

Inherited Wounds. Gendered Memory and Historical Trauma in Han Kang's *Human Acts* (2016) and *We Do Not Part* (2025)

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Abstract This paper investigates the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories in South Korea through a comparative analysis of Han Kang's *Human Acts* (*Sonyeoni onda* 2016) and *We Do Not Part* (*Jakbyeolhaji anneunda* 2025). Framing the Gwangju Uprising (1980) and the Jeju 4.3 Massacre (1948) as “inherited wounds,” this study uses Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” and feminist trauma theory to explore how historical pain is inscribed upon the female body and psyche. While traditional historiography often focuses on the event itself, Han Kang’s narrative architecture shifts the gaze to the “afterlife” of violence – how it is mediated, repressed, and ultimately resurfaces in the lives of survivors and their descendants. By analyzing the polyphonic witnessing in *Human Acts* and the spectral, embodied testimony in *We Do Not Part*, this paper argues that Han Kang constructs a specific form of gendered memory. In this framework, women act not merely as passive mourners, but as ethical agents who transform the open wounds of history into a political practice of “grievability,” resisting the state’s erasure of the dead.

Keywords Han Kang; Postmemory; Gendered Trauma; Gwangju Uprising; Jeju 4.3 Massacre.

1. Introduction: The Anatomy of the “Inherited Wound”

We have to make sure scabs don’t form on the wound [...] They said we have to let the blood flow, that I have to feel the pain. Otherwise the nerves below the cut will die. (Han Kang 2025: 32)

After you died I couldn’t hold a funeral, so my life became a funeral. [...] Everywhere the lights of the temple shrines are burning. In the flowers that bloom in spring, in the snowflakes. In the evenings that draw each day to a close. Sparks from the candles, burning in empty drinks bottles. (Han Kang 2016: 210)

In the opening pages of Han Kang’s *We Do Not Part*, the narrative centers on a harrowing image of somatic survival. The protagonist, Inseon, suffered an

injury in her carpentry shop that resulted in the severing of two of her fingers. The reattachment surgery is successful, but the preservation of the limb requires a ritual of agonizing vigilance. To prevent the nerves from dying and the tissue from necrotic decay, a doctor or caregiver must prick the healing wound with a needle every three minutes, forcibly keeping the blood circulating through the traumatized flesh. Pain is not a symptom of injury to be suppressed: it is the sole indicator of life.

This visceral image of pain as a necessary condition for survival and of wounds that must be kept fresh to prevent necrosis serves as a governing allegory for Han Kang's entire corpus. This paper's aim is to analyze how, for Han Kang, historical trauma operates much like Inseon's injury: it is a lesion that refuses to close. In her two major historical novels, *Human Act* and *We Do Not Part*, Han Kang navigates the pivotal yet marginalized historical traumas of the Gwangju Uprising (1980) and the Jeju 4.3 Massacre (1948) not as a closed chapters of the past but as active, bleeding inheritances.

Set during and after the 1980 Gwangju Uprising, *Human Acts* follows the lives of several characters connected to Dong-ho, a middle-school student killed during the military's violent suppression of pro-democracy protesters. Structured as a polyphonic requiem in six chapters, each narrated by a different voice (including Dong-ho's ghost, his friend's older sister, an editor, a prisoner, a factory worker, Dong-ho's mother and, finally, Han Kang herself), the novel traces the immediate and long-term aftermath of state violence. The narrative shifts between 1980 and the mid-1990s, showing how the trauma of the massacre infiltrates the bodies and psyches of survivors, manifesting in physical pain, censorship, torture, and unresolvable grief.

On the other hand, *We Do Not Part* centers on Gyeongha, a writer who travels to snow-isolated Jeju Island to find her friend Inseon's pet bird. As Gyeongha becomes trapped in a blizzard, the narrative layers three temporal levels: Gyeongha's present-day search, Inseon's account of her mother Jeongsim's survival of the 1948–1954 Jeju 4.3 Massacre, and spectral traces of the massacre victims themselves. Through dreams, documents, and embodied suffering, the novel explores how the silenced trauma of Jeju is transmitted across generations, with women bearing the burden of remembering the 'ungrievable' dead.

The historical context of these novels is essential to understand the urgency of Han Kang's intervention. The Gwangju Uprising of May 1980 was a pro-democracy movement led by students and citizens against the military dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan, which had seized power following the

assassination of Park Chung-hee. The military responded with what Kim (2024) identifies as ‘democidal’ violence, deploying paratroopers who shot and violently suppressed unarmed civilians, resulting in hundreds of deaths. Similarly, the Jeju 4.3 Massacre, which began in 1948, was a brutal counter-insurgency campaign enacted by the South Korean government (under US military supervision) against islanders labeled as communist sympathizers. This campaign resulted in the deaths of an estimated thirty thousand civilians, nearly ten percent of the island’s population, and was followed by decades of enforced silence where the mere mention of the event was punishable by imprisonment under the National Security Act.¹

These events represent wounds that the South Korean state actively sought to cauterize through censorship, revisionism, and forced silence. As Kim (2024) argues, the state’s strategy was one of alienation, attempting to sever the connection between the people and their history, and between the victims and the human community. By labeling the victims of Jeju as ‘reds’ and the protesters of Gwangju as ‘rioters’, the state effectively erased their political agency and denied their families the right to public mourning. The struggle against this erasure is central to Han Kang’s work. By insisting on the visibility of the wound, she challenges the state’s attempt to impose a smooth, revised history over the jagged reality of mass violence.

