
Shame, Silence and Survival: A Feminist-Trauma Study of How We Disappeared

Khurram Shehzad¹, Muhammad Rashid², Prof. Dr. Muhammad Saeed Akhter³

1 MPhil Scholar in English Literature, Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus Faisalabad, Pakistan. chkhurram472@gmail.com

2 MPhil Scholar, Department of English Literature, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan. iamminhas4@gmail.com

3 Department of English, Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus, Faisalabad, Pakistan. msaeed.akhter@riphahfsd.edu.pk

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.2455>

Abstract

This article examines Jing-Jing Lee's debut novel *How We Disappeared* (2019) to address the systemic erasure of Singaporean "comfort women" and challenge the redemptive conventions of traditional war fiction. It argues that the novel functions as a "feminist-trauma text" wherein literary strategies of fragmentation, delayed disclosure, and embodied narration serve as the formal correlates of complex psychological and social trauma mechanisms. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Judith Herman, Cathy Caruth, and Sandra Bartky, the analysis explores how shame is weaponized as a patriarchal disciplinary technology to enforce silence, and how that silence functions simultaneously as a traumatic wound and a precarious strategy of resistance. Furthermore, the study theorizes the "body as archive," demonstrating how somatic memory preserves historical atrocities that official language and state-sanitized historiographies withhold. By analyzing the dialogic interplay between the elderly survivor Wang Di and her young, non-professional listener Kevin, this article proposes a feminist historiography of silence—one that rejects redemptive narrative arcs in favor of an ethics of testimony that honors the fragmented, the idiosyncratic, and the irretrievable. Finally, it offers pathways for future scholarship to undertake comparative transnational analyses of comfort women narratives across East and Southeast Asia and to further theorize the somatic and acoustic registers of trauma.

Keywords: *Feminist trauma, Comfort women, Shame and silence, Somatic memory, Transgenerational testimony.*

1. Introduction

Jing-Jing Lee's debut novel *How We Disappeared* (2019) belongs to a small but growing body of Anglophone fiction that returns to the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942–1945) to recover a history that official memory has been reluctant to hold: the systematic sexual enslavement of Asian women as "comfort women" for the Imperial Japanese Army. As Biswas (2023) points out, Lee's work is vital because it "stands out as one of the very few novels in existence to document wartime sexual violence on Singaporean women during the Japanese occupation," effectively rewriting these marginalized, nameless figures back into global history (p. 4). The novel alternates between two time periods. At the age of seventeen, Wang Di is kidnapped from her kampong and put in a military brothel where she is imprisoned with two other women, Huay and Jeomsun. As twelve-year-old Kevin records his dying grandmother's

mumbling confession on a cassette recorder, he embarks on the journey to discover the secret of his family, little realizing he is headed towards the same history. The novel's title is doubled in meaning: it refers to the thousands of Singaporeans who disappeared during the Occupation without any official documentation, and it refers to the social disappearance of a woman who, for sixty years, disappeared into her own life.

This article argues that *How We Disappeared* is best read as a feminist-trauma text, in which the literary strategies of fragmentation, delayed disclosure, and embodied narration are not stylistic options but the formal correlate of psychological and social mechanisms that the novel explores. Lee's novel, in which the act of speaking is not a painless one and indeed is often impossible, defies the usual conventions of war fiction, which tend to make trauma into heroic testimony. Until the very end of her life, Wang Di does not share her story with a tribunal, a journalist, or even her husband, but only in response to a stranger's tape recorder, and then only in bits and pieces. As feminist trauma theorists have long theorized, the novel thus illustrates that sexual violence's survivors do not automatically or simply "recover" a story which was always there to be told, particularly if their trauma is complicated by patriarchy's shame. The story, instead, has to be constructed – often many years later – out of the silence, the shame, the body that remembers what the mind has learned to withhold (Herman, 1992; Caruth, 1996).

This article is also driven by another concern in feminist literary criticism: that fiction that attempts to portray sexual violence against women in history could either be consumed as the aestheticization of suffering by a reader, or, in the attempt to represent and honor the survivors, iron out their individuality to make them symbolically represent some injury or collective suffering. Lee's novel dodges this danger by grounding Wang Di's interior in particularities: her habits of thought, her relationship with her husband, her half-remembered songs and recipes, and so on, so that the reader is introduced first to Wang Di as a person struggling with a normal, if somewhat limited, old age, and only slowly and partially to Wang Di as a survivor of one of the twentieth century's least-known instances of atrocity against women. This plot choice, revealing the entirety of Wang Di's past only after the reader has taken the trouble to know her as an idiosyncratic individual, is itself a feminist plot device: it refuses to categorize the "comfort woman" and argues for her individuality.

