



Trauma in the Asian Anglophone Novels
Pachinko and The Mountains Sing

Bachelorarbeit im Kernfachstudiengang Anglistik/Amerikanistik
zur Erlangung
des Grades Bachelor of Arts (B.A.)
der Philosophischen Fakultät
der Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf

vorgelegt von:

Anne Schulzki
Matrikel-Nr. [REDACTED]

Prüfer*innen:
Christina Slopek, M.A.
Univ.-Prof. Dr. Birgit Neumann

16.09.2022

Table of Contents

1 Introduction	3
2 Trauma Theory	5
2.1 Memory Studies	10
2.2 Trauma Depiction in Literature	13
3 Recognised Trauma in <i>The Mountains Sing</i>	15
4 Unrecognised Trauma in <i>Pachinko</i>	27
5 Conclusion	38
Works Cited	41

Trauma in the Asian¹ Anglophone Novels *Pachinko* and *The Mountains Sing*

1 Introduction

What exactly is ‘trauma’? ‘Trauma’ is a term that is often heard and hence not necessarily new to most people. But when it comes to defining and understanding it, many struggle. Not because trauma is difficult to grasp as a concept, but rather because putting yourself in the shoes of someone suffering from trauma, especially when you yourself are not, is challenging. What helps overcome this challenge is reading about trauma, about people suffering from it and how it comes into existence. Caruth states that trauma is an individual experience (cf. “Introduction” 4-5) and can never be the same for anyone, even if the event triggering it is the same. Here in Germany and generally in Europe as well, World War II and Holocaust trauma are two major fields of trauma studies (cf. Craps, “Beyond Eurocentrism” 46). In North America, especially the United States, two of the rather recent focuses of trauma studies are the American involvement in the Việt Nam² War and 9/11 (cf. 46). But what about other countries that do not belong to ‘the West’³? What about their trauma, their perspectives on traumatic experiences such as occupations, World War II and the Việt Nam War, and the aftermaths those have ensued? These are perspectives and experiences not often heard from in Western latitudes, but they still are perspectives and experiences that matter.

Two novels that deal with such experiences and perspectives are Min Jin Lee’s *Pachinko* and Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai’s *The Mountains Sing*. Both novels have not been released for long, with *The Mountains Sing* having been published just in 2020, meaning that not much research has been done on them, and especially very little, if any, regarding trauma representation. However, both novels’ stories take place in the 20th century and they both deal with trauma in their own ways. *Pachinko* is a multigenerational tale about a Korean woman that immigrates to Japan during the Japanese occupation of Korea and the life and hardships of her family in the following decades. *The Mountains Sing* also follows a family’s story through decades, this time a family from North Việt Nam, spanning over occupations, the American War in Việt Nam⁴, and its aftermath. Both Asian families can be considered ordinary families who need to work hard in order to survive.

¹ This is an umbrella term, or as Kain explains “a heading which obviously embraces a tremendous breadth of peoples, cultures, languages, etc.” (1) and thereby also tends to exclude some.

² Instead of the English spelling ‘Vietnam’, the Vietnamese syntax will be used in this thesis.

³ Refers to the geographical locations including Europe, North America and Australia that are often referenced as First World countries, which oppose Third World, often non-white geographical locations.

⁴ In the West generally referred to as the Vietnam War, this thesis will use the Vietnamese labelling.

They undergo traumatic experiences during their lives, mostly triggered by political and historical events happening in the respective countries they are living in. That is also the reason for choosing these two novels, as they both not only take place in the 20th century and have the effects of some historical events in common, but by choosing two novels set in two different Asian countries, it also shows that trauma occurs everywhere in different ways and does not exclude anyone.

Trauma can be, though an individual experience, shared by many all over the globe and hence can evoke a feeling of not being alone in tough times. The events and experiences that these novels cover are often unknown in the West, as they are seldom discussed in History classes. This could be the reason why Min Jin Lee's novel *Pachinko* starts with the opening line "[h]istory has failed us, but no matter" (3), indicating the exclusion of some stories in the wider global historical context. And even if they are covered, they are pre-dominantly viewed from the Western perspective, mostly focusing on the trauma the West and its people have suffered. Therefore, I argue that *Pachinko* and *The Mountains Sing* give voice to the historically and politically induced trauma suffered by Korean and Vietnamese people through the perspectives and experiences of the novels' characters and thereby not only help the historical reappraisal of these events by adding a marginalised perspective on the matter, but also showing the imbalance of what and who is being remembered. In which ways do the characters experience and remember their traumas in *Pachinko* and *The Mountains Sing*? How do the historical and political events of the 20th century impact the characters' traumas and memories? And how do the novels reappraise and show the imbalance of who and what is being remembered in the Western world? These are the questions that are going to be answered in this thesis.

Before the literary analysis, I am going to introduce and give an overview of the field of trauma studies. In this part, I will primarily deal with Cathy Caruth's fundamental work on trauma theory and memory studies, as well as Stef Craps decolonised approach to traumatic experiences. Some of the other scholars being considered in this part will be Sonya Andermahr, Aleida Assmann, Gabriele Schwab, Ulrike Tancke, and Irene Visser. Then I am going to analyse the two novels *Pachinko* and *The Mountains Sing* regarding the characters' traumatic experiences. For this, I will briefly describe the novels' historical and political settings, focusing on the Japanese colonialisation of Korea and the treatment of Koreans in Japan over the decades in the case of *Pachinko*. As for *The Mountains Sing*, I will focus on Việt Nam's history with the various occupations of the country, the American War in Việt Nam, and its aftermath. For each novel's trauma representations,

I will focus on some of the novels' characters and how historical events have affected them in a traumatic way, influencing their memories and behaviours. This will give them a voice for their perspectives on events often viewed from a Euro-American perspective, which is important as they are the ones seldom remembered in history.

2 Trauma Theory

Trauma theory is a very broad field of study with many different sub-fields and research interests. This makes it quite challenging to give an overview over the whole field, but for this thesis the most fundamental points of general trauma theory are sufficient. The focus for this thesis will be on decolonialised trauma theory, memory studies – which are both fields of trauma theory – and how trauma is depicted in literature.

The official recognition of trauma has happened rather recently in the 1980s, “when Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was first recognised as a valid psychiatric diagnosis” (Tancke 7) in the United States of America “in the context of the political and social aftermath of the [Việt Nam] War” (Assman 74). Trauma's origin stems from the Greek word for ‘wound’ (cf. 74) and is understood, in the psychological sense, as a wound inflicted “upon the mind” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 3). Due to the invisibility of psychic injuries, Bell states that “such injuries are often repressed, remaining unhealed and leading to various forms of ‘acting out’” (7).

Caruth explains that most generally, “trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (*Unclaimed Experience* 11). Other forms of traumatic manifestations can be “intrusive flashbacks, nightmares, vivid imagery, incongruent sensations or emotions, behavioral re-enactments, and hauntings” (Stahl 16), which are often caused by mourning, grief, guilt, and loss (cf. 20).

The concept of trauma has been developed in the West and “has been increasingly medicalized but also and importantly linked into wider political” (Buelens et al. 1) as well as cultural frames. Trauma inherently challenges a person's identity and such as ‘identity’, the term ‘trauma’ “is open to multiple interpretations” (Bell 7). Experiencing a traumatic event has an “endless impact on a life” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experiences* 7), and this impact – this experience of trauma – is an individual one as “[n]o two people have

identical reactions, even to the same event” (Herman qtd. in Stahl 12) and hence experience trauma differently.

Cathy Caruth states that not only the event but also the recovery process can be traumatic (cf. “Introduction” 9) since it is “the incompleteness in knowing that is at the heart of trauma” (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 9). And this question about knowledge and witnessing trauma is what can make the recovery traumatic, since it is either that a person is unaware of their trauma or they become aware and thereby fully realise the scope of their trauma, making them struggle to come to terms with it (cf. Caruth, “Introduction” 7).

