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State Violence: Turbulent Past in Han Kang's *Human Acts* and Nayantara Sahgal's Rich Like Us

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Abstract: This paper studies how state violence is powerfully shown in Han Kang's *Human Acts* (2016) and Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985). It places both novels within their real historical settings — the Gwangju Uprising in South Korea (1980) and the Indian Emergency (1975–77) respectively. The study shows how both writers use fragmented storytelling, physical and emotional trauma, and collective memory to criticize the cruel and inhuman actions of the state, which treats its people as worthless. In *Human Acts*, Han Kang gives voice to the dead through multiple narrators, showing how military dictatorship destroys personal freedom and individuality. In *Rich Like Us*, Sahgal explores how personal greed and political corruption during the Emergency led to the loss of democratic values and human dignity.

The paper looks at how both authors respond to authoritarian cruelty, dehumanization, and the lasting effects of national trauma. The "turbulent past" in each novel not only reveals the violence of the state but also challenges readers to face forgotten histories and their own moral responsibility. Both novels use literature not as a way to heal but as a way to bear witness and resist oppression, creating a powerful record of truth against official silence.

Keywords: *State violence, Gwangju Uprising, Indian Emergency, Authoritarianism, Collective trauma, Counter resistance.*

Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed several political regimes that exercised control through violence, censorship, and dehumanization. Both Han Kang's *Human Acts* and Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* provide a profound exploration of how state power, when corrupted by authoritarianism, turns against its own citizens. Set against the backdrop of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea and the Indian Emergency (1975–77) under Indira Gandhi's government, these novels illuminate how ordinary citizens become victims of institutionalized brutality. Through their respective narratives, Kang and Sahgal uncover the psychological, physical, and moral consequences of political violence while interrogating the ethical responsibility of the citizen and the state.

Both novels serve as literary memorials to the silenced and forgotten. Human Acts depicts the military's merciless suppression of civilian resistance, while *Rich Like Us* reveals how the machinery of power manipulates democracy into tyranny. The present paper studies how both writers depict state violence as a weapon of control and explores how collective trauma emerges as a defining experience for the oppressed.

The Abuse of Power: Methods of Torture and Suppression

State violence in these novels manifests through diverse methods of torture, targeting the bodies of ordinary citizens to instill fear and obedience. In *Human Acts*, Kang vividly details the physical brutality during the Gwangju Uprising, where soldiers employed beatings, bayonet stabbings, and gunfire to suppress protesters. One harrowing scene describes the boy's friend Jeong-dae caught in the crossfire: "The rifle butt cracked against his skull, and as he fell, the bayonet pierced his side, a tool of the state carving obedience into flesh" (Kang 134). Such depictions illustrate how the military dictatorship used direct physical force to dehumanize civilians, treating them as expendable obstacles to power.

The torture extends beyond immediate violence to include post-arrest interrogations, where detainees endured waterboarding, electric shocks, and prolonged beatings. Kang portrays these methods as systematic, designed to break the spirit of the collective: "In the cells, the screams merged into one voice, a chorus of the oppressed echoing through the halls of power" (Kang 201). This collective aspect amplifies the trauma, as survivors carry not only their scars but also the guilt of witnessing others' suffering.

Similarly, in *Rich Like Us*, Sahgal portrays the Emergency as a time when democracy was replaced by fear. Declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the Emergency utilized legal provisions to suspend civil liberties, imprison political opponents, and impose strict censorship. The government deployed police raids, imprisonment without trial, and censorship as tools of domination. Citizens were

silenced through intimidation and propaganda. As Sonali, a frustrated high ranking civil servant remarks bitterly, “When everything is upside down and morals are on holiday, only the lawless flourish” (Sahgal 112). This statement encapsulates the moral chaos of the Emergency — a regime where legality itself becomes the weapon of tyranny.