2. Methodological Approach

This article follows a close textual analysis of the novel, and feminist-trauma dynamics discussed here are performed at the level of sentence and image as well as at the level of the plot summary. In choosing passages, care has been taken to include, where relevant, examples throughout the two timelines of the novel, and amongst all three of Wang Di's fellow captives, to show that the trend noted—the redirection of shame, the multiplicity of silences, the corporeal storage of memory are not a one-off occurrences, but a systemic feature of the text. The quotations have been kept intentionally short, and are used as evidence, not as replacements for discussion of the surrounding narrative context. The theoretical sources of this article are mostly from trauma studies and feminist philosophy, which are not approached with the intention of applying one in sequence after the other, but rather as mutually constitutive, as the novel's own logic – of shame resulting in silence, and silence being stored in the body – resists any attempt at a disciplinary separation of the psychological, the social and the somatic.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Trauma Studies

Trauma theory, as developed by Judith Herman (1992) and Cathy Caruth (1996), provides the foundational vocabulary for this analysis. Herman's (1992) tripartite model of trauma and recovery (establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection) has been the most popular way to read survivor narratives, but Herman is also sensitive to what she calls the "dialectic of trauma"... "the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud" (p. 1). This oscillation characterizes Wang Di throughout the novel; she is a woman who has lived sixty years controlling and suppressing this dialectic

oscillating between the two at will, or else the memory comes out of her and disrupts her life. Caruth's (1996) discussion of trauma as an event that is not fully assimilated at the time of its occurrence and which therefore returns belatedly and repetitively is helpful in shedding light on the way the novel is structured—by flashback and delayed telling—in which, once again, trauma is not so much an event as a way of being returned.

Traditional trauma theory has historically, however, focused more on sudden and catastrophic public trauma and less on the systemic violence toward women in the private or domestic sphere. Feminist psychologist Laura S. Brown (1995) proposes “insidious trauma” as an “everyday life of oppressions” and the “constant, low-level stress of living in a world that is hostile” (p. 107) to fill this void. What is important to recognize is that Brown's formulation is crucial to *How We Disappeared*, because it shows that Wang Di's pain persists beyond just the ending of the comfort stations; it continues and grows under the malevolent gaze of the post-war society she re-enters.

Feminist criticism then contributes an explanation for such a pervasive occurrence of foreclosing women's traumatic speech. Sandra Bartky (1990) makes a case for shame as a technology of femininity, a disciplinary mechanism that internalizes and enforces patriarchal norms and in which the disciplined woman disciplines herself, thereby eliminating the need for external discipline. Sharon Lamb's (1996) research on the “trauma myth” and victim-blaming is another example that shows how cultures place the blame on sexual violence victims instead of the perpetrators; this displacement of blame is rendered explicit in the community's use of the epithet “comfort woman” as an insult aimed at Wang Di, the victim, rather than the system that violated her (Lee, 2019, p. 234). According to Judith Butler (1990), understandings of gender can be thought of as regulatory ideals that are produced and reproduced through performance, hence Wang Di's re-entering into “normal” femininity after the war (marriage, domestic silence, the enactment of an undistinguished life) is felt as continuous labor but not as a return to an authentic former self.

Lastly, this article's reading of the novel's strategies with voice is framed by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's (1992) analysis of testimony and Gayatri Spivak's (1988) seminal question of whether the subaltern can speak. According to Felman and Laub, testimony is not a monologue but a relational event, which demands that the person be a listener who can hear what is not yet ready to be heard: the silence of a survivor is not always a failure of memory but often a conscious or unconscious judgement that no listener is there yet. As Wang Di's testimony, when it comes, is recorded by a child's toy-like cassette recorder, rather than by any formal apparatus of historical record, Spivak's insight that the subaltern woman's speech is structurally unheard when uttered is quietly literalized in the novel by Wang Di's illiteracy. Another theoretical thread that applies to this article is the politics of care and complicity in close relationships that are intersected by trauma. Intimate partners of trauma survivors have been identified by feminist scholarship as an ambiguous figure, as well as being protective, they can also be complicit when they do not insist on disclosure because of love, tact or because they do not want to confront what they are not sure of. This has yet another dynamic, not so much theorized as the survivor testimony itself, but it's at the heart of how the novel shows Wang Di's marriage, in which her husband's decades-long silence is an act of caring that nonetheless perpetuates the very silence which has isolated her. The analysis of this article has been enabled by reading this relationship in the light of Herman's (1992) insight that traumatic events “destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community” and shatter the connections “formed and sustained in relation to others” (p. 51).