Without the survivor having any control over it, traumatic experiences unconsciously repeat themselves (cf. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experiences* 2) as “the past – loss, trauma – continually works its way into the present moment because the subject cannot move past it” (Boulter 5). Since trauma is unassimilated at first, it haunts the individual (cf. 4), possessing and sticking to them like glue, which excludes any interpretation of the traumatic symptom being seen “simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once was wished” (Caruth, “Introduction” 4-5). It is the literal return of the traumatic event after its repression (cf. 7), but it can also be triggered by “the betrayal of a promise or an expectation” (Edkins 109). Visser explains it as “implanted in the psyche [...], hidden behind the screen of consciousness, but making itself known through [...] symptoms” (9). And these symptoms “can also be unconsciously passed on from one generation to another” (Assmann 75), letting not only the individual who experiences the event first-hand suffer, but also the generations afterwards.

Before traumatic experiences show themselves through various symptoms, they are not forgotten but “[remain] isolated from consciousness, meaning that these experiences move into a latent state where they remain subliminal and inconspicuous for a long period of time” (Assman 74). This ‘latency’, “the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experiences* 17), is a delay in time between cause and effect, meaning that the event causing trauma is not processed at said moment, but rather later on (cf. Caruth, “Introduction” 7-8). ‘Latency’ “troubles chronological continuities between past, present, and future” (Neumann and Kappel 39), overlapping and affecting each other, which makes it possible for trauma survivors to be present but simultaneously feel trapped in the past, which then affects their future.

Suffering from trauma can change a person and have other related impacts on them. As already mentioned, mourning can be a cause for trauma, but on the other hand it is also the normal and healthy way to deal with loss and death. However, Freud distinguishes mourning from a “pathological variant that can eventuate in chronic depression, deterioration, killing and suicide” (Stahl 21) which is called ‘melancholia’. ‘Melancholia’ can reverse role dynamics and make a traumatised individual act out and “[displace] blame and rage onto a surrogate” (24) as a way of dealing with their trauma.

But the problem with trauma theory is, that “psychological trauma is a Western artefact [...] dealing with Euro-American experiences of industrialization, gender relations, and modern warfare” (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 3). Trauma’s definitions are hegemonic and “have been constructed from the experiences of dominant groups in the West, that is, ‘white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men’” (Brown qtd. in 20-21) and hence the diagnosis only applies to individuals fitting that category and no other. And though it “is certainly true that ‘trauma theory’ is a response to the developing and changing impact of the Holocaust, at least in the West” (Buelens et al. 2), it is not appropriate that the Western definitions and treatments of trauma are imposed on other cultures and people, disregarding their ways and traditions, as especially Americans have done over the past decades (cf. Craps, “Beyond Eurocentrism” 49). As Buelens et al. point out, trauma theory often “marginalise[s] the traumatic experience of non-western cultures” (5) and assumes that the Western approach to recovery is the standard, even “in a country where the ‘Western standards of normality ... are actually the exception rather than the rule’” (Craps qtd. in 5).

A paradox of trauma theory is, as Rebecca Saunders states, that “while trauma theory has primarily been produced in Europe and the United States, trauma itself has, with equal if not greater regularity and urgency, been experienced elsewhere” (qtd. in Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 9). And these people, cultures, and countries that experience traumatic events in such scope are the ones that are often categorised as ‘other’ in the Western view (cf. Radstone qtd. in Craps, “Beyond Eurocentrism” 46-47). That is why it is important for ‘counter-narratives’, which engage with and process the effects of traumatic events from a different point of view, to emerge (cf. Buelens et al. 5), because “the sufferings of those belonging to non-Western or minority cultures must be given due recognition” (Craps, “Beyond Eurocentrism” 46).

Trauma and history are strongly tied to each other, because, the same as trauma, history can only be understood afterwards, but not at the time of its occurrence (cf. Caruth,

“Introduction” 8) – meaning that history is also latent in concept. Generally, “Caruth conceives history as being inherently traumatic, and trauma as an overwhelming experience that resists integration and expression” (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 1), making them both depend on each other.

However, even with all of this, not all trauma is recognised as such. For example, PTSD is diagnosed when it is triggered by war, life-threatening or near-death experiences. When an individual shows the same symptoms of psychic suffering, but they are caused by “everyday racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ableism, and other forms of structural oppression” (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 25-26), the individual is not diagnosed with PTSD because it “does not qualify [...] if [...] an overt threat or act of violence is absent” (25-26). It might be true that a one-time occurrence of such triggers does not lead to trauma, but if these ‘micro-aggressions’ accumulate, they can “create an intense traumatic impact” (26). By not paying attention to the trauma caused by social and political triggers and thereby leaving them out of trauma studies’ focus can be quite problematic, especially for the mission of a more inclusive, diverse and cross-cultural approach to trauma studies (cf. 27-28).

In the case of racism – and also discrimination to some extent – it is “[u]nlike structural trauma [...] historically specific; yet, unlike historical trauma, it is not related to a particular event, with a before and an after” (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 32), which makes it unable to “fit either of the ‘classical’ forms of trauma” (Andermahr 2). Because no form of oppression fits the definition of trauma, it “cannot be adequately addressed within the conceptual frameworks which trauma theory provides” (Craps, “Beyond Eurocentrism” 50), meaning that trauma theory needs to be readjusted to fit the trauma caused by racism and other forms of oppression, especially when these types of trauma are of social nature (cf. Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 30).

Another aspect that is unrecognised in trauma theory is the act and concept of ‘forgiveness’. Visser explains that this might be “mainly due to what Julia Kristeva diagnoses as the problem of Freudianism, which is that it has no place for forgiveness” (19-20). However, ‘forgiveness’ is an interesting concept, especially for postcolonial trauma studies, as “[a] cycle of violence, wounding, and suffering [can be] broken and healed by [it]” (19-20). It might be complex and controversial, but it is a necessary concept for postcolonial studies, especially those of trauma (cf. 20), as it can help heal past trauma – of oneself or of previous generations.

Caruth argues that trauma is “capable of being passed on not only between people, but also across generations and cultures” (Bell 7). This way of connecting through the notion and experience of trauma can form bridges and links between people and cultures (cf. Caruth, “Introduction” 11) and in order to do so, Caruth claims that there needs to be “a new mode of seeing and of listing [...] *from the site of trauma*” (*Unclaimed Experiences* 56) to “break the isolation imposed on both individuals and cultures by traumatic experience” (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 2). However, what Caruth implies can often lead to “witnessing across cultural boundaries” (Craps, “Beyond Eurocentrism 47) which often reflects the Eurocentric bias of Western attempts to “reach out to the non-Western other” (47).

This is where decolonised theory trauma comes into play. The mission of trauma theory has always been “to bear witness to traumatic histories in such a way as to attend to the suffering of the other” (Andermahr 1), but it is difficult for individuals, groups and cultures for whom trauma is constantly present and who live with trauma as an underlying yet always present factor in their lives to be fully acknowledged. Rothberg has stated that “trauma theory’s Eurocentric, event-based conception of trauma” (Visser 8) needs urgent revision. He also emphasises that early trauma theory focuses on a concluded event in the past, but that (post-)colonial traumas still affect the present (cf. 9). Additionally, he stresses that “postcolonial trauma narratives often also demonstrate that resilience and growth are possible in the aftermath of traumatic wounding” (12), which includes the aforementioned concept of ‘forgiveness’. Hence,

a decolonized trauma theory would, firstly, redress the marginalization of non-Western and minority traumas; secondly, it would challenge the supposed universal validity of Western definitions of trauma; thirdly, provide alternatives to dominant trauma aesthetics; and lastly, address the underexplored relationship between so-called First and Third World traumas. (Andermahr 2)

‘Eurocentrism’, or a Eurocentric bias, describes the “lack of interest in the non-Western world” (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 12) and in regard to trauma theory the “traumas visited upon members of non-Western cultures” (11-12). This does not comply with trauma theory’s aspirations, especially when there is the tendency, which Craps finds troubling, “to turn violence inflicted on a non-European other into a mere occasion for the exploration of the exemplary trauma suffered by the [...] European subjects responsible for that violence” (17). The Holocaust is a traumatic event often referenced in trauma theory, yet, “Alexander acknowledges that there are many parts of the world [...] where the Holocaust is not a common reference” (79). That is because these regions have their own historical traumas and sufferings that they are preoccupied with, “in many cases

those of Western imperialism” (80). And so Craps argues that “traumatic colonial histories [...] have to be acknowledged more fully, on their own terms, and in their own terms” (72).

