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The Representation of Pain and Trauma in the Novels of Han Kang

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Abstract

Han Kang is known for delving deeply into the themes of pain and trauma in her novels, providing readers with a complex portrait of the human condition. The representation of suffering and trauma in Han Kang's literary oeuvre is examined in this study, with particular attention to important works like "The Vegetarian", "Human Acts" and "The White Book". This paper aims to shed light on how Han Kang adeptly conveys the psychological and emotional effects of trauma on both individuals and society by closely examining her use of narrative techniques, character development, and theme. Han Kang's novels dive into the complexity of human suffering with empathy and understanding, addressing everything from the personal hardships of her characters to larger historical catastrophes that influence their lives. Han Kang challenges readers to address the long-lasting repercussions of trauma and to consider the prospects of healing and perseverance in the face of adversity by delving into issues like violence, grief, and memory.

Key Words

Trauma, Pain, Memory, Grief and Violation.

Introduction

Han Kang is famous for her vivid examination of human condition, especially as it relates to themes of suffering and trauma. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate how Han Kang depicts these subjects in her books, looking at the effect of how she shows pain. This paper aims to offer a thorough comprehension of Han Kang's portrayal of pain and trauma and its relevance within her literary output by concentrating on important works like "The Vegetarian", "Human Acts" and "The White Book".

The Vegetarian

In "The Vegetarian", Han Kang portrays pain and trauma gradually. The sadness in this novel isn't obvious or dramatic. It subtly permeates Yeong-hye the protagonist, until it completely changed her. Han Kang shows in this novel that how Yeong-hye's trauma begins in her childhood, especially as a result of her father's violence. She grows up in a society that shows fear is a normal thing and obedience is precious. Her father always abuses all his children and does physical violence too. As a young child she learns that being

rebellion tends to physical violence and abuses, so it is better to remain silent than to speak up. Her early life has shaped who she is. She withdraws, gets silent, and becomes passive. She has been taught since childhood that her voice is unimportant, thus she does not publicly express her rage or irritation. Childhood trauma frequently stays buried in her subconscious mind and never truly goes away. In Yeong-hye's case, these suppressed memories resurface as violent dreams with graphic imagery and blood. These nightmares imply that the violence she endured or saw as a youngster is still there in her subconscious. This early trauma has a strong connection to her aversion to consume meat. The meat symbolises as a metaphor for violence and blood. Because of her violent and fearful upbringing, she grows to strongly disapprove of everything connected to cruelty. She uses her body to show her opposition because she is unable to face her father or the patriarchal society that formed her misery. Her symbolic rejection of the violence that has dominated her from childhood is demonstrated by her refusal to eat meat. The incident where her father thrusts meat into her mouth is especially noteworthy. The power imbalance is the same as it was in her early years. She is treated like a defenceless child even though she is an adult. This incident goes beyond simple physical assault and reopens old wounds. It illustrates the persistence of her trauma. Instead, it was repressed and rekindled whenever similar violent events occurred. The novel serves as a symbolic manifestation of Yeong-hye's inner turmoil and trauma. Due to her sudden and seemingly impulsive decision, she exposes the underlying tensions in her relationships and upends family and society's expectations. Han Kang delves into themes like trauma, pain, suppression, and the fight for autonomy against social pressure by means of Yeong-hye's decline into mental illness and self-destructive actions that followed. The layers of Yeong-hye's psychological sufferings are revealed as a result of her rejection of meat, illuminating the complexity of trauma and its deep psychological ramifications.

Yeong-hye's plunge into mental turmoil in "*The Vegetarian*" is mostly caused by the restricting expectations of society and her family. Her decision to give up meat puts her family's patriarchal traditions in trouble, which causes friction and exclusion. Yeong-hye's mental health deteriorates as her spouse and family's expectations on her, diminishes her autonomy, representing the crushing consequences of societal pressure. Kang illustrates the widespread impact of social constructions on human identity and autonomy by examining the negative effects of familial and societal expectations on individual agency and mental health via Yeong-hye's story.

She grows quieter as the pain gets worse. She emotionally withdraws from people and ceases conversing with them. Silence becomes an additional escape route. If speaking up has never brought you comfort or understanding, then it feels safer to keep quiet. She gradually becomes disconnected from social conventions and reality. This mental retreat eventually turns into physical self-destruction as she continues to shun nourishment. She believes she is becoming more innocent and pure in her head, even if her body is weakening. She escapes in the most drastic way possible by thinking that she is becoming a plant. In addition to not wanting to be violent, plants also do not harm other plants. According to Yeong-hye, humans are strong and nasty. She tries to avoid people entirely by seeing herself as a tree. This is not a healthy or therapeutic way to escape; it is a total rejection of identity and society. Her suffering is so severe that she no longer wants to be a human.