4. Historical and Literary Context

The “comfort women” system, which saw the Imperial Japanese Army kidnap and force tens to hundreds of thousands of women in occupied Asia into sexual slavery, was virtually ignored in official history for decades after 1945, partly due to shame on the part of the “comfort women” survivors, and on the part of their communities. Lee has confirmed that the novel is based on the witnesses of Singaporean and Korean

comfort women survivors, and her own family's history of the Occupation, and that it belongs to a larger body of "comfort women" literature, which encompasses Korean and Filipino comfort women testimonies, and later fictional works. In fact, this historical silence is present in the novel itself in that a newspaper clipping Kevin finds reports that "the number of people who disappeared during the Japanese Occupation and remain unfound is estimated to be in the thousands" (Lee, 2019, p. 171), which returns the novel's title to the realm of documented history and reminds the reader that Wang Di's individual silence is part of a collective, unresolved national memory.

Specifically, the novel refuses two narrative tendencies to which trauma narratives about historical atrocity are prone: the temptation to make suffering into a spectator sport, and the temptation to resolve suffering through a redemptive disclosure and healing trajectory. Instead, Lee shares this burden of witnessing among three roles — the old survivor, the man who is dying and has already witnessed her, and the child who becomes her first listener — thereby creating a new ecology of witnesses that disrupts institutionalized processes of national commemoration that historically flatten female trauma into abstract symbols of victimhood (Lim & Lye, 2024).

This reading is enabled by the novel's paratextual framing. The book is described in promotional materials accompanying the first edition as an "unforgettable image of how women were silenced and disappeared by both war and culture" (Lee, 2019, p. 4), and this places culture as a key factor in the erasure of women, in addition to military violence. This framing is akin to the novel's own argument, which is developed over the sections to follow, that the apparatuses that silenced Wang Di did not die when Japan surrendered in 1945 but were reproduced, albeit in a different register, by the Singaporean society she returned to, in which the same patriarchal norms concerning female chastity and marriageability provided a second apparatus of shame over the first and original wartime violation. Sandhya Devi (2025) notes that survivors in the novel are "multiply discriminated against before, during, and after war through familial, national, and international structures" (p. 14), illustrating how systemic marginalization transitions seamlessly from military occupation to peacetime domestic spaces. To read the novel, in other words, in a feminist-trauma perspective is to focus not only on the comfort house as a place of historical horror but also on the postwar kampong, marriage, and public housing estate as places where the afterlife of that horror is both produced and taken care of.

It is important to note, too, that Lee does not collapse her feminist-trauma exploration into a single, monolithic figure. Wang Di survives the comfort house alongside Huay, whose body begins to show "rashes... scatterings of brown spots flecking her pale skin" that later "turned to sores" (Lee, 2019, pp. 166, 176), and Jeomsun, whose blunter, angrier register — she is the one who first gives voice to the desire to "tell everyone what happened" (Lee, 2019, p. 184) — offers a counterpoint to Wang Di's more inward, dissociative mode of endurance. The three women thus illustrate different strategies of coping with structural violence: Huay's body shows the somatic price of repeated violence and the neglect of infection; Jeomsun fights back with her anger and with the threat of revealing herself; Wang Di survives by dissociation, by protective silence, and, finally, by fragmentary testimony — a testimony that is only effective because it comes so late. The significance of this distinction in terms of the novel's argument is that it highlights that the novel offers no universalizable "trauma response" but rather a range of gendered survival strategies informed by and legible against a common system of sexual violence.

5. Shame as Disciplinary Technology

The most consistent theme in the novel is that shame is inauthentic and instigated by the patriarchal system, thus making the victim feel ashamed when in fact they are not. This redistribution of shame takes place on three levels in the text: in the comfort house itself, in the postwar marriage between Wang Di and her husband and in the community, she can turn to after her liberation.

Shame is created in the comfort house by stripping subjects of their clothes, inspecting them with a trained

eye, and treating their bodies as objects in a routine manner. Wang Di remembers being forced to undress in front of the “silent watch” of the caretaker (Lee, 2019, p. 129) and undergoing what is presented as a hygiene inspection while trying “not to cry” (Lee, 2019, p. 126). This shame is part and parcel of the violence of the system – it is one of its tools, conditioning the women to feel shame in their own bodies instead of feeling hurt by others. This sense of shame does not leave Wang Di after the war, as when she goes to the doctor years later, she feels “the shame that crept all over her body,” a feeling that the narrator calls “almost as bad as being back there, in that little room” (Lee, 2019, p. 199). As Bartky (1990) argues, shame once internalized does not require the original coercive apparatus for the same bodily shame to be reactivated, instead, the shame was never purely “situational” but had become a part of Wang Di’s relation to her own body, a medical gaze decade away from the comfort house was enough to reproduce it.

