

The Review of *Greek Lessons* by Nobel Prize-Winning Author Han Kang: Examined Through the Lens of Ethical Literary Criticism

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Abstract: Han Kang, Nobel Prize winning author and a pivotal voice in contemporary Korean literature, has long transfigured personal traumas and social violence into works of ethical meditation. Her novel *Greek Lessons* extends this thread with profound impact, tracing the parallel stories of a woman rendered mute and a Greek instructor gradually losing his sight. Their intertwined stories, articulated through the interplay of third-and first-person narration, dramatize the fragility of human existence and seek new forms of attunement that emerge through the quietude of silence and the uncertainties of darkness. Critics have lauded the novel's delicate evocation of grief and its nuanced portrayal of the collapse of language, observing how Han gives form to suffering rather than leaving it at the level of description. When analyzed through the framework of ethical literary criticism, the woman's aphasia and the man's blindness emerge as ethical lines that reveal the incompleteness and vulnerability inherent in human life. Their deficiencies call forth responsibility toward the Other, requiring a response that transcends sympathy. Within the framework of Nie Zhenzhao's theory of ethical literary criticism, *Greek Lessons* illustrates how vulnerability itself constitutes the very foundation of ethical relation. By transforming loss and deprivation into a site of ethical encounter, Han Kang underscores literature's capacity to compel reflection on suffering and to elicit a moral response. In doing so, *Greek Lessons* exemplifies the literature's enduring ethical force and reaffirms Han's distinctive literary vision within both Korean and world literature.

Keywords: Han Kang; *Greek Lessons*; Nie Zhenzhao; ethical literary criticism; ethical line

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标题：诺贝尔文学奖得主韩江《失语者》评析——以文学伦理学批评为视角

内容摘要：韩江作为诺贝尔文学奖得主，始终是当代韩国文学不可忽视的声音。她长期致力于将个人创伤与社会暴力升华为深刻的伦理思辨，这一创作脉络在其小说《失语者》中得到了延续与深化。小说以一位失语的女性与一位逐渐失明的希腊语教师为主线，构建出双线并行的叙事结构。通过第三人称与第一人称视角的交错运用，小说不仅生动呈现出人类生存本质中的脆弱，更在沉默与黑暗的境遇中探索建立新型共鸣的可能性。评论界普遍赞誉小说对悲伤的细腻描摹与对语言失效过程的深刻呈现，并指出韩江并未止步于痛苦的展演，而是通过语言形式本身为痛苦赋形，使不可言说之物获得美学与伦理的双重形态。从文学伦理学批评的角度看，女性的失语与男性的失明共同构成一条深刻的伦理线，揭示出生命内在的不完整与脆弱。而这种缺失，恰恰召唤着一种超越怜悯、指向责任的伦理回应。在聂珍钊所构建的文学伦理学批评框架中，《失语者》揭示出：脆弱性本身正是伦理关系得以建立的根基。韩江通过将“失落”与“匮乏”转化为伦理相遇的潜在空间，凸显出文学作为一种媒介，如何迫使我们凝视苦难，并激发道德层面的觉醒与回应。因此，《失语者》不仅展现了文学持久而深刻的伦理效力，也再次确立了韩江在韩国乃至世界文学格局中独特而清醒的洞察力。

关键词：韩江；《失语者》；聂珍钊；文学伦理学批评；伦理线

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Positioned at the forefront of modern Korean literature, Han Kang has continually developed a perspective that converts private wounds and social brutalities into rigorous meditations on ethical responsibility. Han's work consistently reveals both the essence of human suffering and the ethical action it demands. In 2016, the English translation of *The Vegetarian* (채식주의자) made her the first Asian writer to win the Man Booker International Prize and in 2024 she received the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Nobel Committee's award motivation was "for her intense poetic prose that confronts historical traumas and exposes the fragility of human life" (Nobel Prize Outreach).