The concept of inheritance here is drawn from Marianne Hirsch’s (2012) theory of “postmemory”. Although Hirsch primarily discusses this inheritance in terms of events that occurred before one’s birth, the framework is particularly relevant to Han Kang’s position in relation to these traumas. Han Kang was born in 1970—ten years prior to the Gwangju Uprising—but she experienced the event through a profound spatial and epistemic displacement: her family moved from Gwangju to Seoul just four months before the massacre occurred. Consequently, she did not witness the violence directly; instead, she encountered it indirectly and tangentially through the “hushed whispers” (Han

¹ The National Security Act (*Gukga Boanbeop*, 1948–) is a South Korean law originally enacted in the early Cold War to criminalize activities deemed supportive of North Korea or “anti-state” organizations. Especially under Syngman Rhee (1875–1965), who served as the first President of South Korea from 1948 to 1960 and later military regimes, it functioned as a broad instrument of political repression: speech, publications, and assemblies critical of the government or discussing events like the Jeju 4.3 Massacre and the Gwangju Uprising could be prosecuted as “pro-communist” or “benefiting the enemy.” The law enabled long-term imprisonment, torture, and surveillance, and its vague definitions of “anti-state” activity were used to stigmatize victims and their families as “reds,” or “rioters” thereby legitimizing state violence and obstructing public memorialization.

Kang 2016: 213) of her parents and by accidentally viewing a photo book documenting the atrocities. For Han Kang, the trauma of Gwangju (like the Jeju 4.3 Massacre, which historically preceded her) operates not as a direct memory but as a “structure of transmission” characterized by “imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (Hirsch 2012: 5). However, Han Kang complicates this transmission by rooting it specifically in the female experience and the politics of resistance. While male bodies are often the spectacular victims of state violence in these texts – the piles of corpses in the Gwangju gymnasium, the executed prisoners of Jeju – it is the female characters who bear the burden of remembering.

This paper shows how the trauma in Han Kang’s novels is not merely personal but a symptom of alienating forces in a society still grappling with the legacies of imperialism and dictatorship. By refusing to let the wound heal into the scar tissue of forgetting, her protagonists perform a radical act of “not parting,” ensuring that the spirits of Gwangju and Jeju remain present, articulate, and undeniably real. This refusal to part is an ethical stance, a demand that the reader acknowledges the ongoing pain of the past as a condition for any meaningful future.

2. State of the Art and Scholarly Intervention

Scholarship on Han Kang’s historical fiction has evolved significantly over the past decade, particularly following the international recognition of *Human Acts*. Early critical responses centered on the novel’s testimonial function and its challenge to official narratives of the Gwangju Uprising, positioning it within the broader tradition of Korean “democratization literature” (*minjung munhak*). Subsequent work has expanded this focus to interrogate the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of trauma representation. Pak (2020), for instance, examines the ‘impossible translation’ of *Human Acts*, arguing that the novel’s use of the Gwangju dialect constitutes a form of linguistic resistance that risks being flattened in global circulation. Similarly, scholars employing trauma theory have emphasized the novels’ refusal of narrative closure and their insistence on the “irrepresentability” of mass violence (Choi 1999; Na 2022). More recently, Kim Youngchan (2024) has introduced the concept of “mimesis of pain” (*gotong-ui mimesis*) as a defining feature of *We Do Not Part*, suggesting that the narrator undergoes a “symbolic death” to access the perspective of the deceased—a move that transforms the text into what he calls an “impossible

place” (*pulganunghan jangso*) where the boundary between the living and the dead dissolves.

At the same time, Han Kang's female protagonists are not passive victims but active custodians of counter-memory, engaging in what Butler (2004) terms the politics of “grievability”²—insisting on the public recognition of lives the state has deemed unworthy of mourning.

However, while these interventions have enriched our thematic understanding of Han Kang's prose, they tend to treat *Human Acts* and *We Do Not Part* in isolation, analyzing them as a response to distinct historical events rather than as part of an evolving aesthetic project.

What remains underexplored in the current scholarship is a comparative structural analysis that examines how Han Kang's narrative strategies shift between the two novels in response to the different temporalities of trauma. Specifically, existing studies (Chung 2023; Dahal 2025; Pokharel & Banu 2025) have not adequately addressed how the transition from the “fresh wound” of Gwangju (a massacre within living memory) to the “chronic wound” of Jeju (a trauma buried under decades of amnesia) demands fundamentally different modes of narration. Moreover, while feminist readings (Lee 2022; Glynne & Latha 2025) have rightly emphasized the centrality of women's voices, they have not systematically theorized how the architecture of female witnessing changes across the two texts—from the polyphonic ‘chorus’ of caregivers and mourners in *Human Acts* to the intimate, dyadic “intercorporeality” of Gyeongha and Inseon in *We Do Not Part*.

This article addresses these gaps by offering a comparative formal analysis that foregrounds the relationship between trauma's temporality and narrative structure. It argues that Han Kang does not simply repeat a single aesthetic strategy; rather, she develops distinct modes of representation suited to the specific ‘afterlife’ of each massacre, while demonstrating that Han Kang's prose on gendered memory is not merely a thematic concern, but a formal practice that adapts to the conditions under which historical violence is transmitted. Also, by situating both novels within Marianne Hirsch's framework of “postmemory” and the Korean critical concept of ‘mimesis of pain,’ this study

² Judith Butler introduces the concept of “grievability” in *Precarious Life* (2004) to describe the political and social distribution of value. A life is considered “grievable” if its loss would be publicly marked and mourned, signifying that it counted as a qualified, recognizable life within the community. Conversely, lives deemed “ungrievable” (such as those of the “reds” or “rioters”) are excluded from the sphere of public mourning, effectively rendering them ontologically null even before death. Han Kang's characters resist this erasure by insisting on the “grievability” of the state's victims.

shows how Han Kang constructs the female body as a persistent “embodied archive”—a site where the past is not passively remembered but actively, painfully re-experienced in the present. In doing so, this article clarifies what is central in Han Kang’s shifting aesthetics of remembrance: the insistence that the “inherited wound” must remain open, unhealed, and politically contestable.

