

“An Analysis of Politics of Representation in Han Kang's Novels”

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Abstract: Han Kang is the fiction author and among the most powerful modern South Korean writers that narrate the tale about the deep psychological, social and political realities of human experiencing in her fiction. The problem of identity, violence, gender, trauma, and memory have been touched upon in her works, *The Vegetarian* (2007), *Human Acts* (2014), and *The White Book* (2016). The paper will also examine the politics of representation in the writings of Han Kang, and how she uses her works to create the voices of the marginalized and experience of trauma of the history, through the experimental style of narration and poetic minimalism. The study aims to appreciate the fact that Han Kang literary vision criticizes dominant systems of culture and politics but still allows one the opportunity to empathize and be imaginative in thinking about the problem. By analyzing her silence, fragmentation and embodiment, this paper will explore Han Kang in ways that redefine the meaning of representation that is not shaped by the language and history as well as reveal the stratified meaning of personal and political in response to post-war Korean writing.

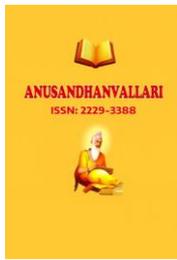
Keywords: Han Kang, politics of representation, trauma, identity, postcolonial literature, gender, violence, memory, Korean fiction.

Introduction:

Han Kang is a renowned author who transforms pain and silence of people into a tale about ordinary life of people. In her books, she discusses what is in the boundaries of expression, the right to witness, and the struggle between what we observe and what we cannot observe in life. Han Kang brings out how language, memory and art can expose as well as conceal the truth of violence, identity and history through her novels.

The social and political realities of South Korea such as the rapid modernization of the country, trauma caused by past, and patriarchy frequently find their reflection in her fiction. *The Vegetarian* (2007), *Human Acts* (2014), and *The White Book* (2016) are some of her most popular works. Throughout these books, she employs distinctive modes of narration to talk about the sufferings of the silenced people and how difficult it is to express the pain through writing. What is written is not the only question she raises, but she also pays attention to what is not said, which makes sense as one cannot easily speak on behalf of other people and be a voice of any other person in distress.

In *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang talks about the transformation of female body as an object of standing against male and social dominance. The refrainment of eating meat when Yeong-hye is the protagonist of the movie, is a rebellious act, a way of saying no to violence and conformity. The one against authority and individuality is also discussed in the story. In the book *Human Acts*, Han Kang brings back to the recent state violence in Gwangju Uprising of 1980 the common memory of many ordinary people whose trauma is common in this context. In this way, she provides the voice of those ignored by history and explores the politics of memory and forgetting. *The White Book* is more personal, as it is deeply contemplative on the themes of grief, loss, and rebirth, in a form of fragmented poems. Even writing, in this case, is the defiance against forgetting and meditation about the unimportance of life.



The style of writing used by Han Kang is silence, fragmentation and open endings, that surpass the conventional narrative of stories. Her novels are not providing some simple closure and offer readers to think and to question ethical issues. She uses pauses and silences in her writing to indicate the hardship of the process of embodying trauma or violence, making it impossible to highlight certain things through words. Through this, her literature is made a place of empathy, moral then artistic imagination.

The work of Han Kang transcends the Korean culture too. Her books are read worldwide as her novels have been translated into numerous languages. Her stories are familiar to any reader around the world because the basic themes of suffering, identity, and transformation connect with them. Through her writing, the readers are compelled to deal with the dismal reality of power, violence, and human condition.

This paper discusses the way Han Kang constructs her politics of representation in the storytelling, use of characters and theme. It examines the way she is voicing the excluded experiences and whether or not language is sufficiently adequate to voice such pain. It also looks at her artistic techniques such as body imagery, non-linear narrative, and symbolism and the way in which her decisions have political and ethical implications.

Finally, it can be affirmed that Han Kang works are indistinct in terms of art and expectation. Her writing does not only censure systems of oppression, but it makes the reader sympathize with the sufferers. With her insightful and heartfelt narratives, Han Kang transforms literature into a kind of protest and creates a voice of the oppressed and recollects the past that is trying to be forgotten.

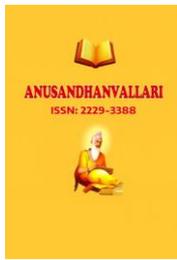
Literature survey:

The literature review shows the ways in which themes of gender, trauma, identity, and politics of representation have been investigated by Indian scholars within the framework of the recent Asian and postcolonial fiction and enables perceiving the novels of Han Kang in the context of the newest trends in literary and cultural studies.