So, for the decolonialisation of trauma theory there is a need, as Rothberg puts it, “to turn away from the original formulations of literary trauma theory and develop the tools needed ‘in the simultaneously intellectual, ethical, and political task of standing against ongoing forms of racial and colonial violence’” (qtd. in Visser 8). For this to happen, Craps wants to focus on “the critical commitment in postcolonial studies ‘to make visible the creative and political’ rather than the ‘pathological and negative’ in trauma literature” (Visser 11), because by being enabled to “recognize and attend to the sufferings of people around the world, an inclusive and culturally sensitive trauma theory can expose situations of injustice and abuse, and open up ways to imagine a different global future” (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 8).

Though many scholars want to change some of Caruth’s foundational theory for it to be more applicable and inclusive, what remains undisputed, at least for Visser, “is Caruth’s notion of the enduring and ultimately unknowable and inexpressible nature of traumatic wounding” (11). But generally, Craps’s aim is similar to the thesis of this paper, because he believes

that rethinking trauma studies from a postcolonial perspective and providing nuanced readings of a wide variety of narratives of trauma and witnessing from around the world can help us understand that shared precariousness. By fostering attunement to previously unheard suffering and putting into global circulation memories of a broad range of traumatic histories, an inclusive and culturally sensitive trauma theory can assist in raising awareness of injustice both past and present and opening up the possibility of a more just global future – and, in so doing, remain faithful to the ethical foundations of the field. (*Postcolonial Witnessing* 127)

And one very important field of trauma theory to take into account for that is ‘memory studies’.

2.1 Memory Studies

The term ‘memory’ refers to “the process or faculty whereby events or impressions from the past are recollected and preserved” (Bell 2), so to say, it is like a storage unit in the mind for knowledge and impressions that the individual has acquired in the past. Hence, it is a field of research and study as the process of how memories are formed, stored and what they entail is of interest. Today’s focus in memory studies is “on understanding the past as a construction that responds to the needs and possibilities of the present” (Assman 5), meaning how the past can affect the present through memories.

But, as Bell points out, not all memories are studied equally: European memories and those of the United States of America have been very much focused on by scholars and researchers (cf. 12) even in today's globalised world. This Western focus in memory studies can be problematic, as it alludes that these are more valuable memories in comparison to that of other cultures and parts of the world. Therefore, terms such as 'transnational memory', 'global memory', and 'transcultural memory' "oppose the idea that memory is a stable product, tied to a specific place and connected to the identitarian needs of seemingly homogenous groups" (Neumann 133), with that helping to stir away from "'thick' social relations" (Bell 18) and also take into account memories of other parts of the world, especially those of marginalised groups.

Memories and remembering are only possible "because we can also forget" (Assman 82), as in order to remember an individual also needs to know what the opposite – forgetting – is. And this 'forgetting' happens when memories are not stored in external media and then vanish "with the death of their carrier" (36-37). But when they are archived in some media or are passed orally to the next generation before the carrier passes, they can be saved for the time being.

When an individual acquires the knowledge of others' memories, it impacts their own individual memory. As Assman explains, "individual and collective memories are always interwoven" (11), and the things the individual hears about, but has not experienced themselves, interweave with the individual's own experiences, making it difficult to identify which memories are their own and which are not (cf. 20). This process of making others' memories one's own has been labelled 'prosthetic memory' by Alison Landsberg (cf. 74). This often happens with historical events such as Germans and the Holocaust, Vietnamese and the American War, or also the memories of discrimination and racism of Korean-Japanese people. One reasoning for this tie to historical events and memories could be, that "the memory of the individual is already embedded within broader frames of reference with which it constantly interacts: the social group of the family or the generation [... or] the ethnic and/or national group" (175) for instance.

Therefore, the individual memory is often closely related to family and generational memory. Family memory "tends to span three generations of people" (Assman 10-11) whose lives overlap and thereby exchange experiences, histories, and stories. The younger generations often see themselves "in terms of familial continuity [and] are interested in events that have influenced their own biographies" (183). Because of this, which often happens through storytelling, generations can unconsciously affect each other (cf.

Schwab 4), as young and old form bonds over time and exchange stories (cf. Winter 70). Generational memory can be linked to family memory but is rather defined as a “generation-specific standardized narrative” (Assman 176) that is linked to experiences and events of a generation.

Then, there are more forms of memory: ‘social memory’, which “gives an account of past as present” (Fierke 130) and is heavily influenced by ‘collective memory’, which “denote[s] collectively shared representations of the past” (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 73). ‘Collective memory’, again, is related to the concept of ‘cultural memory’ that “stresses the role of institutionalized canons of culture in the formations and transmissions of collective memories” (73). Sometimes “[l]iterary texts [...] serve as media of cultural memory” (Neumann 135), which allows them to “shape the collective imagination about specific historical periods, people and events” (135).

Until now the focus was on available, or ‘conscious’, memories, but there are also those that are “inaccessible [and] ‘unconscious” (Assman 12), which are ‘traumatic memories’. They are “often too painful or too shameful to come to the surface of consciousness without external aids” (12) and they are often “inseparable from the person, since [they] cannot be fully transformed into a conscious recollection” (181). Traumatic memories are mostly of latent nature and are therefore often only “represented and socially recognized belatedly” (57). They often lie “outside verbal-semantic-linguistic representation and involve bodily skills, reflex actions and classically conditioned responses” (Fierke 120) as the traumatised individual’s means of coping, since their trauma becomes “fixed or frozen in time” (120).

Traumatic memories have different ways of showing and can “come in flashbacks or nightmares [...] [or] in the memories of the body and its somatic enactments” (Schwab 2). ‘Forgetting’ as a way of healing does not help, especially for historical traumas, since those often “arise not out of acts of war but out of the exploitation, dehumanization, and extermination of innocent people” (Assman 60-61). As Schwab explains, “[w]arfare and genocide, as well as more individual violent acts such as torture and rape, are liminal experiences that bring us to the abyss of human abjection” (3). But also “the trauma experienced after catastrophic losses” (3) can lead to trauma and melancholia when the individual “annihilates a shared sense of time and forecloses proper mourning” (3). This falling into melancholia can also happen “[w]hen there is no grave [...] [and] one remains forever tied to a loss that never becomes real” (3).

While trauma survivors “live with the scars of memory” (Schwab 14), the people – often following generations – who witness the survivor’s trauma unconsciously have to “live with a ‘postmemory’ that comes to them secondhand” (14), meaning that they are haunted by trauma they have never experienced. ‘Postmemory’ is a concept “elaborated by Marianne Hirsch” (Hirsch and Miller 4) and for her “characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (Hirsch 22). And as Gabriele Schwab declares, “[t]here is no life without trauma [and] [t]here is no history without trauma” (42), yet there are still those lives that are completely “overshadowed by violent histories” (42).

History can have a lasting impact on memory and trauma, and not only by its trauma being passed on to following generations. History and historical trauma is mostly viewed and analysed from the survivor’s or victor’s perspective, but there is also that of the perpetrator. From their perspective it is “not a matter of an inner dissociation from a traumatic experience as an unconscious strategy of survival, but of a defense against guilt as a strategy for saving face” (Assman 63). The perpetrator made the conscious decision for their actions and hence their trauma is related to the guilt they feel for said actions.

Memories, whether of traumatic nature or not, “have themselves become more mobile, more transportable” (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 74) through channels such as “mass media, including television, film, and the Internet” (74). This can have positive effects, as telling the stories of memory and trauma can “shed light on those – concrete, embodied and affective – aspects of historical experiences that frequently remain unexplored in history’s grand narrative” (Neumann 135). By depicting trauma and memory in literature, cultural and collective memories can be revived, reappraised, and expanded.

