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Article

The Burden of Memory: Trauma, and Identity in Post-colonial Narratives

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Abstract: This study interrogates postcolonial motifs in Lisa See's novel *The Island of Sea Women*, arguing that the text operates as an act of decolonial assertion on behalf of subjugated populations. It demonstrates how the narrative becomes a means through which individuals actively contest the legacies of imperial violence, negotiating and repurposing inherited cultural structures in the aftermath of colonial rupture. The novel hence moves beyond a simple recounting of colonial oppression, directing sustained attention toward the measures—both personal and communal—by which identity is reconstructed in the crucible of imperial war. In the context of the Pacific theatre of the Second World War, it reveals how postcolonial discourses rearticulate collective memory in order to address enduring trauma and assert the claims of historical justice, whilst simultaneously nurturing cultural self-consciousness. Jeju Island functions in the text as a palimpsest of memory, a referential surface affixed to the withholding of the Korean landmass, and, concomitantly, as a bastion of cultural archiving against the perils of national assimilation. The surrounding sea is elaborated, in the novel's semiotic lexicon, as a repository of profound sorrow, persistent recollection, and slow, deliberate recuperation. The study traces the operation of generational trauma, observing how domestic, imperial, and global catastrophes cohere to forfeit an entire island's historical consciousness. Central to the narrative is Young-sook, whose battered memory accumulates the sediment of multiple colonial episodes. Her personal journey discursively charts the embeddings of Japanese servitude, American military arrival, and, finally, the duplicity of the heroine's childhood companion, Mi-ja. Each datum of the personal chronicles is discursively framed as a microcosm of societal registers of loss—silenced, strategized, and diffused across the decades—thus sedimenting the novel as an act of collective re-membering. The inquiry investigates the mechanisms through which colonial rule fractures indigenous social formations, foregrounding the dynamics

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of systemic marginalization, the erosion of collective identities, and the enforced uprooting of local populations. The specific case of the Republic of Korea—persistently negotiating the tension between inherited, pre-colonial cultural vectors, traumatic legacies of imperial rule, and the imposition of ongoing, transnational cultural forces—serves as the central axis of the examination. The narrative articulates the multifaceted repercussions of colonization, including the reordering of political authority, the persistent psychogenic aftereffects of collective trauma, and the pronounced reconfiguration of cultural praxis. Attention is directed to the trans-generational continuity of remembered trauma—an intersubjective store of memorial sedimentation whose iterative reach re-codifies subsequent subjectivities. The analysis thereby traces the sedimentation of colonially legitimized violence as it rescripts both everyday experience and normative social formations.

Keywords: colonized; marginalized; trauma; displacement; socio-psychology; alienation

Introduction

World War II had a lasting and significant impact on the collective memory and personal identities of those affected, whether through direct involvement or indirect experience. The trauma from the conflict, including physical injuries and psychological scars, has been passed down through generations, shaping personal stories and influencing cultural and national identities. Additionally, the war's legacy continues to influence collective memory, affecting how nations remember and memorialize historical events, often shaping discussions on national identity, responsibility, and resolution. The postcolonial framework in the novel explains the intrinsic connection between trauma and historical oppression. The inhabitants of Jeju Island endure not only internal conflict but also the enduring consequences of Japanese colonization, the U.S. military occupation, and Cold War geopolitics.

The character of Mi-ja most emotionally embodies this postcolonial tension. As the daughter of a Japanese collaborator, she carries the burden of inherited guilt, placing her as an outsider within the Jeju community. This marginalization presages her complex and combative relationship with Young-sook. Mi-ja's narration represents how the enduring legacies of colonization continue to influence individual destinies well beyond the attainment of independence. Her psychological state during the massacre was influenced by her husband's political connection and threats; her emotional involvement in Young-sook's suffering was intensified by her symbolic role as a sign of betrayal. Through Mi-ja, the novel reveals how postcolonial identities are encumbered not only by personal memories but also by the transgenerational trauma shaped by colonial histories, which serves to fracture communities in South Korea.

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In the novel *The Island of Sea Women* by author Lisa See explores the intertwined themes of memory and postcolonialism, making a narrative that is both emotionally reoccurring and historically grounded in the reader's heart. The novel reflects the socio-political traumas and personal wounds experienced in twentieth-century Korea, with a particular focus on the women of Jeju Island. The story centres on two main characters, Young-sook and Mi-ja, whose lives unfold against a backdrop of colonial domination, war, betrayal, and eventual reconciliation with the next generations. Here, in the context of the text, memory functions as both an individual source and a collective witness, serving as a vital instrument for bearing witness to the experiences of women whose voices have historically been marginalized or silenced. On a personal level, the protagonist's memories are often uneven and selective to establish the emotional core of the narrative.

