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Remembrance of the Gwangju Massacre: A Comparative Analysis of  
*There a Petal Silently Falls* and *Human Acts*

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## ABSTRACT

Between May 18th and 27th, 1980, the Gwangju Uprising, held by local citizens and students, was a mass protest against the South Korean military government that took place in the city of Gwangju. In response to the brutal repression of South Korea's military dictator, Chun Doo-Hwan, the event has been internationally acclaimed and represented as a pivotal movement in South Korean history for the struggle of democratic reform. Examining the literary representations of the Gwangju Uprising, this paper aims to provide a comparative analysis of Choe Yun's *There a Petal Silently Falls* and Han Kang's *Human Acts*. Firstly, I provide a theoretical framework drawing from Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* to examine how the concept of ghosts and the haunting empowers marginalized victims of state-sanctioned violence. Secondly, I discuss and apply Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* of how trauma re-evaluates history as fragmented, complex experiences, exploring the psychoanalytic theories of traumatic experiences and language of literature in historical fiction. Lastly, I analyze the representation of female protagonists in both novels and its themes portraying the relationship between gender and violence. Through this comparative analysis, the paper hopes to highlight the complexities of commemorating the Gwangju Uprising and its relevance to the ongoing struggle for justice and historical truth.

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## Introduction

In the aftermath of Park Chung-Hee's assassination in 1979, the South Korean president's 18-year authoritarian regime came to its conclusion. With the lack of political and social stability as well as presidential authority from Park's successor, Choi Kyu-Hah, came the coup d'état of December Twelfth led by the chief of the Defense Security Command, Chun Doo-Hwan. In response to Chun's declaration of martial law, there came a nationwide protest of military rule, primarily from students, labour activists, and local citizens in support for human rights, freedom of the press, and democratization (Kim, 2006). Despite national criticism erupting throughout Chun's military dictatorship, a capital in the South Jeolla Province, known as "Gwangju," came to represent the center of the pro-democracy movement during his regime (Jean, 2003). On May 18, 1980, 600 students, joined with civilian demonstrators, gathered to protest at Chonnam National University against government forces and suppression of academic freedom, with estimates rising to 200,000 after the massacre. As citizens raided local police stations and armories to take up military arms, Chun's government sent paratroopers from the Republic of Korea Special Warfare Command in retaliation. From May 18th to 21st, witnesses reported soldiers clubbing demonstrators and paratroopers firing upon citizens as the army blocked all routes and communications leading in and out of the city by May 22nd. Based on government figures, approximately 200 civilians were killed, with witnesses claiming it to be closer to 2,000. On May 27th, Chun's administration denounced the Gwangju Uprising as an insurrection by North Korean communists through three consecutive strategies: the complete cutoff of Gwangju with the outside world, media manipulation censorship, and state violence

(Choi, 2013)(Katsiaficas, 2000). It wasn't until 1987, during the reinstatement of democratic presidential elections as well as pro-democracy demonstrations in the 1980s, that there was an official evaluation of the massacre with the National Assembly declaring a public hearing and renaming the events as the "Gwangju Uprising."

With the memorialization of the Gwangju Uprising throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the literary movement of South Korean writers began producing works dealing with the trauma of Gwangju, exploring the restoration and reparations for the victims during the Uprising. Known as "May Literature," two literary novels have come to represent the genre's primary works that successfully integrate mourning of violent death and redemption among survivors and victims: *There a Petal Silently Falls* by Choe Yun and *Human Acts* by Han Kang.

Although *There a Petal Silently Falls* encompasses three novellas, this paper will be examining the first novella with the same title. Written in 1988, *A Petal* presents three chapters of victims of state violence during the Gwangju Massacre, with alternating chapters told from first or third person points of view: a girl journeying through Seoul in search of her brother; an inarticulate construction worker, tormented with guilt after violating the girl; a group of college students – the girl's brother's friends – on a search for the missing girl. After two decades of *A Petal's* publication, Han Kang, a South Korean writer in Gwangju, develops a novel that also draws upon the democratic uprising, bearing witness to victims and state violence. In contrast to Choe, Han writes her novel in a poetic yet concise narrative from the perspective of average citizens and activists who directly experienced the events of state violence and human brutality. Separated into seven chapters with a final epilogue, the first chapter follows the perspective and circumstances leading to the death of a young boy, Kang Dong-ho, during the Gwangju Uprising. Traversing between the 1980s to the present day, the author introduces six different

characters – all intertwined in Dong-ho’s lives – and provides a dimensional outlook on the impact his death had on their lives and the aftermath of the Uprising.

Despite Choe and Han never directly experiencing the state violence and trauma inflicted in Gwangju, their intention to write the novels comes from questions of violence and human brutality in contemporary Korean history. Raised in Seoul and restricted to information related to government suppression, Choe’s time as a graduate student in France allowed her to receive news reports of the Uprising halfway across the world which led to her debut novella (Choi, 2020). During South Korea’s immense period of industrialization and modernization in the 1980s, risking history to be distorted or forgotten, the author’s main objective of the novella came in two points: instate Gwangju as a universal incident of historical violence; produce a novel above and beyond historical temporality in order for Gwangju not to be forgotten (Choi, 2023). Choe pushes past the monotonous socialist realist paeans in the 1980s and provides an ode to both readers and the victims of Gwangju who’ve long been denied the truth of the Uprising (Choi, 2020). Additionally, she constructs the narrative to be read in terms of its universal significance:

I emphasized the universal aspects of the story because I was concerned that this uprising would soon be forgotten in contemporary Korean history. All around us, albeit in different forms, violence is perpetrated endlessly against the pure and innocent, and this story can be read as an awakening to that violence (Choi, 2023).

On the other hand, Han’s experience of viewing photographic imagery and stories of the Gwangju massacre as well as being a native to the city leaves the writer with a case of survivor’s guilt and a fundamental question: “What does it mean to be human?” (Reed, 2016). As Han provides a nuanced look of suffering and trauma through fictional accounts composed in

different chapters, styles, and narratives, her question is central to understanding the importance of testimony and gestures of mourning.

With both novels aiming to ask questions and discuss topics related to the human conscience, guilt and remembrance in an event of state-sanctioned violence, there exists a notable gap in literature regarding the comparative analysis of the two influential works. *There a Petal Silently Falls* primarily focuses on the emergence and aftermath of the Gwangju Massacre, following a polyphonic narrative structure, elliptic style, and hallucinatory flashbacks. In *Human Acts*, Han incorporates a gothic style that highlights the essences of absolute community and a Korean shamanic ritual, a metaphorical, ritual incantation with the narrator as a spiritual medium for those who died and are still alive (Choi, 2020, p. 440). Despite their relative differences, both novels share stylistic and thematic elements that unveils the violent acts their characters have experienced. In comparison between the seven, focalized narratives in *Human Acts* and the Girl's journey to search for her brother in *There a Petal that Silently Falls*, they present similarities of representing ghostly apparitions, universal aspects of repressed trauma, and gender discrimination. The paper attempts to study and compare the narrative and poetic elements of these novels in order to shed light on the complexities between memory and trauma as well as universal implications of state-violence and resistance in historical fiction.

Chapter One looks at ghostly representations of victims in the Gwangju Uprising in Chapter Two of *Human Acts*, "The Boy's Friend, 1980," and The Girl in *There a Petal that Silently Falls*. Avery Gordon's novel, *Ghostly Matters*, provides a theoretical framework to examine the social and political impacts of marginalized groups in past or haunting social forces. The Chapter aims to emphasize how apparitions of Jeong-dae and The Girl do not just represent superstitions or individual psychosis, but relates to a larger social phenomenon that serves as



evidence of a social figure embodying lost or unseen aspects of history, particularly in the aftermath of the Uprising.

Chapter Two looks at examples of trauma affecting distortions and repression of memory through the unnamed narrator in *Human Acts*' Chapter Four: "The Prisoner, 1990" as well as The Girl in *There a Petal that Silently Falls*. Through Cathy Caruth's exploration of psychoanalysis and literature in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History*, this chapter largely explores how trauma in both novels disrupts traditional models of understanding history by introducing the complex narratives of the unnamed protagonist's experience as a tortured activist in prison and The Girl's traumatic witness of her mother's death.

Chapter Three looks at gender, particularly female, agency through Seon-ju in *Human Acts*' Chapter Five: The Factory Girl, 2002 and The Girl in *There a Petal that Silently Falls*. By examining the role of female factory workers during the Minjung movement as well as male-dominated literary works and films of the Gwangju Uprising, this chapter aims to explore how Choe and Han's portrayal of female protagonists within a patriarchal society sheds light on the overlooked contributions and struggles women faced during a time of political and social upheaval.