In her marriage, shame is the guiding principle of what is said and what is not said between Wang Di and her husband Soon Wei. After intimacy, the narration states it was “as if nothing had happened” and that Wang Di was awake, “the heat of her shame keeping her awake, making her breath come quick and shallow” (Lee, 2019, p. 203). The marriage is held together by a tacit agreement never to ask, and Soon Wei’s final words, “there’s nothing to be ashamed about. You did nothing—” (Lee, 2019, p. 18), only come out at the end of his life, and we learn he has known her secret and suffered the shame of it for decades with her, in silence. The scene is important because it places shame not only in Wang Di’s emotional sphere, but also as a relational structure that gives structure to the entire marriage, including a sympathetic loving husband who is a co-architect of the silence required by shame.

Shame is used most forcefully at the community level, through language. Upon her return, Wang Di finds that her neighbors do not call her by her name, but by the derogatory “wei an fu, comfort woman” (Lee, 2019, p. 251) and elsewhere, it is described as striking her “like a slap to the face, like shutting her in a cupboard” (Lee, 2019, p. 234). The simile is precise: the insult does not merely describe what happened to her, it re-enacts the original confinement and violation, imprisoning her a second time within a linguistic space from which she cannot escape. The silence that pervaded her movements after the war was, as the novel itself notes, “the shame foisted on her by herself, her family, and everyone around her, had dictated the silence that shadowed her every move after the war” (Lee, 2019, p. 280). This single sentence functions as a thesis statement for the novel’s feminist argument: because shame is not a thing Wang Di feels alone, but is rather something imposed on her by a number of social agents, which all overlap, and it is this externally produced shame, rather than the original violence alone, that determines the shape of her postwar life.

The novel is also sensitive to the ways in which women can inflict patriarchal shame on other women, which makes it impossible to blame this violence solely on the male perpetrators. As the manager of the comfort house for the military, Mrs. Sato polices the compliance of the women and changes her tone of voice to “apologetic, coquettish, confused” (Lee, 2019, p. 209) as she does so. Later, it is Wang Di’s own mother’s warning on the night before her wedding that “Don’t tell anyone what happened. No one. Especially not your husband” (Lee, 2019, p. 27), to pass on to Wang Di the imperative for silence and shame that will go on to govern her marriage, suggesting that patriarchy is reproduced intergenerationally by women as well as imposed upon them from outside. This detail is important to the feminist perspective of the article on the novel’s gender politics because it does not allow it to be read as simply a binary of male perpetrators and female victims, rather, in Lee’s account, shame is a diffuse structural force, one that women themselves are often recruited to implement over other women, that, as Bartky (1990) noted, is most effective when it operates without any particular identifiable enforcer.

6. Silence: Wound, Strategy, and Resistance

If shame is the way in which Wang Di’s speech is disciplined, then silence is the most obvious symptom — but a novel that is wary of depicting silence as a unified state, shows it instead as a range of states of silence:

enforced silence, protective silence, collective silence, and, sometimes, a precarious silence as a form of agency.

When at its worst, the silence in the comfort house is a situation where women lack a language in which to be heard. The narrator describes lying awake at night listening to “the silence of girls like me, in rooms next to mine and rooms next to that, afraid and waiting” (Lee, 2019, p. 112). This silence is not the quiet of rest, but the quiet of fear, anticipation and terror; not a silence of nothing to say, but a silence of terror. Later, describing the psychological toll of repeated assault, the narrator notes she and the other women became “silent in the shells that they were already beginning to form around themselves. No one spoke. No one talked” (Lee, 2019, p. 147) a dissociation that is like Herman’s (1992) “constriction” whereby the trauma survivor withdraws affectively to endure repeated violation.

But the novel also claims that the absence of words can be an expression of solidarity and even resistance among the imprisoned women. When Jeomsun does not respond and simply remains silent in reply to a dangerous question, the narrator understands that this is her way of protecting herself: in another place, the three women, “a silent understanding about how we should take care of each other” (Lee, 2019, p. 176), do not need to speak about it, else it could become dangerous. The interrogation-room dynamic is echoed after the war when Jeomsun’s search party interrogates Wang Di, who is later made to say painful things, and the narrator says, “Sometimes all you had to do to get someone to talk was to be silent” (Lee, 2019, p. 309) - which is closer to Felman and Laub’s (1992) conception that testimony involves a listener who makes space for the survivor’s speech, rather than a listener who demands disclosure.