3. Theoretical Framework: The Architecture of Remembrance

To fully understand the complex narrative mechanism Han Kang employs to excavate the ‘inherited wound’ it is necessary to present a precise theoretical framework. This study employs three distinct but complementary fields: Maurice Halbwachs’ (1992) foundational sociology of collective memory, Marianne Hirsch’s (2012) psychoanalytic theory of “postmemory”, and the specific, localized aesthetics of the ‘mimesis of pain’ and the ‘impossible place’ derived from recent Korean literary scholarship. Together, these lenses examine how historical trauma is not merely represented, but structurally reenacted within the text, transforming the novel into a site of ethical witnessing against the obliterating forces of state power.

3.1 From Individual to Collective Memory: Reconstructing the Shattered Frameworks

Maurice Halbwachs, in his seminal work *On Collective Memory* (1992), fundamentally challenges the Cartesian notion of memory as a purely individual, biological faculty. Instead, he states that memory is a social function, inextricably bound to the groups to which an individual belongs. He argues that individual recollection is always supported, structured, and indeed made possible by “social frameworks” – such as the family, the religious community, the social class, and the nation. As Halbwachs states:

It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories. (Halbwachs 1992: 38)

Halbwachs draws a crucial distinction between collective memory, which is living, continuous, and carried by a group, and history, which he views as a dead reconstruction of the past that begins only when the living memory of the group has faded. For Halbwachs, history is a unitary, abstract narrative imposed from

the outside, while collective memory is plural, diverse, and rooted in the specific experiences of group members.

In the context of Han Kang's novels, this distinction is crucial and goes against the official history that required the systematic destruction of the "collective memory" of the victims. By banning funeral rites, bulldozing massacre sites, and criminalizing speech, the state sought to shatter the social frameworks – kinship networks and village communities – that sustained the counter-memory of the events. When the group is destroyed, Halbwachs warns, its memory is threatened with extinction.

3.2 The Generation of "Postmemory"

While Halbwachs explains the dynamics of memory within a living group, Marianne Hirsch's theory of "postmemory" is essential for analyzing Han Kang, born in 1970, who writes about the events of 1948 and 1980 not as a witness, but as an inheritor. Hirsch defines "postmemory" as the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – they experience only through the memory of others, through the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up.

Crucially, Hirsch distinguishes this from simple recollection or historical knowledge. As she argues in *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012):

Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories [...] is to be shaped [...] by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction. (Hirsch 2012: 5)

In Han Kang's work, this "imaginative investment" is an intense ethical labor. The writer herself belongs to the generation that inherited the silence of Gwangju – the "hushed whispers" of adults that she mentions in the epilogue to *Human Acts*. This inheritance is mediated through what Hirsch calls "testimonial objects" – material objects that carry memory traces and embody the process of transmission. These objects do not merely signify the past; they carry the affective weight of its transmission into the present. In *We Do Not Part*, objects like the black logs (representing unburied bones) and the needle used to prick Inseon's finger function as these testimonial objects.

However, Han Kang expands Hirsch's theory by positioning the female body itself as the ultimate testimonial object. While Hirsch often focuses on the

visual medium of photography as the carrier of “postmemory” (the “family album”), the writer shifts the locus of memory to the somatic dimension: it is the scar, the migraine, the phantom limb, and the stomach cramp that serve as the indexical signs of the past. This somatic “postmemory” suggests that trauma is not just psychologically inherited but physically transcribed onto the next generation. Because the state successfully erased the archival evidence of the massacres, the memory of the event was forced to bypass the textual record and settle into the biological life of the survivors. In this context, the descendant’s physical pain—such as Gyeongha’s sympathetic stomach cramps or Inseon’s phantom pain—functions as a form of “intercorporeal witnessing.” The body becomes an “embodied archive” (Kim 2024), where the unarticulated suffering of the ancestor is reenacted by the descendant, allowing the past to be felt before it can be known.

Furthermore, Hirsch’s concept of “connective histories” is also crucial. This approach allows divergent histories to be thought of alongside one another, resisting the competitive logic of victimhood. Han Kang uses it to link the diverse traumas of Gwangju (1980) and Jeju (1948) into a single, connective genealogy of state violence. By doing so, she creates an affiliative “postmemory” that moves beyond the biological family to include the reader in a wider, trans-generational community of witnessing. The reader is invited not just to learn about the past, but to feel its weight, becoming a “co-witness” through the affective transmission of the text.

3.3 The “Mimesis of Pain” and the Symbolic Death

To fully recognize how Han Kang bridges the gap between the living and the dead without relying on Western concepts of closure or catharsis, turning to the concept of the “mimesis of pain” (*gotong-ui mimesis*) is needed. As elaborated by Kim Youngchan (2024), this concept suggests that the narrator does not merely observe the trauma from a safe distance, but voluntarily steps into the center of it.

Kim argues that the narrator undergoes a ‘symbolic death’ to become a vessel for the pain of others. This is not merely a metaphorical device but a structural enactment of radical empathy:

‘This symbolic death opens “I” to the pain of the others who died, overlapping one’s body and mind with theirs. This mimesis of pain repeats

throughout the novel, demonstrating the premise and method of writing about Jeju 4.3's suffering.' (Kim 2024: 80)

This mimetic practice transforms the narrative space into an “impossible place” (*pulganunghan jangso*) where the spirits of the dead arrive, and their voices become manifest. In this space, the ontological boundary between the self and the other, the living and the dead, is dissolved. Unlike Halbwachs's collective memory, which relies on the stability of the group, or Hirsch's “postmemory”, which relies on mediation, the mimesis of pain relies on a radical, somatic identification. By physically suffering the pain of the past – through exhaustion, cold, or sympathetic agony – Han Kang's characters transform historical records into lived experience.

