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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Han Kang's Nobel Prize Award is a Cry for Palestine



Han Kang in 2017. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

South Korean novelist Han Kang has won the Nobel Prize for Literature, beating short-listed literary heavyweights like Thomas Pynchon, Haruki Murakami, Salman Rushdie, Gerald Murnane, and the all-odds-favorite, Chinese author Can Xue. Han Kang was as shocked as anyone else after receiving the call notifying her that she had won. When asked what she would do next, she said she would quietly “have tea with her son”.

She has refused a press conference, saying that “with the wars raging between Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, with deaths being reported every day, she could not hold a celebratory press conference. She asked for understanding in this matter.”

A brilliant, powerful writer, but clearly the literary dark horse in the race, Han Kang’s unexpected award is the closest the Nobel committee could get to acknowledging the

Palestinian genocide. Han Kang herself had not mentioned Palestine until her recent Nobel award. But it's unmistakable that her award is a reflection of the current historical moment.

Of course, we cannot presume what the Nobel Committee's position on the Palestinian genocide is. Certainly, the Nobel Committee would have been crucified by institutional powers if they had awarded the prize to a deserving Palestinian writer or poet; nor could they have risked a redux of Harold Pinter's public takedown of Western brutality and hypocrisy.

But the Nobels are always political statements, situated in the political moment, and across a backdrop of live-streamed genocide and daily atrocity, it's unthinkable that that Palestinian genocide could have been far from their minds or ignored in their deliberations.

The awarding of the Nobel to Han Kang is that oblique acknowledgment. Of the short and long lists, she is the only contemporary writer dedicated to witnessing and inscribing the horrors of historical atrocity and mass slaughter perpetrated by the Imperial powers and their quislings.

The Nobel committee suggests this by praising her for "*her intense poetic prose that confronts historical traumas and exposes the fragility of human life.*" and characterizes her work as "*witness literature*", "*a prayer addressing the dead*", and as artworks of mourning that seek to prevent erasure.

The echo of Palestine is not lost in that description of her major works: In *Human Acts* ("The Boy is Coming"), she wrote about the effects of the US-greenlighted massacres of civilians in the city of Gwangju by a US-quisling military dictatorship.

At the time, the US did not want a redux of the fall of the Shah of Iran, where popular protest brought down a US quisling dictator. Instead, the Carter Administration authorized the deployment of South Korean troops (at the time under full US operational control) to fire on and slaughter students and citizens protesting the recent US-backed military coup.

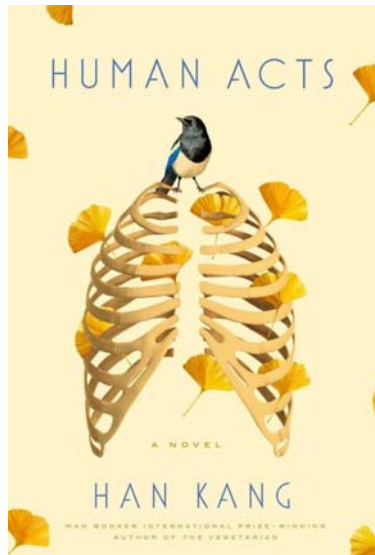
And exactly as in the current moment, the US portrayed itself as a hapless bystander to mass murder, enmeshed but incapable of preventing it, when in fact, it was the underwriter and the agent of the massacres.

Tim Shorrock clearly documented the doublespeak:

"Gwangju was an unspeakable tragedy that nobody expected to happen", he said. The State Department, he added, continues to believe the United States "has no moral responsibility for what happened in Gwangju."

Han Kang's book doesn't bother to accuse the US: her book is not a political tract, and most people in South Korea know these facts backwards and forwards. Instead, she reanimates the human suffering of this massacre from the standpoint of multiple characters:

the grieving, the dead, the tortured, the resisting, the guilty living—including herself.



Starting with a pile of hundreds of decomposing bodies in a makeshift morgue, tended to with exquisite care by a young boy, Dong Ho, she shows us what it smells and feels to contact an unfiltered massacre. Dong Ho is actually a stand-in for a real person, Moon Jae-Hak, a high school student shot dead in Gwangju. Han Kang reveals that Dong Ho/Jae-Hak had moved into the room of the home that Han Kang herself had vacated 4 months earlier as her family serendipitously moved out of the city of Gwangju. It's clear that had it not been for fate, Han Kang herself could very easily have been that dead child: Dong Ho is a stand-in for both Jae-Hak and Han Kang. That trope becomes obvious as Dong Ho survives a first skirmish, runs away from a shooting, while his comrade falls. Han Kang writes:

I would have run away... you would have run away. Even if it had been one of your brothers, your father, your mother, still you would have run away... There will be no forgiveness. You look into his eyes, which are flinching from the sight laid out in front of them as though it is the most appalling thing in all this world. There will be no forgiveness. Least of all for me.

It may not be possible to write herself into forgiveness for surviving, and Han Kang does not attempt it.

You're not like me... You believe in a divine being, and in this thing we call humanity. You never did manage to win me over... I couldn't even make it through the Lord's Prayer without the words drying up in my throat. Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. I forgive no one, and no one forgives me.