2.2 Trauma Depiction in Literature

Literature, fiction or not, is a great way to portray concepts, experiences, facts and imagination. In the case of trauma representation, the genre of ‘trauma fiction’ has arisen, which encompasses literary works that “can be classified as narrating a deconstructive experience that ruptures selfhood” (Tancke 6), but other genres and forms of literature can also include trauma representation without it being the sole focus or theme of the story.

In much contemporary fiction, characters “suffer profound losses or are wrecked by overwhelming experiences of guilt” (Tancke 1), making trauma a prominent theme in the

novels. Fiction is able to combine “personal, individual experience and public, collective concerns” (Visser 7) by addressing traumatic experiences, which makes literature, as Schwab puts it, a “transformational [object]” (8) because it not only carries knowledge but can also “make it indirectly accessible to others” (8). Boulter also implies something similar by stating that contemporary fiction wants to “negotiate a relation with history” (12) to tell about historical events and thereby archive them for the future. And because of these desires and purposes, the “boundaries between truth and fiction [sometimes] become blurred” (Winter 66), making it difficult to tell where reality ends and fiction begins. However, trauma stories are not necessarily diverse as “a narrowly Western canon of trauma literature has in effect emerged, one which privileges of the suffering of white Europeans, and neglects the specificity of non-Western and minority cultural traumas” (Andermahr 1).

Narratives, whether oral or written, can be a means to reclaim “the truth of traumatic experiences” (Visser 14) and hence also help “coming to term[s] with the aftermath” (14) of trauma. Narrating (traumatic) stories and histories empowers the individuals, groups, communities and cultures involved and has literature perform “a major part in [...] the ‘trauma process’” (14) because traumatic experiences are given “shape and meaning” (14). With that, trauma narratives allow insights into the past and the causes of different traumas (cf. 15).

The difficulty with narrating trauma is its representation, as trauma is said to be unnarratable and “characteristically eludes representation” (Tancke 6). This is why theories often express not to narrate trauma at all, because “[a]n experience that exceeds the possibility of narrative knowledge, so the logic goes, will best be represented by a failure of narrative” (Craps, “Beyond Eurocentrism” 50). However, this stance is problematic for the aim of a diverse trauma canon as this, according to Craps, could lead to a canon “of non-linear, modernist texts by mostly Western writers” (50).

Trauma is often a theme in genres such as memoirs and life writings, whether they are fiction or fictionalised, as it is often used to “comment on the social and cultural conditions” (Tancke 9) of an individual, a community, a society, or a country. Life writings for example, “often emerge from a traumatic core, occupying a space between two parallels universes: daily life and trauma” (Schwab 41). Fiction, or any other form of art, is able to create “a more protected space to explore the effects of violence from within multiple voices embedded in imagined daily lives” (5). Yet, not all trauma depictions are inherently positive ones, as the use of trauma as a narrative or literary tool can also

influence actual trauma victims negatively, if the author is not careful with handling the topic (cf. Farrell qtd. in Tancke 9).

While artistic representation can help trauma victims come to terms and work through their trauma, “[l]iterary writings of traumatic histories often resort to experimental use of language” (Schwab 33). While it is thought that experimental syntax or semantics show how trauma is actually experienced (cf. 33), it is not the only way to adequately give voice to traumatic experiences (cf. Craps, “Beyond Eurocentrism” 50). For example, even simple “storytelling offers a way to come to terms” (Visser 16) with trauma and can make way for a road of recovery.

Trauma depiction in literature also functions as a theme or narrative device (cf. Tancke 9) that can be analysed in content and form. It encompasses many possibilities, and traumatic representation becomes more and more a theme for colonial, postcolonial, migration and war literatures to “come to terms with the aftermath of [the traumatic] wounding” (Visser 14). Though trauma is difficult to adequately represent in literature, it is not impossible, and its representation can also add to collective and cultural memories as well as help trauma survivors to relate and overcome their struggles.

3 Recognised Trauma in *The Mountains Sing*

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai’s *The Mountains Sing* follows two timelines: the ‘present’, which begins in 1972 in Hà Nội, and the ‘past’, which starts in 1930 Nghệ An Province, North Việt Nam, until it catches up with the present. The first-person narrator of the novel is Hương, born in 1960, who tells the story of her life during the American War in Việt Nam⁵ and its aftermath in the present timeline. The past timeline is also narrated by Hương but tells the story of her grandmother Diêu Lan’s life. She has told Hương her life’s stories to comfort her (cf. Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 17), which Hương now recounts as those stories were what has “kept [her] and [her] hopes alive” (17). The chapters of the two timelines alternate between one another, disrupting the general continuity of the story, but being continuous on their own. They are framed by two short chapters, similar to a prologue and an epilogue, set in the 21st century in which Hương visits her grandmother’s grave as an adult and remembers her stories and own life.

The novel focuses on the lives of a granddaughter and her grandmother, their bond, and what they and the rest of their family have experienced in mid-twentieth

⁵ The war started in 1955 and ended in 1975 (cf. Steininger 105-108).

century North Việt Nam. Diêu Lan has survived many historical events such as “the French occupation, the Japanese invasion, the Great Hunger, and the Land Reform” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 17) even before the American War began. Hương was born during the American War and has experienced its aftermath, and also learns about her family’s history through Diêu Lan’s stories.

Some of the chapters in which Diêu Lan tells Hương about her life are titled as historical events, such as “The Great Hunger” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 77) and “The Land Reform” (131), and thereby immediately showcase the time and setting these chapters will focus on. Other historical events are mentioned or implied throughout the novel, often ones which have “not yet been sufficiently documented in Vietnamese fiction” (Nguyễn Phan, “Climbing many Mountains” n.pag.) and therefore the trauma resulting from those has also not been considered yet. These events Diêu Lan has survived have led her to make difficult decisions for her and her family and have also shaped her life and identity.

All of the characters in this novel experience some kind of trauma or are witness to traumatic memories triggered by war, loss, grief, political and social shifts and much more. Most, if not all, of their trauma would be recognised as such by trauma theory because it is triggered by mostly unexpected and sudden life-threatening, world-shattering, or other impactful events that leave their traces on the characters’ identities and lives. What kind of traumas the characters have suffered and how historical and political events play into their trauma will be focused on.

Diêu Lan experiences many sudden and unexpected world-shattering and identity-shaping traumatic events, which are almost all induced or affected by historical events. The first traumatic event Diêu Lan has witnessed was the murder of her father by Japanese soldiers. Diêu Lan begins this part of her story by stating that “one day during the winter of 1942, [her] life changed” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 32) and goes on by telling Hương about her, her father’s and her brother’s journey to Hà Nội to sell potatoes. One night on their journey, they see Japanese soldiers from afar and want to turn to avoid them, but it is not possible anymore as they were “[s]andwiched between two groups of [them]” (39). Her father tells Diêu Lan’s brother: “Hurry. Take your sister. Hide by the roadside. Choose the thickest bush. Whatever happens, don’t come out until I say so” (39), leaving the siblings to watch their father encounter the Japanese soldiers. Diêu Lan refers to one of the soldiers as ‘Black Eye’ because he has one (cf. 40), who does not believe her father that the potatoes are for his customers, but thinks them to be for either

the “Việt Minh guerrillas”⁶ (78) or the French, which Black Eye believes to be a betrayal. So, Diêu Lan and her brother have to witness their father’s head “thump[ing] down the road, rolling, his eyes wide with terror” (79). Diêu Lan knows at the time of telling Hương this story that her father “died protecting [her and her brother]” (79), but at that time Diêu Lan “blamed [herself] for [her] father’s death [because] [i]f [she] hadn’t been driving the cart, [they] would have gone faster, and [her] father wouldn’t have met Black Eye” (80).