Young-sook's recollections are shadowed by the betrayal of her closet friend, Mi-ja, and the traumatic events of the April 3rd Massacre, a brutal political suppression that took place in Jeju in 1948, haunt her throughout her life. As a survivor, Young-sook bears the burden of memory not only as an emotional weight but also as a psychological defence. She suppresses certain painful truths while protecting other family members, illustrating how trauma can distort and reshape recollection. This individual's experience of memory parallels the broader phenomenon of collective amnesia frequently observed in postcolonial contexts, where dominant political discourses often repress or manipulate historical narratives.

The Jeju People's Struggle

Throughout the period of war, many women endured repeated sexual violence, physical abuse, disease, and systematic dehumanization. In the post-war period, numerous survivors confronted social stigma and isolation, resulting in prolonged silence until their experiences were publicly acknowledged in the 1990s. Specifically, on Jeju Island, some women were forcibly conscripted as 'confront women' while others sought refuge in secluded caves and forests to evade abduction. These women faced dual layers of oppression, colonial subjugation, and patriarchal restrictions that frequently deprived them of legal rights, property ownership, and independence. Survivors of sexual exploitation and forced labour often experienced social exclusion, which contributed to enduring psychological trauma. The cultural trauma engendered by colonization had lasting effects on family structures, gender roles, and individual self-perception well beyond the period of liberation.

The history of Jeju, especially the atrocities committed during the Korean War and the invasion by the Japanese, has been largely marginalized in the mainstream of historiography. Kidnapping a male child illegally for the army cause made the family devastated. To secure their children from the Japanese army, local people were in panic and conscious all day and night. Due to this, young children lose their education and freedom to develop their knowledge. The hostility was stated as, "We stayed alert for Japanese soldiers. Korea had now been a Japanese colony for twenty-eight years. We hated the Japanese, and they hated us. They were cruel." (*TISW* 13)

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The postcolonial dimension of the novel is obvious in its exploration of imperial domination and its aftermath, particularly the effects of Japanese colonization and the ideological divisions that ripped Korea apart. Mi-ja, as the daughter of a Japanese collaborator, embodies the complex and often ambiguous identity associated with colonized subjects. Her lineage as the daughter of a Japanese collaborator situates her in a profoundly stigmatized social position during and after the period of Japanese colonial rule. This custom rendered her status within the community ambiguous, as she is neither fully trusted nor wholly accepted by society. Culturally, her presence serves as a sign of conflict and suffering.

Though she was born in Korea, her family ties to Japanese authority cast a shadow on her social standing and influenced her relationship with the protagonist and the broader heanyeo community. Her character captures the complexities of postcolonial identity, where individuals must grapple with inherited guilt, vulnerability, and social exclusion. The legacy of occupation persists not only in Mi-ja's personal life but also in the political violence that follows Korean independence. The author narrates a tense moment when the Japanese arrive at Young-sook's field during work. The narrator's mother quickly notices the danger and responds by dropping her tool, kneeling, and bowing her head. Additionally, the narrator and Mi-ja also stop when they notice soldiers approaching. The narrator feels terrified, sensing the threat and hearing the soldiers' boots. A soldier flicks a stick, accusing her of being one of the troublemakers during the march. The protagonist remembers this harrowing incident as a future memory: "I was only ten, but I'd already been cautioned about what soldiers could do to women and girls." (*TISW* 53)

The experience of Korean women during the period of Japanese colonization (1910-1945) represents a significant historical episode characterized by profound adversity, resilience, and resistance. Women across Korea, including those residing on Jeju Island, were subjected to intersecting forms of oppression. The concrete gender discrimination is rooted in Confucian societal norms, the political domination imposed by Japanese colonial governance, and the economic and social demands associated with wartime mobilization. Their struggle extended beyond mere survival, encompassing efforts to preserve cultural identity and personal dignity.

Allied Countries Colonialism

The U.S military governance and the ideological battle between North and South Korea create a state of persistent neo-colonialism, where foreign powers continue to dictate domestic policies and suppress dissent. This is illustrated through the brutal suppression of local uprisings in Jeju, leading to the deaths of thousands of civilians. According to data collected by *History.com*, Korea was under Japanese colonial rule in the early twentieth century. During World War II, the Allied powers, including the U.S., the Soviet Union, China, and Great Britain, reached a somewhat ambiguous agreement that Korea should attain independence following the war's conclusion. As the war was declared, U.S. officials increasingly urged the Soviet Union to enter the war against Japan.