Another one of Han Kang's representative works, *Greek Lessons* (희랍어 시간), similarly depicts the fragility of human life through her intense poetic prose, which was equally underscored as the basis of her Nobel Prize. The novel ethically explores vulnerable human existence through the intersecting narratives of a female character who has lost the ability to speak and a male Greek instructor who is losing his eyesight. Both characters have experienced loss, and their respective deprivations compel them to seek new forms of connection. The woman, narrated in the third-

person, is acutely sensitive to the violence inherent in the nature of language and thus has lost her ability to speak. Meanwhile, the male Greek instructor, narrated in the first-person, faces the genetic fate of progressive blindness, with the prospect of completely losing vision by the time he turns forty. The interplay between third-person narration and first-person narration, which create a distinct yet tense composition, highlights Han Kang's characteristic narrative awareness. The paths of two protagonists, bound in crisis, intersect within a Greek language classroom. The story evolves as the two are drawn together through their respective experiences of loss and deprivation, and their fragile convergence exposes the essential vulnerability of human existence. *Greek Lessons* attempts to probe the condition of human existence and the possibility of finding healing amidst hardship.

The Guardian observed *Greek Lessons*, stating, "I was struck by how powerfully she had used language and the failure/absence/collapse of language to make palpable the disorienting experience of grief: she doesn't describe grief, but uses language and narrative form to embody it. What an achievement!" (Strang), thereby underscoring the novel's delicate treatment of the interlaced themes of language and loss. *The Atlantic* praised the novel, noting that "words are both insufficient and too powerful to tame," (Chihaya) emphasizing language as both limited and overwhelmingly potent. This suggests that language exists on the threshold between anguish and silence. *The Asian Review of Books* describes the novel as a "poetic, and intimate look into the lives of two people, each affected by a disability, both cleaved from society [...] yet progressively drawn together by their shared grief and nascent hope," (McShane) offering a positive assessment of how the two characters, estranged from society, find affinity through shared sorrow and the possibility of hope.

The reviews illuminate the novel's aesthetics of lament, deprivation, and delicate language. While it is agreeable that these assessments capture the dimensions of its artistry, reading *Greek Lessons* within the framework of ethical literary criticism reveals interpretive possibilities that transcend an understanding of the text as merely a poetic novel of individual tragic narratives. *Greek Lessons* instead demonstrates how literature, by disclosing the suffering of the Other, compels the reader to formulate an ethical response. For example, the woman's silence raises a fundamental question about the ethics of language, highlighting an ideal that we strive for but can never fully attain. In turn, the man's loss of sight reveals the inherent vulnerability of being human, and that depicts how we are ethically incomplete from the start. This suggests that the world available to any individual is inevitably partial and imperfect.

These two essential ethical lines¹—namely, the woman’s aphasia and the man’s loss of sight—form the core of the narrative, each developed through their respective perspectives. Examining how aphasia and blindness constitute an ethical line will become central to future ethical criticism of this novel. The man and the woman do not reveal their past experiences to each other but instead each carries their own ethical knots.² These entanglements of suffering are narrated through the processes of aphasia and sight loss, and within this process the two characters meet as teacher and student in a Greek language class, where they come to recognize each other’s vulnerability. This vulnerability, while unique to each character, ultimately reflects the inherent fragility of human existence.

Such an inquiry lies at the heart of ethical literary criticism. The Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao (聂珍钊), who pioneered this theoretical framework, stresses that literature is not simply an object of aesthetic appreciation but an art that compels reflection on the ethical relationships human beings form with the Other.³ Han Kang’s *Greek Lessons* vividly demonstrates this role of literature. Through the figures of one who has lost the ability to speak and another who is losing sight, both marked by deprivation, the reader is invited to envision the suffering of others and, in confronting that suffering, to reflect upon their own ethical stance.

The woman describes the moment when she was first rendered speechless at the age of seventeen as follows:

The most agonizing thing was how horrifyingly distinct the words sounded when she opened her mouth and pushed them out one by one. Even the most nondescript phrase outlined completeness and incompleteness, truth and lies, beauty and ugliness, with the cold clarity of ice. Spun out white as spider’s silk from her tongue and by her hand, those sentences were shameful. She wanted to vomit. She wanted to scream. (Han 11)

The woman was startled at the realization that the very violence she associated

1 For a detailed discussion of ethical lines, See Nie Zhenzhao, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, translated by Kim Soon-jin, Yoon Seok-min and Lim Da-geun, Seoul: Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Knowledge Publishing Content Center, 2022, 529-531.

