

'Dharana' as the Gateway: Meditative Wit(H)nessing and the Transformation of Trauma in Han Kang's *the White Book*



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ABSTRACT: Han Kang's *The White Book* (2016) redefines trauma narratives through Eastern meditative traditions, particularly the yogic concepts of 'dharana' (concentration) and 'dhyana' (meditative absorption). The novel's structure, symbolism, and fragmented prose mirror these meditative stages, offering a literary model for processing grief and engaging with collective mourning. The narrator begins with an intense focus on her deceased sister's absence, using whiteness—represented by objects like swaddling bands, snow, and salt—as a focal point ('dharana'). This disciplined concentration anchors her mourning in a structured, ritualistic act of remembrance. As the narrative progresses, this focused contemplation expands beyond personal grief into an immersive meditation on mortality, impermanence, and renewal (dhyana). This transition reflects a shift from individual sorrow to a broader existential awareness, dissolving boundaries between self and collective memory. In parallel, Bracha L. Ettinger's (2006) concept of wit(h)nessing reframes witnessing trauma as an ethical, intersubjective process rather than a detached observation. The novel's sparse and fragmented prose, combined with deliberate white spaces, invites readers to engage actively in the mourning process, transforming reading into a participatory act of remembrance. By integrating Eastern meditative philosophy with poetic storytelling and ethical engagement, *The White Book* challenges conventional trauma narratives, positioning literature as a space for healing, reflection, and communal memory. This study argues that Kang's work reconfigures how trauma is represented in literature, and offers a transformative framework for understanding grief as a shared and meditative process.

KEYWORDS: Dharana, dhyana, trauma, meditation, enlightenment, transformation, consciousness of impermanence, communal rebirth, and wit(h)nessing.

INTRODUCTION

Eastern meditative traditions outline a structured journey toward spiritual and cognitive transcendence. Central to this process are two stages: 'dharana' (concentration) and 'dhyana' (meditative absorption). These concepts—rooted in classical texts like *The Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali and the *Dhammapada*—describe a movement from focused attention to an expansive, absorbed state that ultimately paves the way to 'samadhi', or enlightenment (Patanjali, 1990; Buddha, 1993).

In *The White Book*, Han Kang reimagines these meditative practices as a metaphor for transforming personal trauma into a communal, ethical act of mourning. The narrative uses the poetic symbolism of whiteness to bridge the gap between individual grief and broader historical or cultural loss. This transformation occurs through a process that mirrors 'dharana'—where the mind is sharply focused on a singular, painful object—and then evolves into dhyana, where that focused grief is reconstituted into an expansive meditation on death and renewal. Alongside this meditative progression, Bracha Ettinger's concept of wit(h)nessing redefines witnessing trauma as an intersubjective, ethical engagement rather than a detached act.

This article explores the theoretical and literary dimensions of 'dharana' and 'dhyana', demonstrating how *The White Book* not only reconfigures trauma narratives but also invites both narrator and reader into a shared, transformative process of mourning.

'DHARANA' AND DHYANA IN EASTERN MEDITATIVE THOUGHT

'Dharana' and dhyana are fundamental stages in Eastern meditative traditions, particularly within Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, guiding practitioners toward deeper states of awareness and transcendence. 'dharana', meaning "concentration" in Sanskrit, refers to the practice of fixing the mind on a single object, thought, or sensation, creating a focused and disciplined state

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of attention. This stage is considered essential for calming mental distractions and preparing the mind for deeper meditation. As concentration deepens, it transitions into dhyana, or meditative absorption, where the boundary between observer and observed dissolves, allowing for an unbroken flow of awareness. Unlike ‘dharana’, which requires effortful focus, dhyana emerges as a state of effortless presence, leading toward greater self-realization and, ultimately, enlightenment. Rooted in texts such as The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and Buddhist teachings, these stages are not only spiritual practices but also conceptual frameworks that have influenced literature, philosophy, and psychology. Their application extends beyond traditional meditation, offering insights into how individuals engage with memory, trauma, and transformation in both personal and collective contexts.

