

Psychoanalytical Criticism in Korean Literature: A Study of Trauma, Repression, And Desire in Han Kang's Novels

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ABSTRACT

This study employs psychoanalytical criticism to examine selected works by South Korean novelist Han Kang, with a particular emphasis on *The Vegetarian* and *Human Acts*. Utilizing Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories, the research investigates the underlying motivations, traumatic experiences, and suppressed emotions in Kang's characters. The analysis explores how these psychological aspects mirror both personal challenges and wider social issues in post-war South Korea. By uncovering the intricate relationships between personal identity, trauma, and desire, this study offers a novel interpretation of Kang's literature that goes beyond conventional readings. The paper enhances the expanding body of research on modern Korean literature by presenting a psychoanalytic framework that deepens our comprehension of Han Kang's critique of societal norms and historical trauma.

INTRODUCTION

Psychoanalytic criticism, rooted in the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, examines the subconscious mind, suppressed longings, psychological wounds, and the intricacies of human mental processes in literary works. Han Kang, a renowned South Korean writer, is recognized for her profound psychological examination of human anguish, trauma, and self-concept. Her novels, particularly *The Vegetarian* (2007) and *Human Acts* (2016), provide fertile ground for psychoanalytic scrutiny. This research employs psychoanalytic theory to analyze Han Kang's selected writings, emphasizing how subconscious influences mould characters' actions and encounters. Specifically, it delves into how repression, trauma, and desire function within the framework of post-war and post-authoritarian South Korea, mirroring the nation's collective psychological wounds. This analysis seeks to investigate how psychoanalysis enhances our comprehension of Han Kang's depiction of psychological distress and the human experience. In doing so, the study underscores how personal psychological struggles intertwine with historical and cultural trauma, offering a multifaceted interpretation of Han Kang's literary works.

While Han Kang's novels *The Vegetarian* and *Human Acts* received significant attention for their feminist, historical, and socio-political aspects, there remains a lack of scholarship that employs a concentrated psychoanalytic perspective—specifically Freudian and Lacanian theories—to explore the ways in which repressed emotions, trauma, and desire affect both individual and collective identity in post-war South Korea. The difference highlights the issue of how unresolved trauma and psychological suppression, as shown in Han Kang's characters, reflect broader historical and cultural wounds in South Korean society. Thus, the challenge is to see how psychoanalytic criticism can uncover deeper meanings in Han Kang's writings and provide a better understanding of the relationship between individual suffering and collective memory.

Methodology

This research employs a **Psychoanalytical Framework**, incorporating both **Freudian** and **Lacanian** psychoanalysis to interpret Han Kang's novels. The methodology involves:

1. **Textual Analysis:** Close reading of *The Vegetarian* and *Human Acts* to identify unconscious motivations, repressed memories, and desires within the characters' psyche.

2. **Application of Psychoanalytic Theory:** Key psychoanalytic concepts such as repression, trauma, the unconscious, and Lacan's notion of the Mirror Stage will be used to analyze character development, internal conflicts, and narrative structure.
3. **Historical Contextualization:** The analysis will also consider the socio-political context of post-war South Korea, particularly the lasting effects of the Korean War, political oppression, and authoritarian regimes on both individual psychology and collective memory.

The study integrates these methods to generate a psychoanalytical interpretation of Han Kang's novels, considering how individual trauma interacts with societal trauma.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Han Kang's works have been examined through various critical lenses, including feminist, postmodern, and existentialist approaches. However, there is a scarcity of research employing psychoanalytic criticism to comprehend her exploration of trauma and identity.

- **Feminist Interpretations of Han Kang:** Researchers such as Seo and Kim (2015) have scrutinized *The Vegetarian* from a feminist perspective, examining how the main character's defiance of social expectations can be viewed as a form of gender rebellion. These analyses, however, do not thoroughly investigate the underlying psychoanalytic processes at work.
- **Postmodern and Existential Analyses:** Other investigations, like those conducted by Lee (2017), highlight the existential dilemma and postmodern narrative structure in Kang's novels. While these studies often emphasize the absurdity and fragmentation in the character's experiences, they lack emphasis on the unconscious forces driving their behaviours.
- **Trauma in Modern Korean Literature:** Academics like Choi (2018) have investigated the broader cultural and historical trauma in contemporary Korean literature, including an examination of the impact of the Korean War and subsequent authoritarian governance. However, psychoanalysis is seldom applied to explore how these traumas are internalized and manifested in the characters' psychological conditions.