2 For a detailed discussion of ethical knots, See Nie Zhenzhao, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, translated by Kim Soon-jin, Yoon Seok-min and Lim Da-geun, Seoul: Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Knowledge Publishing Content Center, 2022, 525-528.

3 See Nie Zhenzhao, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, translated by Kim Soon-jin, Yoon Seok-min and Lim Da-geun, Seoul: Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Knowledge Publishing Content Center, 2022, 33-34.

with language was coming out from her own lips. For her, language is not confined to wholeness, truth, nor beauty; it also conveys the imperfection, falsehood, and ugliness of the world. If this constitutes the violence of language, then the ethics Han Kang seeks to pursue is ultimate, inviolate and unattainable. The following passage offers a concrete illustration of the women's aversion to language after losing her voice.

Eventually, without feeling, as though remembering a distant acquaintance, she recalls that day. "You're insane," the person had spat at her from the dark, when she regained consciousness. "All this time, I let a crazy bitch look after my child." Short-tongued and shallow-throated words, loose words, words that slipped and slashed and stabbed, metallic, filled her mouth. Before they fell woo-soo-soo out of her mouth like the splintered pieces of a razor blade, before she was able to spit them out, they had first wounded her. (Han 150-151)

When she regains consciousness after attempting suicide, her ex-husband says to her, "You're insane," "a crazy bitch." These words are effectively a declaration that she has no place in society. In the world of the novel, it doesn't unfold in such a way, but if she were truly mentally ill, she would have to be confined to a hospital and separated from the world. Nevertheless, she has no language with which to resist. Even if it was a language full of irrationality, in such circumstances she needed to speak up but was unable to do so. The moment she speaks a language of resistance, that language connects her to the world. Conversely, when she fails to express that contradictory, irrational language, then she becomes isolated from it. Thus, for the woman, "language is both a bridge connecting her to the world and the contradictory mechanism that separates her from it" (Kim 47).

Thus, this separation between the woman and the world arises from a fundamental dissonance in the relationship between language and reality, ultimately rendering it impossible to determine whether the world is alienating her or she is alienating the world. This sense of dissonance becomes a clue that allows us to ethically assess the extremity of her situation, in which she has lost the ability to speak. The knots of discord she feels in the language of the world can be called ethical knots. In her case, these include the violence of her birth metaphorically, the rift between language and the world, and the separation from her child due to divorce and its proceedings. She had already gone through a previous phase of aphasia in the past but unexpectedly regained speech during a French class. This experience leads her, having once again lost her speech due to another wound in her

present life, to attempt to restore herself through the act of learning Greek, a “dead language” (Han 40).

Meanwhile, the male teacher is a scholar who majored in linguistics and teaches ancient Greek. As he gradually loses his sight, he also loses his connection to the world. He progressively descends into darkness, and in that process, memories from his past are conjured. Among them, memories of a deaf German woman he once loved in his youth remains a significant trace. Though the relationship ultimately did not endure, he continued living on with the feelings of emptiness and loss:

More than twenty years have swept by, but certain aspects of that moment have not gone from my memory. Not only that moment alone, but all the moments we spent together—yes, even the most awful—are wholly alive for me. That which pains me even more than my self-accusation, my regret, is your face. That face, a mask of tears. The fist that slammed into my own face, harder than a man’s, having spent so many years handling wood.

Will you forgive me?

And if you are unable to forgive me, will you at least remember that I seek it of you? (Han 32)

For over twenty years, he has been losing his sight while inwardly gazing at the ‘face’ that wounds him more than any self-reproach or regret. Still pleading for forgiveness, he undergoes the ironic ordeal of being unable to forget her face, even as he loses his sight. This can be perceived as a reflection of the man’s own ethical imperfection. Back in Germany, he had once asked the then-seventeen-year-old girl, Joachim Gründel—who, because of her hearing impairment, was unable to speak—“Could you say something, anything, to me, like you learned in your lip-reading class?” And went on to explain his reasoning to the question. “That at some point we would live together, and that I would go blind. That when I was unable to see, we would need spoken words” (Han 41). He believed that although she couldn’t hear, she understood meaning through reading lips, and therefore he believed she might also be able to attempt vocalization by imitating lip shapes. His reasoning was that he had a hereditary condition that would cause him to lose his sight around his forties, and at that point the mode of communication he had relied upon—vision—would no longer be possible.

