

Between Presence And Absence: Whiteness As A Lens For Witnessing Trauma In The White Book

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Abstract:

This study analyzes Han Kang's The White Book through the lens of trauma theory, focusing on how poetic language and recurring white imagery express grief, memory, and personal loss. Set in a foreign city, the narrative centers on the death of the narrator's mother's first child and examines how this early trauma echoes across generations. The novel's fragmented structure, composed of short reflections on white objects such as swaddling cloth, snow and a burial shroud, mirrors the disjointed, often unspeakable nature of traumatic memory. Illustrating on trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, this research explores how The White Book bridges the gap between personal and collective trauma between bodily experience and language. The study uses close reading to place the novel within the context of trauma studies and Korean literature. The analysis argues that Kang's work creates a space for witnessing, mourning and the gradual healing process. Through poetic form and symbolism, The White Book allows readers to confront silence, loss, and memory, offering a powerful literary response to the emotional aftermath of trauma.

Keywords: Korean Literature, Memory, Trauma, Whiteness.

INTRODUCTION:

Trauma theory, which became a key area of literary criticism in the 1990s through scholars like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman, explores how literature gives shape to psychological trauma. Rooted in psychoanalysis, it examines how overwhelming experiences disrupt memory, identity, and language, often pushing suffering beyond the boundaries of linear narrative and rational understanding (Caruth 4; Felman and Laub 57). Over time, the field has expanded to include pluralistic approaches that investigate how personal trauma intersects with collective histories and sociocultural realities (Kaplan 25; Rothberg 12). Han Kang's *The White Book*, translated by Deborah Smith, offers an emotional reflection on grief, loss and the lingering imprint of trauma. Structured as a series of poetic fragments centered around white objects such as swaddling cloth, snow, salt, and shrouds the novel blurs the boundaries between memoir and fiction. At its heart is a Korean woman living in a foreign city, reflecting on the death of her mother's first child. This death, though brief and silent, reverberates across generations. The narrator's contemplation of her own existence as one born in the shadow of loss reveals how absence can become a central part of identity. Through repetition and imagery, the novel becomes both a space of mourning and a ritual act of remembrance, where trauma is approached indirectly, through symbolic language (Whitehead 82). This study uses trauma theory as its primary framework, drawing on Caruth's idea of trauma as a belated and fragmented experience (Caruth 5), and Felman's emphasis on testimonial narrative as a form of bearing witness (Felman and Laub 70). It also engages with newer perspectives that question the limits of irrepresentability and instead explore how trauma can be articulated within specific cultural and historical contexts (Craps 2; Balaev 3). *The White Book* is examined as a text that negotiates the fragile boundary between personal and collective trauma, the physical body and symbolic language, mourning and the potential for transformation. Methodologically, the research adopts a close reading approach, analyzing key motifs and passages that embody trauma's effects, such as fragmentation, repetition, and silence. These readings are supported by theoretical insights from psychoanalytic trauma theory, especially the concepts of latency, dissociation, and the limits of language (Freud 13; LaCapra 89). At the same time, it incorporates cultural trauma theory to highlight how *The White Book* reflects Korean historical memory and gendered forms of loss (Cho 177; Kim 220). By combining literary analysis with theoretical inquiry, this study shows how Kang's novel not only testifies to trauma but also performs a subtle act of healing. Through poetic language, memory, and ritual,

The *White Book* opens a quiet literary space where pain is acknowledged and loss is given form, allowing meaning to emerge where words once failed. Trauma theory helps us understand how literature shows emotional pain, memory, and healing. This field grew stronger in the 1990s with the work of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Judith Herman. It focuses on how trauma can break normal memory and language. As Caruth explains, “trauma is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known, and it is only later that its experience returns” (Caruth 4). This idea is useful for reading Han Kang’s *The White Book*, a novel made up of short poetic pieces that reflect deep grief and loss.

Bracha Ettinger adds to trauma theory by introducing the term “wit(h)nessing.” This means not only seeing someone’s pain, but also feeling it with them. She writes that “wit(h)nessing is not about watching from a distance, but about being affected and transformed by what we encounter in the other” (Ettinger 703). Kang’s narrator shows this idea as she imagines the short life of her baby sister, using the color white to connect with her. White becomes a way to show mourning, love, and shared memory.

Anne Whitehead explains that trauma is often hard to describe with normal words, so writers use images, repetition, and silence. “Trauma is often addressed not through realistic description but through metaphor, image, and repetition” (Whitehead 82). In *The White Book*, Kang uses white objects like “swaddling bands” and “a white ointment applied to a swelling, like gauze laid over a wound” (Kang 68) to show how the narrator feels pain. These images let her talk about trauma in a gentle, symbolic way.