In her article, Gender, Body, and Resistance in Contemporary Fiction, Ahuja (2020) discusses the idea of the female body being used as a means of protest against the oppression by the patriarchal and political regime. Her kind of work is also linked to the Vegetarian by Han Kang, in which the refusal of food by the protagonist turns into the protest and individual choice. In the same manner, Banerjee (2019) in Politics of Silence: Representation of Trauma in Women writing examines the way women communicate about pain and trauma using silence and discontinuous stories. This point is consistent with the narrative style used by Han Kang in which silence is usually more expressive than words, particularly in the description of female victims and their inner poles.

In her book Women, Violence and Identity in Postcolonial Narratives, Bhatia (2015) talks of the role of violence experienced by postcolonial women in defining their identity and their social status. Her reflections can be used to understand how Han Kang can relate individual trauma to the collective memory of violence of Korea. In the article Reclaiming the Silenced Voice: Feminist Readings of Trauma and Memory, Bose (2022) highlights the strength of voice and memory recovery as an empowerment, and is applicable to women writers, which is discussed by Han Kang in her evolving psyche of the characters in the novel.

Chakraborty (2018) focuses on the topic of the paper, which is that of Body Politics and Gender Representation in Modern Asian Fiction, and demonstrates how Asian authors disrupt the traditional gender depictions. The concept of human body as a location of pain and protest is strongly related to the description of circumstances given by Han Kang. In a work by Chatterjee (2021), Ethics of Remembering: Trauma and Collective Memory in Contemporary Literature, the author talks about the ethical obligation of the author who aims to describe an issue of trauma. This is the same view which Han Kang showed in his sensitive depiction of the Gwangju Massacre in Human Acts with memory and ethics at the centre of the narrative.



In her book *Trauma and Testimony: Narrating Pain in Asian Women Literature*, Das (2017) examines the way female authors employ their writings in attempts to articulate oppressed or shared pain. The way Han Kang provides her accounts can be regarded as a literary testament to trauma, in particular, to the historical pain. In the article *Silence as Protest: Feminist Perspectives in Contemporary Asian Women Writers*, Gupta (2023) states that silence may serve as an effective means of protest, a very strong motif of the works by Han Kang.

Moreover, there are focuses on the importance of the ethics of representation of marginalized voices and suffering by Joshi (2013) in *Postcolonial Feminism and the Ethics of Representation* and Nair (2016) in *Forgetting/Remembering Postcolonial Narratives of Suffering*. Their writings give a theoretical perspective of how Han Kang cleverly balances her texts between presenting the trauma and maintaining dignity of her characters. In the comparison of the works of silence, trauma, and the body, Thomas (2023) provides the example of the writing of Korean and Indian women, which author notes a similarity in the application of silence and memory to reveal hidden feelings and opposition to the authorities. Finally, Verma (2019) in the article *The Politics of Representation: postcolonial versus Feminist stances* describes how literature can oppose and support dominant ideologies. These structures of power are definitely questioned in the context of the novels that were written by Han Kang, and the gender, violence, and memory are depicted.

Altogether, these articles demonstrate that the role of trauma, gender and postcolonial identity in shaping literal expression is thoroughly discussed by scholars. Their insights can be used to read the novels by Han Kang as the strong explorations of the politics of representation in which factor of silent, memory, and female body turns out to be both the resistive and the memorizing tool in contemporary Korean fiction.

Han Kang

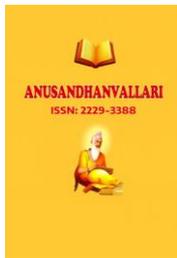
Han Kang is considered to be one of the greatest representatives of the modern Korean literature, whose poetic prose, minimalism, and profound inquiry of the human condition seem to be very philosophical. Han Kang was born in Gwangju South Korea in the year 1970, the year after the Gwangju Uprising which created a traumatic event in her literary imaginative. The most notable of her works such as *The Vegetarian* (2007), *Human Acts* (2014) and *The White Book* (2016) are exploring the crossroads between pain, silence, memory and resistance.

The writing of Han Kang is marked by an experiment how people have to face dehumanizing social, political, and historical pressures. She adds to dispel traditional representations in literature by incorporating silence, fracturing and body images; she employs a metaphysical expression of trauma and strength through the use of imagery. Her works do not only touch upon the historical and political struggles in South Korea but they also pose questions that concern all people on the subject of humanity, morality and the boundaries of what is put across.