The mimesis of pain ensures that the specific, local agony of Jeju or Gwangju is not dissolved into a generalized national narrative, but remains sharp, distinct, and physically felt. Writing thus becomes an ethical performance, where the writer stages her own difficulty in accessing the past not as a failure, but as a necessary condition for respecting the magnitude of the trauma she seeks to represent.

3.4 The Narrative Space as an “Impossible Place”

Linked to the mimesis of pain is the concept of the narrative space as an “impossible place.” Kim (2024) posits that Han constructs her novels as liminal zones where the laws of physics and linear time are suspended to allow the dead to arrive. In *We Do Not Part*, the snow-covered isolated Jeju creates an “heterotopia”³ where the deceased of 1948 can manifest alongside the living.

‘The space of “writing” that Han depicts is an impossible place where the spirits/ghosts of the dead arrive and their voices become manifest. Han transforms this space into one where the voices of “I”, Inseon, and the dead are superimposed.’ (Kim 2024: 79)

This theoretical insight provides a framework for understanding the spectral elements of Han Kang's work not as magical realism, but as an ethical necessity.

³ The concept of “heterotopia” was introduced by Michel Foucault (in *Of Other Spaces*, 1967) to describe physical sites that function as “counter-sites” to ordinary society, where real spaces are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. In this paper, the term is applied to the snowbound house in *We Do Not Part* and the gymnasium in *Human Acts*—liminal spaces where the boundary between the living and the dead is suspended, allowing the suppressed “counter-memory” of state violence to emerge in opposition to the space of the official nation.

Because the state has erased the physical traces of the massacres, the memory of the dead has nowhere to go but into this “impossible place” of literature. Here, the polyphonic voices of the dead in *Human Acts* and the silent trees in *We Do Not Part* find their own space where they can be heard, which is ‘impossible’ because it defies the state’s logic of erasure and the biological logic of death, asserting instead a continuity of existence through shared pain.

4. Historical Context: The Genealogy of Violence

The Gwangju Uprising and the Jeju 4.3 Massacre are not isolated incidents but connected tangles in a genealogy of state violence that shaped modern South Korea. Both events share a common trajectory: a popular uprising or resistance, a brutal military suppression labeled as “anti-communist” purification, and a subsequent era of enforced silence where the victims were criminalized and their families silenced. This shared history of repression created what scholar Heonik Kwon (2009) terms a “politics of the dead,” where the rights of the living were contingent upon the erasure of the “political ghosts” (Kwon 2009: 12) of the past.

4.1 The Jeju Massacre (1948–1954): The Silenced “Red Island”

The Jeju 4.3 Massacre (*Cheju sasam sakon*) remains one of the most traumatic events in Korean history. Following Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945, the peninsula was divided along the 38th parallel, with the Soviet Union occupying the North and the United States administering the South. The division, intended to be temporary, became increasingly entrenched as Cold War tensions escalated. On Jeju Island, a unique confluence of factors created a volatile situation: the island had suffered particularly brutal treatment under Japanese colonization (1910–1945), including forced labor and militarization; after liberation, many Jeju residents who had fled to Japan or worked in collaboration networks faced intense social stigma; and the U.S. military government’s policies, including the appointment of former colonial collaborators to positions of power, generated widespread resentment.

The violence on Jeju did not occur in isolation; it was a direct response to the changing political landscape in the post-liberation era (Cumings 1981; Armstrong 2003). After the plan proposed in 1945 at the Moscow Conference failed and the U.S.-Soviet Joint Commission deadlocked on establishing a

unified provisional government, the prospect of a unified Korea started to fade. By 1947, as Cold War tensions escalated, the U.S. military government moved to hold separate elections in the south to contain Soviet influence. Korean nationalists and leftists alike—particularly on Jeju Island—perceived this decision not merely as a procedural step but as the permanent crystallization of national division. Thus, the April 3 uprising was fueled by a desperate—albeit violent—rejection of this separate state-building project. This frames the subsequent massacre not just as an anti-communist purge but also as the crushing of a final attempt to preserve a unified nation.

The response was catastrophic. The South Korean government, operating under U.S. military supervision and supported by paramilitary Northwest Youth League members (refugees from North Korea known for their anti-communist fanaticism), launched a scorched-earth counterinsurgency campaign. President Syngman Rhee (1875 – 1965) declared martial law and authorized the designation of most of the island's interior as a “cleared area”—any person found in these zones could be killed on sight. Between 1948 and 1954, government forces and paramilitary groups systematically destroyed entire villages, burned homes, executed civilians, and buried bodies in unmarked graves. The brutality was indiscriminate: elders, women, and children were killed alongside suspected insurgents. By conservative estimates, approximately 30,000 civilians—nearly 10 percent of Jeju's population—died. Some scholars place the death toll even higher.

The massacre was systematically erased from public discourse for decades. Survivors and their descendants lived under the stigma of being associated with “reds,” facing discrimination in employment, education, and social life. The phrase *saram simyeon sarajinda* (tr.: “if you endure life, you can survive”) became a survival mantra, encoding the enforced silence that allowed survivors to persist (Kim, 1989).