This guilt about her father’s death and the need to understand Black Eye’s actions have led Diêu Lan to “learn about the Japanese” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 77), because she thought there to be a reason. But “[t]he more [she] read, the more [she] became afraid of wars” (79), as war turns “people into monster” (79) and one of those monsters killed her father. This event and the suffering have led Diêu Lan and her family to avoid leaving their village, because they did not want to get into the cross-fire between “the Việt Minh, the French, and the Japanese” (80). However, it will not be the first suffering she has to face.

That is, because the next traumatic event in Diêu Lan’s life has happened during the Great Hunger⁷ of 1945 – also called the Great Famine, or in Vietnamese *Nạn đói năm Ất Dậu* (cf. Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 80). The Japanese invaders have raided the villages in the North and left them with no crops to harvest, food to eat, or water to drink (cf. 81-82). Diêu Lan knows that she had to do something to keep her family alive because waiting for food from the south was needless since “Japan and America had been fighting in other parts of the world, and now American bombs had exploded onto [Vietnamese] land, destroying shipping lines, ports, roads, and railways” (82). Hence, her mother and Diêu Lan have gone to search for food in their famished states and came upon a field of corn plants (cf. 87-88). Then, however, the owner of the land finds them and instead of helping and giving them some corn to survive, he raises his whip and whips them. Diêu Lan tries to shield her mother from the lashes, and they try to apologies to the man – whom was called ‘Wicked Ghost’ (cf. 88) – but he did not listen. Rather,

he turned his whip on [Diêu Lan’s mother], spattering blood into the air. ‘Forgive and let you steal all my corn? Forgive and see the mob come out here and make me hungry?’ His kick sent [her mother] sprawling. ‘Mama!’ [Diêu Lan] jumped toward her. Pieces of flesh had been ripped away from her skull and neck. Blood was streaming down her face. [...] ‘Don’t beat my Mama, I beg you. I’m the one that took her here. I’m the one who stole your corn.’ The whip lashed down, knocking Diêu Lan to the ground. (89)

⁶ The Việt Minh were a communist organisation formed by Hồ Chí Minh to bring about the independence of Việt Nam (cf. Steininger 6-7).

⁷ The Great Hunger was caused by the French and the Japanese invaders and “affected 32 provinces across colonial Tonkin and Annam, reducing the population of what is now northern and central Vietnam by an estimated 15 percent” (MacLean 188).

When Diêu Lan comes back to consciousness, she is tied up and her mother lies unmoving and dead near her (cf. Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 89-90). A man who worked for Wicked Ghost helps her get away, but she was devastated by her mother's death and knew that "[b]lood had to be paid by blood" (90). Afterwards, Diêu Lan suffers from nightmares and guilt for months, seeing "[her mother] slumped against cracked soil" (91) in her sleep and waking up "screaming, telling [her mother] that [she] was sorry for not being able to save her" (91-92). The traumatic memories from this event haunt her, and at the same time Diêu Lan "was twenty-five years old, and had seen both [her] parents murdered" (92).

Then came the Land Reform⁸ in North Việt Nam and Diêu Lan's husband, Hùng, was one of its first victims. He was poisoned at one of the Việt Minh meetings and died (cf. Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 131-135) because he did not share all of their views. Later, Diêu Lan "heard plenty of rumors that the Việt Minh was getting rid of its anticommunist members, as well as intellectuals and the rich. The Party had to belong to farmers and workers, not to a member of the bourgeoisie like Hùng" (135). The death of her husband left Diêu Lan feeling "like a broken shell" (136) and has wrecked her, but she knows that she "had to stay strong for [her] children" (136). She also hopes that to be the last turbulence of their life (cf. 136), but that would not be the case.

That is, because the Land Reform also took from Diêu Lan her brother, her oldest son Minh, as well as their home. Apart from a few of their workers, the villagers turned their back on Diêu Lan's family and shouted to "[k]ill them all, the wicked landowners" (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 140), and that is what they did: they killed Diêu Lan's brother Công and also almost killed her son Minh, if he had not been able to escape (cf. 147). Diêu Lan would have most likely been next, if she had not been able to escape with her other five children in time. She was scared and terrified, devastated about the loss of her brother and hopeful yet worried about her son Minh, which all added to her trauma.

Diêu Lan tells Hương that she will never read about the Land Reform in any of her textbooks for school. That is because

[a] part of [their] country's history has been erased, together with the lives of countless people. [They]'re forbidden to talk about events that relate to mistakes or the wrongdoing of those in power, for they give themselves the right to rewrite history. But [Hương's] old enough to know that history will write itself in people's memories, and as long as those memories live on, [they] can have faith that [they] can do better. (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 166)

⁸ It "was a program to abolish landlordism and place the land in the hands of peasant smallholders" (Moise 70) and thereby not shying away from any means of ridding themselves off the bourgeoisie.

With this statement not only the forced forgetting and oppression of memory is criticised, but at the same time this part of the novel indirectly states one of the novel's aims: to not only reappraise this forgotten – and forbidden – history of Việt Nam, but also to add to Vietnamese collective and cultural memory; to re-member what was forced to be forgotten and thereby shape the future by bringing the past to the present. It does so in a subtle way, by Diêu Lan addressing Hương for example, but still shows the imbalance of what is remembered – and not only in the West, but in Việt Nam itself.

After the Land Reform, Diêu Lan has gone through many more struggles. One was that she had to leave all but one of her children behind on her journey to Hà Nội, because she would not have been able to feed all of them, but she still feels guilty for the decisions she made even though they “have talked about [it] as a family many times” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 185). Then when the war breaks out, her remaining sons and her son-in-law get drafted and her eldest daughter Ngọc also goes to war as a nurse to find her husband. When she gets news that one of her sons, Thuận, has been ambushed and died in the war, it causes Diêu Lan to break down (cf. 50-51) and “[wail] his name, asking him to come back to her” (51) in Vietnamese, indicating her distress and grief. Diêu Lan and Hương become ostracised by their community, because Diêu Lan gives up her job as a teacher and starts working as “a *con buôn* – a trader” (53), who were deemed being “leeches living on people's blood” (53).

But good things also happen: her daughter Ngọc and son Đạt survive the war and their family starts to become more complete again. And then, in 1979, they receive a telegram which “caused [Diêu Lan] to faint” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 295): her son Minh is still alive and lives in the south. When Diêu Lan finally reconnects with her son after all these years, he is very ill, but also has a letter Thuận had written to her, making Diêu Lan ecstatic (cf. 305). Minh succumbs to his illness and dies a few days after their reconnection, but even though it shocks Diêu Lan, the joy of having found her son helps and she prays for his soul (cf. 324). All these positives really help Diêu Lan cope with the trauma she has suffered throughout her life. She has stayed positive and always puts her family first, appearing strong like a pillar others could lean on. And as Hương narrates, “only those who faced battles were entitled to trauma” (73). And Diêu Lan still had one battle left to fight.

Trauma does come back to the person suffering from it, and in Diêu Lan's case that is true in a very literal sense as at the end of the novel she encounters Wicked Ghost, the man who murdered her mother, again. Diêu Lan, Ngọc, and Hương, together with

their family friend Mr. Hải, visit the family of Hương's boyfriend Tâm because they want to get married (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 331). When Tâm's mother introduces her father "[Diệu Lan] looked up. Her lips parted. 'Ôi trời đất ơi!' She called for Heaven and Earth. She looked terrified. More terrified than [Hương's] ever seen her. 'Ôi trời đất ơi!' Mr. Hải exclaimed, and the next thing [Hương] knew, [Diệu Lan] has collapsed onto the floor" (334). As it turns out, Tâm's grandfather is Wicked Ghost, the man who killed Diệu Lan's mother. The shock she feels from this encounter is emphasised by the use of Vietnamese 'Ôi trời đất ơi', which is exclaimed twice before she passes out. Vietnamese is used all throughout the novel for sayings (cf. 284) and names. For example, when Diệu Lan goes on her journey to get her children back, she also exclaims "Ngọc ơi?" (282) in Vietnamese – meaning 'Hello, Ngọc?' – which can be interpreted as her hope and also nervousness about whether her daughter is still where she has left her, and also the uncertainty if she wants to go back with Diệu Lan. Hence, also in the case where Diệu Lan meets Wicked Ghost again, the use of Vietnamese symbolises her shock and emotions.

