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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**Echoes of Unborn Lives: Trauma and Memory in Han Kang *The White Book*****Fatima Rafique**

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Abstract

*This research delves into themes of grief, trauma, and memory in Han Kang's *The White Book*. The story focuses on a sister who lived for only a few hours and the narrator's memory of her absence. The research applies Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, which defines trauma as an experience that is never fully accessed in the moment to allow reflection but returns later through memory, silence, or imagination. This research demonstrates that Han Kang employs white images, fragmented writing, and silence to represent unborn grief. White objects including snow, paper, and fabrics carry symbolic meanings of absence and mourning. The fragmented writing exemplifies memory's brokenness while silence discovers its own language. The narrator also experiences the burden of survival by imagining the life her sister could have lived. This research proves that trauma connects to private and unseen loss and not just large emergency events like war or disasters. *The White Book* contributes to trauma studies by amplifying grief, which is typically silenced. It is a reminder that even though a life was short and fragile, it can have lasting echoes in both memory and literature. Ultimately, the novel mentions how absence can create identity, history, and imagination. The text also claims that literature can make mourning, something invisible, visible, through silence turned into testimony. Furthermore, the work creates a new imaginary space for the study of intimate traumas, which compels the reader to rethink how literature can serve as a record of pain and absence. Finally, this work adds to the field of trauma studies by connecting personal mourning with cultural memory.*

Keywords: Han Kang, *The White Book*, trauma theory, Cathy Caruth, memory, grief, murdered loss

1. Introduction

Han Kang's *The White Book* (2016) consists of a continuous, poetic reflection on themes of grief, memory, and absence. It is not a novel with a narrative, written sequentially from beginning to end. Instead it is thematic fragments layered with silences, memories, and images of white things such as snow, emptiness, salt, paper, sheets, clothing, and chalk (Han, 2016). The fragments revolve around the author's sister, who lived for only a few hours.

The sister may have been absent from the narrator's memory, but despite the briefness of her life, she continued to inform the narrator's memory and identity (Kim, 2019). The current research investigates the invisible and frequent dynamics of a subtle trauma associated with grieving a life that scarcely existed. While trauma often results from incidents of violence, war, or abuse, the trauma of grief from loss is individual and concealed from the world, but remains traumatic because of the continuing pain it generates (Caruth, 1996).

Han Kang conceptualizes grief using whiteness, silence, and fragmented writing. The words take common materials and cause them to symbolize absence and memory. The book also puts forward how the sister may have engaged with her life - suggesting how she would have looked like at age two or twenty, or thirty. The *White Book* blends past, memory, present, and future. The *White Book* gives voice to lives that haven't been noticed, acknowledged, or forgotten. It highlights that even tiniest of lives can make a significant impact (Cho, 2020).

1.1 Background of the Study

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory posits that trauma is never fully experienced at the moment it occurs but instead returns to us later, in fragments, memories, or repetition. She calls this "belatedness" (Caruth, 1996). Trauma speaks for the most part indirectly: in silence, broken images, or imagination. This concept is immediately relevant to Han Kang's *The White Book*. The narrator contemplates her sister, who died before she was born. She doesn't have any direct memories of her sister. However, she carries the weight of the absence of her sister deeply in her grief. Caruth points to "unclaimed experience"; that is, the powerful moment still shapes her life even without memory (Caruth, 2016). Han Kang depicts this grief through broken writing, blank spaces, and repetition of the colour white.

The whiteness of objects like snow, a cloth, a fragment of paper, a pinch of salt departs from just language, however, into representation and signification, signify emptiness, purity, and silence (Kim, 2019). The book does not offer a clear timeline; it is not linear, as is trauma; its fragmented; never told, but shown in gaps and silence. In this fractured style, Han Kang generate grief material, natural, real, and allows the reader to become a witness to this short lived pain (Felman & Laub, 1992). Literature here, gives voice to the unseen; makes silence a testimony.