However, there is the question as to why there are still scholarly discussions of fictional literary works surrounding the Gwangju Uprising despite countless testimonies, photographs, and video recordings now accessible and offering more direct facts to the public. In (Dis)Embodiment of Memory: Gender, Memory, and Ethics in *Human Acts* by Han Kang, Ji-Eun Lee answers the question by confronting the ethics of storytelling. As novels such as Han Kang's "describe the suffering symptoms of the world," it manifests a deep sorrow in readers that prevents history from repeating once again (Lee, 2022, p. 365). Rather than exploiting these

tragic events, *Human Acts* and *A Petal* explores moral complexities inherent in humans and within societal structures as well as creating a fictional narrative that presents as "abiding memory" rather than a factual account (Assmann 2018, 216).

Although the South Korean government has come to recognize and apologize for Chun's acts of state-violence and martial law during the Gwangju Uprising, both novels came to experience critical controversy following their publication. As the nation was still undergoing a dictatorship preceding democratic governance in 1988, Choe's decision to publish her novel in the United States was intended to avoid political scrutiny of stories and art noting the existence of the Uprising (Columbia University Press, 2017). During the publication of *Human Acts* in 2014, the novel was excluded from the National Libraries of South Korea for reasons of "ideological bias" involving keywords such as May 18th as well as the author being placed on the blacklist of professionals in the culture and arts (CBC News, 2017). In May 2017, Moon Jae-in's administration re-opened investigations into the South Korean government's role of the Uprising, revealing information regarding acts of sexual violence, agents provocateurs, and the United States' foreknowledge and involvement of the Gwangju Massacre (Kim, 2017). Even after 45 years, there remains an ongoing struggle for historical truth and justice of the Gwangju Uprising. Through the comparative analysis between *Human Acts* and *There a Petal Silently Falls*, the paper aims to underscore the texts' complex interplay of memory, politics, and ethics of the Gwangju Uprising, fostering remembrance as well as shaping collective memory and confronting societal injustices.

## Chapter 1: Convolutions of Ghostly Apparitions

In Han's *Human Acts* and Choe's *There a Petal Silently Falls*, we encounter representations of ghostly figures during and after the Gwangju Uprising. Chungmoo Choi examines, in *Healing Historical Trauma in South Korean Film and Literature*, Han's role in *Human Acts* as a Korean shaman that is a medium for the invoked spirit, Jeong-Dae, to unleash its resentment and grievances through a cleansing ritual. With the literary representations of spiritual possession, writers of May Literature perform as the Korean cultural figure to not present as a witness to the historical atrocities in Gwangju, but as a medium to empower the voices of the dead to testify. Likewise, in my readings of Han and Choe's texts as well as Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters*, I find that the ghostly figures of Jeong-dae and the Girl aim to confront the forgotten legacy of historical violence as well as allowing the living – the group of college students and the reader – to embody their suffering from the atrocities in Gwangju. In both texts, the concept of the haunting presents itself as a metaphor for unresolved historical trauma and its implications of social consciousness for the Gwangju Uprising.

Through Gordon's definition, the term “Haunting” involves recognizing a presence that appears absent but exerts influence on everyday realities. An evidence of the haunting is a “Ghost,” which represents not just a deceased individual but a “social figure in which investigating it can lead to a site where history and subjectivity make social life” (Gordon, 1997, p. 8). Although Gordon recognizes the notion of ghosts or phantoms as nonexistent and outdated in the modern world, she argues that the concentration of haunting serves to maintain relevance regarding social analysis within contemporary issues, emphasizing history to remain intertwined with both the past and present (Gordon, 1997, p. 12-13). Throughout her exploration of haunting, Gordon identifies three characteristic features in ghosts: bringing forth a sense of charged

strangeness to the sphere it haunts; serving as a symptom of what is missing (through loss of life); obtaining a living presence and offering it an interaction out of concern for justice (Gordon 1997, p. 63-64).

In *There a Petal that Silently Falls*, the beginning of the novella begins with a second person point of view, addressing the reader to be part of the story. Through its brief narration does the narrator describe the setting as to what it may seem like an urban legend when passing through burial grounds: “As you pass by the grave sites scattered throughout the city, you may encounter her, a girl whose maroon velvet dress barely covers her, a girl who lingers near the burial mounds” (Choe, 1991, p. 3). The narrator advises “you,” the reader, to not stop nor look back when the girl approaches you or to stare at the “flesh showing between the folds of that torn, soiled dress, or drawn to something resembling a wound” as by doing so would precede an unfortunate consequence for yourself or for the girl (Choe, 1991, p. 3). The scene immediately presents the girl as a ghost, with the haunting sphere set in a graveyard, a place to bury the dead and serves as a mediator between the living and deceased. As the girl lingers and attempts to follow living beings, the narrator’s advice to ignore her allows readers to infer a sense of charged strangeness, presuming her to be a malevolent or unfortunate spirit. In the same passage, if one were to experience the girl “following you...and pulling at your jacket and draw close to you like a magnet,” the narrator notes to be “gentle as possible when you remove her hand” and to just look at her face for a moment (Choe, 1991, p. 3). Yet, the narrator also advises to not be “too quick to sympathize with this wasted girl who longs to escape the shadows for the sunlight” and to avoid the urge to assault her as by doing “all this, many other girls will notice a young man like you. Traumatized and deranged, They will follow you, crying “Brother!” (Choe, 1991, p. 4). The girl manifests as a ghost to signify the grief of losing a man in his twenties that holds close

resemblance to her brother from her past life. With the advice from the narrator to acknowledge her presence while avoiding direct confrontation, the reader is restricted to limited interactions with the girl out of concern for her sanity.

In contrast to the Girl presenting a ghostly figure, Chapter Two of *Human Acts* provides a more direct approach of the haunting. In “The Boy’s Friend, 1980,” the chapter begins with a first-person narration of Jeong-Dae, Dong-Ho’s friend and the first character to die in the events of the Uprising. In the aftermath of the first political demonstration, Jeong-Dae describes the scene of soldiers transporting bodies to an offsite location, with his soul still attached to his corpse: “they stacked the bodies in the neat shape of a cross...with my head tipped backward, the shade of the wood turned my face into a pallid ghost of itself” (Han, 2014, p. 56). Similar to the burial sites in *A Petal*, Han presents the haunting sphere to be an area filled with bodies of those killed in Gwangju. As the victims’ spirits wander aimlessly, they are unable to interact with other apparitions whilst remaining a level of attachment to their physical bodies. By the light of dawn, Jeong-dae begins to remember the cause of his death and realizes that Dong-Ho is still alive. Yet, the “discovery brought me no comfort. Instead, it frightened me to think that here by this strange thicket, surrounded by bodies gradually breaking down into their constituent parts, I was alone among strangers” (Han, 2014, p. 59). A characteristic of the haunting presented in the Chapter is Jeong-Dae representing as a symptom of what is missing. As Jeong-Dae was killed during the Uprising, he represents the loss of a brother, a friend, and a child in Gwangju. Even after his death, his soul remains attached to his rotting corpse and he is unable to break free, leaving him isolated among ghostly strangers. In terms of obtaining a living presence and interacting with the ghostly figure out of concern for justice, the reader is shown to be the living presence. As Jeong-Dae narrates his thoughts, anxieties, and memories of the past, the reader must acknowledge his

existence as an apparition in order to read his testimonies as a victim to state violence. Han and Choe present characters of ghostly figures that apply to Gordon's definition of the Haunting and Ghost, representing key figures of the past that remain intertwined with the present.

With Gordon's theory of ghosts portraying as a haunting image of marginalized oppression, she describes how historical events may leave individuals and societies haunted by the past. She expands her theory through Walter Benjamin's concept of materialist historiography:

The historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad, encounters what I have been calling the ghost. The monad or the ghost presents itself as a sign to the thinker that there is a chance in the fight for the oppressed past, by which I take Benjamin to mean that the past is alive enough in the present, in the now, to warrant such an approach (Gordon, 1998, p. 65).

Gordon calls attention to the reciprocal relationship between the thinker's mode of engagement and historical events they are confronted with. The thinker must acknowledge the presence of the apparition as a monad – a singular, self-contained entity in a larger historical context – and recognize its symptoms and conditions as potential for revolutionary change. In an event of state-violence, the “ghosts,” or victims of the Gwangju Uprising present not as lingering spirits of past events, but living entities that continue to shape the present.