Crucially, the trauma of Jeju was profoundly gendered. Kim & Hwang (2023) argue that the extermination of approximately 80% of the male population in many villages resulted in a “total deprivation of social support” for surviving women, who faced acute forms of trauma, including proxy killings (*taesal*) where family members were executed in place of missing male relatives. In response, women adopted a survival strategy of enforced silence, maintaining secret ancestral rites to preserve the memory of the dead despite the state's ban.

The historical legacy of Jeju 4.3 cannot be fully resolved through legal rehabilitation alone; it requires a narrative intervention that addresses the “impossibility” of its representation. The memory of the massacre itself is not a static object to be retrieved but a dynamic, painful process of “suffering together” (*hamkke gyeokgi*). By overlapping the voices of the narrator (“I”), the survivor (Inseon), and the dead (Inseon’s mother), Han Kang enacts the true history of Jeju, asserting that the only ethical way to remember 4.3 is to voluntarily inhabit its suffering

4.2 The Gwangju Uprising (May 1980): The Explosive Resurgence

If Jeju represents the suppressed origin, Gwangju represents the explosive resurgence of state violence. In December 1979, following the assassination of dictator Park Chung-hee, General Chun Doo-hwan seized power in a military coup. Pro-democracy protests spread across the country in the spring of 1980 (the “Seoul Spring”). In response, Chun declared martial law on May 17.

In the city of Gwangju, students protesting the closure of Chonnam National University were met with extreme brutality by paratroopers, who used bayonets and clubs indiscriminately. Enraged by the violence, the citizens of Gwangju armed themselves, driving the military out of the city on May 21 and establishing a self-governing community for ten days. This ‘liberated Gwangju’ is described by political scientist Choi Jungwoon as an “Absolute Community”:

In the absolute community, individual possessions that marked social status had no meaning [...] There was no class since every individual’s supreme dignity was recognized. [...] It was a permanent space in which finitude was overcome and time had no meaning. (Choi 1999: 125)

In Han Kang’s *Human Acts*, the brief, utopian counterpoint to the state’s violence is clearly represented. However, on May 27, the military retook the city in a bloody crackdown. The official death toll remains contested, but estimates range from several hundred to two thousand. Like Jeju, Gwangju was framed by the state as a “communist insurrection” incited by North Korean spies. The victims were buried in makeshift graves or dumped in trucks, denied proper rites.

The trauma of Gwangju is characterized by its visibility – the corpses in the streets, the open coffins – and its function as the crucible of South Korea’s contemporary democratic consciousness. Unlike the hidden trauma of Jeju,

Gwangju was a rupture that occurred in the full light of day, demanding an immediate, visceral response.

5. *Human Acts*: The Polyphony of the Fresh Wound

In *Human Acts*, the “inherited wound” is presented to the reader not as a scar of the past, but as an ongoing wound in the present. The novel’s narrative architecture, structured as a requiem in six movements, circles the central void of the Gwangju Uprising – the death of the middle school boy Dong-ho – without ever allowing the wound to fully scab over. This structural choice is not merely aesthetic but deeply political; by refusing a linear, singular historiography, Han Kang democratizes the trauma, distributing the burden of witnessing across different voices that collectively resist the state’s attempt to sanitize the massacre.

From a gendered perspective of memory, while the central victim – Dong-ho – is male, the burden of witnessing and the labor of carrying the ‘inherited wound’ fall disproportionately upon the female characters. Han Kang builds a gendered memory where the female body becomes an active, resistant archive. Unlike the male bodies in the novel, which are often destroyed, silenced, or reduced to meat, the female bodies – specifically the editor Kim Eun-sook and Dong-ho’s mother – survive. However, their survival is not a triumph; it is a painful, ongoing battlefield where the struggle against the erasure of history is waged daily.

5.1 Kim Eun-sook: The Body as a Battlefield of Censorship

The third chapter, centered on the editor Kim Eun-sook, shifts the narrative from the spectacular violence of the 1980 uprising to the suffocating atmosphere of 1985. While historians often mark this year as the beginning of the regime’s political decline following the February legislative elections—which saw the resurgence of the opposition—for ordinary citizens like Eun-sook, the dictatorship had paradoxically consolidated its grip through the “bureaucratization of violence.” (Lee, 2007)

By this time, the regime’s control had migrated from the open street to the closed interrogation room, enforcing silence through a sophisticated mechanism of censorship and surveillance that targeted the private lives of survivors.

Eun-sook represents a new voice emerging from the wreckage, one that must contend with the crushing and oppressive silence imposed by the regime.

This silence is enforced not through bullets, but through the bureaucratization of violence. The pivotal moment of this chapter occurs in the interrogation room, where Eun-sook is slapped by an officer. This slap is not merely a physical assault; it is an ontological rupture described with forensic precision: “At this point, the force of the slap had already burst the capillaries in her cheek and the man’s fingernails had broken her skin” (Han 2016: 76). And as the narration flows, the reader becomes the witness of a multitude of both real and metaphoric slaps that mark her entire life, transcending from the past directly into the present in which she is depicted. In an instant, Eun-sook’s body becomes a living archive where the past and present collide. The redness of her cheek is the surfacing of the blood spilled five years prior. By focusing on this specific, gendered humiliation – the officer’s casual assertion of dominance over a young woman – Han illustrates how the macro-violence of the state is sustained by the micro-violence of patriarchy. Eun-sook’s flinching reflex is not cowardice; it is the somatic registration of a history that refuses to pass.