The family leaves Tâm's family home and goes back to Hà Nội, where – months later – Tâm and his parents visit Diệu Lan. They not only give back Diệu Lan's family's treasure, which Wicked Ghost had taken from Diệu Lan's mother after killing her, but also reveal that they did not know about the incident and that Wicked Ghost had also mistreated their family (cf. Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 337). They want to make up for the trauma Wicked Ghost had caused, but Diệu Lan forgives them as they were not at fault for Wicked Ghost's sins, and decides that Hương can marry Tâm, if she still wishes. She tells Hương that she "used to believe that blood will tell, but blood evolves and can change, too" (337), adding that "[y]oung people can't be blamed for what their ancestors did" (337). This shows that, contrary to what trauma theory states, being able to forgive can heal trauma and should be recognised. Hương also notes that "[t]here was no longer sorrow on [Diệu Lan's] face. She looked peaceful and calm; as peaceful and calm as Buddha" (337). It also shows that Diệu Lan does not want Hương's happiness to be affected by her trauma, and even though she could never forgive Wicked Ghost for what he had done (cf. 93), 'postmemory' should not affect the following generations too much.

It can be said that Diệu Lan is a character whose life, very unfortunately, was "overshadowed by violent histories" (Schwab 42), but that did not mean she decided to succumb to her suffering. She stayed strong and was a role model for Hương, who

“wanted to be like [Diệu Lan]: Never give up hope” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 326).

Hương is the character that probably suffers the least first-hand trauma when compared to other characters in the novel. However, she is the character who suffers the most second-hand trauma through family memory and being a witness to others’ trauma. Hương does experience war in her own way, as she is not a soldier or nurse like her uncles, father and mother, but she is an innocent citizen of Hà Nội, who has to experience the city being bombed. Diệu Lan and her, together with others, even leave behind their home and go to a mountain village because “[t]he bombs won’t be able to find [them] there” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 8). Contrary to others who leave for the city in December of 1972 because it was declared safe, Diệu Lan, Hương, and Diệu Lan’s students’ families stay in the village and are able to survive the Christmas Bombing of 1972⁹. Hương is very scared of the war and the bombs, and in order to “chase away fear, [she] buried [herself] in [her] book, which took [her] closer to [her] parents” (13). After returning from the village to their home, they come back to a destroyed house, which brings great sorrow to Diệu Lan and Hương, and they cry while they “searched for anything salvageable” (16). The war was not over, and because of Hương’s fear, Diệu Lan tells her stories about her life.

While listening to her grandmother’s stories, Hương feels deeply for her and the trauma she has experienced. She cries after hearing about her great-grandfather’s murder (cf. Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 79), it “pained [her] to see [...] the scars inflicted by Wicked Ghost” (298) on her grandmother’s body, and Diệu Lan’s stories make Hương realise “that the world was indeed unfair, and that [she] had to bring [her] Grandma back to her village to seek justice, perhaps even revenge” (17). All of these emotions are caused by the ‘postmemory’ Hương witnesses through Diệu Lan’s stories. She has not experienced her grandmother’s trauma herself and did not know most of the family members Diệu Lan talks about in her stories as they have already died, but that does not mean she cannot witness Diệu Lan’s trauma which passes onto her through family memory.

How traumatic memory as ‘postmemory’ can impact even the later generations is shown when Wicked Ghost turns out to be Tâm’s – Hương’s boyfriend’s – grandfather. When being told that Tâm’s grandfather is Wicked Ghost, Hương cannot believe it and is devastated. But at the same time, she knows that she “couldn’t go back to [Tâm]. [She]

⁹ The USA’s worst bombing, focused on the big cities in North Việt Nam including Hà Nội, with B-52 bombers lasted twelve days and destroyed much of the cities (cf. Steininger 54).

could no longer love him. He was the flesh and blood of [her] Grandma's worst enemy" (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 335). Hương ignores him when he comes to apologise, but nonetheless misses him deeply, even "mumbling [his] name whenever he was not with [her]" (335). But though she misses him, "[a]t the same time, [she] feared that if [she] accepted Tâm back, it would be a betrayal of [her] grandma" (335). This is how traumatic 'postmemory', as Gabriele Schwab (cf. 14) also illustrates, can affect following generations: they feel, decide, and contemplate things about an event and its impact in which they had no part, but which has affected their family. Hương is an example for this. But she gets lucky because Diệu Lan does not want her to be plagued by past mistakes from previous generations, especially when they did not know about the incident like Tâm and his parents. She gives Hương her blessing, which Hương is happy about and grateful for, so much that she "hugged [Diệu Lan]" (337).

Generational and family memories can influence a person and their identity a lot, and as Nguyễn Phan herself explains, "Hương embodies [her] own experiences growing up in Việt Nam and witnessing the war's devastating effects", as well as also representing "a generation of Vietnamese who have no choice but to inherit the trauma of war brought home by returning soldiers" ("Book Club Kit" n.pag.). And for Hương these 'returning soldiers' that impact her are her uncle and her mother.

Her mother, Ngọc, has followed her father into war as a nurse, which left Hương growing up without both of her parents. When her mother left, Hương found it fitting for her own emotions that the "Heaven cried his farewell in big drops of rain" (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 17). She was content with living with her grandmother, but she nonetheless "missed [her] parents dearly" (69) and imagined her mother returning together with her father in her dreams (cf. 70). Her father never returns, making it difficult for Hương to accept his (possible) death as "[w]here there is no grave, one cannot mourn properly [and] remains forever tied to a loss that never becomes real" (Schwab 3). But when her mother returns, it is not how Hương imagined it to be, as she asks herself "[w]here [...] [her] strong and determined mother [had] gone" (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 72). Not only her appearance had changed (cf. 71), but she also acts differently than before. At fifteen, Hương "couldn't imagine how the war had swallowed [her] mother into its stomach, churning her into someone different before spitting her out" (73-74). This experience of her mother's changes influences Hương a lot. She is scared, angry, and helpless. Her mother was home, "but not home, for she was so lost in the war, she forgot [Hương] was her own daughter" (74).

Hương witnesses her mother's nightmares and whispers about a dead baby "in jumbled sentences" (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 74), which not only depicts Ngọc's trauma, but also scares Hương as she does not believe her mother to be a murderer. When Hương experiences her mother's breakdown (cf. 76) she is stunned and does not know what to do. The only thing she knows is, that she "didn't care what war meant. [She] just wanted it to return [her] mother to [her], give [her] back [her] father and [her] uncles, and make [their] family whole again" (76). But the nightmares were not the only changes about her mother: she completely closed herself off from everyone, did not talk and seldom came out of her room (cf. 98-99). When her father's sister is finally able to talk to her mother, Hương thinks that she got better and they would have "a happy reunion lunch" (99). But instead, Ngọc gets angry, shouts at Diệu Lan for having left her and her siblings once and says that she knows "exactly how it feels and that's why [she] can't understand how [Diệu Lan] can sit [there], eating like [that]" (101). Hương is shocked and does not understand why her mother turned "into such as horrible person" (101). Then her father's sister tells Hương that she wants to tell her something Ngọc told her to say, to which Hương reacts with "She can't talk to me herself?" (102), being angry and feeling lost about her mother's little interest in her. When she then learns that her mother wants to move in with her sister-in-law, abandoning Hương for the second time, Hương is angry and hurt. She believes her mother "didn't trust [her]. She didn't think [Hương] was good enough as a daughter" (102), which influences Hương a lot. She feels worthless and betrayed by her mother, leading to her own traumatic experience caused by another's trauma. And hence, Hương does not want to have anything to do with her mother anymore, as she wants "to walk away from [her] mother's problems" (107) that also bring her pain. But she still decides to visit her regularly, in the hope of getting her mother back, but instead it only brings Hương more pain (cf. 109).