In Chapter Three of *A Petal*, a group of college students actively search for the missing girl, who is their classmate's sister. Although the group has never come to directly interact with the Girl, either as a living being or monad, they take on the role of the historical materialist in hopes of finding her. With only fragmented stories of the Girl from witnesses, the group speculates as to what may have inclined her to leave Gwangju, “perhaps on that day, terrified by

her mother's death, or maybe it was something worse than terror, she had found a place to hide" (Choe, 1991, p. 19). By disrupting their conventional way of thinking, the group is able to address and configure of the Girl's past that led to her disappearance. As they interview neighbors and strangers who've interacted with her, they theorize the possibility that the Girl ran away as a result of the tragic events during the Gwangju Uprising. Although the South Korean military involved in the Uprising were not directly responsible for the Girl's disappearance, their acts of state violence involving the murder of her mother causes her to leave Gwangju to escape the traumatic events whilst aimlessly searching for her brother in Seoul, who is also killed by Chun's administration. With no reliable coordinates or direction of where the girl ran off to, the group attempts to invent a nonlinear itinerary to "grasp the wanderings of the girl's spirit...to pinpoint her peculiar journey we had to enter inside of her, remain with her, follow the dictates of her mind" (Choe, 1991, p. 23). By engaging the Girl's living presence as a "spirit" or apparition in addition to examining the symptoms and conditions she experienced from structural violence, the group develops a reciprocal relationship between their mode of engagement and the historical events that are presented to them.

In *Human Acts*, the roles of the historical materialist and the apparition presents between the reader and Jeong-dae's ghost. After his discovery of Dong-ho being still alive, he experiences intense isolation and fear, surrounded by the dead bodies of strangers. To calm himself, he thinks of his sister, Jeong-mi, who he finds out is also killed during the Uprising. In response,

With neither tongue nor voice to carry it, my scream leaked out from me in a mess of blood and watery discharge. My soul-self had no eyes; where was the blood coming from, what nerve endings were sparking this pain?...A strange violence welled up within me, not spurred by the fact of my death, but simply because of the thoughts that wouldn't

stop tearing through me, the things I needed to know. Who killed me, who killed my sister, and why? (Han, 2014, p. 60)

With the leaking of blood and watery discharge emitting the violence and sorrowful grief that fills Jeong-dae's soul, the reader interacts with him as a ghostly configuration. Rife with tension, he crystallizes into a "monad," an entity during the Gwangju Uprising that is left with questions and an unfulfilled sense of justice. As the group in *A Petal* must delve into the historical violence of the Girl's past in order to find fragments of her spiritual presence, the reader must delve into how government's state-sanctioned violence have left the deceased to rot in unmarked graves, piled on top of each other. Without the ritual of a proper funeral and their deaths inflicted by authoritarian abuse, ghostly victims such as Jeong-Dae are left to wander around the mass grave of corpses, filled with contempt and confusion as to who killed them and why. Evidently, the reciprocal relationship between the living and victims of state-violence in Gwangju reveals the underlying tensions and causes of the ghostly apparitions in *Human Acts* and *A Petal*. Both texts utilize methods of historical materialism to preserve the struggles and trauma that victims and survivors of Gwangju endured whilst calling attention to how dominant narratives in history (i.e. the government and military power) attempt to change narratives as seen in contemporary issues of censorship and denial.

Centering on Toni Morrison's novel, "Beloved," Gordon sets the framework of how the haunting presence of ghosts influences the lives of the novel's characters, particularly Sethe and Beloved, during the period of Reconstruction in the United States with the harrowing legacy of colonialism and slavery. When examining the resolution of the struggle between Sethe and Beloved, the ghost of Sethe's dead daughter, Gordon brings forth the idea that to remain haunted is to remain fixated on the past. The desire of the haunted is essentially wanting to address their



grievances of unresolved trauma and injustices through marginalized individuals or events: “when ghosts appear to you, the dead or the disappeared or the lost or the invisible are demanding their due. They are, for better or worse, very much alive and present” (Gordon, 1998, p. 182). Haunting is shown to not just be a spectral encounter, but a fundamental aspect of human existence as readers must recognize its pervasive nature and relevance to societal issues. To remediate the situation, Morrison argues for a “collective exorcism,” involving rectification of past wrongs (Gordon, 1988, p. 182). Requiring more than just acknowledging the ghostly presence, the living must call attention to the underlying consequences of historical injustices as well as provide systemic changes and reconciliation. Gordon notes that by engaging in this collective labor, the process will shape the present and lay out possibilities for a just future.

*A Petal* presents the protagonist as a living being through fragmented, incoherent narratives, in which she is supposedly on a search for her brother in the city due to the mysterious disappearance of her mother. However, the Girl is forced to confront her past and comes to unveil her suppressed memories near the end of the novella. Realizing that her mother was killed during the events of the Uprising, the Girl does not wish to return home as she is haunted of the possibility that her community would come after her. With nowhere to go and nowhere to turn except her brother’s grave, the Girl wishes to find her brother and tell him of her mother’s death. Only then, she can “turn into dust and disappear into the ground...tomorrow my moldy body will be drying in the sun for everyone to see. I have to tell Brother everything” (Choe, 1991, 72). In relation to Gordon’s theory of the haunting presence, the Girl hopes to tell her story and truth to her deceased brother in order to confront her repressed trauma and release herself of her guilt surrounding her mother’s death. The protagonist presents as a spirit whilst being haunted by the past in which she clings onto the memory of her mother and brother being

alive. Yet, only when she addresses her unresolved trauma and injustices, the murder of her mother and brother by the South Korean military, does she address her grievances, experience serenity, and detach her spirit from her physical being – collapsing into dust and mold. The focus of “collective exorcism” allows readers to recognize how the Gwangju Uprising impacted the lives of not just activists and students protesting for democracy but to innocent civilians such as the Girl who are left traumatized in the aftermath. By calling attention to the haunting of suppressed memories and underlying consequences of systemic oppression, Choe urges audiences to engage in collective labor by advocating for reconciliation and remembrance of the victims.

As the Girl seeks closure from the haunting traumas of her past, Jeong-Dae, as an apparition, remains fixated on the injustices he’s experienced directly from the Gwangju massacre. Recollecting his memories of the past in hopes to avoid his present circumstances, Jeong-Dae envisions of his death:

Of the bullet that tore in there. Of that initial impact. Of the hole it made in my other side, where it flew out and tugged my hot blood behind it. Of the barrel it was blasted out of. Of the smooth trigger. Of the eye that had me in its sights. Of the eyes of the one who gave the order to fire. I want to see their faces, to hover above their sleeping eyelids like a guttering flame, to slip inside their dreams, spend the nights flaring in through their forehead, their eyelids. Until their nightmares are filled with my eyes, my eyes as the blood drains out. Until they hear my voice asking, demanding, why (Han, 2014, p. 65-66).

The original text presents as a poem, with the use of anaphora incorporating the term, “of,” emphasizing Jeong-Dae's fixation on the details of the shooting, suggesting a desire to

understand what happened. The sensory details and repetition add a rhythmic quality that intensifies the psychological and physical impact of the traumatic event, highlighting the unresolved grievances of his vengeful spirit. Jeong-dae is directly demanding his due for justice, primarily from the perpetrators who killed him, his sister, and community in Gwangju. Through Morrison's solution of "collective exorcism" does it allow the reader to engage in the cause for reconciliation and justice for the victims. It is not enough to call out the solitude and grief that Jeong-Dae, and many other ghosts, experience, but to acknowledge that his murderers, the oppressors that have systematically harmed his community and family, are still alive. Choe and Han emphasize that those who remain alive in the mortal world have a responsibility to maintain accountability and truth, especially for the deceased within their community that represent one's history and culture. As the Girl and Jeong-Dae come to represent the many victims of the Gwangju Uprising, Gordon's theory highlights the importance of representing their ghostly figures to ensure justice and prevent a horrific event like this from happening again.

Although Gordon provides a definitive and traditional overview of the Ghostly Specter, she presents two counterintuitive aspects of haunting that challenge conventional understanding, extending trauma to constitute larger societal dynamics. The first feature is that the Ghost does not solely embody negative desires and individual trauma, but complex social forces that call attention to unfulfilled potentials and repressed aspects in the present. In the case of *Beloved* in Morrison's novel, the ghost represents a call to address the historical narrative of slavery and racially gendered capitalism in the present for black Americans. The second feature is that history is "the ghostly totality that articulated and disarticulated itself and the subjects who inhabit it" (Gordon, 1997, 184). Despite its constant evolution and changes, history – like the ghostly figure – is inescapable and continues to exert a major influence on society. With these

two features in mind, Morrison warns individuals of overlooking legacies representing historical atrocities and to remain vigilant of narratives that obscure or downplay the impact of past injustices. By listening carefully to the voices of the past, individuals will “hear not only ‘their’ story, but how we are in this story” (Gordon, 1997, 190). The concept of haunting is therefore central, as ghostly figures continue to shape the past, present, and future while the living being haunted means to be bound to social and political issues surrounding the voices of the marginalized.