However, Eun-sook is not merely a passive victim. Her act of remembrance, which is both physical and mental, constitutes a profound resistance against a modernizing world that seems bent on erasing the memory of Gwangju. Amid the rapid, dizzying changes that Seoul, the capital city, has undergone in the modern era, Eun-sook remains an unmoving, scarred anchor. Her existence embodies a refusal to move forward, recalling the wounds of a past that continue to burn beneath the surface of the nation’s progress:

It was time for her to get up and leave the office, but instead she remained where she was, unmoving. The flakes of snow silently sifting down looked as soft and white as freshly ground rice flour. Nevertheless, she could not think of them as beautiful. Today was supposed to be the day for her to forget the sixth slap, but her cheek had already healed. It barely even hurts anymore. When the next day dawned, then, there would be no need to forget the seventh slap. There would never be a day when she would forget the seventh slap. (Han 2014: 80)

5.2 The Mother: The Dialect of Grief and the Refusal to Part

If Eun-sook represents the struggle of the witness in the public sphere, the sixth chapter, narrated by Dong-ho’s mother, retreats into the radical interiority of maternal grief. This section serves as the emotional and ethical anchor of the novel, grounding political history in the irrefutable, biological reality of loss.

In the original Korean text, the mother's narrative is distinguished by its linguistic specificity. Written in a thick Gwangju dialect (*Jeolla bang-eon*), her voice resists the 'standardization' of national history. This dialect is not merely a regional accent but a political marker of the working-class south, which was historically marginalized by the Seoul-based military regime. In the translated work, this distinct regionality is inevitably replaced with a specific Anglophone dialect, creating an incongruous cultural displacement. Consequently, the foreign reader encounters a voice that is semantically clear but phonetically "widowed"—stripped of the rough, local texture that originally marked her defiance against the standard language of the state. This loss in translation⁴ paradoxically reinforces her status as a "remnant": the mother's grief is so deeply rooted in the specific soil of Gwangju that it resists full assimilation into a global literary language. (Na 2022).

The mother's memory can be defined as gendered through her refusal to accept the linear progression of time. The state demands reconciliation and closure, a moving on, but she refuses, rejecting the changing seasons, the blooming flowers, and the very passage of time because they signify a world continuing without her son.

I cut out the photo from your school ID and put it in my purse. Day or night, the house is always empty, but still I like to wait until the early hours of the morning, when there'd be no earthly reason for anyone to drop by, before I unwrap it from the folds of plain writing paper and smooth out the creases lining your face. There's no one around to overhear, but still I only let myself whisper it... Dong-ho. (Han 2014: 210)

By clinging to the pain, she asserts the "grievability" of a life the state deemed disposable, and her grief is an active, stubborn persistence. She wanders the streets of Gwangju, a spectral figure who haunts the city's modernity with the unresolved past. In her, the wound is shown to be terminal, with no possibility of healing; only fierce, protective custody of the memory.

Through these two women, Han Kang delineates a specific taxonomy of female resistance. While Eun-sook resists through the intellectual and somatic struggle against censorship, using her bruised body as a testament to the truth, Dong-ho's mother resists through the absolute fidelity of affect, using her

⁴ This loss is partially mitigated by the translator's, Deborah Smith (2016), who clarifies such aspect in the introduction, informing the reader, through a paratextual intervention, that the political marker of the dialect is inevitably 'flattened' in English, asking to 'hear' the silence of the missing dialect.

refusal to heal as a weapon against the state's enforced amnesia. Together, they show that in the face of violence, the most powerful "human act" is the refusal to let the dead disappear.

6. *We Do Not Part*: The Chronic Wound and the Embodied Archive

If *Human Acts* is a confrontation with the chaotic violence of an immediate, persistent scar, *We Do Not Part* is a meditation on the chronic wound that has festered in silence for seventy years. Shifting the focus to the Jeju 4.3 Massacre, Han Kang moves from the visceral shock of Gwangju to an aesthetic of atmospheric haunting, reflecting the latency of a trauma buried under decades of anti-communist suppression. The violence here is not fresh in the temporal sense, yet it is no less active; it has simply migrated from the surface of the skin to the nervous system of the survivor.

6.1 Inseon's Finger as Historiographical Allegory

The central allegory of the novel is Inseon's severed finger. As mentioned in the introduction section, the medical necessity of pricking the wound every three minutes to prevent the nerves from dying creates a harrowing somatic parallel to the labor of "postmemory". Just as the finger will rot if the pain is allowed to subside, the historical truth of Jeju will coagulate into oblivion if it is not constantly, painfully reactivated by the witness.

This "phantom pain" (Han 2021: 32) is not merely metaphorical but deeply material. Inseon's body becomes an 'embodied archive' where the data of history – U.S. military records (Han 2021: 105), massacre lists, oral testimonies (Han 2021: 203) – blends with sensory agony. As Inseon tells Gyeongha:

It was like I had thousands of transparent needles placed all over my body and they were transfusing me with life. [...] In that profound, uncanny euphoria, feeling my heart might rip open, I knew. That now I really could start on our project. (Han 2021: 205)

Inseon does not just know the history of 4.3; she suffers it, her body becoming the medium through which the unclaimed experience of the past erupts into the present. The novel suggests that for the generation of "postmemory", historical knowledge is not an intellectual acquisition but a physical burden.

Gyeongha, the writer-protagonist, experiences this burden as a crushing weight that manifests in her dreams and her physical exhaustion. The narrative enacts a “mimesis of pain” (Kim 2024), forcing the reader to participate in the somatic experience of the characters. We feel the cold, the exhaustion, and the sharp prick of the needle, just as we feel the weight of the unspoken history. This strategy collapses the distance between the event (1948) and the reading experience (2021), insisting that the pain of the massacre is trans-historical.