‘DHARANA’: CONCENTRATION AS THE FOUNDATION FOR TRANSFORMATION

‘Dharana’ (Sanskrit: धारणा) refers to the practice of holding or concentrating the mind on a single object, idea, or experience. In The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, ‘dharana’ is defined as the binding of the mind to one specific locus:

“Desa-bandhas cittasya ‘dharana’.” (Yoga Sutras 3.1)

8th Century Scholar Adi Shankaracharya defines ‘dharana’ as follows:

“Wherever the mind wanders, perceive the Brahman there; this state of absolute certainty of mind is called ‘dharana’.” (*Aparokshanubhuti*: 122, quoted in Barua 2014: p. 45)

This concentrated state—described by scholars such as Iyengar (1993, p. 178) and expounded upon by Swami Sivananda (1982, p. 147)—is a prerequisite for deeper meditative practices. It involves eliminating mental distractions to create a “reservoir” of focused awareness that can then be transformed into insight.

In *The White Book*, the narrator’s intense fixation on the death of her sister functions as a form of ‘dharana’. Her recurring thought, encapsulated in the line:

“If she had lived, I would not have been born.” (Han, 2016)

serves as a meditative anchor. Her methodical recording of every white object—swaddling bands, salt, snow—further reinforced this concentrated focus, which becomes a symbol of her grief. Through this disciplined concentration, the text mirrors the meditative practice of ‘dharana’, in which a singular painful experience is held tightly, setting the stage for further transformation.

DHYANA: EXPANDING THE FOCUS INTO MEDITATIVE ABSORPTION

After the mind has been fixed upon a specific object through ‘dharana’, it naturally moves into dhyana (ध्यान), or meditative absorption. In this stage, the distinction between the observer and the observed begins to blur as the mind enters an uninterrupted flow of consciousness:

“Tatra pratyaya ekatanata dhyanam” (Yoga Sutras 3.2)

According to Shankaracharya, ‘dhyana’ is blissful ‘paramanandadayi’. Barua 2014: p. 46)

As Iyengar (1993, p. 180) explains, dhyana is the seamless expansion of focused thought into a unified, immersive experience. In Buddhist meditation, this absorption is key to transcending suffering and realizing a broader, existential insight (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1991).

In Han Kang’s narrative, the transition from ‘dharana’ to dhyana is marked by a profound shift in the representation of grief. Initially, the narrator’s attention is fixated on her personal loss. Yet as the novel progresses, her concentrated mourning expands into a more universal meditation on whiteness. When she writes:

“A white cloth spreads over everything. An end, and a beginning.” (Han, 2016)

the individual sorrow dissolves into a broader contemplation of mortality and renewal. Here, whiteness ceases to be a mere symbol of death; it becomes a dynamic emblem of transformation, mirroring dhyana’s dissolution of rigid boundaries between self and object.

ETHICAL WIT(H)NESSING: PARTICIPATORY TRAUMA AND COLLECTIVE MOURNING

Reconfiguring the Role of the Witness

Traditional approaches to trauma often cast the witness as a detached observer. However, Bracha Ettinger’s theory of wit(h)nessing challenges this model by emphasizing an empathetic, intersubjective engagement with trauma (Ettinger, 2006, p. 71). In this framework, the act of witnessing is not passive; it involves an ethical, shared experience between the self and the other.

In *The White Book*, the fragmented prose and intentional white spaces are not simply aesthetic choices but serve as meditative gaps that invite the reader to participate in the act of mourning. The narrator’s decision to record:

“She resolved to write about white things. Swaddling bands, the moon, rice, waves, the white bird’s wings.” (Han, 2016)

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functions as a call for the reader to join in this meditative process. The text transforms the act of reading into an ethical exercise—an invitation to move beyond mere observation into a realm of shared emotional and cultural remembrance.

COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS IN *THE WHITE BOOK*

The concept of collective consciousness, first introduced by sociologist Émile Durkheim, refers to the shared beliefs, values, and experiences that bind a community together. In literature, collective consciousness often manifests as an interwoven fabric of historical memory, cultural identity, and communal mourning. Han Kang's *The White Book* explores this idea by transforming personal grief into a meditative reflection on broader human suffering. Through the narrator's contemplation of whiteness—symbolized by objects like snow, rice, and swaddling bands—the novel transcends individual loss and engages with a universal meditation on death, impermanence, and renewal.