In the final chapter of *A Petal*, the group of college students immerse in Gordon’s counterintuitive concepts of the haunting a year after the failed attempt to search for The Girl. As they prepare to mourn for the first anniversary of their friend’s death, the Girl’s brother, they find an old newspaper showing an image of the Girl and an advertisement to possible family or acquaintances to claim her. Attempting to search for her one last time, they locate the address of a man who “grew distracted” when the group explained the purpose of their visit. Realizing that the Girl was not there, they “listened to his monologue punctuated with sobs, we felt as if we were dropping into a bottomless gulf. He constantly reproached himself. He begged us to find her, or to tell him how to find her” (Choe, 1991, p. 77-78). In the aftermath of the Girl’s passing, the group of college students come to experience the two features of counterintuitive haunting. Although they have never come to directly interact with the Girl, they are able to approach those who have during her period of psychosis and search for her brother. Chang, the unnamed secondary character in *A Petal*, comes to present the complex social forces that the Girl has interacted with. As the college students note his appearance to look similar to the Girl’s brother, it is evident that the Girl had attached herself to Chang in hopes of fulfilling the familial relationship she lost during the Uprising. With the relationship she establishes comes the grief

that Chang experiences as well, further puncturing the emotional wound that the group experiences as they cannot find The Girl who has influenced the lives of many characters throughout the novella. Evidently, she embodies not just the negative aspirations of the ghostly figure but the historical implications of the Gwangju Uprising for survivors and their communities.

Returning to the boarding house from the address, the group of college students gather around the ceremonial table and sit in silence as they imagine a girl that they “had never seen, a smile that seemed to hover about us, a withered flower in her hair, and her maroon dress swaying as she dropped lightly to a sitting position in front of a grave that didn’t contain her brother” (Choe, 1991, p. 78). In reference to Benjamin's concept of materialist historiography, the group engages with the Girl’s spirit through the ceremonial table. They are not only mourning the death of their beloved friend, but his sister as well, whose presence continues to haunt them even after a whole year passes by. Applying the second feature of the counterintuitive haunting comes the inescapable events of history and the Girl as a ghostly figure, who continues to exert her influence on her brother’s friends. As Choe writes the novel’s concluding sentence of the group envisioning the Girl to be in a grave that does not contain her brother, it is implied that the Girl was unable to fulfill her promise. The intention to write an unfavorable ending can allude to both survivors and victims in the aftermath of the Gwangju Uprising. Due to political and social censorship by military forces to cover up their acts of state-sanctioned violence, the only evidence during that time that spoke for the voices of the marginalized are through written or oral testimonies. Despite those in power who attempt to obscure the past, Choe writes the Girl’s spiritual presence to serve as a legacy beyond the grave of the historical atrocities in Gwangju throughout the past, present, and future. To individuals who may wish to overlook the legacies of

martial law and dictatorship, narratives in *A Petal* resonate such topics with contemporary societal issues and individuals' experiences, leaving the reader unable to escape from the haunting.

In comparison to *Human Acts*, Chapter Two of “The Boy’s Friend, 1980” reveals the conclusion of Jeong-Dae’s ghostly spirit being set free, albeit through the military’s unjust acts. After compiling the corpses, the soldiers came to douse petrol over the towers of bodies and set it ablaze. As Jeong-Dae’s body burns among the masses, he asks himself as to where he can go to which the drifting spirits among him answer, “*To your sister. But where is she?...Go to those who killed you then. But where are they?*” (Han, 2014, p. 70). Similar to the Girl who sought out for her brother, Jeong-Dae experiences a mix of confusion and fear, unsure of where to go and who to follow, not knowing whether his family or those who killed him were dead or alive. It’s only until he calms himself through the burning of his rotting corpse that he decides he will set out to find Dong-Ho: “*I’ll go to you. And just like that, everything became clear...Perhaps you’d found my sister in the meantime. Perhaps I’d be able to greet her again, in the only way left to me-by haunting the edges of her body*” (Han, 2014, p. 71). Essentially, Jeong-Dae views Dong-Ho as a form of escapism, distracting himself from his ghostly figure as well as the trauma he endures from watching the burning of his physical body. Instead of seeking vengeance against his oppressors, Jeong-Dae embodies his humanity by being reminded of his relationships with his family and friend. In reference to Morrison’s first feature of counterintuitive haunting, Jeong-Dae’s unfulfilled potential lies in finding his sister and Dong-Ho again, similar to the Girl’s search for her brother. Both central characters present a call to the deceased of the Gwangju Uprising, specifically the historical narrative of their unjust deaths. With their souls wandering

between the mortal and spiritual realm, they are seeking to find reconciliation with their immediate passing through acknowledgment of their loved ones and community.

Jeong-Dae further slips through the orange flames as he watches the fire subside and the bodies collapse into glowing embers. Yet, he hears a distant scream and the sound of fireworks setting off, experiencing “living breaths snapped like a neck. Souls shocked from their bodies. That was when you died, Dong-ho. I didn’t know where, I only knew that was what it was: the moment of your death” (Han, 2014, p. 72). As a ghostly spirit, Jeong-Dae experiences a mass sensation of the living being killed, one of them he recognizes to be Dong-Ho. That is the moment in which the ghostly figure is left alone, with no possibility of seeing Dong-Ho nor his sister again. Like the rest of the spirits and victims of the Uprising, they do not merely embody the individual trauma experienced from state violence but the ghostly totality that articulates and disarticulates throughout history. With their bodies set on fire as well as their own community being killed in the process, those who witnessed the historical atrocities are unable to testify against the military government. Similar to the group of college students who mourn for the Girl, Jeong-Dae can only mourn Dong-Ho’s passing as a ghost, seeing the shattering of guns in the fair distance. As time passes by throughout the novel, Han’s choice to have Jeong-Dae remain as a wandering spirit implies that his narrative still remains unacknowledged while those alive continue to experience systemic violence and authoritarianism. History is inescapable regardless of its changes and those who read “The Boy’s Friend” must recognize that it is not enough to recognize the haunting as a historical genre but a means to address present conditions of human rights and democracy. Despite those who attempt “declarative repudiations and voluntaristic identifications” to avoid accountability, Gordon’s idea of the haunting and ghostly apparitions evidently prevails the separation between history and the living (Gordon, 1997, p. 190).

Throughout the stories written by Choe and Han, the haunting is not something the living chooses to engage with, but rather shape and influence individuals and society as well as have them experience displacement and disorientation within the present. From the ghostly perspectives of Jeong-Dae and the Girl, they not only represent being a spirit of the past but as a catalyst to strive for justice and transparency through political and social means.



## Chapter 2: Historical Trauma and Ethics of Storytelling

The events of a political demonstration against an authoritarian government often leads activists and communities to cope with the aftermath of the violence committed by those in power. For Choe and Han, they provide complex characters that must deal with such historical atrocities. Firstly, it is important to outline traditional literary theories of psychoanalysis that provide a fundamental framework surrounding the characters throughout both novels. In *Healing Historical Trauma*, Choi investigates Freud's theory of the Uncanny in relation to the Girl's mirrored image of herself in *A Petal*, presented as a "double" that confronts the repression of her mother's death (2022, p. 117). Through the non-sequitur, fragmented soliloquies of the protagonist, Choi exemplifies the Girl's escape from the bullets of the military and corpses in the streets of Gwangju in relation to survivor's guilt and unaddressed trauma. Similarly, Cathy Caruth also delves into Freud's texts of psychoanalysis, literature, and literary theory that elucidate the psychiatry of trauma in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. In Chapter Two, I apply Caruth's exploration of Freud's theories of trauma, within the referential limits of language and history, to challenge the conventional notions of historical references through the unnamed former prisoner in Chapter four of *Human Acts* and the Girl in *A Petal*. Additionally, I will also examine the ethical implications of the novels' secondary characters that play as a distant witness to the Gwangju Uprising, problematizing potential exploitations in documenting trauma and memory.

Broaching a subject that has left communities to grieve the loss of their loved ones, it is important to objectively define what trauma is. According to Caruth, one can perceive a history of trauma to not be "fully perceived as it occurs" but as something that emerges from complex,

often fragmented experiences (1996, p. 11). When defining trauma, it is said to be a “response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (Caruth, 1996, p. 11). Modern examples include soldiers from World War II, who have witnessed mass death, to experience both delayed and uncontrollable responses as well as hallucinations or intrusive thoughts from the event.