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It was agreed that the subsequent occupations would be temporary, with Korea ultimately determining its own political future. However, no specific timeline was established for the termination of the U.S. and Soviet military presence, and the commotion rose. In 1945, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan, and the following day, Soviet forces invaded northern Korea. Shortly, Japan surrendered, and under the prior arrangement, U.S. forces entered southern Korea in 1945. In the subsequent year, the social, political, and cultural situation in Korea declined progressively. A civil conflict erupted in the southern part of Korea between communist and nationalist factions, resulting in significant casualties. The Soviet Union consistently refused to entertain a proposal for the reunification of the Korean peninsula.

Resulted in the rise of a communist government in North Korea; Soviet forces withdrew in 1948, and U.S. troops left South Korea in 1949. In 1950, North Korea launched a large-scale military invasion of South Korea to reunify the peninsula forcibly. The U.S. quickly intervened to support South Korea, starting a prolonged and destructive three-year conflict known as the Korean War. To this day, the country remains divided, and North Korea continues to be one of the few remaining communist governments worldwide. The colonization by allied countries affected the economic structure, and the common people were severely impacted by taxes. When people already lacked adequate provisions and rations, the imposition of taxes worsened their daily lives. This situation was described in the novel as, "The Japanese don't pay us a fair price. They take too high a percentage for themselves. Forty percent! How are we supposed to live with that? And some of their officials–collaborators–sneak our harvest of agar-agar through Jeju City's port for their own gain". (TISW 47)

A research thesis titled *From Colonialism to Neo-colonialism: The Yongsan Exchange*, by Kerstin Norris, asserts that the existing scholarship acknowledges the unparalleled influence exerted by the United States on Military affairs in South Korea and its significant impact on the South Korean population. A significant body of research has focused on the power dynamics present in camp towns and interpersonal interactions with U.S. military personnel, where the United States is frequently perceived as either a culturally dominant entity or an unwelcome presence. Furthermore, agreements such as the Facilities and Areas Agreement (FAA) and the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), along with burden-sharing arrangements, have been criticized for their perceived inequities and infringements on South Korean sovereignty. Nonetheless, a notable gap remains in the literature concerning the reconceptualization of neo-colonialism to include dimensions beyond the conventional framework of material extraction.

Memory and Trauma

Lisa See's *The Island of Sea Women* presents an emotional exploration of friendship, survival, and historical violence, emphasizing the complex ways in which memory and trauma impose enduring burdens on individuals, communities, and successive generations. Backdrop of Jeju Island, the narrative centers on the lives of two women, Young-shook and Mi-ja, who are haenyeo, female divers whose dangerous labor sustains their community. Beneath the surface of this matriarchal society, memory

lies the deep-seated fear of colonial occupation. Through its non-linear chronology and highly developed characters, the novel illustrates that memory transcends mere recollection. It constitutes a profound weight accepted by survivors that can fracture interpersonal relationships, shape individual and collective identities, and resist erasure amid political suppression. Trauma within the narrative is portrayed not as an isolated incident but as a persistent force that continuously influences lives, decision-making, and the cultural consciousness of Jeju Island. The context was explained in the book as she remembered her mother when a character, Sun-sil, met with an accident at sea. "Sun-sil should have stepped aside. She didn't, and months later, she died in the sea. Those old enough to remember my mother nodded gravely at the memory". (*TISW* 302)

The burden of memory is further revealed through the motif of survivor's guilt, a recurrent theme in post-traumatic literature. Young-shook, as a survivor of events that claimed many others, grapples with the existential question of why she was spared while loved ones expire. Her struggle to reconcile this question intensifies her emotional alienation. Survivor's guilt imposes upon her both humiliation and unresolved mourning, demonstrating how trauma endures not only in memory but also in self-identity. Moreover, her estrangement from Mi-ja complicates this dynamic, the protagonist directs much of her anger toward her, accusing her of betrayal during the massacre. However, this anger simultaneously conceals the painful reality that neither woman exercised full agency over the atrocities inflicted upon them. The unresolved tensions within their friendship exemplify how trauma disrupts social bonds, burdening survivors with both external losses and internal psychological conflicts.

Through this historical lens, the novel critiques how postcolonial societies often repeat patterns of oppression, loss, and displacement, creating a cycle of trauma across generations. The island becomes both a literal and metaphorical space of isolation, cut off from the nation's collective memory and forced to bear its own grief in silence. Furthermore, memory in the postcolonial context challenges traditional historical narratives by highlighting the experiences of women, especially the heanyeo, whose roles are often marginalized in male-centric historiography. These ordinary women appear not as passive victims but as active agents shaping their country's history through dangerous labor, communal alliance, and resistance. Their traditional life was stated as, "Life on land had changed, but the sea remained the same." (*TISW* 322)

Nonetheless, their trauma is transmitted across generations, conveyed through silences, secrets, and ritual practices. Young-sook's initial reluctance to discuss the past with her granddaughters embodies the tension between forgetting and remembering, a fundamental dynamic in postcolonial memory studies. It is only through her granddaughter's persistence and the revelation of Mi-ja's narrative that the protagonist confronts her suppressed memories. This narrative progression exemplifies the broader commotion to engage with historical trauma as a condition for healing and reconciliation. Similar to the island itself, which bears the scars of foreign invasions and internal conflict, its inhabitants, particularly the women, have endured profound physical and emotional suffering.