At the heart of *The White Book* lies the narrator's deep engagement with the loss of her unnamed sister, who died shortly after birth. While this grief is personal, it does not remain isolated; instead, it expands into a meditation on historical and collective trauma. The narrator's reflection on whiteness serves as a bridge between her private sorrow and the broader experiences of loss within Korean history. In this way, the novel aligns with Buddhist and yogic meditative traditions, particularly the transition from 'dharana' (focused concentration) to dhyana (meditative absorption). The narrator begins with an intense fixation on her sister's absence ('dharana'), but as her mourning deepens, it becomes a broader engagement with mortality itself (dhyana).

The fragmented prose and deliberate white spaces in the novel reinforce this sense of collective meditation. These narrative gaps invite readers to participate in the act of witnessing and remembering, transforming their role from passive observer to ethical wit(h)ness—a term coined by Bracha Ettinger, which emphasizes intersubjective engagement rather than detached observation. By leaving room for the reader's imagination and emotions, *The White Book* creates a shared space of mourning, where personal grief dissolves into a communal consciousness of loss and resilience.

Moreover, the novel subtly engages with South Korea's collective memory of war, colonial trauma, and national identity. Han Kang's sparse, poetic language mirrors the way societies attempt to process large-scale suffering—through silence, through ritual, and through symbolic acts of remembrance. The act of writing itself becomes an offering, a means of inscribing the forgotten and giving voice to the unspeakable. In this way, *The White Book* functions not just as an individual's lamentation but as an invitation to reflect on how memory, identity, and history intertwine within the collective human experience.

THE READER'S ROLE IN COLLECTIVE MOURNING

Collective Mourning in *The White Book*

Mourning is often considered a deeply personal process, but in *The White Book*, Han Kang expands this notion to include collective mourning, where individual grief merges with historical and communal sorrow. Through fragmented prose, sparse white spaces, and a meditative focus on whiteness, the novel transforms a private loss into a universal meditation on death, impermanence, and memory. The narrator's grief for her deceased sister becomes a conduit for contemplating broader histories of loss, subtly invoking Korea's past traumas and the shared experiences of human suffering.

From Personal to Collective Mourning

At the outset, the narrator fixates on her sister's brief existence, stating:

"She was born, but could not take a single breath in this world." (Kang, *The White Book*)

This initial grief is personal and singular, but as the novel unfolds, it evolves into an engagement with larger existential themes. The narrator meditates on objects associated with whiteness—snow, salt, swaddling bands, and white rice—which symbolize both absence and continuity, linking her sorrow to the cycles of life and death experienced by countless others.

The transition from individual to collective mourning mirrors the Buddhist meditative journey from 'dharana' (focused concentration) to dhyana (meditative absorption). The narrator begins with an intense focus on her own pain but gradually dissolves the boundaries of selfhood, merging her grief with a broader consciousness of impermanence:

"Wishing that all suffering, all sorrow, would be healed." (Kang, *The White Book*)

Here, the narrator's mourning is no longer confined to her family's loss; it extends outward, encompassing unnamed others who have suffered, died, and been forgotten.

White as a Symbol of Collective Remembrance

White, the novel's dominant motif, serves as a unifying symbol of mourning. It is not merely a personal colour of grief but one deeply embedded in Korean culture and history. Traditional Korean mourning garments (sangbok) are white, and historically, white

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has been associated with both purity and loss. The novel's sparse, fragmented structure mirrors the silences left in the wake of trauma, allowing readers to become active participants in the mourning process.

Bracha Ettinger's concept of wit(h)nessing is particularly relevant here. Instead of being passive readers, we are invited to ethically engage with the text, filling in the gaps, contemplating loss, and acknowledging grief that extends beyond the narrator's personal tragedy. Han Kang achieves this through deliberate narrative omissions, where the absence of detail speaks as powerfully as what is written:

"The void left behind. The gaps, the spaces, the white." (Kang, *The White Book*)

By structuring the novel in this way, Kang creates an interactive form of mourning, where both the narrator and the reader participate in the act of remembrance.

Historical and National Mourning

Although *The White Book* does not explicitly name historical events, its engagement with collective grief subtly gestures toward Korea's past traumas—the Korean War, colonial oppression, and the lingering scars of national division. The narrator's personal sorrow resonates with a history of loss endured by an entire nation, making the novel a meditative space for communal mourning. In this sense, the novel aligns with broader literary traditions where personal grief serves as a gateway to historical reflection. Much like how W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* and Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl* intertwine personal memory with collective trauma, *The White Book* blurs the lines between the individual and the communal, showing how mourning is never truly isolated—it is always part of a larger fabric of human experience.