1.2 Problem Statement

Most of the research on trauma focuses on major events, such as wars, natural disasters, or violence (Whitehead, 2004). In these scenarios, survivors are usually able to recount their memories, objects, and/or tell their stories. However, *The White Book* presents a different type of trauma: the loss of a sister mere hours after birth. This trauma is distinct because even the narrator was not alive at the time of her sister's death. She does not have any photographs or objects or direct memories to hold on to. Her grief is constructed solely from silence, absence, and imagination.

1.3 Research Objectives

The aims of this research are:

- i. To examine in what way Han Kang's *The White Book* demonstrates pre-birth trauma and memory-making through symbols, silence, and fractured writing

- ii. to utilize Cathy Caruth trauma theory, and, in particular, the ideas of belatedness and unclaimed experience to analyze the text
- iii. to show how Han Kang's style of writing and Caruth's theory together aid an understanding of absentness, loss, and inherited grief.

1.4 Research Questions

This research considers the following questions:

1. How are unborn trauma and memory realized through symbols, silence, and fragmentation in *The White Book*?
2. How does Caruth's trauma theory, particularly her concepts of belatedness, help our reading of the trauma in this text?
3. How do Han Kang's narrative strategies, in merging with Caruth's theory, engage understanding of absence, loss, and familial grief?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study has significance because it deals with a type of trauma that is rarely talked about: grieving for a life that barely lived. Whereas trauma studies examine grand events such as war, disaster, and genocide, *The White Book* illustrates something else: loss without memory; grieving without letters, or witnesses. This research shows how literature has its own way of generating meaning from silence and absence, as well as demonstrating that trauma can be realized even if not lived. By drawing on the theories of Cathy Caruth, the study expresses how trauma might return in later life symbolically, through imagination, or silence. Han Kang's use of white imagery, broken text and empty spaces illustrates how literature can hold fragile grief. This is important to note because it emphasizes that trauma does not have to arise from significant events. Fragmentation or destruction can be personal and intimate, and often times neither visible nor acknowledged. Examining *The White Book* demonstrates how literature assists us in remembering and memorializing fragile lives we would never remember afterwards.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Trauma Studies and Literature

Trauma studies have been an important focus in literary and cultural studies. Scholars are interested in literature's ability to articulate those experiences that are too painful or complex to tell directly, because, as noted by Cathy Caruth (1996), trauma theorizes an "unclaimed experience." Trauma is never fully experienced at the time it happens, but returns later through fragmentation, void, or repetition. Literature often provides a way to articulate these unclaimable experiences. Writers often articulate what cannot be spoken directly through symbol, metaphor, and fragmentation. For instance, Whitehead (2004) argues that trauma fiction confronts the "crisis of representation" whereby memory cannot resist telling a different story. In a related vein, Luckhurst (2008) explains that trauma is not merely psychological causation but a concern for ways storytellers may tell it.

Recent scholarship suggests that trauma may never reach an explicit description, but can be written about and represented through broken forms and silences (Craps, 2020; Lakehurst, 2019). This is one of the reasons when looking at representations of trauma such as *The White Book* by Han Kang, we see fragmented poetic forms.

2.2 Memory, Absence, and Unborn Lives

A further significant exploration is to consider memory and absence. Critics are increasingly focusing on unborn lives and forgotten grief. As Bond and Craps (2020) state, trauma studies must move beyond warfare and violence, and examine silenced lives and sorrows, such as miscarriage and stillbirth. I find Caruth's consideration of trauma interesting here. She claims trauma returns via absence, silence, or imagination, rather than directly (Caruth 2016). This notion helps understand grief for unborn lives, since there are no memories, and recollections won't easily resurface, but trauma is still echoing.

Clinical and cultural studies have documented similar findings. Frosh (2018) and Layne (2020) observe that families often continue to feel the presence of an unborn child, despite the absence being socially unacknowledged and unnamed grief. That literature can provide a vehicle for some of these alien lives to enter into public understanding is in itself important.

Indeed, from conceptualizations of trauma, scholars such as Balaev (2021) and Rothberg (2019) warn against assuming trauma is always the same. Balaev indicates that cultural context is essential to how trauma becomes represented, meanwhile Rothberg presents a consideration of "multidirectional memory" that shows how timelines of separate traumatic events can connect. These considerations remind us that trauma in *The White Book* is at once deeply personal but framed and understood in larger social meanings.