Politics of Representation

The politics of representation is the language of power which is associated with the representation of people, events and experiences in art, literature and the media. It wonders which people have the right to represent who, whose voices are listened to and who are silenced or marginalized? This is one of the main ideas in the novels of Han Kang. She reveals the ways in which the dominant social and political discourses disregard or manipulate the voices of the oppressed people in the society especially women, victims of state violence and the voiceless dead people.

In *Human Acts*, Han Kang restores the voices of the people of Gwangju that were murdered during the massacre and lets them voice their own misfortune and dignity. She confronts the patriarch systems in *The Vegetarian* in which the female bodies are dictated on by identity and morality. The inability to give linear narratives or any obvious resolutions of Han Kang is in itself a political gesture a denial of the suggestion that the trauma can be easily depicted or comprehended. This makes her characters to engage in ethical bearing



whereby readers are forced to face the uneasy realities of the presence of power, silence and representation.

Trauma

In psycho-literary terminologies, trauma is an intense emotional trauma resultant of extreme suffering, violence or loss that cannot be directly described. The roots of the fiction of Han Kang lie very deeply in exploring the issue of trauma, both individual and national.

In *Human Acts*, the traumas are found in its occurrence following political violence in the Gwangju Uprising. Han Kang lowers the camera not only to depict the bricks and bloody scenes of the physical brutality but also to portray the emotional and psychological bruises left to be with survivors. The narrative is discontinuous, using multiple voices and narration; it shows the fragmentation of memory and the impossibility of expressing trauma as a whole.

Correspondingly, the scenario with Yeong-Hye in *The Vegetarian* is also the violent and alienation internalization and, as such, the mental collapse of the character. According to Han Kang, trauma is not a solitary circumstance but a continuation of living in a violence-prone and misperceiving world. Her non-linear time, use of silence, repetition and non-linear time depict the way trauma interferes with language and consciousness.

Identity

The nature of identity in works by Han Kang is complicated, dynamic and quite divided. Her characters have problems with delineation in the strict social, political and cultural borders. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-Hye defies the conventions and rejects all social regulations by giving up meat, and, ultimately, all human identity, in the pursuit of being pure, even vegetal. Her action upsets traditional ideas of sanity, morality, and femininity.

In *Human Acts*, individuality turns into a group phenomenon where individual voices are united in a group of common anguish where the individuality of identity is impossible to disconnect and integrate it in the world of historical and community experience. Han Kang develops the concept of identity in such a way that it is based on memory, body and resistance, as opposed to being determined by external powers. This has to do with her philosophical question as a whole, how are people going to remain human amidst a dehumanizing world?

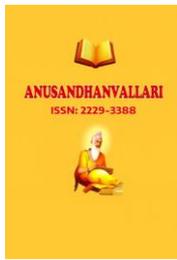
Postcolonial Literature

The subject matter of postcolonial literature is the culture, politics, and psychology of the effects of colonialism and its consequences. Despite the fact that South Korea had not been a colony in the same manner as most colonies of the West, it was occupied by Japan (1910-1945) and then divided and directly dictated, which had a great impact on the country and its literature.

The works of Han Kang are readable in the postcolonial context due to the fact that they address the remnants of colonialism, authoritarianism, and modernity on the Korean society. Her books raise doubts about the systems of power, imposed, which determine the morality, history, and identity. This is the meaning of her writing against historical victim silence and silencing of the marginalized groups. The success of her translated works across the world also creates some concerns regarding cultural representation - the way in which Korean trauma and Korean history is translated to global audiences. Han Kang finds his way around this, as he concentrates on universal concepts of pain and empathy, so that the local is made globally important but without the loss of authenticity.

Gender

The theme of gender is critical in the works of Han Kang especially in the way she depicts the bodies of the women, their independence, and rebellion. Her most direct feminist involvement probably was *The*



Vegetarian. Yeong-Hye disengages to eat meat as the rebellion against the patriarchal control and the brutality of demands when it comes to being a woman. She uses her body to speak out what words cannot protest the world that devours and objectifies women.

Han Kang does not describe gender merely as a biological category, but attracts the site of conflict in which societal norms, violence and identity intertwine. Her female characters resort to silence, withdrawal, or change as one of the forms of resistance. The human and non-human boundary is unclear, and Han Kang breaks the existing gender roles and alters the definition of agency and freedom.