Literature as a Space for Collective Mourning

Han Kang's *The White Book* challenges conventional narratives of trauma by reframing grief as a shared, meditative process. Through its poetic structure, symbolic whiteness, and fragmented storytelling, the novel dissolves the boundaries between personal and collective loss, urging readers to become participants in the act of remembrance. The text does not just memorialize one lost life; it becomes a ritual of mourning for all those who have been forgotten. In doing so, *The White Book* affirms that literature itself can serve as a sacred space for collective mourning, where the unspoken is acknowledged, the absent are remembered, and grief finds a communal voice.

Katie Kitamura (2019, p. 42) encapsulates this shift by describing *The White Book* as "an urgent plea for the ritual power of mourning—for its significance in terms of both personal and historical restitution." The novel's structure, which disrupts linear narratives and employs significant white space, encourages readers to adopt a meditative stance. As they navigate these spaces, readers are drawn into a process that mirrors the transformation of grief from personal ('dharana') to universal (dhyana).

By inviting the reader to become a wit(h)ness, the text dissolves the traditional victim-witness binary. This participatory act of ethical witnessing ensures that trauma is not contained solely within the narrator's experience but becomes a collective process of remembrance and renewal.

Han Kang's Approach to Rituals and Religious Rites in *The White Book*

In *The White Book*, Han Kang subtly engages with rituals and religious rites without directly adhering to any single tradition. Instead, she weaves elements of Korean mourning customs, Buddhist meditative practices, and personal acts of remembrance to explore grief and memory. The novel's structure, imagery, and language reflect a ritualistic approach to mourning, where everyday objects and moments become sacred sites of reflection and healing.

Mourning as Ritual: The Role of Whiteness

Whiteness in *The White Book* serves as both a spiritual and ritualistic motif, embodying the liminal space between life and death. In Korean mourning traditions, white clothing (sangbok) is worn by the bereaved, marking a departure from life and a transition into ancestral memory. Throughout the novel, white objects—salt, snow, swaddling bands, fog—function as ritual offerings, symbolizing both loss and purification. The narrator's repeated contemplation of these objects mirrors the structured, repetitive nature of mourning rites, turning them into a form of secular prayer or meditation.

One of the most striking examples is the narrator's act of listing and contemplating white things, which resembles a chant or litany, much like the way religious rites often involve repeated invocations. The act of naming these objects becomes a meditative practice, a way of summoning the presence of the deceased while maintaining a reverent silence around their absence.

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Buddhist and Zen Influences: Meditative Rites of Letting Go

Though *The White Book* is not explicitly Buddhist, its meditative quality aligns with Buddhist and Zen philosophies surrounding impermanence (anitya) and suffering (dukkha). The novel's fragmented structure and deliberate silences resemble the ritual of zazen (sitting meditation), where emptiness (śūnyatā) is not merely absence but a space for contemplation and renewal.

Han Kang's approach to grief reflects the Buddhist concept of non-attachment. The narrator does not seek closure in a conventional sense but instead learns to dwell in the silence of loss, accepting its presence rather than resisting it. In this way, her mourning process echoes the ritual of contemplating impermanence, an essential practice in Buddhist traditions that teaches individuals to accept the transient nature of life.

Personal Rituals: Writing as a Sacred Act

Rather than adhering strictly to religious rites, *The White Book* suggests that personal acts—writing, naming, remembering—can become intimate rituals of mourning. The narrator's reflections on her sister's brief existence are structured like a ritual offering, where language itself becomes a form of commemoration. By transforming everyday objects into symbols of remembrance, Han Kang suggests that rituals do not have to be dictated by institutional religion; they can be created through the deeply personal act of bearing witness.

This aligns with the idea that literature itself can function as a sacred space, where grief is not only expressed but ritualized. In this sense, *The White Book* acts as both a literary memorial and a spiritual exercise, guiding the reader through a ritual of collective mourning, where silence, contemplation, and engagement with symbols become transformative acts.