On a level of postwar domestic life, silence is the medium of Wang Di’s marriage and by extension, her survival in a society that has already dictated what to call her. The narration tracks the couple’s “easy silence” (Lee, 2019, p. 25) over the radio news, a private quiet that, on the surface, seems like the usual sort of marital bonding, but which the reader knows is troubled by the unspoken histories that each member of the couple is trying to shield the other from. Wang Di’s inner thoughts result from decades of muffling: “Trying not to see them when she closed her eyes at night” and “decades of muffling their voices in her head” (Lee, 2019, p. 24) are the voices of Huay and Jeomsun, the women she survived with and has never been allowed, by circumstance and by shame, to publicly mourn.

The novel also draws a careful distinction between silence as absence of speech and silence as an active, effortful performance. Wang Di’s years of marriage involve not only withholding but actively creating a “normal domestic life” over the top of what is withheld; the narration reveals that even simple sounds of the home are enlisted to this service, as Wang Di “filled the kitchen with sounds: the kettle’s sharp cry, the round splash” precisely “to meet the silence that greeted her each day” (Lee, 2019, p. 237). As Bartky (1990) has pointed out, femininity in this register is something that has to be managed and covered up, and silence is not a passive void. The requirement that Wang Di’s silence not only be there but that it be undetectable — that no one can tell if she’s experiencing anything other than a normal, happy housewife’s life — is another, second-order trauma imposed on the first.

Crucially, the novel does not resolve this dynamic through a single climactic act of speech. The telling is disjointed even in her last “confession” to Kevin, though the cassette recorder, she “fell silent” and “reached out to stop the recording” because “she had never told this part to anyone” (Lee, 2019, p. 308). The narrative refuses to give her a final statement, leaving instead some residue of what happened to her never to be said—even at her death. This refusal to full disclosure is, too, a feminist-trauma statement: a refusal of the redemptive formula that is typical of trauma narrative, that the full articulation will ensure healing, and that therefore the piece is honoring Spivak’s (1988) warning that the subaltern’s speech may still be partly unrecoverable even when the sympathetic listener is finally present.

7. The Body as Archive of Trauma

The novel repeatedly moves memory into the body: physical sensation, scarring, and bodily transformation

serve as an alternative register in which trauma is recorded, and, in the end, a certain amount of reading. This carnal focus echoes feminist theories of embodiment which reject the Cartesian dichotomy of mind and body, and instead claim trauma is experienced in the flesh (Herman, 1992; Caruth, 1996).

This physical registration of historical violation is further supported by Khan, Rahim, and Jan (2025), who emphasize that trauma is fundamentally a “body-based experience” recorded “in mutilated syntax, sensory metaphor, and disrupted chronology” when conventional words fail. By centering the body as an active “archive of trauma,” the text challenges early literary trauma paradigms that prioritized purely cognitive or language-based processing, affirming instead that somatic memory is a legitimate medium of truth-telling and historical preservation.

In the present-day story line, Wang Di’s hand touches “the faint scar on her neck” and then to “the line on her lower stomach” (Lee, 2019, p. 15) early in the novel, even before the plot offers an explanation for them, and this is a kind of repetition that precedes the narrative comprehension of what caused them, as Caruth (1996) asserts that trauma is first known through repetition. Inside the comfort house, the young Wang Di watches how her body changes, almost as if she were watching a strange life form: “my pelvic bone jutting like the edge of a rock... My body kept time and I watched it as if observing a strange life form. This isn’t me, I thought” (Lee, 2019, p. 185). The dissociation is a literalization of a coping mechanism, documented in trauma literature (Herman, 1992), that the self would enact when it is being violated by the body.

Feminist philosopher Susan J. Brison (2002) has written about the devastating effect that sexual violence has on the survivor’s sense of self, this dissociation and alienation of her body very much illuminated. Brison notes that trauma “shatters” the connection between the mind and the body, leading the survivor to experience their own physical form as an “object” controlled by others, which disrupts “the feeling of being a bodily self” (p. 42). Wang Di’s internal retreat is in essence exactly that: the somatic self is shattered.

