (Kim, 2022, pp. 471-494).

The text explores memory fragility and the sorrow of watching a loved one decline. Lee Joon's character, portrayed as 'snooty Sooni,' particularly highlights this through her flight scene juxtaposed with the death of Ho Dong's father and Lee Joon's sobs in class, intensifying the tragic experience. The phrases "He was, is, will be my father" and "A million times a million and other times more" illustrate the nuances of loss, showing its profound impact on life. Kwan's concern for Lee Joon's family exemplifies their bond and past joy amid struggles against arbitrary power, revealing the harsh realities that provoke empathy for the Park family, ultimately showing how families cope with their homeland's trauma.

The events of May 1980 in Gwangju are significant in contemporary South Korean history, marking a period that seemed to fade from memory. It began after Chun Doo-hwan assumed power and involved violently suppressing opposition, leading to harsh actions against Gwangju citizens. Over ten days, it became a narrative of blood and suffering, influencing the fate of democracy in Korea.

Gwangju's 80 years have witnessed countless challenges, marking history with blood and punishment. As generations pass, people

increasingly understand the significance of significant historical events. There emerges a feeling of remorse for past ignorance. With culture and arts influencing perceptions, one questions if history is destined to repeat itself, and whether repressed events stay static in history or resonate with contemporary contexts (Lee, 2023).

A novel undertakes the historical narrative of the May 1980 Gwangju Uprising and transforms it into a powerful retelling of history while raising these difficult questions. It finds dramatic potential in the story of history and focuses on 'the implications of *Human Acts* involved in the events of history.' It examines how one of those deeds, conceived as futile and meaningless, has destructive power beyond ripping history open and passing it on. The musical interpretation of the play is also a way of searching for this estrangement and traces a historical, aesthetic, and visual exploration of the theatre.

6. Influence on Korean Literature

Contemporary Korean literature has gained more attention from readers worldwide, and Korean authors are recognized as worthy of being included in the global literary canon. A prime example is Han Kang, an author whose work translated into English has received award nominations and literary awards, just as it has worldwide. Han Kang successfully portrays the voice of a placeless human being who ends up being an outcast and victim after brutal repression against Korean civilians in the 1980 Gwangju uprising. *Human Acts*, a novel featuring voices of various characters, including victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and their concerns for humanity, is a sequel to the internationally praised author's previous work, *The Vegetarian* (Kim, 2019).

The first novel in English translation deals with the theme of regulation and bodily control in a claustrophobic domestic environment, as well as the violation and destruction of human dignity by state control over the body and the existence of a human. Presumably, this award-winning novel on the human body and condition will further prompt inquiries into the human heart in her next work, which will be translated into English. However, a sequel containing dissimilar pretexts was released in English shortly after the author's rise to a global following. It is an exquisite and innovative construction, portraying reenactments of bodily experience beyond reasoning. The target of scrutiny in this latest novel is not the human body but the human act.

6.1. Global Reception

In 2016, Han Kang won the International Man Booker Prize for her novel *The Vegetarian*, now a modern classic in literature. Born in South Korea in 1970, she is a professor of creative writing at Yonsei University. Before *The Vegetarian*, she published two poetry collections and two novels. This text focuses on her work, *Human Acts*, which looks into the 1980 Gwangju Uprising. It will address three questions: (a) How was *Human Acts* chosen for English translation?; (b) What challenges did this translation face?; and (c) How has Han Kang's work been received in English, considering South Korea's political and humanitarian context? The

discussion will offer insights into a translator's note style (Chung, 2023, pp. 27–37).

In South Korea, literature serves as a force for social justice, allowing Han Kang to address truths in Asian literature beyond Asian American narratives. Certain scenes reflect on acts of reading, hinting at intermediality in storytelling. The politics of representation reveal issues in translation studies, as texts change during translation, making original meanings elusive. Korea is often viewed as merely a scope of representation. However, Han Kang's moral tenacity against distortions of inhumanity highlights literature's power to challenge regimes of visibility. By emphasizing fragility and mortality, she creates a potent act of listening, a vital tool for a writer seeking to escape the indignity of renunciation and rationality. Her cultural background reflects the untruth in language and truth in actions, restoring literature to its original place.

7. Critical Reception

Han Kang's *Human Acts* is captivating with its unique prose and structure, reinterpreting history through the scars and wounds of anticipation transformed into wondrous writing. However, its innovative narrative may have led to misunderstandings of Korean history. With translations in 35 languages, the novel has gained significant popularity, particularly in Europe. A key question arises: how have writers addressed the notion of bodily suffering throughout history? Kang's prose features a graceful yet complex interplay of 'yes' and 'no,' blurring the lines between reality and dreams. The narrative's oscillation challenges traditional meanings and evokes a sense of liberation and wonder, ultimately nurturing a deep, imaginative void that celebrates endless expressions.