Her mother does return, but it changes nothing, as she was still not speaking to Hương. So, because Hương did not know what else to do, she goes through her mother's things one day, finding a diary. After reading it, she feels betrayed and when her mother finds her, Hương accuses her of being "a baby killer" (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 216) and that she has betrayed her husband (cf. 216). Hương does not want "to see her face" (216) and runs away, but her mother catches up with her and finally tells her what has happened: she was raped by South Vietnamese soldiers during the war, which led to a pregnancy (cf. 217) – a life-shattering traumatic event. She decided to abort the baby because she felt shameful and stained (cf. 219). When her mother reveals her secret to

Huong, she feels ashamed for having doubted her mother and is angry at herself because she “should have been able to figure [it] out” (218). She is also unable to put herself in her mother’s shoes and does not “find a single word to console her” (219). This leaves a deep influence on Huong, because it reveals to her, that war is not only fighting and surviving, but that so much more traumatic events can happen, such as rape.

This talk between mother and daughter not only brings out Ngọc’s secret, but also helps the family to get back together, as Ngọc “no longer kept herself isolated” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 220) from her family, though she still suffers from her trauma. Huong was Ngọc’s surrogate for “[displacing] the blame and rage” (Stahl 21) she has felt on someone else – in her case Huong because she did not feel worthy of her daughter anymore. Additionally, their talk shows that opening up and talking about one’s trauma can help overcome it and start the healing process, which is also what Visser (cf. 16) has claimed.

The telling of one’s story also helps Huong’s uncles Đạt and Minh come to terms with their trauma. Her uncle Đạt comes back from the war having lost both of his legs (cf. Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 125), but bringing Huong hope as he had seen her father, and also brings home a gift from him for her: a bird carved from wood called “[s]on ca [which] means ‘The Mountain Sings’” (126). This does not only reference the title of the novel, but the *son ca* was also the “type of bird [that] used to sing for [the soldiers] as [they] walked for months and months to get to the battlefields” (126). Hence, it can be argued that the novel’s title symbolises the journey into the war, which was accompanied by birds singing for the marching soldiers. Unfortunately, not many *son ca* survived the war because “the bombs and the chemical sprayed by the [USA] silenced them” (127) – the chemical being ‘Agent Orange’¹⁰.

But Đạt does not only bring hope, but also his own trauma back home. He has started to drink because it “[helped] ease things” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 128), and he also suffers from nightmares because of what he has experienced during the war (cf. 150). That he has lost his legs really made him struggle, even thinking about not going home at all (cf. 151), and when Huong hears him admit it, she “fought back tears” (151) as it pains her to hear him say something like that. She listens to him after asking him to tell her his story of the war, which shows Huong’s interest in what her family

¹⁰ A chemical used by the US that made “leaves fall off trees, so they could see [the enemy] [...] [and] also killed small living things” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 127). Later it was found out that the people exposed to Agent Orange suffered increasingly from cancer and their children were often born with disfigurements (cf. Steininger 4).

members went through. He tells her and while listening, Hương realises that it was a very dangerous journey and duty (cf. 153). She is very sorry for what he had to go through (cf. 165) and wants to comfort him. At the same time, she understands that “he had to untangle his feelings on his own, by talking out loud, so that he could understand how it was to be alive, and to be dead at the same time” (164). This also matches what decolonialised trauma theory talks about, that talking about one’s trauma helps understand it and leads to the healing process.

Hương’s uncle Minh has also suffered from trauma, but a bit differently than the rest of their family. In 1979 Diệu Lan receives a telegraph which “caused [her] to faint” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 295), as it was from her long-lost son Minh. So, the whole family went to see him in the South, where he was able to flee to after his escape from the Land Reform. When Hương sees him for the first time, he “looked like [a] skeleton of a man” (296) and she sees her grandmother, mother and uncle be happy to finally reunite with him (cf. 296). When her mother tells Hương that her uncle Minh is very sick and will not live for long, Hương’s “chest hurt for [her] Grandma” (299) who has just reunited with her son. And then Minh hands over a pack of letters that tell his story, which Hương reads to the others. It is about the struggles he has experienced by having to leave his family and birthplace behind, his journey to the South and his own family (cf. 307-314). And then it is revealed that he got drafted for “the Army of the Republic of Việt Nam” (315) in 1971, that he was afraid of having to face his siblings in the war (cf. 314-315) and that he was sent “to a reeducation camp” (316) for two years after the war has ended, because he had fought for the other side. The suspicion from the government against people who had fought for the South made him suffer discrimination and also lose his “rights as a citizen” (317). This makes Minh the only character in this novel that experiences unrecognised trauma, as the sufferings of discrimination are not officially recognised as causes of trauma according to trauma theory. After Hương is done reading the letter, she cannot believe what her uncle had gone through and is conflicted about him having fought against the rest of her family (cf. 319). Her mother is also shocked about this and does not know how to feel, but Đạt tells her that “it was the stupid war” and that she should not “let anything change” (320) the fact that Minh is still her brother. And Diệu Lan cries, and cries again when Minh succumbs to his illness a few days later (cf. 323).

Hương experiences all of this as a witness of her family’s struggles, either told to her or by her being an eyewitness to the events. That she is interested in her family’s

stories shows that she wants to know about what has “influenced [her] own biograph[y]” (Assman 183) and she decides to write it all down. Hence, after Minh’s death she narrates:

I took my notebook to the back of the house. Squatting on the ground, I wrote for an uncle I’d been robbed of, who was a leaf pushed away from its tree, but at its last moment still struggled to fall back to its roots. I wrote for Grandma, who’d hoped for the fire of war to be extinguished, only for its embers to keep burning her. I wrote for my uncles, my aunt, and my parents, who were helpless in the fight of brother against brother, and whose war went on, regardless of whether they were alive, or dead. (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 324)

By narrating this, Hương emphasises the struggles of her family, their losses, their grief, their trauma, and their reconciliation. It also showcases the emotional narrative and Hương’s perception of the events and her feelings toward her family. It is the perspective of the youngest family member, who is eager to learn about the other generations’ experiences, and the older Hương becomes, the more aware she is of the effects these experiences had.

The depiction of the characters’ trauma under Hương’s perception and narration contrast with trauma theory’s statement of an unconventional and experimental use of language. No trauma has been depicted by the use of syntactical or semantic oddities, but it is shown directly, even mentioned by the character themselves (cf. Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 150). For Nguyễn Phan, the use of the Vietnamese language and diacritical marks not only illustrate the culture and history the novel is based on but are “as important as the roof of a home” (“Book Club Kit” n.pag.). Additionally, the author has voiced that by “reading *The Mountains Sing*, [the reader] already show[s] [their] acceptance and appreciation of [her] mother tongue’s beauty and complexity” (n.pag.), as well as Vietnamese history and culture.

The historical and political events of and in Việt Nam impact the characters and their traumas quite heavily, as all of the trauma and traumatic memories they suffer would not have occurred, if not for political shifts and historical events. As the novel especially focuses on North Vietnamese history and events – narrating them openly and directly – it not only reappraises and sheds light on North Vietnamese history and lives from a marginalised perspective, but also shows how ordinary people, who in the West have often been connoted as the enemy or as ‘other’, have been impacted by global and communal politics as well as historical events. Because of the novel’s focus on an ordinary family, especially its women and children who have not gone to war, it brings “to life the underrepresented women and children who often suffer the consequences of war the most but must hide their sorrows to become pillars of strength and comfort for returning soldiers” (Nguyễn Phan, “Climbing many Mountains” n.pag.).

It is also a kind of counter-narrative, as the novel depicts another, marginalised perspective on the war, trying to make sense of it and engaging “with [...] its traumatic effects” (Buelens et al. 5). Moreover, *The Mountains Sing* also responds to Hollywood films and other Western media that often depict Việt Nam “as a place of war” and the Vietnamese people as “simple, naïve, cruel, or opportunistic” (Nguyễn Phan, “Climbing many Mountains” n.pag.). The novel counters the “lack of voices from inside Việt Nam” (n.pag.) in the literary canon of war and post-war stories, and also focuses on additional North Vietnamese history that is insufficiently represented.