The descriptions of institutionalized sexual slavery revisit the theme of the body that “was not her own” again, with each day “divided up into twenty to thirty-minute segments, where my body was not my own, but belonged to strangers, who seemed not to think I was human” (Lee, 2019, p. 166). This formulation—the body’s alienation from its owner, the body’s becoming an object of use—prefigures the postwar images of circles rubbed over her stomach, around the raised horizontal scar, “thinking about what it once held, what it would never hold again” (Lee, 2019, p. 200), a scar left by the forced termination of a pregnancy, which is one of the deepest, least speakable losses of the novel. The scar does exactly what trauma theory would expect a bodily symptom to do, namely, to remain in the flesh beyond the end of the trauma, resisting the possibility of full translation into language, while insisting on its own recognition.

The body-as-archive theme is most overtly explored in the novel’s most explicit metaphor for the disintegration of identity under trauma. Reflecting on the woman she has become by the war’s end, Wang Di thinks of how the person she once was — “their unplanned-for daughter, their Wang Di” — has “disappeared entirely,” comparing herself to “the way a body burns and leaves nothing recognizable in its wake. Just a few shards of bone, ash” (Lee, 2019, p. 244). The novel’s central metaphor of disappearance is literally tied to the body by the image of cremation, implying that what is erased by sexual violence in the war is not only Wang Di’s social status or the ability to speak, but the body that formerly presented herself as a social subject—even her previous social subjectivity. As read against the earlier dissociative scenes, this passage highlights that in Lee’s novel the body is never a passive site of inscription that is acted upon by trauma from outside: rather, it is the terrain where traumatic feminist drama is played out in the struggle for shame, silence, and survival.

The novel extends this embodied register into the register of voice, making the sound of the human voice an additional, intermediate archive between the full register of linguistic disclosure and pure bodily symptoms. In the opening pages of the novel, Wang Di wakes, “to the ghost of a voice... not unlike her aunt’s, calling out her name” (Lee, 2019, p. 14), and later, the internalized, unwelcome voices of Huay and Jeomsun

emerge ‘not just as memory’ but ‘as something closer to auditory haunting’ (Lee, 2019, p. 24). In these passages voice is like the traumatic symptom as Caruth (1996) describes it: it returns, beyond the survivor’s will, bearing a truth that exceeds what has been, and maybe cannot yet be, deliberately narrated. This is important for the argument of the article as it is a way of showing that even before Wang Di starts speaking in a conscious manner, her body and her auditory memory are already “speaking,” but in an involuntary register, the history which her conscious self continues to withhold; she is finally, and voluntarily, beginning to close this distinction between symptom and testimony at the end of the novel when she starts talking to Kevin’s recorder.

8. Transgenerational Trauma and the Ethics of Testimony

The second narrative strand of the novel, through Kevin, expands on the feminists-trauma argument into the register of transmission: how is trauma passed down when the (silenced) generation that experienced it is gone, and what responsibility does the listener have to the fragments of trauma that enter him or her secondhand?

Trauma need not be spoken of to be transmitted: Kevin’s own domestic situation mirrors, on a smaller and different scale, the novel’s larger point: his father’s habit of “disappearing” into what the family call “his Dark Place” (Lee, 2019, p. 135), an ability Kevin acquires early in the novel: “that it was possible to disappear and still be there, to disappear even further, to be emptier than empty” (Lee, 2019, p. 116) — this is his ability to recognize the shape of concealed suffering when he finds it in his grandmother. From the start, Kevin is drawn to the need to capture the things that have not been said yet — to another person — and he does so by confiding in his “Inside Voice”: a device he takes to be a cassette recorder in which he catalogues “things I don’t have to see anymore if I go blind” (Lee, 2019, p. 58).

The confession of Wang Di is only offered when Kevin, almost in an accidental way, supplies the prerequisites that Felman and Laub (1992) list as essential for testimony: patience, attention and a refusal to interrupt and extract more than is given. The novel’s final chapters, which are organized around the recorded interview format, highlight how systems for formal, official historical record can always come too late (or not at all) for those who need to be heard, such as Soon Wei, who is interviewed by an official interviewer to whom he responds that he did not provide his testimony to the tribunal, as he did not know that they were collecting testimonies (Lee, 2019, p. 302). Only a child with a toy recorder, not a tribunal, can finally be allowed to hear Wang Di’s story, a statement that condemns official historiography’s inability to find a place for women like her.

Such listening is an unconventional kind of listening, and it is what E. Ann Kaplan (2005) calls the “ethics of empathetic witnessing”. Kaplan sets up a contrast between a “vicarious trauma”, which is a “consumerist” use of another’s trauma, and a “witnessing” which must involve “an ethical relation to the trauma of another... a way of listening that does not seek to master, define, or co-opt” (p. 122). Kevin is not a camera or an agenda, and his child’s cassette machine is a safe and non-threatening dialogic environment where the often-fractured and guarded memories of Wang Di can open up at their own speed.