Ritual Without Doctrine

Han Kang's approach to rituals in *The White Book* is deeply spiritual but not dogmatic. Instead of prescribing religious rites, she transforms mourning into a poetic and meditative practice, blending elements of Korean mourning traditions, Buddhist contemplation, and personal remembrance. The novel suggests that ritual does not have to be fixed or institutionalized; it can be fluid, deeply personal, and continually reimagined through acts of witnessing, writing, and remembering. In doing so, *The White Book* offers a new kind of sacred space, where loss is honoured not through grand ceremonies but through quiet, meditative engagement with the everyday.

Life Begins Where Death Confirms: The Cyclical Nature of Existence in *The White Book*

Han Kang's *The White Book* meditates on the fluidity between life and death, suggesting that existence does not have a clear beginning or end, but rather unfolds in a continuous cycle. This idea is deeply embedded in the novel's use of white imagery, fragmented prose, and its engagement with both personal and collective grief. The text portrays death not as an absolute cessation but as something that lingers, transforms, and even gives rise to new forms of life.

"Wearing white. In the end, white is death. And yet it is also birth."

This moment in the novel encapsulates the paradox of whiteness as both an emblem of mourning and a marker of renewal. The narrator, reflecting on her deceased sister, gradually comes to recognize that her sister's absence is not just an ending but also an opening—a space through which new life, memory, and meaning emerge.

Interpreting the Cycle of Life and Death

White as a Threshold: The recurring white imagery—snow, salt, swaddling bands—suggests that the boundary between life and death is permeable. Death is not an erasure but a transformation, much like how snow eventually melts into water, feeding new growth.

Non-Linearity of Time: The narrator moves between past, present, and imagined futures, reinforcing the idea that life and death do not follow a linear progression but exist in a constant, recursive interplay.

Mourning as a Rebirth: The act of remembering her sister, of witnessing and acknowledging loss, is itself a way of bringing her into a new kind of existence—not as a physical presence, but as a lived experience through memory and narrative.

From Individual Mourning to Collective Memory

Han Kang extends this notion beyond personal grief, linking it to historical trauma and the shared consciousness of loss. When the narrator describes fog enveloping the city, she implies that all lives, even those forgotten or erased, leave a trace in the collective fabric of existence.

"Fog. The whiteness that shrouds the city. As if the whole place is turning into something else."

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This passage underscores how death does not simply signify disappearance but a transformation into something unnamed yet ever-present. The city itself seems to shift, as though each loss leaves an imprint, ensuring that no death is truly final.

The Reader's Role in Perpetuating Life Through Memory

By engaging with *The White Book*, the reader becomes a participant in this cycle. The fragmented structure invites us to pause, reflect, and carry forward the memory of those who came before. The book does not offer closure but instead opens spaces for thought, for remembering, for witnessing—ensuring that what has passed continues to shape what is yet to come.

In this way, *The White Book* does not merely tell a story of loss but enacts a philosophy of life and death as inseparable forces. It affirms that life begins where death confirms—not as an opposition but as an eternal, fluid movement where one state gives rise to the other.

Defending the Poetic Nature of *The White Book*: The Role of Fragmentation and Small Units

Han Kang's *The White Book* is often described as poetic prose, blurring the boundaries between fiction, poetry, and memoir. The novel's small, fragmented units serve a deliberate artistic and thematic purpose, reinforcing its meditative, elegiac, and contemplative qualities. This structure is not merely an aesthetic choice but a reflection of the novel's engagement with themes of grief, memory, and impermanence.

1. Fragmentation as a Reflection of Mourning

Grief is not linear; it comes in waves, in moments of sudden intensity and quiet contemplation. The fragmented nature of *The White Book* mirrors this non-linear emotional experience, capturing mourning in small, delicate pieces rather than through a conventional narrative arc. Each small unit acts like a breath, a fleeting moment of thought or memory, mirroring the way loss is processed in real life—through scattered recollections rather than a continuous story.

The narrator, reflecting on her deceased sister, does not tell a story in a traditional sense but instead constructs an emotional landscape through short, meditative reflections. This aligns with poetic traditions where meaning emerges not from a clear sequence of events but from the resonance of images, silences, and rhythms.

2. The Poetic Rhythm of White Space and Silence

One of *The White Book*'s defining features is its intentional use of white space—both visually and metaphorically. Just as poetry often relies on line breaks and stanza divisions to create meaning beyond words, Han Kang uses silence and spacing to emphasize absence, loss, and the ineffable nature of grief. The blank spaces between the units are just as important as the words themselves, allowing the reader to pause, reflect, and engage in a contemplative process.