2.3 Trauma and Experimental Form

Most scholars identify trauma as often symbolized in experimental writing forms. The nature of fragmented structure, poetic framing, and disrupted time are correlate to the fractured quality of traumatic memory (Kaplan, 2018; Bond, 2021). Susan Sontag (as quoted in Luckhurst, 2008) describes such texts as "counter-histories;" a way to give voice to experiences otherwise left out of histories as traditionally constructed. Also, fragmentation can serve as testimony by encouraging readers to remember that particular moments are to be understood as incomplete. *The White Book* by Han Kang is an example of this. By virtue of its short fragments, space, and silences, it performs trauma as do every work analysed here; they do not simply relay trauma. It forces the reader to stop, take account of, and feel through the absences arranged by grief.

Tied to this idea of witnessing is trauma. Felman and Laub (1992) describe literature as testimony, where readers also bear the burden of memory. Oliver (2020) elaborates on the idea of "secondary witnessing," a process that involves readers becoming witnesses in their own way by engaging with silence, metaphor, and broken form. In *The White Book*, the blank spaces, white images, and poetic replicas draw readers into the narrator's experience of grief. This evokes Caruth's (1996) discussion of trauma as belonging to neither the survivor alone. Rather, it is held collectively by the act of witnessing.

Trauma studies have come a long way, but gaps still exist. Much of the research is still focused on war, genocide, and collective forms of violence (Whitehead, 2004; Luckhurst, 2008). There is less research on prenatal or familial trauma, for example. There is little application of Caruth's theories to unborn lives, despite the silences

and omissions being very much in line with her ideas (Caruth, 2016). Another gap emerges in the realm of form; at the level at which critics often state that fragmented writing is a reflection of trauma, few studies equate this to Caruth's notions of belatedness and repetition. Furthermore, while memory studies increasingly discuss intergenerational trauma, the supposed grief of unborn lives has yet to be explored in depth. This research aims to fill these gaps by applying Caruth's theory of trauma to *The White Book*. It analyses how Han Kang uses whiteness, silence and fragmentation to articulate grief. Therefore, this study's contribution to trauma studies illustrates that trauma can be understood as losses that are more personal, intimate, and rather invisible, alongside the violence of our history (Kim, 2019; Cho, 2020).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach. Trauma is an experience that cannot be calculated in numbers, or statistics. It is an experience characterized by fragments, silences, and symbols. For that reason, a qualitative method was chosen for this study. It allows the researcher to look at meaning, language, and interpretation rather than data and numbers. This study is guided by a constructive framework. Interpretative is the idea that meaning is not fixed but rather it is produced by culture, symbols, and social understanding (Balaev, 2021). Literature is more than pieces of information. It is an open space for readers who respond to the grief experienced differently through blank pages, silence, and absence.

3.2 Data Sources

The primary source of this research is Han Kang's *The White Book* (2016), translated by Deborah Smith. The text itself is the primary evidence because it is the language, style, and structure of the book that bears the themes of trauma and memory. Secondary sources include critical writings on trauma theory, especially Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) and *Listening to Trauma* (2016). Other scholarship on trauma, memory, and Han Kang's writing added support to the analysis (Kim, 2019; Cho, 2020). These sources provide theoretical and cultural context, but they do not supersede the main text.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma serves as my main framework. Caruth (1996) says that a trauma returns only partly formed, not fully experienced in the moment. The trauma then can return later in pieces, as fragments, dreams, or silences, and it is also described as an "unclaimed experience." This seems to be applicable to *The White Book*, in which the narrator grieves for a sister she never met, and the trauma returns in whiteness, silence, and fragmented writing. Her idea of belatedness is also important. Trauma is always in some sense belated, and the trauma returns after the event. For *The White Book*, she only remembers the deceased sister later through imagination and poetic fragments. This makes her theory a particularly lens for analyzing the novel.