6.2 The “Impossible Place”: Writing as Katabasis and Heterotopia

The theoretical “impossible place” finds its concrete realization in the novel's setting. The blizzard that isolates Inseon's house functions as the physical threshold of the aforementioned “heterotopia,” suspending the laws of physics and time to allow the ghosts of 1948 to manifest. Gyeongha's journey through this white abyss is thus not merely a travel narrative but a form of *katabasis*—a mythological descent into the underworld to retrieve a lost soul (represented here by the bird Ama, a proxy for the witness's own spirit).

In this space, the distinction between the living and the dead blurs. The “black tree trunks” in Gyeongha's dream are simultaneously trees and the bodies of the executed. This spectrality is not a supernatural horror but an ontological reality for survivors. For Jeongsim, the dead brother is more real than the living daughter. The novel argues that for the “negative community” of Jeju survivors, the present is permanently colonized by the past.

I wipe the snow from my numbed nose and eyelid. Who's to say the snow
dusting my hands now isn't the same snow that had gathered on their faces
(Han 2021: 88)

The “impossible place” of the novel allows these “isolated monads” of memory to finally touch, if only in the shared space of the text. The writer's task is to enter this impossible place, to undergo a symbolic death and to become the medium for the voices that have been silenced. This narrative strategy challenges the rationalist historiography of the state, which demands empirical proof and linear timelines. Han Kang suggests that the truth of trauma can only be accessed in the “impossible place” of art, where the dead are permitted to speak.

6.3 Decentralized Representations: The Agency of Objects and Location

A key aspect of *We Do Not Part* is its “decentralized representation” (Kim 2024). The novel moves the center of gravity from Seoul (the center of power and official history) to Jeju (the periphery). The tension between Gyeongha (the outsider from Seoul) and Inseon (the local) highlights the difficulty of cross-cultural witnessing. Gyeongha struggles to understand the Jeju dialect and the specific texture of the island’s grief.

This linguistic estrangement is crucial. It prevents the “harmonization” of the narrative. The trauma of Jeju cannot be seamlessly translated into the standard language of the mainland. By preserving this friction, Han respects the “singularity” of the Jeju experience. The novel refuses to universalize the trauma; it insists on the specific, local, and untranslatable nature of the violence. This aligns with the critical insight that “an individual’s particularity cannot be fully exemplified by similarity with others.” (Kim 2022)

Furthermore, Han imbues objects with a profound agency. Ama, Inseon’s bird, serves as a witness to the isolation of the survivor. The needles used to prick Inseon’s finger become instruments of memory. The snow itself acts as a preserving medium, freezing the bodies of the past in a state of suspended animation (The Atlantic 2025). These objects are “testimonial objects” (Hirsch) that carry the affective charge of the trauma when words fail. The black logs that Inseon collects are not just wood; they are the ‘bones’ of the history she is trying to reconstruct. By granting agency to the non-human world, Han expands the scope of witnessing beyond the human subject, suggesting that the land itself remembers what the state has tried to forget.

6.4 Maternal Resistance and the Embodied Archive

Ultimately, the figure of Jeongsim represents the “embodied archive.” Her memory is not stored in books but in her body – in her dementia, in her wandering legs. Her search for the bones is a form of “clandestine commemoration” that defies the state’s ban. For decades, Jeongsim searched the snowy landscapes of Jeju, looking for the remains of her family members who were executed and dumped in mass graves. This act of searching is portrayed not as a futile gesture but as a supreme act of resistance.

Jeongsim acts as a “liminal witness”: her dementia paradoxically allows her to access the past more directly than the sane. As Inseon recounts in the novel,

her mother's survival was driven by a somatic refusal to succumb to the cold of history:

She told me the desire to know the reason she had been the only one spared was like a roaring flame inside her, and this was what kept her from freezing to death (Han 2025: 38).

This internal fire represents an ethical fidelity: while the rational world has moved on, Jeongsim refuses to part. Her body becomes a testimonial object itself, carrying the traces of the massacre into the 21st century.

The novel suggests that true historical memory resides in these embodied practices of persistence, rather than in the official monuments of the state. Jeongsim's refusal to stop searching is a refusal to accept the "ungrievability" of her brother, in the attempt to assert that his life mattered, and that his remains deserve the dignity of recognition.

7. Comparative Analysis: "Inherited Wounds" Across Time and Form

While both *Human Acts* and *We Do Not Part* are united by their preoccupation with state violence and the inherited wound, a comparative reading reveals a distinct evolution in Han Kang's aesthetic strategy. This comparative analysis is guided by three primary criteria: (1) the temporality of trauma (immediacy vs. latency, fresh vs. chronic wounds), (2) the structure of narrative voice (polyphonic chorus vs. intimate dyad), and (3) the forms of gendered witnessing (public commemoration vs. private endurance). This shift—from the visceral shock of the former to the atmospheric haunting of the latter—reflects not only the different historical textures of the Gwangju Uprising and the Jeju 4.3 Massacre, but also a deepening of the author's engagement with the ethics of representation. These criteria are grounded in the methodological dialogue between structuralist and postcolonial trauma theory. Following Cathy Caruth's (1996) notion of "latency," the analysis distinguishes between the immediate rupture of the event and its belated return. Furthermore, drawing on Stef Craps' (2013) call to pluralize trauma aesthetics, it examines how Han Kang shifts from a polyphonic "acting out" (LaCapra 2001) of the collective Gwangju trauma to a dyadic, intimate witnessing of the silenced Jeju massacre, demonstrating that narrative form is contingent upon the specific historical ontology of the violence.