As the Girl traverses from Gwangju to Seoul, her behavior can be said to illustrate the image of trauma survivors suffering symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. With witnesses observing her irrational patterns as she throws erratic fits in between hysterical laughs, her mental state implies her avoidance of what caused such behavior. In Chapter 4 of *A Petal*, after experiencing a surreal nightmare of being pinned down and interrogated to speak, the Girl wakes up in a village. At that moment, Choe incorporates a fragmented memory of the Girl seeing her mother’s dead body only to be covered with a heavy black curtain: “At that moment, the moment Mama fell, I could no longer see past or present. Part of that curtain’s still there. When I came to, I couldn’t budge—it felt like a dresser had fallen on me” (1991, p. 26). Throughout her journey, the Girl experiences major delays as a result of these uncontrollable hallucinations and thoughts. Applying to Caruth’s definition of trauma regarding memories with fragmented events, Choe incorporates symbols such as the black curtain as well as the Girl’s nightmares to describe the oppressed history of trauma from the Gwangju Uprising. As the Girl is persistently tormented by imaginary nightmares, she cannot fully grasp the horrific experience she witnessed of her mother’s death.

Expanding past the victims of the Gwangju Uprising, Han involves multiple, diverse narratives in *Human Acts* through a similar, fragmented mode of storytelling. Chapter Four, “The

Prisoner, 1990,” begins with a black Monami Biro, a pen used for everyday purposes, as a form of torture for the prisoners of the Uprising. The unnamed narrator goes into graphic detail of his fingers rubbed raw from the pen, with the same treatment applied to ninety other men.

Throughout the chapter, the narrative switches between the past, the events leading up to the Uprising, the narrator’s imprisonment, and present aftermath. Comparing the two events, Han makes clear the chain of events that leads up to the narrator’s ruination from the emotional and physical scars he endured from his time as an activist. With the ordinary Monami Biro leaving a mark on his hand, the pen serves as a reminder to the narrator of the abuse he endured: “I wait for death to come and wash me clean, to release me from the memory of those other, squalid deaths, which haunt my days and nights” (Han, 2014, p. 140). Comparing the unnamed narrator to the Girl, he appears fully conscious and aware of the torture he experienced while being imprisoned. However, similar to the Girl’s narrative and the unclaimed experiences of the Uprising as a result of censorship, he is forced to deal with the haunting memories alone. Essentially, through repression of their near-death experience, both protagonists internally cope with their survivor’s guilt and trauma of state-sanctioned violence.

With the definition of trauma comes ways in which individuals must learn how to survive or live with it. From Freud’s readings as well as Caruth’s analysis, she challenges the conventional notions of trauma survival to be a linear process by emphasizing the indirectness and paradoxical nature of psychological trauma. As physical wounds may heal, Freud’s observation of psychological trauma determines that it impacts the psyche in a way that is not apparent, not physically visible to the human eye. The psychiatrist questions the problem of survival, in trauma, with “what does it mean for consciousness to survive?” (Caruth, 1991, p. 61). As the paradox of psychological trauma comes with the challenges of coping with a

traumatic event, Caruth exemplifies how such experiences can severely impact human consciousness. Not only are individuals left with physical and mental scars as a result of intrusive symptoms, traumatic experiences play into the deep rooted intricacies of the mind's coping mechanisms and processing. Therefore, the reminders of a violent event creates a contagion of behavioral repetition or unhealthy coping mechanisms, leading to self-destruction and the possibility of death.

The Girl's attempt to survive her trauma did not come with physical scars but rather psychological aging and transformation. When recollecting the day that she saw her mother die, that was the day that she had come to realize the reality she lived as a young girl under martial law: "That day, the day I blacked out, I lost forty, fifty, a hundred years of my life. That day, when the black curtain draped my memory and the image of my mother's arrested motions—on that day I lost everything forever" (Choe, 1991, p. 33). With the repetition of the nightmares and physical self-harm the Girl inflicts upon herself, Choe incorporates such symptoms to demonstrate the challenges to the protagonist's consciousness. Although *A Petal* intends to hold the Gwangju Uprising as not just a historical event but a narrative that holds the victims in remembrance, the author portrays a complex protagonist that must deal with the aftermath of the historical violence, like many survivors. Therefore, the Girl's repetition of self-destructive acts serves as a punishment and constant reminder of being a coward for being the only survivor in her family.

For the unnamed narrator, he also challenges the conventional modes of trauma survival as his thoughts and actions contradict the linear processes of healing. After an encounter with Jin-su, the lead activist involved in the Uprising, the narrator observes a similar state of

disorientation after their imprisonment. While inquiring on each other how the other has been, they undergo a night of binge-drinking and continue to do so every now and then:

Seven years dragged by in this way, with each of us seeing in the other a crooked mirror image of our own pathetic lives: failing to gain any qualifications; being involved in a car accident; getting into debt; suffering injury or illness; meeting kind-hearted women who made us dare to believe that our suffering was finally over, only to see it all turn to shit through no one's fault but our own, and eventually end up alone again (Han, 2014, p. 132).

Due to the psychological scars they carry, the two activists are unable to properly function back into society. Both seek solidarity and comfort among those who went through the same, violent events and play into an inherent repetition of self-destructive acts. It is not just the singular protagonist that struggles with survival trauma but his comrades who were imprisoned as well. Even after they were released, welcomed back by their families, and healed of their bodily wounds, the psychological trauma essentially has made its impact on the psyche, having the survivors question their purpose to live after what they've endured. As they grow older, they continue to be plagued by their violent experiences while the rest of the world continues to progress, eventually leaving no one to shed tears or worry for them. Stuck in isolation, they seek various coping mechanisms such as drinking, education, finances, and love in hopes to cure themselves of their mental illnesses. Yet, with Caruth's theory of trauma survival, it is not enough for the unnamed narrator, Jin-su, and the Girl to forgive and forget as they continue to be stuck in limbo of their mental anguish.

Drawing onto the relationship between trauma survival and isolation, So Yong-in highlights how *Human Acts* insists on the "suffering of singularity in isolation and, as such, it

deliberately underscores the disharmony with collective memory” (Choi, 2022, p. 106). Han’s intention to describe the singularity that her characters experience, being isolated from their communities, emphasizes the disconnect between collective community and historical narratives. Tying into Caruth’s work, the inability to bond with other individuals of their violent experiences further contributes to the fragmented process of trauma survival. While the Girl breaks away from her community due to survivor’s guilt, leaving herself vulnerable and isolated, the unnamed narrator and Jin-su seek solace but cannot cure each other of their past. For the survivors who endured violent, human conditions through the event or after, they are deprived of collective memory while seeking a community that provides understanding and solidarity of their experiences.

An alternative perspective to Freud’s psychoanalytic theory is French psychiatrist Jacques Lacan, who suggests that trauma is not just an isolated event but a fundamental encounter with reality. When understanding the transmission of traumatic experiences in human psychology, Caruth argues that the works of Lacan emphasizing the “act of survival, the repeated failure to have seen in time—in itself a pure repetition compulsion, a repeated nightmare—can be transformed into the imperative of a speaking that awakens others” (1991, p. 108). In other words, by surviving traumatic events can individuals be compelled to speak out, converting the repeated failures of self-destruction to cause an awakening and awareness of historical violence. Caruth highlights Lacan’s perspective that engaging with trauma survival goes beyond intellectual inquiry by exposing the ethical dimensions of human behavior and condition. Freud’s psychoanalytic theory comes to bear both the repetition of traumatic experiences and the responsibility of ethical behavior. When encountering or understanding a history of violence, it is

not just encompassing oneself with facts and figures but emotionally disturbing events, forcing individuals to grasp the definition of morality in human behavior and society.

Facing psychological torment, the Girl undergoes a schizophrenic episode in a train on the way to Seoul. As she comes to realize how the deterioration of her mental further detracts her physical body, the Girl believes that to survive the Uprising means she is doomed to live:

That black curtain? It never existed. But for a long time I thought it did, because I wanted that curtain badly, wanted it to cover up everything. The memories of that day, clearer than water or glass, I painted over in white. Just like the horrible faces of those dead people were painted over (Choe, 1991, p. 54).

Applying Lacan's theory, the Girl comes to understand that repressing her memories of the Uprising is not just an isolated event for herself but the reality of the nation's state-sanctioned violence which has affected her mother, brother, and community in Gwangju. Through the symbolic representation of overcoming her trauma by removing the black curtain, the Girl soon breaks out of her psychological symptoms and describes the memories she holds from the Gwangju Uprising. Remembering the faces of the victims and activists, painted over in white as a symbol of censorship and repression, the Girl undergoes an awakening to which she believes she is, once again, punished for surviving a historical atrocity.