This stylistic approach aligns with modern poetry, particularly the haiku tradition or minimalist poetry, where a few carefully chosen words create profound emotional depth. The effect is meditative, compelling the reader to slow down and absorb each phrase with intensity and introspection.

3. White Objects as Poetic Motifs

Han Kang constructs her narrative around a series of white objects—swaddling bands, salt, fog, snow—which serve as recurrent poetic motifs. These objects are not just descriptions but symbols laden with meaning, allowing the text to function as a long, extended poem rather than a conventional novel. For example, in one passage, the narrator writes:

"A newborn's gown. Swaddling bands. The salt that lingers beneath the skin."

These seemingly simple, unadorned phrases carry deep emotional weight, much like lines in a poem, using minimal language to evoke profound themes of birth, death, and memory.

4. The Influence of Meditative and Poetic Traditions

The poetic nature of *The White Book* is also linked to Eastern meditative traditions, particularly Buddhist and Zen aesthetics. In these traditions, brevity and simplicity are not limitations but means of accessing deeper truths. The novel's structure encourages the reader to engage with each unit as a singular moment of reflection, similar to how a reader of poetry might approach a haiku or tanka.

Furthermore, the novel embodies the aesthetics of impermanence, a key concept in Japanese wabi-sabi philosophy, where beauty is found in transience, incompleteness, and the ephemeral. By presenting grief in fragmented units, Han Kang embraces this philosophy, suggesting that mourning is not a single event but an ongoing, ever-changing process.

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5. The Reader's Role: Active Participation in Poetic Mourning

Unlike traditional novels that guide the reader through a structured plot, *The White Book* demands active participation. The gaps between the small units require the reader to engage in interpretation, meditation, and emotional investment. Each section, though brief, carries layered meanings, much like lines of poetry that reveal new depths upon rereading.

In this way, the novel becomes an interactive ritual of mourning, where the reader, like the narrator, must sit with loss, absorb its weight, and find meaning in the quiet spaces between words.

The Poetic Necessity of Small Units

Han Kang's choice to structure *The White Book* in small, poetic units is essential to its artistic and emotional impact. This fragmentation:

Mirrors the nature of grief, which is nonlinear and comes in fragments.

Utilizes white space and silence to create a contemplative, poetic rhythm.

Employs recurring white imagery to build a symbolic, interconnected meditation on loss.

Draws from meditative and poetic traditions, embracing brevity and stillness as sources of meaning.

Engages the reader in an active, participatory process of mourning rather than passive consumption.

Thus, *The White Book* is not just a novel about loss—it is a poetic experience of loss, where form and content are inseparable. By breaking the narrative into small, delicate pieces, Han Kang does not diminish the impact of her storytelling; rather, she intensifies it, making every word, every pause, and every silence resonate with profound emotional weight.

CASE STUDIES AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Intertextual Meditations on Loss

To deepen our understanding of how *The White Book* employs meditative structures to address trauma, comparing it with other texts exploring similar themes is useful. For example, Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police* (1994) utilizes sparse, meditative prose to evoke a pervasive sense of loss and erasure. Like Han Kang, Ogawa leverages fragmented narrative structures and deliberate silences that encourage readers to engage with what is unsaid, highlighting the interstitial spaces where memory and absence coexist.

Similarly, Edmund de Waal's *The White Road* (2015) explores the symbolism of whiteness within the context of porcelain history—a narrative that juxtaposes beauty with the residue of colonial violence. Although de Waal's approach is more historical and less personal, the shared focus on whiteness as a marker of both loss and transformation creates a resonant dialogue with *The White Book*. Both texts expand the notion of mourning beyond the individual, inviting readers to participate in a broader, collective meditation on history and identity.

Comparative Reflections: Meditative Narratives Across Cultures

Comparing these works reveals a common structure: an initial concentrated focus on loss ('dharana') that gradually dissolves into an expansive, universal reflection (dhyana). Whether through the erasure of memory in *The Memory Police* or the historical layering in *The White Road*, these narratives underscore the potential of meditative practices to transform trauma into a shared experience. Han Kang's contribution lies in her ability to fuse personal grief with cultural and historical narratives, thereby creating a literary space where ethical wit(h)nessing becomes a lived, participatory process.