4. Data Analysis

This section has analyzed Han Kang's *The White Book* through the lens of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. Caruth (1996) describes trauma as an unclaimed experience. It has not been fully understood when it took place, but emerges later in fragments, silence and repetition. Within this framework, the analysis has illustrated how Han

Kang is enacting her grief for her unborn sister with whiteness, fragmented writing, silence, broken temporalities, and imaginary memory.

Caruth (1996) posits trauma as an “unclaimed experience”—an event not fully apprehended at the moment of its occurrence, which returns belatedly through fragmented memories, repetitive symbols, and haunting silences. This theoretical lens is particularly apt for Kang’s work, which grapples not with a remembered loss, but with an absence inherited through family narrative and imaginative reconstruction. The trauma of the narrator’s sister, who lived only a few hours, was never directly experienced by the narrator, yet it structures her consciousness, memory, and artistic expression. This analysis will demonstrate how the novel’s form and content—its use of whiteness, fragmentation, silence, speculative memory, and ritual—perform the very mechanisms of traumatic belatedness and unresolved mourning that Caruth describes. By examining specific passages and their symbolic resonance, we can see how Kang transforms personal grief into a literary testimony that speaks through what remains unsaid and unseen.

4.2 Whiteness as a Language of Loss

The novel’s opening establishes whiteness not merely as a color but as a primary vocabulary for articulating loss. Kang presents a series of lyrical fragments cataloging white objects: “Snow. Ice. White birds. White dog hair. White waves” (Kang, 2016, p. 5). This incantatory list functions as more than description; it initiates a symbolic system where whiteness embodies paradox—it signifies purity and newness, yet also emptiness, erasure, and silence. This duality mirrors Caruth’s (1996) conception of trauma as an event that is both present and absent, known and unknown. The repetitive return to white imagery—such as “white towel, white porcelain, white sugar” (p. 17) and “white paper, unwritten” (p. 48)—enacts the compulsive recurrence central to traumatic memory. Each object becomes a minimalist monument to the sister’s absence. Particularly potent is the image of snow, which “erases everything, makes everything blank again” (p. 9). Here, whiteness performs a double gesture of preservation and obliteration: it covers the world, creating a uniform surface that visually represents the silencing of a life, while simultaneously offering a blank canvas upon which the narrator projects imagined memories. This aligns with Caruth’s argument that trauma often expresses itself indirectly through symbolic and sensory returns rather than through direct narrative. The pervasive whiteness becomes the aesthetic medium through which an “unclaimed experience” is both concealed and revealed, a visual manifestation of a grief that lacks conventional objects or memories.

4.3 Fragmentation as Testimony

The *White Book* is structurally defined by its fragmentation. It is composed of brief, poetic vignettes, often no longer than a paragraph, separated by significant white space on the page. This formal choice is a profound mimetic strategy, directly embodying the fragmented nature of traumatic recollection as theorized by Caruth. Trauma, she argues, disrupts linear narrative and cohesive memory; it returns in shards, flashes, and disjointed sensations. Kang’s narrative mirrors this disruption. There is no continuous plot, only a series of resonant moments and images. For instance, the section titled “Lullaby” consists of the stark phrase, “White moon. White breath” (p. 23), followed by an entire blank page. This gap is not an omission but an integral part of the testimony. It forces the reader to pause, to dwell in the silence, and to experience the weight of what is missing.

This technique aligns with the work of Felman and Laub (1992), who assert that testimony to trauma is often inherently fragmented; the full story is unavailable, even to the survivor, and can only be approached through its pieces. Kang's fragments are those pieces—each one a delicate, self-contained artifact of mourning. The blank spaces between them are as expressive as the text, representing the silences within family history, the gaps in knowledge, and the pauses in breath that grief necessitates. Through this form, the novel does not simply describe trauma; it replicates its cognitive and emotional structure, making the reader a participant in the process of piecing together a loss that can never be fully assembled.