In this context, Joachim Gründel’s lack of language use overlaps with the woman now afflicted by aphasia. Yet the man who demands that Joachim Gründel

speak ultimately shows an obsession with grasping the world through language, thereby completely disregarding her world. In doing so, he already carries an underlying coercive pressure, a kind of implicit forcefulness that violates her will and demands that she must be with him. Just as Oedipus' attempt to evade the divine command ultimately ensured its fulfillment, the man's attempt to physically claim his first love before losing his sight results instead in an everlasting rupture.¹

The Greek teacher not only finds himself disconnected with the deaf German woman but also becomes estranged from his father, who is likewise losing his sight due to a hereditary condition and eventually goes missing. Because Greek and everyday life are already severed, the process of learning and teaching this dead language is an ethical exercise, an introspection into those "ethical knots" of communication breakdowns. Therefore, as the following quote suggests, the metaphor of salvation here is transcendent:

In the part that argues everything has within it that which harms it, he uses the example of how the inflammation of the eye ruins the eye and blinds it, and how rust ruins iron and completely shatters it. Why, then, isn't the human soul, which is analogous to such things, ruined by its foolish, bad attributes? (Han 97)

Such abstract ethical questioning places the reader in a position of reverence. Just as the woman's aphasia pursues the ideal of a perfect ethics of language, so too does the man's search for the "human soul" pose a fundamental ethical question. In the latter part of the novel, the man seeks the salvation of that human soul. The critical point for readers lies in observing how he, who once caused loss to Joachim Gründel in Germany, will now embody an ethically awakened response toward the woman suffering from aphasia.²

A bird flies into the academy building, shattering the man's glasses leaving him injured and unable to see. The woman arrives just in time, tends to his wound, and guides him home while he remains nearly blind. As the man recounts his story, shifting towards past and present, the woman communicates by tracing letters into his hand. The novel closes with the man gently caressing the woman's cheek with his eyes closed, as if to affirm each other's existence, suggesting that the world is

1 See Jin Gyu Kim, "On the Dynamics of Disconnection and Relationality in Han Kang's *Greek Lessons*," *The Journal of Korean Fiction Research Literature Studies* 97 (2025): 46-53.

2 See Hyunjin Yang, "Tactile Perception of World and Sensitivity of Communication in Han Gang's Novel: Focused on the Novel '*Greek Class Hour*,'" *Korean Literary Theory and Criticism* 70 (2016): 38-39.

not constituted solely by what can be seen or spoken.

The novel does not end with a clear conclusion. Instead, it remains open, shaped by deficiency, fragments, and ruptures. This unsettled form presents an ethical task for the reader, inviting them to fill in the gaps themselves. Ethical literary criticism assumes that literature is not merely a space for psychological pleasure or aesthetic experimentation, but rather an act intimately linked to human moral existence. In other words, literature awakens ethical consciousness in the reader and prompts reflection on what it means to be human in relation to the Other. Such a perspective carries particular force in Han Kang's works, which explore themes such as loss, silence, pain, and vulnerability.

Judith Butler defines humanity as inherently vulnerable, viewing this vulnerability as the basis of ethics and politics. Butler explains that humanity must perceive the face speaking through something beyond language, and that the vulnerability emerges at points where traditional modes of representation fall short, thereby unveiling the ethical significance of human existence in its weakness and limitations of its ability to create meaning.¹ In this light, the scene in which the male Greek instructor who is losing his sight and the mute female narrator, recognize each other's vulnerability, with the instructor gently tracing the narrator's face with his fingertip—directly corresponds to Butler's discussion. This moment prompts reflection on the fragility of human beings and the limits of our understanding, encouraging the reader to empathize with this vulnerability and experience ethical catharsis.