The novel also intimates at the boundaries of second witnessing. In passing, Kevin’s mother says that “the comfort women in South Korea have been demonstrating” (Lee, 2019, p. 279), and “they’re dying, the witnesses, one by one” (Lee, 2019, p. 279), thus placing Wang Di’s personal experience in a pressing, current historical moment where testimony is at all possible. In this way the novel implies that, although Kevin only hears part of it and late, his listening is important because the other option is that the story does not exist at all. In this context, Lee’s novel suggests a feminist ethics of testimony that is not perfectionist or professionalist, but only one that is willing — and yet still one that laments, in this case through the incomplete telling of Wang Di, the impossibility of a full recovery even by the willing listener.

It is worth noting, too, that Kevin’s own position as a male listener complicates any simple account of the novel’s feminist politics of testimony. Kevin is not the representative of the tribunal or the historian or the

nation: he is a kid, almost helpless amid his family, curious in his own ways, driven by love and confusion, but by no institutional mandate to document women's suffering. His listening is therefore more on the level of the ordinary, non-professional listener, who is not as much an expert in listening to testimony as is available and caring, as Felman and Laub (1992) put it. That this act of listening, Wang Di's most historically important moment in the novel, comes from an untrained, young, and initially unaware listener reinforces the article's broader argument that the formal historical and legal apparatuses had already failed Wang Di long before Kevin turns on his recorder, and that whatever redress the novel is able to imagine must be found in the intimate and domestic rather than in the institutional.

9. Toward a Feminist Historiography of Silence

The above analyses indicate that *How We Disappeared* is more than a fictionalized recovery of "comfort women" history, but a way of reading silence as history itself. Because of the documents, testimony, archival record approach of traditional historiography, it is very difficult to find the traces of women such as Wang Di, whose lives depend on avoiding such disclosure. Lee's novel does not attempt to fill this evidentiary gap by positing a more extensive testimony than the historical record can reasonably or even conceivably be credited with, but by narrative itself brings to its attention the incompleteness of testimony. The reader is made privy to Wang Di's shame, her dissociation, her scars, her late confession, but it is disjointed; the novel purposefully withholds a full account of "that little room" (Lee, 2019, p. 199), and it is not a failure in narration, but rather an ethical necessity.

There is an obvious feminist message within this. Lee does not go for the exploitative or the redemptive, which have often been the tropes of fictionalized sexual violence against women in wartime, and she's not going to make a show of Wang Di's suffering either. Instead, the novel indicates, shame, silence and embodied memory do not exist outside the "real" story; rather they are the story: they are how patriarchy's violence lives on with the survivors long after the original violence, and how any feminist history of patriarchy's violence should be written.

More importantly, this act of survival needs to be safeguarded from the co-optation of trauma discourse as "cultural capital", as Lucy Britt and Wilson H. Hammett (2024) put it. However, when trauma narratives are destigmatized and enter the institutional sphere, they often are used by the privileged or powerful to set themselves apart, avoid responsibility, and "re-entrench, rather than dismantle, existing structural injustices" (p. 923). *How We Disappeared* is an analogous threat: Wang Di's personal somatic suffering is systematically undermined by the state-centric, sanitized histories that try to reduce her suffering to nationalistic, post-colonial statistics. Lee keeps Wang Di's story in a very fragmented and elusive medium of disclosure (Kevin's cassette tape) so it cannot be turned into bureaucratic or national "capital". The text presents trauma as a continuous site of survival, defying any formal historical, legal or political systems that seek to package it in structures of use or moral innocence.

The novel's feminist position is also and inevitably, a claim about class, illiteracy and colonial history; and it is worth lingering here on how these claims intersect, rather than merely standing as parallel dynamics. Wang Di faces double marginalization in the novel's world: firstly, as a woman who is to be abducted because her family is poor and rural, and secondly, as an illiterate woman who cannot even record her own experiences in a citable record of any kind, even after the war. When the hospital staff bring her papers to sign after her husband's death, she must press her thumb into an ink pad "as if she hadn't done it before" (Lee, 2019, p. 20), a subtle but significant gesture that reveals the extent to which she has been excluded from official history – census records, marriage certificates, tribunal testimonies – that are typically fashioned through the written apparatus. Her eventual testimony was only because there is an object without institutional authority, a domestic cassette recorder. This detail helps to conclude that the novel's feminism is broadly intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989), meaning that Wang Di's silencing is not merely gendered, but is an effect of multiple, intersecting forces of gender, poverty and illiteracy working within a colonial and

wartime social system, which had little interest in listening to the testimony of rural women even before shame entered the equation.