Violence

The use of violence physical, emotional and symbolic is an aspect that keeps reoccurring in the writing of Han Kang. Her works explore the role that violence plays in human relations, social systems and the collective memory.

In Human acts, violence is as ugly as political violence whereby the state ends up being the enemy of its citizens. However, Han Kang does not dramatize violence; she pays her attention directly to the moral cost of the observation and the recollection of violence. Violence in *The Vegetarian* is more psychological and domestic in the everyday push and pull of family and conformity. The body of Yeong-Hye is not only the site where she suffers but also the medium against the suffering.

Han Kang not only deals with violence as a topic but also an instrument that shows how weak human beings are. Writing about the unspeakable, she turns violence into a moral inquiry zone, which provokes the reader to ask themselves whether they are too much in matters of complicity and empathy.

Memory

In the novels by Han Kang, memory serves as the life-buyer and life-sustenance. Her characters are struggling with the fact that they cannot forget traumatic experiences, and, at the same time, realize that they should remember in order to heal and be just.

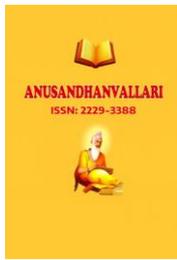
In *Human Acts*, the memory emerges as the rebellion against forgetting history. Pieces of voices of the dead and the people who survived merge together to speak against the official version of the Gwangju massacre. The way that personal and collective memories are mixed in order to maintain the truth amid political denial is depicted in the novel. The role of memory in *The White Book* is somewhat more subdued and perhaps more meditative in nature a reflection on the temporal nature of life and the continuation of grief.

The way Han Kang treats the concept of memory provides a focus on skin sensitivity; it is painful yet redemptive. Using memory, her characters recuperate their dignity and humanity and her readers are welcomed to witness the continuance of suffering.

Korean Fiction

The work of Han Kang is part of a larger tradition of the modern Korean fiction that tends to focus on the issues of political turmoil, identity crisis and cultural change. Korean literature has experienced great transformations under colonial resistance literature to post-war realism literature, and currently transforming to postmodern world of exploring trauma and subjectivity.

The authors, Hwang Sok-Yong, Kim Young-ha, and Shin Kyung-sook, have addressed the issue of modernization, dictatorship and globalization on Korean identity in a similar register. Nevertheless, Han Kang stands out with the poetic manner and philosophical richness. What she tells about is not much about the outer happenings but rather the inner terrain of time of pain, silence and empathy.



Han Kang helps to revise the identity of the Korean fiction in the world of international literature by allowing the personal and political to intermingle with each other. Her writings remind the readers that the that of Korean literature is not restricted to national frontier but instead engages in the common discourses relating to violence, humanity, and ethical duty.

Conclusion

The novels of Han Kang demonstrate the way literature can bring pain, silence, and memory to articulate it in a strong and purposeful manner. She writes about the intimate relations between the individual and the political, the body and society, memory and history through her works like *The Vegetarian*, *Human Acts* and *The White Book*. Her tales challenge the way people and their plight are discussed, more especially those that are frequently overlooked, or silenced through power, patriarchy or politics.

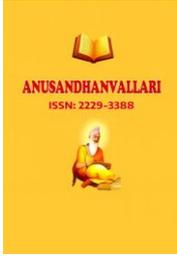
The politics of representation in the fiction of Han Kang is her prudent use of language, no no and images. She does not tell violence and trauma per se but makes the lack of words and the silent moments speak. This demonstrates that language is incapable of expressing certain experiences, more so the ones involving pain or loss. Her distinctive approach to the narration style, which can be defined as fragmented and poetic, can encourage the readers to be the witnesses instead of the observers.

Han Kang can make readers realize the plight of individuals and societies attempting to repair historical wounds with the help of her focus on trauma, identity, gender, violence, and memory. She is taking personal stories as her mirror of a wider social and political problem to indicate that only when we decide to remember about others and think about their hurt we can heal and empathize.

Eventually, the novels of Han Kang are not merely tales of suffering but also tales of opposition and change. They teach us that through literature, we can speak when everyone remains silent, we can ask questions and generate some sense of understanding amongst humans. Her work is a call to the voiceless and her work still leaves the readers with a reflection on the definition of humanity, compassion, and justice.

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