Moreover, Butler further argues that vulnerability is essentially shaped within social realms, reminding us that human life is always dependent on the hands of Others.² From this perspective, the female narrator's loss of language and the man's loss of sight are not merely misfortunes but rather manifestations of vulnerability arising within social conditions. The enforced silence upon the woman, along with societal indifference and blindness, are precisely these conditions. Yet vulnerability is not simply a deficit; from the standpoint of ethical literary standpoint, it becomes the very condition for new ethical relationships. The man's darkness resonates with the woman's silence, and the two forms of deficiency—of language and of sight—draw them closer toward one another, opening the possibility of new forms of communication. This illustrates how human vulnerability can serve as a force that

1 See Butler Judith, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London and New York: Verso, 2004, 151.

2 See Butler Judith, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, London and New York: Verso, 2009, 14.

enables solidarity and responsibility.

Meanwhile, In *Greek Lessons*, the classroom is not merely a place of learning. Readers themselves are also invited into the Greek language classroom. Throughout the learning process students transcribe and pronounce the language, participating in the act of reviving the dead language. Although the woman cannot speak, she overlays herself with the dead language through the act of writing. Even in her linguistic silence, she revives the language through the movement of her fingertips, symbolically reflecting her own process of loss and recovery. The act of learning a dead language becomes an ethical practice that calls forth the voice of the Other. Drawing from Butler's discussion, the study of Greek becomes an act of solidarity among vulnerable beings in order to sustain one another. In this scenario the readers, too, are marked by vulnerability. The scene in which the mute and the blind connect through the medium of a dead language embodies an ethical moment of encounter within the realm of deficiency.

Here, the reader must interpret the woman's silence and imagine the meaning of the relationship within the man's darkness. Such gaps impose ethical responsibility upon the reader, prompting a question: How will I respond to the suffering of the Other? This is not a mere aesthetic effect but an ethical demand. In the act of reading, the reader attempts to explain the situations of both the woman and the man, yet this explanation is incomplete, and this incompleteness provokes ethical reflection. The reader can never fully decode the silence of the female narrator nor entirely understand the darkness of the Greek instructor. But it is precisely this limit that compels the reader to continually engage with the Other. The entirety of Han Kang's literary world deals with themes of loss, pain, and the ethical reflection that arises from them. *Human Acts* (소년이 온다), for example, testifies to collective violence and death during the 1980 Gwangju Democratization Movement, leading readers into a space of collective memory and ethical responsibility. *The White Book* (흰) explores death and mourning through the lens of a deceased child and the motif of white objects, reflecting on human memory and oblivion. *The Vegetarian* reveals the violence and alterity that emerge as the subject resists social norms.

In this trajectory, *Greek Lessons* explores the ethical conditions of human existence through sensory deprivation—of both language and sight. Whereas *Human Acts* foregrounds collective violence and historical memory, *Greek Lessons* contemplates ethical relationships emerging from subtle individual deficiencies. Similarly, while *The White Book* examines memory through language and color, *Greek Lessons* probes memory and healing through the study of a dead language. If *The Vegetarian* dramatizes radical resistance to social norms, *Greek Lessons* instead

seeks a relational path grounded in silence and vulnerability. In this way, *Greek Lessons* not only revisits Han Kang's recurring themes of loss, suffering, alterity, and ethical response but also extends them into a new dimension of inquiry.

Ultimately, *Greek Lessons* confronts its readers with urgent questions: How might we appreciate the fragility of language while beautifying the language of the world? How can we perceive the essence of what remains unseen? In this way, the trials of vulnerable human existence continually press upon us as ethical challenges. Extending further on this idea, we ask: In the absence of language, how do we hear the voice of the Other? In the absence of sight, how do we see the Other's presence? These are the ethical questions of our age: How do we hear the voices of minorities, the socially vulnerable, and the marginalized? How do we witness their suffering? *Greek Lessons* awakens readers to this ethical awareness, making it one of the most compelling works that highlight the moral function of literature. At the same time, it reaffirms the brilliance of Han Kang's literary vision, interweaving personal narrative and social violence, Korean context and universal resonance, and elevating literature into a sphere of ethical reflection. Through this novel, readers are called to act as ethical agents who respond to the suffering of the Other. This, indeed, is the profound legacy of Han Kang's work, and it ensures her place within the history of world literature.

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