7.1 Between Immediacy and Latency: Confronting Narrations

Human Acts operates through a poetics of confrontation. The novel's primary mode is exposure; it seeks to rip the bandage off a wound that is still, in a historical sense, wet and hemorrhaging. The narrative is saturated with the abject materiality of the body. This visceral immediacy serves a specific political function: it counters the sanitized, abstract language of the military dictatorship. By forcing the reader to look directly at the open wounds, Han Kang creates a "counter-sovereign sacredness" (*banjugwonjeok seongseureoum*) rooted in the undeniable reality of the corpse (Na 2022). The fresh wound here functions as irrefutable evidence: it screams, demanding an immediate, shock-induced ethical response. The aesthetic is one of heat, smell, and noise – the sensory overload of a battlefield.

In contrast, *We Do Not Part* operates through poetics of mediation. Dealing with a massacre that occurred seventy years prior and was silenced by decades of effective censorship, the novel cannot rely on the immediacy of the fresh corpse. Instead, it evokes the chronic wound through atmospheric pressure. The violence of Jeju is filtered through layers of dreamscapes, documents, and the numbing cold of the blizzard. The "black tree trunks" that look like "haggard children" (Han 2021: 11) in Gyeongha's dream are not the literal bodies of 1948 but their postmemorial avatars. As Kim Youngchan (2024) observes, these spectral images function as the entry point into the 'impossible place' of the massacre, bridging the gap between the dreamer's present and the historical trauma.

7.2 The Evolution of the Female Voice: From Chorus to Dyad⁵

Despite these stylistic divergences, the two novels converge powerfully on the gendered dynamics of witnessing. In both texts, the 'inherited wound' is ultimately sustained and articulated by the female voice. However, the structure of this female witnessing evolves significantly.

⁵ The term "dyad" draws on Georg Simmel's (1950) sociological concept of a two-person group characterized by unique interdependence and fragility. Here, it analyzes the structural coupling of Gyeongha and Inseon in *We Do Not Part*, contrasting it with the polyphony of *Human Acts*. As Kim Youngchan (2024) observes, these two subjects are "superimposed" in a shared "intercorporeity," blurring individual boundaries to form a single, intimate site of witnessing where the existence of the testimony depends entirely on the maintenance of their bond.

Human Acts presents a chorus of female caregivers. Their witnessing is communal and public, performed in the gymnasium or in the interrogation room. The novel creates a textual communality where multiple female voices overlap to form a collective resistance. The politics of the spirit in *Human Acts* is democratic and polyphonic; it suggests that the memory of Gwangju belongs to the collective body of the people.

We Do Not Part transforms this chorus into the intimate dyad of Inseon and Gyeongha. Here, the witnessing is more private, taking place in a remote house during a snowstorm. The “intercorporeity” of pain binds these two women together in a relationship that is almost symbiotic (Kim 2024). This shift from the public chorus to the private dyad reflects the specific nature of the Jeju trauma, which destroyed the community so thoroughly that only fragmented, individual connections remain.

In both cases, Han Kang posits the female body as the embodied archive that resists the patriarchal state’s attempt to part the living from the dead. Whether through the mimesis of pain in Inseon’s finger or the flinching reflex of Eun-sook’s cheek, Han Kang shows that the obligation to witness is absolute. The evolution from shock to hunting does not diminish the urgency of the testimony; rather, it suggests that as the event recedes in time, the wound must be tended to with even greater vigilance, preventing the risk of forgetting.

7.3 Meta-fictional Ethics: The Writer as Witness

Furthermore, both novels employ a meta-fictional device that implicates the writer herself in the act of witnessing. In *Human Acts*, the epilogue features the writer explicitly discussing her research and her personal connection to Gwangju. In *We Do Not Part*, the protagonist Gyeongha is a thinly veiled extension of Han Kang herself, struggling with the burden of writing about mass violence. This self-reflexivity highlights the ethical difficulty of representing trauma.

Han Kang acknowledges that writing is always a form of failure – a failure to fully capture the horror of the event, a failure to bring the dead back to life. Yet, she insists on the necessity of this failure. As Gyeongha reflects:

Having decided to write about mass killings and torture, how could I have so naively – brazenly – hoped to soon shirk off the agony of it, to so easily be bereft of its traces? (Han 2021: 19)

By foregrounding the struggle of the writer, Han Kang invites the reader to share in the burden of representation. We are not passive consumers of historical tragedy; we are active participants in the struggle to find a language for the unspeakable. This aligns with the concept of the “drama of writing” (Kim 2024), where the text stages its own difficulty as a way of respecting the magnitude of the trauma.

8. Conclusion

Han Kang’s literary project in *Human Acts* and *We Do Not Part* constitutes a profound intervention in the global literature of trauma. By intersecting the concept of “postmemory” with a feminist ethics of care, she transforms the novel into a space of communal mourning that defies the boundaries of time and the edicts of the state. Her prose shows that the ‘inherited wound’ is not merely a pathological condition to be cured but a historical truth to be witnessed, a scar that opens a channel between the living and the dead.

Through the gendered bodies of her protagonists, Han Kang refuses the revisionist history and alienating forces that sought to justify the massacres of Gwangju and Jeju. She shows her public that the erasure of history is never complete so long as there are bodies that remember – bodies that flinch, ache, and bleed in sympathy with the past. As this analysis has shown, her prose reactivates sites of collective and intergenerational suffering, transmitting the affective ties that bind the generation of the “postmemory” to the ancestors they never knew.

The title *We Do Not Part* thus serves as the ultimate manifesto for her aesthetic intervention. It is a refusal of the closure that conventional narratives often promise. To ‘part’ would be to accept the state’s verdict that the dead are gone, that the wound is healed, and that the past is past. By choosing not to part, Han Kang and her characters engage in a form of radical, painful love – a love that keeps the wound fresh so that the connection to the lost remains alive. In a world intent on forgetting, this refusal is the most potent human act of all.

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