Read in this way, the novel can also be interpreted as an implicit critique on the parameters of expanded commemoration by the state. The newspaper clipping that mentions thousands of disappearances (Lee, 2019, p. 171) suggests that there was an official acknowledgment of losses during the Occupation, but it is a collective and anonymous number, a statistic. Only in the light of this private, almost accidental, listening, Wang Di's story can become readable as a story of its own, individual story. The novel thus implies a feminist approach to the historiography of sexual violence in war has to go beyond formal, state-run archives, and to account for, and to give space to, the informal, domestic and belated modes of testimony by which women like Wang Di can speak at all.

10. Conclusion

How We Disappeared makes visible, and in a surprising way, the feminist-trauma dynamics of shame, silence and embodiment that shape the afterlife of wartime sexual violence. As the article has suggested, the shame that Wang Di feels is not a natural or private reaction to what has been done to her, but rather a disciplinary effect actively produced by the comfort house, her marriage, and her community, and directed at the violated, in order to give Wang Di no reason to blame herself for her violation. Her silence, correspondingly, is neither simple repression nor simple resistance but a shifting, situational strategy, sometimes protective, sometimes corrosive, that the novel refuses to resolve into either full disclosure or permanent muteness. But her body is where all the shame she cannot say is stored; the scars, the dissociation, the constant metaphor of disappearance, which gives the novel its title, emerge from her body. Finally, in Kevin's amateur, accidental listening, the novel suggests a light but no less genuine other way to listen than the official historical apparatus that Wang Di was denied in her lifetime; a listening that does not want to recover everything that shame and silence have, partly, irretrievably withheld. The most significant feminist aspect of *How We Disappeared* is that it refuses to let us forget the historical price being paid for violence against women.

The novel does not stop there. Lee's point about the need for notional, incomplete, non-authoritative listening has an argument that still holds today, when the survivors of Japan's military "comfort women" system, like Lee, are "dying, one by one" (Lee, 2019, p. 279), and when, even more broadly, survivor testimony is still being heard unevenly in legal, journalistic, and literary contexts. *How We Disappeared* suggests that the moral necessity of listening does not require a perfect listener, or a complete archive, and that literature itself, patient, attuned to silence, aware of its own incompleteness, can be one of the few places where women such as Wang Di can disappear a little less. Future scholarship might explore Lee's novel in relation to other testimony and fiction about the "comfort women" from Korea, the Philippines, and China to consider the various national context of the novel that shape the experience of shame, silence, and embodied memory in a common, albeit unevenly recognized history.

References

- Bartky, S. L. (1990). *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. Routledge.
- Biswas, A. (2023). "I'll tell that human tale": Documenting the wartime sexual violence in Jing-Jing Lee's *How We Disappeared* (2019). *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 15(3), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v15n3.01>
- Brison, S. J. (2002). *Aftermath: Violence and the remaking of a self*. Princeton University Press.
- Britt, L., & Hammett, W. H. (2024). Trauma as cultural capital: A critical feminist theory of trauma discourse. *Hypatia*, 39(4), 916–933. <https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.22>
- Brown, L. S. (1995). Not outside the range: One feminist perspective on psychic trauma. In C. Caruth (Ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in memory* (pp. 100–112). Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- Felman, S., & Laub, D. (1992). *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history*. Routledge.
- Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books.
- Kaplan, E. A. (2005). *Trauma culture: The politics of terror and loss in media and literature*. Rutgers University Press.
- Khan, A. A., Rahim, M., & Jan, A. (2025). The body speaks: Embodiment and trauma in contemporary women's literature. *Journal of Asian Development Studies*, 14(2), 47–61. <https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2025.14.2.4>
- Lamb, S. (1996). *The trouble with blame: Victims, perpetrators, and responsibility*. Harvard University Press.
- Lee, J.-J. (2019). *How we disappeared*. William Morrow.
- Lim, Y., & Lye, K. Y. (Eds.). (2024). *Reading Violence and Trauma in Asia and the World*. Routledge.
- Sandhya Devi, N.K. (2025). Unweaving the accustomed silence: a study of comfort women using *How We Disappeared* by Jing Jing Lee (2020). *Journal of Gender-Based Violence* (published online ahead of print 2025). Retrieved Jul 14, 2026, from <https://doi.org/10.1332/23986808Y2025D000000080>
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the inte*