Yeong-hye's transformation suggests that persistent, unresolved pain may make someone run away rather than fight. When pain is not acknowledged or allowed to go, it vanishes rather than is faced, it is terrible because Yeong-hye's escape is her only opportunity to be free. Instead of attempting to alter the terrible environment, she separates herself from it. In order to find solace, a person in severe grief may feel forced to sacrifice relationships, identity, and even life.

The protagonist's inner battles and more general themes of alienation and loneliness are conveyed in "*The Vegetarian*" through a fragmented narrative style and rich symbolism. Three interconnected perspectives are used to tell the story of Yeong-hye's psychological failure, each providing and each providing a unique

perspective. Symbolism highlights Yeong-hye's yearning for freedom and a connection to nature despite her social constrain. Examples of this include the recurrent theme of plant life and vegetal images. Kang draws attention to the extreme alienation and isolation that people who dare to break conventional standards face internal agony by outside influences.

Human Acts

In "*Human Acts*," the characters' lives are profoundly impacted by the tragic Gwangju Uprising. The events of the novel are set against the backdrop of the revolt, in which people demonstrated against military government. During the uprising the characters see or suffer violence and loss with scars that never go away. The trauma affects their relationships, attitudes, and behaviours, moulding their lives. Han Kang investigates the enormous and frequently unanticipated effects that happened in Gwangju. She illuminates the long-lasting consequences of trauma and the human spirit's ability to persevere the characters. In "*Human Acts*", Han Kang depicts trauma and suffering as deeply embodied, historical, and social events that affect people as well as the whole society. Political violence, particularly the Gwangju Uprising in South Korea in 1980, is the main subject of "*Human Acts*". In contrast, the Vegetarian is about suffering that is primarily personal and private.

The novel starts with the death of a young boy named Dong-ho during the Gwangju massacre. Han Kang makes the reader face the harsh truth of political violence by describing in detail and in a disturbing way the bodies of people who have been mutilated in a gymnasium that has been turned into a temporary morgue. The bodies are not unknown; they belong to students, workers, and children. This pain is a sign of how cruel state power is to common people, but physical suffering is not where Han Kang ends. She investigates the psychological trauma experienced by survivors who have to deal with memories of loss, abuse, and incarceration. A former prisoner considers how torture ruins identity and dignity and trauma leaves a lasting impression on the psyche. The past continuously interferes with the present, survivors are unable to resume their regular lives. Unexpected memories that are frequently brought on by little elements demonstrate how trauma refuses to stay in the past. The narrative also depicts how trauma spreads beyond those directly involved. Families of the deceased have been stuck with grief and unanswered questions. Mothers search for their children's bodies. Friends feel bad that they made it through but others did not. A community thus suffers from what is referred to as collective trauma. Silence is an important theme of the novel. After the massacre, the government makes an effort to conceal the truth and survivors get silent due to the fear of death. This political suppression makes it impossible for people to express their grief or talk about what happened in public, which adds another level of suffering. It is made much more alienating by the public denial of sorrow. Han Kang claims that silence enforced by authority exacerbates emotional wounds. The work simultaneously examines the issue of humanity. Small gestures of compassion and unity can be found even in the face of overwhelming brutality. Volunteers assist with body identification. Inmates help each other out. These incidents imply that although tragedy exposes the worst aspects of human brutality, it also highlights the depth of human empathy. A person's potential for dignity is not entirely destroyed by pain. In terms of style, Han Kang employs varying narrative voices and shifting points of view. Traumatic memory's fractured nature is reflected in this disjointed structure. By switching between first-, second-, and third-person narrative, the book demonstrates how trauma cannot be described in a single, consistent voice. It is present in testimony, echoes, and pieces. In *Human Acts*, suffering is not only a personal psychological problem but also a political and historical one. It is demonstrated that trauma persists long after acts of violence have stopped. It influences identity, memory, and even the history of a country. Han Kang makes the case in this book that it is important to recall and bear witness to suffering because violence can be forgotten and perpetuated when people remain silent.

"*Human Acts*" explores issues of political oppression, survivor, guilt, and the quest for identity in the face of senseless violence. This paper shows the observation of the psychological effects of survivor guilt through the experiences of the characters as they struggle with the point of either watching or taking part in the rebellion. The book also shows how political regimes can be repressive and how far they can go to hold onto power.

The White Book

Han Kang examines the meaning of the colour white in “*The White Book*”, that is stands for loss, absence, and purity. Kang employs vivid imagery and poetic words to represents both the innocence and purity of recollection as well as the void created by loss. The white pattern that appears repeatedly draws attention to the themes of absence and quest for identity in the midst of severe loss. It also encourages readers to consider the intricacies of bereavement and the persistent power of memory.