She simply bears witness:

I still remember the moment when my gaze fell upon the mutilated face of a young woman, her features slashed through with a bayonet. Soundlessly, and without fuss, some tender thing deep inside me broke. Something that, until then, I hadn't realised was there.

And she mourns the unmournable:

After you died, I couldn't hold a funeral, So these eyes that once beheld you became a shrine. These ears that once heard your voice became a shrine. These lungs that once inhaled your breath became a shrine...After you died I could not hold a funeral. And so my life became a funeral.

And she denounces, what could easily be an echo of current Israeli "*Amalek*" doctrine:

At that moment, I realized what all this was for. The words that this torture and starvation were intended to elicit. We will make you realize how ridiculous it was, the lot of you... We will prove to you that you are nothing but filthy stinking bodies. That you are no better than the carcasses of starving animals.

In another novel, *I do not part* ("*I won't say farewell*"; "*Impossible Partings*"), she tells the story of those who perished, disappeared, were buried, without a farewell. The title is a message to those who disappeared, perished under rubble, or vanished into mass graves without so much as a farewell, a stubborn assertion that they will not be lost, abandoned, forgotten.

Drawing from an image from a relentless dream, and a line gleaned from a pop song overhead in a taxi, she tells the story of the US-instigated genocide of Jeju Island in 1948, where 20% of population were wiped out, bombed, slaughtered, starved to death under the command of the US military government in Korea. This is Gaza—with snow:

Even the infants?

Yes, because total annihilation was the goal.

After the surrender of Japan in WWII, post-colonial Korea had been assigned to the shared trusteeship of the USSR and the US. On August 15th of 1945, the Korean people declared liberation and the establishment of the Korean People's Republic, a liberated socialist state consisting of thousands of self-organized workers' and peasant collectives. The USSR was supportive, but the US declared war on these collectives, banned the Korean People's Republic, forced a vote in the South against the will of the Koreans who did not want a divided country, and unleashed a campaign of politicide against those who opposed or resisted this. Jeju island was one of the places where the carnage reached genocidal proportions, before cresting into the full-scale omnicide of the Korean war. That genocide

was covered up and erased for half a century, where not even a whisper of truth was permitted. For this, Han Kang uses over and over again the metaphor of snow:

A cluster of forty houses, give or take, had stood on the other side, and when the evacuation orders went out in 1948, they were all set on fire, the people in them slaughtered, the village incinerated.

She told me about how, when she was young, soldiers and police had murdered everyone in her village...

The next day, having heard the news, the sisters returned to the village and wandered the grounds of the elementary school all afternoon. Searching for the bodies of their father and mother, their older brother and eight year old sister. They looked over the bodies that had fallen every which way on top of one another and found that, overnight, a thin layer of snow had covered and frozen upon each face. They couldn't tell anyone apart because of the snow, and since my aunt couldn't bring herself to brush it away with her bare hands, she used a handkerchief to wipe each face clean...

Snow, for Han Kang “is silence”. Rain, she says, “a sentence”.

This is a theme in her books: cleaning bodies, brushing away blood and snow with precision, to see things clearly, trying to recover some dignity and truth, no matter how excruciatingly painful. The book itself is an excavation—a relay race, as she put it—passed along through three women characters, each one excavating further into the harrowing truth—“to the bottom of the ocean” of horror.

The snow that fell over this island and also in other ancient, faraway places could all have condensed together inside those clouds. When, at five years old, I reached out to touch my first snow in G—, and when, at thirty, I was caught in a sudden rain shower that left me drenched as I biked along the riverside in Seoul, when the snow obscured the faces of the hundreds of children, women and elders on the schoolyard here on Jeju seventy years ago.... who's to say those raindrops and crumbling snow crystals and thin layers of bloodied ice are not one and the same, that the snow settling over me now isn't that very water?

As she uncovers—like “a tough homework assignment”—the Bodo league massacres, the Jeju massacres, Vietnam massacres, Gwangju, she tries to thread all of them together in an unbroken thread using “an impossible tool”—the flickering heart of her language—animated by an “extreme, inexhaustible love” and the stubborn refusal to turn away:

Han Kang recalls her very young self when she first became aware of the atrocities in a secret chapbook, and thus formed the question that centers her writing:

After it had been passed around the adults it was hidden away in a bookcase, spine facing backwards. I opened it unwittingly, having no idea what it contained. I was too young to know how to receive the proof of overwhelming violence that was contained in those pages.

How could human beings do such things to one another?

On the heels of this first question, another swiftly followed: what can we do in the face of such violence?“

Han Kang’s question is the question that should animate all of us, as we, too, realize what is happening.

None of us can unsee what is unfolding in front of our eyes. The French have an appropriate wording:

Nous sommes en train d’*assister* à un genocide: we are witnessing—that is to say, *assisting*, in smaller or greater ways—a genocide. As Jason Hickel puts it:

The images that I see coming out of Gaza each day—of shredded children, piles of twisted corpses, dehumanisation in torture camps, people being burned alive—are morally indistinguishable from the images I have seen in Holocaust museums. Pure evil on a horrifying scale.

What can we do? Each of us must confront this question individually and collectively, and all of us, together, must take action. None of us will be forgiven for turning away.

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