As mentioned before, Han delves into the question of human acts through the suffering and trauma of her characters on fictional accounts. From the perspective of an adolescent, the Girl undergoes a metamorphosis and gains consciousness of humans being capable of killing and committing acts of violence. However, the unnamed narrator, as an adult, comes to question whether humans are innately born this way:

Rather than fading with the passage of time, those memories become the only things that are left behind when all else is abraded. Is it true that human beings are fundamentally cruel? Is the experience of cruelty the only thing we share as a species? Is the dignity that we cling to nothing but self-delusion, masking from ourselves this single truth: that each one of us is capable of being reduced to an insect, a ravening beast, a lump of meat? To be degraded, damaged, slaughtered—is this the essential fate of humankind, one that history has confirmed as inevitable? (Han, 2014, p. 139).

Tormented by his memories of prison and unable to assimilate back into society, the narrator undergoes an awakening of the historical violence regarding human behavior. Referencing similar events of militaristic violence that occurred in Busan and Vietnam, he questions himself as well as to the reader of morality existing within the human condition. The memories of being treated savagely, Lacan's theory of trauma survival applies to the narrator reckoning with the emotionally disturbing events being proof that history is fundamentally cruel, that the state-sanctioned violence of the Gwangju Uprising was bound to happen as citizens and students protested against an authoritarian government. Tying into the larger framework of *Human Acts*, Han's writing of testimonial narratives provide not just a gesture of mourning for the survivors and victims, but forces audiences to question whether the atrocities that have been committed by the State is a universal aspect of human behavior and society. Therefore, narratives such as *A Petal* and *Human Acts* allow individuals to confront their own consciousness in recognizing the relations between historical violence and human ethics, further contributing to remembrance and addressing social injustices of the Uprising.

Although it is reinstated that both Choe and Han have never come to directly experience the Gwangju Uprising that their characters experience in *A Petal* and *Human Acts*, they come to



document the memories and events through historical narratives to shape collective memory.

Presenting as a storyteller for the victims who are unable to speak, the authors provide a voice to those experiencing trauma survival and engage in contemporary conversations regarding state-sanctioned violence. However, there is the question of whether these authentic stories truly fall under documentation rather than exploitation, possibly profiting off or sensationalizing themes of trauma. To address such limitations, Choe and Han incorporate secondary characters, who did not come to experience the Uprising, to problematize the potential issues when attempting to find and articulate stories of trauma.

Near the end of the novella, the group of college students have come to terms with the end of their search, that there is no hope in finding the Girl. Yet, the illusion of her spirit that clings onto them forces them to question as to why they sought out to find the Girl in the first place. Was it to comfort their lost friend? The soul of the Girl's dead mother? Or just to fulfill their sense of humanitarianism after the events that occurred in the city of the South: "Did we, like that wandering girl, wish to keep awake for fear of sleep? Or were we trying simply to live on in spite of the cancerous nightmares we carried inside us?" (Choe, 1991, p. 76). In contrast to citizens outside of Gwangju who were unable to understand the Girl's motives to search for her brother, the group of college students sympathize with the Girl's coping mechanisms of trauma survival. Yet, by failing to find her do they examine their motivations as to why they wish to seek out this traumatized individual. Specifically, what would they have planned to do if they were to find her, and would it have been ethical by any means to ask that she articulates her lived experiences of a massacre? By calling attention to their motives of searching for the Girl, such actions call into the ethical implications of seeking testimony regarding historical violence.

Although the intention to seek evidentiary materials may be to memorialize the Uprising, Choe

examines how victims such as the Girl, who've already experienced an immense level of pain and suffering, risk undergoing re-traumatization as a survivor.

In comparison to *Human Acts*, the unnamed narrator directly addresses the irony of having survivors recall traumatic events in hopes to relieve themselves of their guilt and heal psychological wounds. After the suicide of Kim Jin-Su, the narrator goes a period of self-reflection and questions why Jin-Su died while he remains alive despite both experiencing the same treatment during prison. Through a fragmented memory, the narrator addresses a professor who reached out to obtain information about Kim Jin-su as a former prisoner for his dissertation. Finally agreeing to an interview, the narrator's tone emits a mix of sarcasm and criticism as he questions the professor of who exactly would benefit from these testimonies:

You wanted to record my testimony-what for? Would that bring Jin-su back to life? Our experiences might have been similar, but they were far from identical. How could we ever hope to understand what he went through, he himself, alone? What he'd kept locked away inside himself for all those years (Han, 2014, p. 115).

Through this passage, Han emphasizes that it is not herself nor the professor who is speaking for the voices of the deceased. Aside from the problematic implications of asking the narrator to remember events that left him in psychological ruin, the professor's intention, whether naive or ingenuine, to document testimonies will not equate to commemorating the victims' trauma. Even as someone who was affiliated with Jin-su and empathized with his mental turmoil, the narrator also excludes himself to possibly understand the suffering Jin-Su endured after imprisonment. While Choe focuses on secondary characters to recognize the unethical implications of seeking testimony through the traumatized, Han calls attention to the different, individual experiences that survivors experience after the Uprising. In response to the ethical limitations of historical

documentation, the authors' humanize their characters through their individual backstories and experiences. Rather than recreating factual or accurate accounts of historical violence, Choe and Han choose to articulate narratives that discuss the risk of exploitation and re-traumatization for survivors, aiming to provide a space for survivors to speak their truth and stories of the Uprising.

### Chapter 3: Female Agency within the Democratic Movement

Presenting as contemporary female writers in South Korea, Choe and Han's works not only provide exploration of political and social consciousness, ethics, and human identity, but questions regarding the roles of gender through their choices in style, language use, and subject matter. Throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries, they depart from preceding traditions and follow a new approach writing historical subjects (Lee, 2022). Primarily, the narrative strategies from *A Petal* and *Human Acts* not only emphasize human dignity and violence, but hegemonic and military masculinity that was predominant throughout the 1970s and 80s. Although such cultures persist to a certain extent within the present, the lack of ethical and historical motivation to challenge diverse perspectives within the democratic movement is largely due to the dominance of male writers throughout the time (Kim, 2020). Before South Korea's first direct presidential election in 1987, the Gwangju Uprising was one of the most repressed subjects to display in films, TV dramas, and literary works during Chun Doo Hwan's dictatorship which quickly evolved to monuments of change. However, Ji-Eun Lee notes that with the post-1987 South Korean media culture, the subject, within films and literature, often presented the "crisis of male figures and their masculinity, both as victims and as perpetrators" (2022, p. 359). While men were given complex individuality and subjected to representation regarding trauma from state-sanctioned violence, the concept of meaningful female characters were nonexistent and were primarily presented as dead bodies or disposable outlets for sex. Through characters such as Seon-ju in "Chapter Five: The Factory, 2002," as well as the Girl in *A Petal*, I examine female agency of the Gwangju Uprising through Choe and Han's portrayal of

female characters, intersectionality between class and gender, sexual violence, and patriarchal roles in South Korea, both past and present.

When discussing intersectionality between class and gender in South Korea, it is important to acknowledge labor movements, including women's origins, as a fundamental origin for political demonstrations in South Korea. Reclaimed from the earlier anti-Japanese colonial movement, the term, "Minjung," was defined as championing "democratization and social transformation against the all-powerful authoritarian state" (Nam, 2021, p. 112). With the development of the Minjung movement as well as the rise of gender politics among the working class, it led to the slang, "yogong," to label female factory workers as unfeminine and morally suspect due to their class and poor education (Nam, 2021, p. 113).

In *Human Acts*, Seon-Ju's consists of three fragmented roles set in different times, being a yogong, an activist of the Gwangju Uprising, and transcriber for informal gatherings and forums. Throughout Chapter Four, Seon-Ju recollects past memories of her teenage years working in a textile factory:

Those were fifteen-hour days with only two days off per month. The wages were half of what the men got paid for the same work, and there was no overtime pay. The guards who insisted on body-searching the female workers every night before they went home (Han, 2014, p. 158).

During General Park Chung-Hee's regime, the rapid developmental infrastructure of South Korea led to exploitation of the working class, primarily through low wages, unsafe working conditions, and long hours. With Seon-Ju's occupational role during Park Chung Hee's dictatorship, Han exhibits the allegorical representation of the working-class women in South Korea. Describing the lower-paid jobs compared to men and sexual harassment within textile

factories, the author highlights the hegemonic view of the young teenage female workers at the time, who were also burdened to also be the breadwinner for their families (Nam, 2021, p. 123). Although Han has never come to directly experience the shame that women such as Seon-Ju were forced to endure, her knowledge and awareness of the relations between labor rights and martial law exemplifies the representation of female agency that led to the events of the Gwangju Uprising.

With the labor struggle in the minjung movement including women factory workers to advocate for gender equality in their pay and treatment, unionists began to realize the politicization of the female body as a sexual affair. Due to the clear nature between gender and violence throughout the workers' demonstrations, women workers had to be conscious of their vulnerability and reputation of being perceived as feminine and chaste women (Nam, 2021, p. 144). During the labor movement, the directed violence towards women unionists forced them to react in extraordinary ways.