Han Kang creates a very intimate and introspective narrative in “*The White Book*” fusing autobiographical aspects with theme exploration of grief and loss. The book is organised as a collection of short stories that straddle the lines between memoir and fiction. Each vignette is based on Kang’s personal experiences and observations.

Using her sister’s early death as a major theme, Kang uses the book to reflect on her personal experiences with loss and grief. Through this autobiographical component, Kang addresses more general themes of loss and grief. Through weaving together of her own tale with painful experiences Kang allows readers to identify her process of self-discovery and recovery.

Han Kang skilfully blurs the lines between memoir and fiction in “*The White Book*”, allowing readers to consider the confluence of individual and societal tragedy. Kang crafts an emotionally complex and authentic narrative by fusing fictional storytelling with autobiographical components. The work blurs the boundaries between memoir and fiction with its structure of interconnected vignettes each inspired by Kang’s personal experiences and insights.

Kang crafts a narrative tapestry that depicts the intricacies of loss and grieving on both an individual and a community level by fusing together personal tales, historical occurrences, and literary observations. The work delves into the issues of collective trauma, including historical events and societal upheaval, while also exploring personal trauma, including Kang’s own feelings of loss and sorrow.

By combining different genres, Kang encourages readers to think about how individual societal tragedies are connected, which helps them to develop empathy and compassion for other people’s experiences. Kang provides a moving and thoughtful reflection on the nature of trauma and the ability of narrative to transcend personal suffering and unite us with the larger human experience by allowing readers inside her own path of loss and healing.

Cross-cutting Themes

In order to the effects of pain and trauma on people and society, Han Kang uses a variety of motifs and narrative devices in her books to examine these recurrent topics with nuance and complexity.

Yeong-hye’s decision to give up meat in “*The Vegetarian*” is a reflection of her inner conflicts and serves as a springboard for examining topics of autonomy and repression. In “*The White Book*”, the protagonist’s contemplation of her own body and its weaknesses also serves as a metaphor for loss and bad times.

Storytelling devices like broken narratives and numerous points of views are also used to illustrate how complex trauma is. In “*Human Acts*”, kang employs a range of point of view to depict the societal anguish caused by the Gwangju Uprising, and in “*The White Book*” she delves into the individual experiences of sorrow and loss, using a poetic and reflective narrative device.

Overall, Han Kang’s works present a complex tapestry of suffering and trauma, empathetically and perceptively examining their repercussions on people and society. Through storytelling approaches and recurrent themes, kang challenges readers to consider the potential of healing and perseverance in the face of misfortune as well as the intricacies of human suffering.

Conclusion

The indescribable quality of suffering and trauma is profoundly communicated in Han Kang's work through the use of language, imagery and symbolism. Readers are able to fully immerse themselves in the experiences of the protagonists, as Kang skilfully conveys the physiological and emotional dimensions of pain through evocative prose and striking imagery. Symbolism like the body and natural elements that appear often, gives the story depth and complexity as well as layers of meaning that are relatable to everyone. Kang challenges readers to confront the complexities of human suffering and empathise with the character's struggles in managing their anguish and trauma by utilising language and symbolism. Han Kang creates a cohesive and comprehensive understanding of pain and trauma as essential experiences that mould both personal identity and societal memory throughout "*The Vegetarian*", "*Human Acts*", and "*The White Book*". She portrays suffering as something that resides in the body, stays in memory, and persists throughout time rather than as a singular occurrence. In her literature, pain is not fleeting; rather, it transforms characters' perceptions of the world and themselves. Her approach to trauma is based on the idea that it is embodied. Suffering is not merely emotional or abstract; it takes the form of physical manifestations, such as wounds, hunger, frailty, quiet, and even absence. The body becomes the location of violence's registration and memory. Whether the trauma is caused by personal loss, political massacre, or household persecution, it is always carried within the body. Han Kang makes the argument that the body retains history in this way. Pain turns into a living archive. Another essential element of her work is silence. In her writing, trauma often defies words. Characters find it difficult to articulate their experiences, instead of succinct explanations, the stories use fragmentation, shifting perspectives, poetic imagery, and restricted style. The fact that trauma cannot be fully defined or categorized logically is encapsulated in this stylistic choice. Both existence and the order of stories are upended by pain. By allowing quiet and gaps in the text, Han Kang emphasizes how suffering is often unintelligible.

The conclusion that comes out of these works is that suffering is an inherent part of being human. It moulds relationships, identity, and consciousness. Although trauma persists throughout time and between generations, facing it head-on through storytelling, remembering, or introspection becomes a dignified act. In the end, Han Kang's work implies that although pain might cause one to become fragmented, the act of seeing that suffering maintains the potential for meaning.

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