Sahgal also focuses on the Emergency's more covert tortures, such as forced sterilizations and evictions, which disproportionately affected the poor. These methods, often administered by local officials wielding scalpels and batons, represented the state's weaponization of public health policy. A character reflects on a sterilization drive: “The vasectomy knife was sharper than any sword, cutting away not just fertility but hope for the future” (Sahgal 217). Police brutality, including lathi charges and arbitrary arrests, further tormented the common people, turning public spaces into arenas of fear.

Weapons of the State: Tools of Suppression

In both novels, the instruments of violence vary from guns and batons to laws and propaganda — all serving the same purpose of subjugation. Han Kang meticulously describes how the South Korean military used assault rifles, bayonets, and tear gas against unarmed citizens. The brutality was both physical and symbolic: the state sought to discipline the body and annihilate the spirit. Victims were shot in the streets, dragged into torture cells, and forced to confess to crimes they did not commit. “They beat him until he could no longer distinguish his own voice from the sound of boots” (Kang 74). Thus Kang describes the brutal torture inflicted on the political prisoner Kim Jin-su.

Sahgal’s India, on the other hand, reveals a more bureaucratic form of violence — violence through law. The Emergency allowed the state to weaponize legislation. Censorship, arrests under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), and coerced sterilizations were forms of administrative torture. The police and bureaucrats became tools of a political will that justified cruelty in the name of “national discipline.” Sahgal’s critique of the Emergency highlights how even educated elites became complicit in oppression. “It was as though the nation had been hypnotized into obedience,” she observes (Sahgal 208).

Slum clearances and police repression further amplify the novel's depiction of state violence as a machinery of displacement and intimidation, evoking the grotesque mutilation of urban underclasses. Bulldozers raze informal settlements under the guise of urban beautification, scattering families into destitution and enforcing a sterile order that benefits the powerful. This physical destruction mirrors interpersonal violence, as seen in Rose's murder: strangled by Dev and his associates—youths emboldened by the regime's impunity—and dumped in a well, her death goes unpunished due to forged documents and legal loopholes shielded by the Emergency.

Dehumanization and the Loss of Individuality

Authoritarian regimes, as depicted in both works, depend on dehumanization. The individual ceases to exist; only categories — traitor, enemy, foreign agent — remain. Han Kang's soldiers strip corpses of identity, labeling them merely as "bodies." This reduction of personhood to objecthood reflects the logic of totalitarianism. "The boy's face was gone, his name was gone, and still his mother searched among the bodies" (Human Acts 91).

In Sahgal's portrayal, the bureaucratic machinery reduces citizens to numbers, files, and statistics. During the sterilization campaigns, men are treated like livestock herded into clinics. The cold impersonality of the process reveals the state's disregard for human dignity. The trauma here is bureaucratic — inflicted through paperwork and silence. Sahgal's narrative insists that the greatest violence lies not in bloodshed but in the normalization of inhumanity.

The Language of Collective Trauma: Fragmentation and Polyphony

Both authors choose fragmented, polyphonic narratives to articulate the unbearable nature of collective trauma. This stylistic choice is not merely an aesthetic flourish; it is a mimetic strategy reflecting the fractured memory and dislocated identity of survivors.

In *Human Acts*, Kang employs multiple narrators across time, spanning the initial uprising, the post-trauma recovery, and the long, debilitating silence that followed. The voice of the dead boy, Jeong-dae, is especially significant. By giving voice to a victim who is physically absent, Kang turns the narrative into a seance, where the dead haunt the living and refuse to be forgotten. The fragmented chapters represent pieces of a story too horrifying to be held by a single consciousness—it requires a collective voice to bear the burden. The trauma is not just the memory of the violence, but the memory of having to forget (Kang, Epilogue 203).

The novel also highlights the collective trauma experienced by the community of Gwangju. Families search for their missing loved ones, friends mourn their dead, and citizens live with the scars of their shared loss. Yet, amid the devastation, the people show remarkable courage and solidarity. Acts of kindness—such as guarding bodies, caring for survivors, and refusing to forget the victims—reflect the resilience of human compassion. Han Kang suggests that even in the face of overwhelming state power, humanity persists through empathy, memory, and resistance.