In response to a labor union voting against a company-dominated union during Seon-Ju's career as a factory worker, she recalls the day strikebreakers and policemen came to arrest them. As hundreds of factory girls began to form a human wall in solidarity, Seonju's mentor and leader of the union, Seong-Hee, called the women to take their clothes off:

Everyone held the naked bodies of virginal girls to be something precious, almost sacred, and so the factory girls believed that the men would never violate their privacy by laying hands on them now, young girls standing there in their bras and pants. But the men dragged them down to the dirt floor. Gravel scraped bare flesh, drawing blood. Hair became tangled, underwear torn (Han, 2014, p. 160).

Although the memory appears to be written as a fictional narrative, the passage references a nude, democratic protest in July 1976. Described as “an extremely surprising and dramatic form of resistance, probably unique in world labor history,” female unionists in Tongil, a former business conglomerate, reportedly undressed themselves as an emotional outburst of solidarity from police brutality and to suffer the shame of nudity (Nam, 2021, p. 144-145). With more than 200 women strikers arrested, the act presents as a memorable moment in South Korean labor history and resistance to appropriating and subverting the conventional norms of femininity. Despite Seon-Ju’s past of the workers’ strike preceding the events of the Gwangju Uprising, Han’s intention to write her character with an activist background coincides with the agency Seon-Ju maintains throughout the 1980s. Furthermore, with Military General Chun Doo-Hwan consolidating his grip to ensure military suppression of peaceful demonstrations after Park Chung Hee's assassination, the Gwangju Uprising essentially changed the terrain of the South Korean democracy movement, impacting working-class citizens to be tormented with guilt in the aftermath of the massacre (Nam, 2021, p. 152). Coming from the democratic movement of labor rights, Han highlights the social injustices of political violent authoritarianism of the Gwangju Uprising through the female agency of Seon-ju.

Although *A Petal*’s narrative does not include any specific allegorical or thematic elements surrounding the women’s democratic movement in South Korea, I wish to briefly compare the intersectionality of gender and class of Choe’s novel in comparison to post-1987 films and literature surrounding the Gwangju Uprising. As mentioned before of post-1987 South Korean media culture, the primary subject within films and literature were male figures while female characters play as a stepping stone for the male lead’s development. In *Peppermint Candy* (1999), the story tells of a working class man who became a policeman who partakes in

the atrocities in the Gwangju Uprising (Lee, 2022, p. 359). As a result of killing an innocent girl, the protagonist undergoes severe trauma, developing a misogynistic outlook towards women, including his wife, for sex. In contrast to *A Petal*, Choe portrays the primary protagonist as a teenage girl, a Gwangju native, who undergoes severe trauma after witnessing the events of the Gwangju Uprising and murder of her mother. Although not explicitly stated, the author implies the Girl to also come from a working-class background due to being raised only by her mother while her brother is studying in Seoul. While films such as *Peppermint Candy* provided representation of the working-class struggle against an authoritarian government in South Korea, writers such as Choe spotlighted women's issues and called attention to how South Korean female characters were often objectified and utilized for the sake of the male character's development. Therefore, the portrayal of the novella's protagonist to be a young female, both as a victim and survivor, highlights and marks the critical absence of female representation in narratives surrounding state-sanctioned violence and democratic movements of South Korea.

Additionally, it is important to note that Choe does not only portray the psychology of abuse and violence between the militaristic bourgeoisie and working class, but also the male and female sex. In *A Petal*, the Girl continuously follows around a construction worker due to the resemblance to her brother. As the Girl is presently mute throughout their interactions, the man soon takes advantage of the opportunity to take her silence as means to sexually assault her:

He had an illusion that the girl was mocking him; he thought he heard an annoying giggle. As if to strip that laughter of its thick shell, but at the same time perplexed at the ease with which he removed her tattered clothing, he attacked her meager body. It was an act of escape and confirmation (Choe, 1991, p. 7).



Comparing to Seon-Ju's experience with sexual violence, as a working class woman, from the police and authoritative state, the Girl's first encounter with abuse comes from a working-class male. Despite experiencing social isolation due to their respective traumas, the construction worker violating the Girl highlights the relationship of the victimizer and victim. With both characters coming from working class backgrounds, the difference of their gender has the Girl be seen as an object of desire – a female – and an unbearable object – a poor villager – to which the construction worker views her to have no sense of agency and as a reason to assault her. While Han explores female agency and the exploitation of gender within the labor movement before the Gwangju Uprising, Choe illuminates the same argument through the portrayal of her female protagonist and within the working class.

Delving into female agency in the Gwangju Uprising, another contemporary issue that maintains relevance to the acts of state-sanctioned violence and social justice is sexual violence. Although investigations into abuses by soldiers on civilian women during the Gwangju Uprising were opened as recently as 2018, the political interest may arise due to the sociocultural spaces that discuss gendered violence amongst Korean women (Karp, 2023). Tying into Minjung feminism and Korean women's movement for gender and class liberation, feminist scholar Miriam Ching explains how Korea's social structure, especially under a patriarchal system with a strong focus of Confucianism, subordinates women:

Under Confucianism women are subordinate to father, then husband, then son.

Confucianism emphasizes the ideology of virginity and chastity for women as well as the supremacy of family. So if a woman is the victim of an attack she does not want to publicize it (1995, p. 422).

With South Korea's rapid industrialization and urban development throughout the late 20th century, the nation's economic development led to the neglect of its social and political infrastructure. Furthermore, the origins of sexual violence in South Korea originally stem from its history of colonization and foreign domination such as Japan's annexation and the Korean War. With the nation's democratic development comes with "living directly under military governments for 30 years" as well as a violent military climate developing a violent society where "men's violence against women are sanctioned" (Ching, 1995, p. 423). When examining the high cases of sexual harassment and assault during the Gwangju Uprising, it is not just political repression that silenced survivors to speak out but the nation's cultural ideologies and history of violence.

As Seon-Ju struggles with her past of being a former activist, a professor reaches out to her to seek her testimony of the Gwangju Uprising. With his continuous requests for Seon-Ju to face her memories to bear witness to them, Seon-Ju angrily questions how she can possibly remember and bear witness to the sexual trauma she's experienced:

Is it possible to bear witness to the fact of a foot-long wooden ruler being repeatedly thrust into my vagina, all the way up to the back wall of my uterus? To a rifle butt bludgeoning my cervix? Is it possible to bear witness to the fact that I ended up despising my own body, the very physical stuff of myself? (Han, 2014, p. 170-171).

Although it may be that Seon-Ju repressed her memories due to the severity of the abuse she faced as an activist, with South Korea's cultural dominance of familial values and saving face, it is clear of the lack of support she obtains in the aftermath of her assault. With the literary device of repetition, Han emphasizes the shame and silence that Seon-Ju endured for so long, to the point that she cannot fathom the idea of testifying. Coming to the belief that Seon-Ju's physical

self worth has deteriorated from the Uprising, Han provides representation of the narrative between trauma and gender that persists for female survivors of state-sanctioned violence. Not only do the women must endure censorship and repression from their political leaders, but within their own communities as well as experiencing abuse due to their gender, class, and civil role in South Korea.

In *A Petal*, the Girl encounters similar acts of sexual violence in the aftermath of the Gwangju Uprising. In contrast to Seon-Ju's assault, represented as an intimidation tactic and form of oppression by the state, the abuse and exploitation of the Girl is overlooked within the local communities. On their search for their friend's sister, the group of college students run into a village to which they meet various people who have seen the Girl or taken her in their homes. One of the men, after much peer-pressuring, took the group to an abandoned farm in which the man heard rumors about a Girl from a shop customer:

For an uncertain period of time a girl had been living at that farm, and many a man from Sochon had gone there to violate her, apparently with impunity. Several versions of the story made the rounds: she was a sweet young thing; or she was just a kid; or she was a bit older and ripe for the plucking. She'd been kicked out by her husband and in-laws; she was a prostitute who had escaped from a red-light district; or else she was simply a madwoman (Choe, 1991, p. 42).

Although the man claims to have never spoken with anyone who have been to the farm where the woman was secluded, he was aware of the rumors that spread of a young girl being raped by the men within his community. Rather than attempting to resolve or address the issue, the village is aware of a possible injustice happening yet does nothing of the sort due to the Girl's undisclosed past tying into South Korea's social structure, primarily its emphasis on familial

protection and Confucianism. As the Girl appears to originate from a working class, whether she was a former prostitute or madwoman, with no subordination to a male figure in her life, she is left unprotected and exploited for her alleged virginity and submissive nature. Along with the impact that the Gwangju Uprising has left upon South Korean civilians and activists such as the Girl, Choe highlights how such an event not only displays the inherent patriarchal system of violence and lack of accountability within an authoritative state but in South Korean culture.