Writing consciously, the text becomes the body itself—a contemplation stage. Contained despair offers an instinctual wish to provide biopolitical resistance to death and 'impossible' recuperation to both conditions. However, dead bodies testify to what is utterly uncontainable, unrecoverable, and unassertable. Despite the dead, reading involves respect and desire to see; what remains is not the body but the corpse. The resistance of vertigo disappears, allowing the rupture to tell its tale. Confined within language, it searched extravagantly for something infinite, not leading to a conclusion and thus rendering this temporal order questionable (Kim, 2019, pp. 1–10).

Contemplation yields wonder, prompting reevaluation and recommencement; Anagnorisis creates a wound of thought. Contemplating wonder adds layers, intertwining present history with the act of writing. Witnesses and victims become absent readers, causing a shift that induces disengagement. Japan's approach to memory becomes crucial to understanding what is 'forgotten.' The challenge lies in carrying this burden and determining how text can responsibly cultivate wonder amidst tragedy.

7.1. Literary Criticism

This article focuses on issues of intermediality and interdiscursivity in contemporary literature of the Republic of Korea. It discusses intertextuality, intermedial communication, and intercourse. It also

lays out the theoretical apparatus and argumentation for the interpretative process. Finally, it briefly overviews contemporary cultural policies and representation in the Korean context and critically examines them (Kim, 2019).

The second part of the article presents a brief history of modern Korean literature to provide interpreters with a contextual framework for analyzing acclaimed contemporary works. This discussion allows for critical interpretations of the tactics and ideology within Korean prose. It posits that the narrative tendencies remain locally marked, as the language undergoes appropriation into "another medium," impacting its discursive order. The main discussion revolves around three novels by 2016 International Booker Prize winner Han Kang: *Vegetarian*, *Human Acts*, and *The White Book*, examined within diverse settings.

The interpretation emphasizes the multiplication of layers in Korean and English readings, highlighting the strategies of power that create various aesthetic and ethical effects. Regarding de- and re-contextualization, two points emerge: (1) Contemporary Korean discourses, incorporating Western frames, remain tied to national and local operations; (2) Late engagement with Western discourse leads to a lack of awareness of compromise and empowerment tactics. This epistemic "stage-lockedness" means contemporary Korean literature serves as an escape for international audiences, enriching knowledge of unusual practices while exposing significant gaps in world knowledge between what is written and the underlying contexts.

7.2. Public Response

In 1980, the Korean government violently suppressed pro-democracy protests in Gwangju. Han Kang's novel, *Human Acts*, captures the horror of this event and reflects on Korea's quest to reclaim its history. The Gwangju massacre, despite being over 40 years ago, remains unacknowledged, mainly, especially among the five nations involved: the U.S., the USSR, China, Korea, and Japan. *Human Acts* confronts Korea's troubled past without explicitly naming it, yet its popularity diminishes its recognition as a profound work necessary for understanding Korea's turbulent 1980s.

It is essential to explore readers' reception of the novel *Human Acts* and its appeal beyond Korea due to its deep engagement with contemporary history, which is crucial for understanding Gwangju. Gwangju is not unique in experiencing tragedy, yet the events of May 18 are tied to political causes and intricate layers within Korea's collective memory of violence. Understanding this requires more than just an interest in culture; it demands a profound, temporal, and expansive cultural commitment, reflected in Jeon Tae-il's slogan: "a decent living, a decent life." The Gwangju uprising 1980 remains unread, mainly shaped by a palimpsest of competing narratives from that decade (Kim, 2019).

8. Findings

Debates of the Gwangju Uprising inevitably evoke discussions on the position of civil society in a democratic state. The nature of, and the human susceptibility to, social orders "what happens" doubt, in Han Kang's words, the realization that "a moment's



weakness in a belief" is what lies between us and order, an understanding that becomes evident only afterward. The Return "History has a way of repeating itself," Kang writes, with echoes of the Gwangju Uprising providing a backdrop to events unfolding in contemporary South Korea, where civil order has once more completely failed.

In doing so, "history dodges away" is understood as a "mistake" that citizens must bear. These concepts might explain some of Kang's text's multiple narrators and temporal levels. In that case, they also help to offer a theory of Kang's re-visioning of the Gwangju Uprising in *Human Acts*. Rereading and telling the story of Gwangju in the present South Korea is a dialectical process, a rewriting in reverse, if you will: A failed script is revisited through the writings nonfictional essays, novels, and visual, cinematic, and theatrical representations inscribed within its genres, and by way of actions of collective commemoration.

9. Conclusion

The Gwangju Uprising of 1980 forms the basis of Han Kang's *Human Acts*, the historical horror of this novel providing an experience of human life so deeply tragic. The story goes beyond mere historical narration to develop into a "working-through" of an incomprehensible and traumatic past. In questioning what the body is and to whom it belongs amid mass killing, the book articulates the breakdown of personal identity and social order under conditions of profound violence.

However, due to the lack of information because the regime controlled them, Kang's book remains a remarkable material regarding how literature can record and inform the senses and words of Gwangju. The novel affirms the power of literature to provide answers, create connections, and maintain the integrity of art in the face of unspeakable atrocities. Ultimately, *Human Acts* underscores that though the physical body may be gone, the pain of exile and the quest for belonging remain so long as there is memory and calls for an incessant grappling with haunting historical truths.

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