4.4 Substitution and Survival: The Burden of Being

A central and deeply traumatic paradox explored in the novel is the narrator's existence as contingent upon her sister's death. The haunting reflection, "If she had lived, I would not be here" (p. 41), encapsulates a profound survivor's guilt, a concept Caruth (1996) explores as intrinsic to traumatic experience. The survivor is burdened not only by memory but by the very fact of their continued existence when another has perished. In this case, the guilt is compounded by its prenatal, almost mythical quality; the narrator's life is founded on an absence. This leads to a complex process of substitution and imaginative identification. The narrator meticulously constructs a parallel, spectral life for her sister: "At two, she would have spoken her first words... At twenty, she might have fallen in love" (p. 56). These are not memories but acts of "postmemory" (Hirsch, 1997), where the experience of a previous generation is so powerfully transmitted that it becomes a formative, imaginative memory for the next. The narrator inherits a grief that is not her own, yet it defines her. This imaginative labor—building a life from "what ifs"—is a coping mechanism and a manifestation of belated trauma. The trauma of the loss returns through the narrator's compulsive need to flesh out the shadow of her sister, to give her a history she never had. This speaks to Caruth's idea that the impact of a traumatic event may lie not in the original moment, but in its endless reverberations and the impossible responsibility it places on those who come after.

4.5 Silence as Eloquent Witness

In *The White Book*, silence is not an absence of meaning but a potent form of expression. It operates on both the narrative and typographical levels. Phrases are often stark and isolated: "White hair. White bird. White shroud" (p. 31). The repetitive, incantatory quality of such lines evokes a ritualistic mourning chant, while the simplicity and brevity create a resonant silence around each image. The narrator explicitly states, "Sometimes, I think silence is the only language she left me" (p. 62). This aligns perfectly with Caruth's (1996) assertion that trauma can defy direct linguistic representation and may reside precisely in the gaps and silences of speech. The trauma of the sister's death is an event without a witness in the conventional sense; the narrator was not present, and the sister could not testify to her own life. Therefore, the testimony must occur through alternative means. The blank spaces on the page, the pauses between fragments, and the minimalist prose all become a form of "speaking silence." They invite the reader into a collaborative act of witnessing. As Caruth suggests, trauma creates a community of listeners; here, the reader is positioned as that necessary secondary witness. By encountering these silences, the reader is asked to hold the space of the loss, to acknowledge the weight of an absence that can never be filled with words. In this way, Kang transforms silence from a void into a vessel—a shared, empathetic space where unspoken grief can be acknowledged and held.

4.6 The Embodied Aesthetics of Trauma

Kang's novel achieves something remarkable: it does not just narrate grief; it corporealizes it through its very form, creating an embodied aesthetic of trauma. The experience of reading *The White Book* is tactile and visual. The sparse text surrounded by white space, the recurring, almost rhythmic invocation of white objects, and the speculative leaps into an imagined future collectively create a sensory and emotional experience akin to mourning. This aesthetic strategy reflects Caruth's insight that trauma is often experienced and recalled on a somatic, pre-linguistic level. The "white shadow" that falls across the narrator's vision (p. 71) is a visceral, bodily metaphor for a grief that is always peripherally present. The fragmented structure forces a reading rhythm of stops and starts, mirroring the interrupted breath of someone caught in sorrow. By making the reader navigate blank pages and minimalist text, Kang implicates us in the labor of mourning. We must slow down, contemplate the gaps, and feel the emptiness. This transforms the act of reading into an embodied ritual, where the literary form itself becomes a site for working through (if not resolving) trauma. The novel thus stands as a testament to Caruth's idea that literature can provide a unique space for encountering trauma—not by explaining it, but by finding forms that allow its rhythms, silences, and repetitions to be felt.