With the representation of the lack of female agency through the notions of class and gender as well as sexual violence, *A Petal* and *Human Acts* exhibit how the state-sanctioned violence of the Gwangju Uprising highlight how postmodern South Korea continue to maintain the patriarchal gender roles for women. Youngjoo Cha, in *Time Divide*, *gender divide: Gender, work, and family in South Korea*, examines further in-depth the typically assigned gender roles women must bear in comparison to men:

Consequently, women are largely expected to take the primary role in caring for children, elderly parents, and sick family members in many societies. Like the workplace, the family is also a “greedy institution” that demands “exclusive and undivided loyalty” from its members and requires that they prioritize its needs above the competing demands from other domains. The ‘greedy’ aspect of family is exemplified by the ideology of ‘intensive mothering,’ which expects a mother to devote all of her time, energy, and emotion to meeting her children’s needs (2023, p. 210).

Despite the prominence of female laborers within the lower-class, there came the expectation in South Korea that women were to be married at a young age and take care of the family. In the case that the women were to bear sons, the Confucianist ideology emphasized the patriarchal

expectations of men receiving an education and career to earn higher prospects while women were solely committed to be a stay-at-home caretaker.

Throughout Seon-Ju's narrative, she comes to reveal how the Gwangju Uprising has not only impacted her psychological state but her physical body and interpersonal relationships as well. From the abuse she received from the authoritarian state, the former activist is unable to establish romantic relationships as well as participate in human acts of intimacy and love:

Is it possible to face up to my continuing to bleed for the next two years, to a blood clot forming in my Fallopian tubes and leaving me permanently unable to bear children? Is it possible to bear witness to the fact that I ended up with a pathological aversion to physical contact, particularly with men? That I willfully destroyed any warmth, any affection whose intensity was more than I could bear, and ran away? To somewhere colder, somewhere safer. Purely to stay alive (Han, 2014, p. 170-171).

Additionally, Seon-Ju mentions a previous marriage that lasted for eight months, to which it reaches its conclusion due to her inability to maintain physical contact with the man she loves. As a single, middle-aged woman who does not bear any children, husband, or future prospects, she not only comes to bear the shame of sexual trauma and fear of physical touch but the nation's expectations of women's roles. Through Seon-Ju's struggles as a laborer, activist, and woman, Han highlights the intersectionality of issues arising from the authoritarian and patriarchal systems in South Korea.

In *A Petal*, Choe highlights how the Gwangju Uprising not only separated the Girl from her family and community but also the systemic gender roles that were soon placed on her during her brother's passing. In a fragmented memory, the Girl recalls the night when government agents came to their house to inform her mother that the Girl's brother was dead:

Mother started shrieking at them; her voice was all choked up and no one could understand her; and the next thing I knew, the whole neighborhood was there...It was much later when Mama told me that Brother was dead and that I had better get myself focused and study hard (Choe, 1991, p. 14-15).

Based on the mother's advice that the Girl must now study hard because her brother is dead, the passage ties into Cha's argument of South Korean gender roles. As the only male figure within the family, the Girl's brother was encouraged to study in school in hopes to attain a prosperous future. In contrast to the Girl, who displays a lack of academic and social intelligence, she, like Seon-Ju, is merely expected to work and provide for the family until they find a husband to start a family of their own. Yet, with the authoritarian state evidently murdering her brother, the mother, as the caretaker of the family, not only bears the trauma of losing her son but must have her daughter carry his responsibilities in hopes to maintain financial stability. In the midst of political turmoil under an authoritarian leadership, Choe chooses to highlight the impact of familial relationships and gender roles to examine female agency and patriarchal structures in South Korean society. Evidently, *Human Acts* and *A Petal* aims to not only call attention to the Gwangju Uprising's impact of trauma, historical narratives, and the human condition, but the political roles that raise issues regarding gender identity and discrimination.

## Conclusion

In a 2008 interview, when asked how she sees herself as a writer, Choe answers the following:

The important thing for me is to depict reality through the most appropriate language and form. When I have a world-view I wish to present, my first task is to flesh it out in language and structure rather than in a message. One needs a unique language and form to depict a changing world, and in this sense a work's world-view creates its own form. I prefer to describe this process not as an experiment but as the pursuit of a different factuality. If you're going to change the world, how are you going to do it through conventional methods and language? (Korean Culture, 2008).

More than two decades after the publication of *A Petal*, when asked a similar question of her process in terms of research and planning when writing *Human Acts*, Han's response alludes to Choe's answer of experimentation and pursuing different aspects of factuality:

I wanted the novel not to have a documentary function, but to be a literary work pervaded by the human. I did not want to subject the families of the bereaved or those who had been injured to yet another interview, given they had already given their testimony several times. I would meet up with ordinary people who I knew and ask them about Gwangju. When had they first found out about it? How had that discovery altered their lives? And I received unlooked-for help with all manner of things (Shin, 2016).

Essentially, both authors not only write a novel that examines the violent, military acts against civilians and activists in the 1980s, but the plurality of memories that blur between the boundaries between the public and private during the Gwangju Uprising. As they are aware of

the sensitive nature of creating a novel that surrounds the deeply humane and inhuman violence, they seek to produce language and literature that invites intermediality and intertextuality across multiple genres and boundaries of global resistance.

Through Avery Gordon's theories in *Ghostly Matters*, the spirits of Jeong-Dae and the Girl not only serve to testify the physical transformations of death as a result of human violence but an alternative aspect of the haunting that calls attention to the unresolved voices of the marginalized. In comparison to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Gordon's version of the apparition breaks free of traditional symbols and applies the spectral to carry a charged strangeness of historical violence. With Jeong-Dae and the Girl experiencing a form of absence and loss of their familial and community ties due to their deaths, they call out to the living – through the reader and the group of college students – to confront the societal injustices that persist even after their deaths. With Benjamin's theory of material historiography, Han and Choe serve as the ghosts' catalyst to grapple with the collective nature of haunting, seek truth and reconciliation, and shape the present through the legacies of the past.

When examining trauma within the field of psychoanalysis, Caruth's novel, through Freud and Lacan's theories, explores the relevance of the Girl and the unnamed former prisoner coping with the acts of state-sanctioned violence. Through both novels' fragmented storytelling and the characters' trauma survival, Choe and Han break the conventional notions of trauma as a linear progression and call into question fundamental aspects of human nature and morality. Despite surviving the Uprising, the Girl and narrator grapple with behaviors of self-destruction and intrusive memories that forces them to isolate and struggle to integrate back into society. As both characters are plagued with memories of historical violence, the authors essentially



humanize them and examine the risk of re-traumatization and exploitation when forced to confront their past. Essentially, Choe and Han seek to enlighten readers of the ethical implications when documenting trauma and open a space for survivors and victims to speak their truth within their own terms.

Finally, within a male-centered literary realm, Choe and Han expand past the themes of political resistance and trauma narratives and offer insight on the intersectionality of gender and class from the Gwangju Uprising in South Korea. As Seon-Ju comes to experience sexual violence and labor exploitation through her role as a female factory worker, Han emphasizes the allegory of female agency as a “yogong” during the Minjung movement. Through the Girl’s experience of exploitation and sexual violence by men after the Gwangju Uprising, Choe exposes the hegemonic system, societal indifference, and system gender roles towards women, primarily from marginalized backgrounds. Revealing cultural and historical factors that contribute to allegorical references in both novels, Choe and Han shed light on the pervasive nature of gender-based violence and patriarchal structures in South Korea. Even post-1987, their narratives remain relevant and serve as critiques on the societal roles, primarily familial responsibilities, imposed on women.

Choe and Han, respectively, push against the traditional genres of historical fiction and witness testimonies of the Gwangju Uprising, exploring the fundamental aspects of human violence and the authoritative state against its people. However, with the omnipresence of violence and trauma comes the counteraction of compassion and grief, both of which represent the qualities of human nature. Han notes that when trauma is embraced, rather than actively trying to heal and move past it, grief can situate as a space between the living and dead and

“through our pained and silent embrace of it over the course of a whole life, life is, perhaps paradoxically, made possible” (Shin, 2016). When acquainted with stories that encompass violence and loss, it is necessary to not only memorialize the sacrifices and absence of those who passed, but to recognize the resilience of humanity that carries forth throughout the past, present, and future. Stories such as *Human Acts* and *A Petal*, therefore, continue to remind individuals of their ability to partake in collective memory, historical truth, and remembrance for a more just society.

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