The novel also connects personal trauma with bigger, historical traumas. As the narrator walks through Warsaw, a city damaged in war, she thinks about how places and people carry scars. Michael Rothberg’s idea of “multidirectional memory” is helpful here. He writes that “memory of different traumas can coexist and interact in productive ways” (Rothberg 3). The narrator’s grief becomes part of a larger history of loss and rebuilding. Judith Herman’s model of trauma recovery, safety, remembrance, and mourning shows how healing works. *The White Book* shows this process as the narrator slowly creates meaning through writing, thinking, and small rituals. Michelle Balaev also says that stories can help people heal. “Narrative structure itself becomes part of the healing process, allowing trauma to be organized and made meaningful” (Balaev 3). Kang’s poetic storytelling helps the narrator move through her grief in a careful, respectful way. Finally, the novel looks at the ethics of remembering a trauma that is not your own. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub call this kind of storytelling “an address, a response, and a responsibility” (Felman and Laub 70). The narrator was not the baby who died, but she still feels the sadness. Writing becomes her way to honor that life and show love through memory.

Whiteness as a Lens for Witnessing Trauma:

“I hold nothing dear. Not the place where I live, not the door I pass through every day, not even, damn it, my life. Those numbers were glaring at me, clenching their teeth shut tight.” (Kang14). These words show that she feels very disconnected from the world around her. She does not care about her home, her daily life, or even her own life. This deep feeling of emptiness and numbness is a common sign of trauma. The scratched numbers and “rusted bloodstains” on the door are not just physical marks. They also represent emotional pain and past violence that has left a lasting effect. The door becomes a symbol of how trauma can change a person’s inner world and their surroundings. It shows how emotional scars can be left on spaces as well as on the body. Cathy Caruth explains that trauma is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known,” and often reappears later in strange and indirect ways, like images or places that carry hidden meaning (Caruth 4). In this way, the door in *The White Book* becomes more than an object. It becomes a silent witness to the pain the narrator carries inside.

I can never forget, my mother told me, the moment she opened her two black eyes and turned them toward my face. ... For God's sake don't die, she muttered in a thin voice, over and over like a mantra. ... They lay there on the kitchen floor, my mother on her side with the dead baby clutched to her chest, feeling the cold gradually enter into the flesh, sinking through to the bone. (Kang20)

This scene shows the deep pain and trauma of losing a baby. The mother’s repeated plea, like a quiet prayer or mantra, expresses desperate hope and fear. The coldness entering the body is a strong image of how trauma is felt physically, not just emotionally. This illustrates how trauma is carried in the body and remembered through sensations as much as through thoughts. Trauma is often passed down from one generation to the next, affecting how people remember and understand their family and themselves. As Marianne Hirsch explains in her theory of “postmemory,” children of trauma survivors carry memories that are not their own but still shape their identity deeply (Hirsch 22). The repeated words and physical feeling in this passage reveal how trauma is expressed both in language and in the body. “In this city there