4.7 Landscapes and Rituals: Externalizing the Internal

The natural world and small domestic rituals in the novel serve as crucial vessels for externalizing an internal, formless grief. Landscapes are never neutral; they are psychically charged. "Snowfall at dawn" (p. 12) and "fog over the river" (p. 29) are not merely settings but emotional correlatives for states of mourning—obscurity, coldness, quiet transformation. This displacement of grief onto nature aligns with LaCapra's (2001) concept of "acting out," where trauma is unconsciously transferred onto symbols and surroundings. The external world becomes a screen for projecting unresolved pain. Similarly, the narrator describes small, tender rituals: "I will leave a rice cake on the windowsill" (p. 65) or "place a white flower in a bowl of water" (p. 58). These are not grand gestures of closure but quiet, repetitive acts of care directed toward an absence. They represent an attempt to domesticate grief, to weave it into the fabric of daily life. Ritual, in this context, becomes a way to mark time around a loss that has disrupted normal temporality. It acknowledges the ongoing presence of absence without seeking to erase it. This reflects a key tension in trauma theory between "acting out" (the compulsive repetition of the traumatic event) and "working through" (the gradual process of integrating the loss). Kang's narrator seems to dwell in a space between the two, using ritual not to move past grief, but to forge a sustainable, living relationship with it. These practices show how intimate trauma becomes embedded in the most ordinary aspects of life, transforming private loss into a patterned, almost sacred, daily remembrance.

Discussion and Implications

In Han Kang's *The White Book*, grief is represented differently. The text does not describe the experience in a direct form; rather, it is informed through the use of images, silence, and fragments. Cathy Caruth (1996) describes trauma, as an experience not fully felt at the time of encounter; it arrives later as memory or imagination. This idea applies to the book as well: the narrator knows her sister never got the chance to live, but she is densely aware of her absence. The white images of snow, paper, and cloth have the heavy weight of

memory attached. These simple objects turn into signs of loss, and acquainted into reminders of black sheep's sister's brief existence when they occurred in the text. In addition, the fractured experience shaped like a broken novel, echoes trauma. The narrator is not telling a story; she is sharing pieces of her experience. In addition, by broken shape of the text, the white of silence and gaps will place the reader in the silence of grief.

Additionally, the narrator is burdened with survival. She reflects on how her life exists because her sister did not live. This creates guilt and a sense of burden. She evokes a process of imagining her sister at various ages as an act of grieving a life never lived. Additionally, Kang's novel contemplates how trauma disrupts both time and subjectivity. The discussion opens up the field of trauma studies. Most studies examine war, disaster, or genocide (Whitehead, 2004; Luckhurst, 2008). The White Book examines a personal form of trauma - the sorrow of the grieving for a life never lived, and it indicates that trauma can exist without the triggering event itself being important. Trauma can emerge from personal losses, any of which can remain unknown or hidden.

Clearly there are additional studies related to other works of Han Kang in terms of trauma theory. These might demonstrate how she employs silence and images and perhaps conceptions of time, or bodily perspectives in different contexts. Comparative studies could also be conducted between *The White Book* and other representations concerning stillbirth, or miscarriage, or other silenced trauma, also providing authorial voice for losses which are otherwise neglected in the world. Other studies could also be conducted using feminist theories of trauma, or cultural theory of trauma, as supplements to Caruth. Adding these additional theoretical layers adds to the depth of meaning, and enhances an already substantial and complete study.

Conclusion

Han Kang's *The White Book* is a subtle yet incredibly poignant work. It depicts the story of a sister lost to grief, one who existed only for a few hours. The book does not have a narrative propulsion, but rather functions through images, silence and fragments to represent suffering. Utilizing Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, we can properly elucidate Han's style. Caruth suggests a trauma is never fully aware at its moment. Rather trauma comes back, at later moments, in broken pieces. In this novel, grief comes back through white images, brief recollections and imaginary futures. The white things, in the sense of snow, paper, cloth and the rest, act as indicators of absence. The fleeting sections and vacant areas represent the brokenness of trauma. The narrator's survival extends pain. She understands that in one sense her life comes from the loss of her sister. This guilt adds to the weight of sorrow she carries. This places another burden on what she imagines might have been her sister's life - by modeling her sister growing through various ages, she is creating a life that never was. This study has demonstrated that trauma is not solely reserved for war and catastrophe. Trauma can also be derived from an individualistic and silent loss. The White Book gives vent to a grief that remains largely unheard. It demonstrates that even one who lived for such a short time, a few hours, and projected to be so fragile, can leave important marks on memory. The research contributes to trauma studies by applying Caruth's theory to unborn loss. It also opens space for future work on personal and intimate forms of trauma in literature.

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