The author develops memory as a form of resistance by recounting the lives of the haenyeo and the socio-political context that has shaped their experiences. Through this documentation, she contests prevailing nationalistic and patriarchal descriptions that frequently marginalize or erase such histories. The memory approach aligns with the broader objectives of postcolonial literature, which seeks to recover the suppressed voices and re-establish action among historically marginalized groups. The novel's dual narrative structure, alternating between past and present, underscores the persistence of trauma and the lasting influence of memory. It illustrates how unresolved grief and cultural silence impact not only individuals but also entire societies and future generations.

Young-shook's eventual decision on the truth, united with her choice to forgive and engage with the past, symbolizes an act of postcolonial healing. The writer's narratives exemplify the critical role of testimonial memory, serving as a witness not only for oneself but also for those who perished, those who were silenced, and those who remain unaware of these truths. For Jeju people, the sea is a store of memory that is preserved, characterized by its fluidity, vastness, and capacity for creation. Within this realm, the women encounter both anguish and comfort, as well as mortality and strength. Notably, even in older age, she revisits the sea, exemplifying the persistent interrelation among identity, memory, and the natural environment within the postcolonial context.

The book powerfully explores the memory and trauma that weigh upon individuals and communities, particularly in the context of Jeju Island's strong history. The book also portrays trauma not as a singular event but as an enduring psychological, emotional, and cultural burden that shapes identities across generations. Through Young-sook's life, readers can analyze how the devastating memories of war, colonialism, betrayal, and the April 3rd Massacre become deep-rooted psychological wounds for the victims. The protagonist's memories are fragmented, selective, and often repressed, reflecting how trauma disrupts the natural process of nostalgia. She carries the burden of survival guilt, which holds her lost children and husband, while being forced to live with haunting images of violence. Her silence towards her family and community illustrates the heaviness of trauma—the factor of inability to articulate pain without reopening wounds. Memory here becomes both a prison and a protective shield, simultaneously preserving the past and preventing healing.

On the collective level, the burden of trauma is tied to Jeji's history under Japanese occupation, U.S. military governance, and the Korean Civil War, which inflicted suffering on ordinary people. The women divers, or haenyeo, embody this burden as they not only provide for their families but also endure generational trauma, passing down silence and unspoken grief to their descendants. Mi-ja's own identity, shaped by her father's role as a Japanese collaborator, shows that inherited trauma and stigma can brand an individual as a perpetual outsider. The friendship between the two young girls symbolizes how personal relationships fracture historical trauma imposed upon personal lives, as stated when Young-shook converses about her loss to her

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neighbour Gu-ja, "There are days when I think my sister has suffered more than I have. She will never forgive herself. How can I not love her for that?" (*TISW* 351)

As a historical fiction, it also reflects how trauma burdens communities through cultural society and forced silence. The atrocities of foreign invaders through their brutal behaviour destroyed thousands of innocent villages and killed many, which are remembered locally but marginalized in national history. This enforced forgetting compounds the trauma, leaving survivors like Young-shook with the dual weight of personal grief and collective invisibility. Only through the younger generation's persistence, when her granddaughter Janet asks questions about the memory, does the nostalgia begin to resurface, suggesting that confronting trauma is essential for reconciliation. When she asked about Mi-ja to Young-shook years later, she felt like Janet had poked her with a thorn. It was stated, "We are wondering if you remember my grandmother? Janet speaks… But didn't you both live in this village?" (*TISW* 6)

The novel, *The Island of Sea Women*, demonstrates that the burden of memory and trauma is not only about suffering but about responsibility to remember, to affirm, and to honour those silenced by violence. Though the protagonist initially resists this burden, her eventual willingness to face the past highlights the novel's message: that only by acknowledging memory, however painful, can individuals and societies begin to heal. Despite the universal influence of memory and trauma, the novel is also associated with the potential for healing and reconciliation, in the climax section, where Young-shook confronts her past and re-evaluates her relationship with her friend, Mi-ja. The narrative suggests that the painful acknowledgement is an essential condition for liberation. The process of storytelling, as exemplified by See's own narrative construction, functions as a form of testimony that eases some of the burden by sharing it with the audience. By recording Jeju's hidden history, the novel engages in the work of postcolonial remembrance, honouring marginal voices and ensuring that trauma, while profound, is not suffered in silence.

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