is nothing that has existed for more than seventy years... The boundaries that separate old from new, the seams bearing witness to destruction, lie conspicuously exposed.” (Kang31) This description of the city shows how the physical space itself carries memories of past violence and loss. The city was destroyed and rebuilt, but the “seams” or scars from that destruction remain clearly visible. This idea connects closely to how trauma works in people’s lives. Just like the city’s wounds cannot be completely hidden, personal trauma leaves marks some visible, some hidden that shape how a person lives and remembers. The passage suggests that trauma is not only an individual experience but also a collective one, shared by communities and nations. As Dominick LaCapra notes, trauma can be both personal and historical, where “historical trauma” involves collective memories of violence that continue to affect societies (LaCapra 29). Thus, the novel shows how personal pain and larger social wounds are deeply connected, reflecting how healing must engage both. I slept badly for several days after reading this, unable to stop my thoughts from turning to the final moments of that six-year-old child, who would ultimately have been murdered. ... For an hour she had held her eyes open, held them in the direction of our mother’s face, but her optic nerves never had time to awaken and so that face had remained beyond reach. ... For there are moments, lying in the darkened room, when the chill in the air is a palpable presence. Don’t die. For God’s sake don’t die. (Kang38) This passage reveals how deeply trauma can haunt a person’s mind, causing insomnia and obsessive thoughts. The child’s inability to see her mother’s face becomes a powerful symbol of the distance trauma creates a gap that cannot be crossed or fully understood. It shows how trauma isolates both the victim and those who carry the memory, making connection difficult. Trauma here is not only personal but also vicarious felt through stories passed down and experienced collectively. Cathy Caruth explains that trauma “is not locatable in the simple event itself,” but in how it continues to “haunt” survivors and others, creating “an event that has not yet been fully experienced” (Caruth 4). The passage reflects this idea, illustrating that trauma resists being resolved or forgotten, instead remaining a living presence in the present. “If that were so, would the souls of this city sometimes drift to the wall where they were once gunned down and flutter there for a time with such a soundless motion? ... They believe that there is no shame in having been butchered. They want to draw out their grief for as long as possible.” (Kang206) This imagery evokes the idea that the souls of victims linger, quietly mourning in a “soundless motion,” emphasizing the enduring presence of collective trauma. The refusal to feel shame for suffering is a powerful statement about the need to honor pain openly rather than hide or suppress it. This passage highlights how public mourning and acknowledgment of past violence are crucial steps in healing trauma. As Jeffrey C. Alexander argues, “the public performance of mourning ... can enable a community to acknowledge suffering and initiate social healing” (Alexander 39). Silencing trauma, or shaming victims, only deepens wounds and keeps pain alive beneath the surface. Han Kang’s text urges readers to recognize the ethical responsibility of remembering collectively, creating a space where grief can be shared and validated. “And she frequently forgot, That her body (all our bodies) is a house of sand. That it had shattered and is shattering still. Slipping stubbornly through fingers.” (Kang111) This powerful metaphor compares the body to a fragile house of sand something unstable, breaking apart, and unable to hold itself together. It reflects how trauma is not just a single moment but a continuous process that chips away at both the body and the mind. The image of sand slipping through fingers suggests how the self feels uncontrollable and elusive after trauma, constantly fracturing and unable to fully recover. This aligns with Judith Herman’s insight that trauma causes “a profound and enduring disruption of the bodily self” that extends beyond the original event and reshapes identity over time (Herman 52). Trauma thus erodes the sense of physical and emotional wholeness, making healing a complex and ongoing journey rather than a fixed endpoint. “If she believes that she has never been shattered, she can believe that she will be shattered no more.” (Kang88) This statement captures a complex tension in trauma recovery between denial and acceptance. On one hand, believing oneself unbroken can serve as a psychological defense, protecting the individual from the overwhelming pain of acknowledging deep wounds. On the other hand, such denial may also hinder true healing by refusing to confront trauma’s impact. This ambivalence reflects Judith Butler’s concept of “strategic denial,” where survival sometimes depends on temporarily avoiding painful truths, even if it delays full integration of trauma (Butler 24). The narrative in *The White Book* thus challenges the simplistic idea that healing only comes through full acceptance; instead, it suggests that survival can require a delicate balance between recognizing and avoiding brokenness. Han Kang’s *The White Book* offers a profound literary exploration of trauma that transcends personal grief to encompass collective and historical wounds. Through its delicate interplay of whiteness as both a

symbolic motif and an aesthetic strategy, the novel creates a liminal space where trauma can be witnessed “wit(h)nessed” experienced not only as unbearable silence but as a shared, embodied memory. The fragmented narrative form mirrors the fractured nature of traumatic memory itself, revealing how trauma resists simple narration or closure while demanding recognition.

CONCLUSION:

This study has shown how *The White Book* situates trauma within both individual and communal contexts, illustrating the interwoven scars of history and identity. The novel’s imagery ranging from rusted doors and cold infant loss to shattered bodies and haunted cityscapes foregrounds trauma’s persistent physical and psychic marks, underscoring its ongoing, disruptive nature. At the same time, Han Kang gestures toward healing through ritualized remembrance, the ethics of public mourning, and the transformative potential of art and language. Importantly, the narrative acknowledges the complex tensions involved in trauma recovery, including the simultaneous need for acknowledgment and the protective function of denial. By embodying trauma’s ambivalence and resisting easy resolutions, *The White Book* invites readers into an ethical encounter with suffering that is both deeply personal and universally human. Ultimately, Han Kang’s work contributes a vital feminine mode of mourning and witnessing that expands trauma literature’s possibilities. It challenges us to rethink how we remember, represent, and live with trauma not as a fixed past, but as a dynamic, relational process that shapes our ongoing connection to self, other, and history. In doing so, *The White Book* affirms literature’s unique power to hold trauma’s complexity and gesture toward the fragile hope of healing.

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