This study addresses a gap by utilizing psychoanalytic criticism to analyze Han Kang's novels, providing insights into the unconscious mechanisms that shape her depiction of trauma and identity.

Research Gap

While Han Kang's novels have been studied in terms of feminist, postmodern, and existential frameworks, there has been relatively limited application of psychoanalytical criticism to her works. The psychological dimensions of her characters, especially in works like *The Vegetarian* and *Human Acts*, have not been thoroughly examined in light of psychoanalytic theories. Additionally, the psychological effects of societal trauma, especially in post-war and post-authoritarian South Korea, have not been explored extensively in this context. This research seeks to fill that gap by focusing on the subconscious and psychological depth of Han Kang's characters through a psychoanalytic lens.

Research Questions

The main questions guiding the research would include:

- How do the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan inform the interpretation of the characters in Han Kang's novels?
- In what ways do trauma, repression, and desire manifest in the characters of *The Vegetarian* and *Human Acts*?

- How does Han Kang's portrayal of individual psychological struggles reflect broader societal trauma in post-war and contemporary South Korea?
- Can psychoanalytical criticism reveal deeper insights into the relationship between the body, identity, and trauma in Han Kang's works?

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of the research will be:

- To analyze selected novels of Han Kang (*The Vegetarian*, *Human Acts*, etc.) through the lens of psychoanalytical criticism.
- To investigate the psychological states of characters and how they reflect their unconscious desires, trauma, and repression.
- To explore how these psychoanalytic elements intersect with historical and societal contexts in modern South Korea, especially concerning political oppression and post-traumatic stress.
- To examine how Han Kang uses psychoanalytical themes to critique societal norms and power structures.

DISCUSSION

1. Trauma and Repression in *The Vegetarian*:

In *The Vegetarian*, the protagonist Yeong-hye's decision to abandon eating meat is symbolic of a deeper psychological rejection of societal norms. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism can be interpreted as a manifestation of repressed trauma. Her body, which she increasingly alienates from, becomes a battleground for her unconscious mind. Using Freudian theory, we can view Yeong-hye's behaviour as a form of repression—she distances herself from the trauma of her past, including an abusive childhood and societal expectations placed on her as a woman.

Lacanian theory, particularly the concept of the Mirror Stage, can also be applied to understand Yeong-hye's identity crisis. She refuses to align with the image of the 'self' that society and family have constructed for her, leading to her psychological disintegration. Her rejection of meat can be seen as an attempt to escape her body, a reflection of her fractured self-image.

2. Desire and the Unconscious in *Human Acts*:

Human Acts explores the aftermath of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising, focusing on the trauma and psychological scars left on the individuals who survived the violence. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, we can examine how the characters' actions are driven by unconscious desires, particularly a desire for justice and recognition. The repeated trauma experienced by the characters reflects how collective and personal memories can be repressed, only to resurface in the form of dreams, nightmares, and symbolic actions.

Lacanian psychoanalysis provides a framework to understand how characters in *Human Acts* negotiate their relationship with the "Other"—be it the state, their memories, or their fellow survivors. The trauma of the Gwangju Uprising functions as a social and individual "wound" that refuses to heal, manifesting in both the body and psyche.

3. Societal Trauma and Identity:

Han Kang's portrayal of psychological trauma cannot be fully understood without considering the historical context of post-war South Korea. The nation's collective trauma, stemming from the Korean War, political repression, and authoritarian rule, is deeply embedded in the individual psyches of her characters.

Psychoanalysis, particularly theories of collective trauma, helps explain how these historical events leave lasting scars on personal and social identities.

The internalized effects of societal trauma—manifested in guilt, repression, and desire—are crucial to understanding the behaviour of Han Kang’s characters. Her works suggest that the psychic wounds of history are not only passed down through generations but are also intricately woven into the fabric of individual identity formation.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the value of psychoanalytical criticism in enriching the interpretation of Han Kang’s novels. By examining the psychological depths of characters in *The Vegetarian* and *Human Acts*, the paper highlights how trauma, repression, and desire function both on an individual level and within the broader socio-political context of South Korea. The research reveals that Han Kang’s novels are not just explorations of personal identity but are also reflections of a nation’s collective psychological scars. By using psychoanalysis as a tool, this study provides new insights into the complex ways in which the unconscious mind interacts with historical and societal trauma.

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