In much the same way, Sahgal uses multiple perspectives to show how the Emergency seeped into every stratum of society. The dual focus—the intellectual Sonali and the corrupted political environment—shows a fragmented social contract. The novel is characterized by shifts in narrative distance, mirroring the citizens' inability to grasp the full extent of the state's betrayal. The trauma here is the breakdown of language itself; when truth is censored, the collective memory loses its anchor.

Sahgal's polyphony allows the reader to assemble the full picture of the systemic rot, demonstrating that corruption is a form of structural violence that poisons the entire body politic.

The novel also highlights how state violence disrupts personal relationships and moral values. Characters like Sonali, a principled civil servant, struggle to maintain integrity in an environment where corruption and fear dominate administrative life. Her resistance to the regime's unethical demands shows how the Emergency forced individuals to choose between conscience and survival. Meanwhile, Rose's tragic storyline reflects the vulnerability of socially marginalised individuals during turbulent political times. Their suffering mirrors the larger suffering of a nation caught in the grip of authoritarian rule. Through these intertwined stories, Sahgal portrays the Emergency as a period where power operated without accountability, crushing truth, justice, and human dignity.

Bearing Witness: Literature as Counter-Resistance

The ultimate function of both *Human Acts* and *Rich Like Us* is to act as a definitive counter-resistance to official narratives of state suppression and silence. Authoritarian states rely heavily on the erasure of history, turning massacres into "incidents" and political repression into "discipline." These novels, conversely, use the precision of literary language to create an undeniable record of truth.

As Foucault observes, "Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 95), In *Human Acts,* the act of recovering and identifying the mangled bodies in the gymnasium becomes a literal and metaphorical act of resistance. Each body identified, each name spoken, is a victory against the state's attempt to render the victims anonymous and worthless. The editor's chapter, where the protagonist is haunted by the documents of violence, demonstrates the long-term moral burden of having witnessed atrocity. The resistance is sustained by the refusal to look away.

In *Rich Like Us*, resistance is quieter but no less profound. It is manifested in Sonali's inner moral dissent and her inability to participate in the widespread self-justification and compliance of her class. Her refusal to conform to the culture of silence—a culture that allows the state's abuses to flourish—is the ethical core of the novel. Sahgal critiques not just the state, but the complicit citizenry, challenging the reader to face their own moral responsibility in the face of authoritarianism.

By giving voice to the marginalized and the silenced, these novels challenge readers to confront forgotten histories and their moral implications. As Kang articulates through Jeong-dae, "The dead are speaking. They demand to be heard" (Kang 112), underscoring the novels' role in bearing witness. Similarly, Sahgal's narrative reveals how "the machinery of the state grinds down the individual, leaving only echoes of dignity" (Sahgal 203). Both authors insist that literature is not a path to easy healing, but a site for eternal witnessing. The novels ensures that the victims of state violence are not forgotten and that their stories live on.

Conclusion: The Persistence of Turbulent Memory

The study of state violence in Han Kang's *Human Acts* and Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* reveals a shared grammar of repression that transcends geographical and political differences. While the Korean state used immediate, violent kinetic force—bayonets, bullets, and severe physical torture—to suppress the Gwangju populace, the Indian state employed systemic, bureaucratic coercion—MISA, censorship, and forced sterilization—to dismantle the democratic contract during the Emergency. In both cases, the state's objective was identical: the dehumanization of the individual and the infliction of profound collective trauma to extinguish the possibility of future dissent.

Both authors, through their fragmented and deeply personal narratives, transform the "turbulent past" from a simple historical fact into a persistent, living wound. They expose the cruel reality that the state treats its people as worthless when they oppose its authority. By forcing the reader to engage with the agonizing details of the violence, both physical and systemic, Kang and Sahgal ensure that these histories are neither forgotten nor reduced to clinical footnotes. Their work stands as a powerful, necessary literary testament, cementing literature's role as the final, unassailable fortress of truth against the silence of official power.

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