Expanding on the case studies in *The White Book* requires a close reading of key moments where Han Kang uses fragmented prose, white imagery, and meditative reflection to explore grief, memory, and transformation. Below, we analyse three significant case studies from the text and cite relevant passages to illustrate how the novel functions as a poetic meditation on mourning, ethical wit(h)nessing, and collective consciousness.

Case Study 1: The Swaddling Bands – Mourning as Ritual

One of the most poignant motifs in *The White Book* is the image of the swaddling bands, which symbolize both birth and death. In the opening sections, the narrator recalls the brief life of her older sister, who died as an infant. The swaddling bands, meant to protect and comfort a newborn, become an artifact of grief—a marker of absence rather than presence.

"Swaddling bands. A newborn's gown. The salt that lingers beneath the skin."

This simple, fragmented list embodies Han Kang's poetic style, where seemingly neutral objects take on immense emotional weight. The swaddling bands, representing an attempt to preserve life, also signify the helplessness of mourning, as they remain unused and futile against death.

Interpretation:

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The brevity of this passage reflects the ephemeral nature of the lost life.

The list format mirrors the way memory works in grief, where objects and sensations emerge in scattered flashes rather than a continuous narrative.

The swaddling bands act as a ritualistic element, transforming personal grief into something structured and sacred.

This case study demonstrates how *The White Book* reconfigures trauma narratives: instead of a detailed recounting of loss, Kang presents grief as a series of tactile, meditative impressions.

Case Study 2: The Fog – Ethical Wit(h)nessing and Collective Mourning

In another striking passage, Han Kang describes a city covered in fog, using it as a metaphor for blurred memory, uncertainty, and shared mourning. The narrator walks through the city, enveloped in whiteness, mirroring her internal landscape of grief.

"Fog. The whiteness that shrouds the city. As if the whole place is turning into something else. As if all of us are being erased."

Here, Kang extends her personal loss into a collective experience. The whiteness of the fog not only obscures individual identity but also evokes historical traumas—moments of loss that entire societies struggle to articulate. This aligns with Bracha Ettinger's concept of ethical wit(h)nessing, where trauma is not simply observed from a distance but experienced through intersubjective engagement.

Interpretation:

The fog serves as a metaphor for historical erasure, where grief is dispersed across generations.

The phrase "as if all of us are being erased" implies that mourning is not an individual act but a shared, ethical responsibility.

This passage transforms the reader into an active participant, requiring them to engage with grief beyond their personal experiences.

By presenting grief through this diffuse, poetic lens, Kang resists a singular, linear trauma narrative and instead proposes a collective, meditative engagement with memory.

Case Study 3: The White Bird – Transformation through Grief

A pivotal moment in *The White Book* occurs when the narrator envisions a white bird taking flight, symbolizing a shift from mourning to renewal. Unlike the previous sections, which focus on objects weighed down by loss, the white bird suggests movement, transcendence, and transformation.

"A white bird, taking off into the sky, its wings beating against the air. The whiteness that remains."

This image is one of the few moments in the book where white is associated with freedom rather than sorrow. The bird, unlike the swaddling bands or the fog, is not bound to the ground—it escapes, carrying with it the weight of memory.

The bird represents a shift from passive grief to active renewal.

Its flight suggests the possibility of release—not forgetting, but transforming mourning into something else.

The phrase "the whiteness that remains" acknowledges that grief never fully disappears, but it can change form.

In this case study, Kang offers a poetic resolution, suggesting that while loss is permanent, the way we hold it within ourselves can evolve.

CONCLUSION

Meditation, Ethics, and the Transformation of Trauma

The White Book challenges conventional trauma narratives by incorporating the meditative processes of 'dharana' and 'dhyana' within its structure and symbolism. Initially, the narrator's focused attention on her sister's death ('dharana') establishes a foundation for a deep, personal engagement with grief. As the narrative progresses, this focus evolves into a meditative absorption ('dhyana'), transforming isolated mourning into a universal renewal process. Additionally, the text invites readers to engage as active participants in mourning through ethical witness, reconfiguring trauma as a collective and intersubjective experience.

In this way, Han Kang's work not only redefines the experience of trauma but also presents a model for ethical engagement that connects personal and historical dimensions of loss. By blending Eastern meditative principles with innovative narrative techniques, *The White Book* transforms grief into a dynamic process of remembrance, healing, and communal rebirth.

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