The trauma represented in the novel, apart from the discrimination Minh suffers, is what theory would recognise as trauma, since the characters’ traumas are triggered by sudden life-threatening, world-shattering or identity-shaping events such as war, rape, abortion, being a murder witness, and loss, which show themselves belatedly in the form of nightmares or changes in character. Hương is the only character that does not suffer trauma first-hand apart from experiencing the bombing of Hà Nội, but she experiences trauma through family and generational memory as well as ‘postmemory’. And what Diêu Lan tells Hương does not only ring true for her life’s stories, but also for stories about history as well: “there’s only one way we can talk about war: honestly. Only through honesty can we learn about the truth” (Nguyễn Phan, *The Mountains Sing* 79).

4 Unrecognised Trauma in *Pachinko*

Whereas *The Mountains Sing* depicts trauma and history of an ordinary family in 20th century Việt Nam, Min Jin Lee’s *Pachinko* portrays trauma by “[chronicling] four generations of an ethnic Korean family, first in Japanese-occupied Korea in the early 20th century, then in Japan [...] from the years before World War II to the late 1980s” (K. Lee 18). It is a multigenerational tale of an ordinary family that focuses on the crucial and shaping events, often induced or affected by historical and political happenings, in the various characters’ lives. The novel is split into three parts – or ‘books’ rather – which are called “Book I: *Gohyang*/Hometown” (M. Lee 1), “Book II: Motherland” (163), and “Book III: *Pachinko*¹¹” (358) respectively. Its narrator is omniscient and constantly changes between different characters’ perspectives. The narrator does mostly focus on

¹¹ Pachinko is a pinball-like game, mostly operated by those of Korean descent, which was the only “route to economic improvement” (Soble n.pag.) for Koreans in Japan.

the main characters of the novel, but also shows the perspective of minor characters – switching between these perspectives in chapters and sometimes even paragraphs.

The novel's setting is the “fishing village of Yeongdo” (M. Lee 3) in the south of Korea for the majority of ‘Book I’, and then Japan for the rest of the novel in ‘Book II’ and ‘Book III’, and thereby depicts the Korean and Korean-Japanese experience in Japan during most of the 20th century. These were times of occupations, change, migration, war and finding a home in a discriminatory country and society. The characters struggle, face language barriers, discrimination, racism, (family) conflict and change throughout the years, most of them affected or caused by historical or political events. The traumas they suffer through these experiences are not necessarily recognised as ‘valid’ trauma in general trauma theory, because they are not triggered by sudden life-threatening or world-shattering events. But they are traumas nonetheless and ought to be recognised as such.

Contrary to *The Mountains Sing*, in which the chapters jump between the two timelines, *Pachinko* tells its story linear, starting in 1910 in Korea and ending in 1989 in Japan. This is almost the complete life-span of Sunja's, one of the main characters, life. Sunja is like the ‘red thread’ of the novel that makes everything and everyone connect, but also the cause for how her family's life turned out. She was born a few years after the beginning of the Japanese occupation of Korea, which lasted from 1910 to 1945 (cf. Tai 357). In her teens she gets entangled with two men “Hansu, the married man who seduces her, and Isak, the gentle Christian pastor she marries” (Bigman 21), which “sets in motions generations of struggle” (21). Pregnant with Hansu's baby but married to Isak, she emigrates to Japan in 1933, a time at which “Koreans living in Japan face systematic discrimination, are confined to ghettos, and watched closely by the state” (Krull 67). In the following decades, she “survives the imprisonment of her husband, wartime deprivation and discrimination against [her and] her two sons, Noa and Mozasu, who as both Korean and Christian are doubly disenfranchised” (Bigman 21).

She faces many struggles during her life, but always tries to stay positive and looks for a solution. This is also why Bigman calls her “noble and long-suffering” (21), because no matter what she faces, she tries to make the best of it. As a reader, one spends a lot of time with Sunja and follows her from her teenage years all the way to old age (cf. Krull 72), and in this time, she is “so many different people in a way that's universal” (72), which makes her life and her struggles relatable for multiple generations.

But even though she suffers discrimination in Japan, Sunja always tries to solve problems herself without relying too much on others. For example, after her husband Isak

is arrested, “Sunja assumes responsibility for the financial well-being [of her family], making and selling kimchi¹² at the train station” (Munson 55), especially as she “had to consider what would happen if the unthinkable occurred” (M. Lee 175) – meaning Isak’s death. Later, she is offered to sell her kimchi to a restaurant (cf. 181-182), but it turns out that it was Hansu – Noa’s biological father and associated with the *yakuza*¹³ – who has helped her behind her back (cf. 218). Though she is not happy to be entangled with Hansu again, the job would ensure a steady income for her family (cf. 183). This would resolve their financial struggles, and by producing the kimchi at the restaurant, their house would not smell of it anymore, which would also lessen the bullying Noa has to endure at school because of the smell (cf. 183). She weighs her options, but decides to go with the one most beneficial for her family, thereby disregarding her own traumatic memories about her own experience with Hansu.

Even though as a Korean she faces discrimination, social injustice, and racism all her life, Sunja stays pretty close to her Korean roots. She speaks little, very simple and broken Japanese, which is for instance emphasised, when she talks to Hansu’s wife: “No money, no food. Speak Koh Hansu, please. Please” (M. Lee 351). His wife believes her to be “insistent like [an] unruly [child]” (351) and sends for a Korean employee to translate. Apart from this showing the Japanese attitude that “Koreans were worth so little, fit only for the dirty, dangerous, and demeaning tasks” (343), it also shows how difficult it was to get by in Japanese society, if an individual’s educational background was insufficient and they had never learnt ‘proper’ Japanese.

Additionally, it was also very difficult for Sunja to leave her home country, and thereby leaving her mother. She always worries about her mother, for example when she hears about World War II from Hansu and asks whether her “mother [is] all right” (M. Lee 222). She hopes to go back to Yeongdo after the war, but then Hansu brings her mother to Japan because Korea is in a very bad state as well. Even her mother tells her that “there was nothing left” (234) in Yeongdo, so there is nothing for Sunja to go back to. This is difficult for Sunja to accept, but she, again, makes the best out of it.

The trauma Sunja experiences is often only alluded to by context and content of the novel, but there are also some instances where she is devastated or visibly suffering. One of these instances is after her son Noa finds out about his biological father and cuts ties with the family. Sunja is so devastated that she visits Hansu’s house, where his

¹² Kimchi is a Korean side dish out of fermented cabbage, which is quite spicy and eaten with pretty much every meal.

¹³ The name of the Japanese crime syndicate.

Japanese wife answers and believes her to be a Korean “beggar [...] who wanted money” (M. Lee. 351). And instead of telling her where Hansu is, his wife is hostile and rather wants to know how Sunja knows where he lives (cf. 351-353), probably not liking that a Korean knows about it. This shows how little the Japanese thought of Koreans living in their country and the discrimination those of Korean descent had to face. This underlines, that even when in need of help, Koreans did not receive any because of the Japanese’s hostility and discrimination against them.

Sunja is so affected by Noa’s decision that it results in years of trying to find him again. She has known that Noa suffered a lot because of his ethnic background and wants to be acknowledged in Japanese society, even though ‘good Koreans’ are still seen as “a stained race” (Bigman 21). When she finds him and visits him, she is happy that he is doing well, though a bit surprised that he, like his brother Mozasu, is working in the pachinko business (cf. M. Lee 420). They talk and she learns that Noa has completely left behind his Korean heritage, making her ask him whether “[i]t is so terrible to be Korean” (424). They talk and she believes that “[i]t went well” (425), but the next morning she receives a call that Noa has killed himself after she left (cf. 426). Though it is never narrated, she probably feels guilty and asks herself whether she was the reason of his suicide, since she hopes for Noa and Isak to have reconciled in death (cf. 529). This guilt is probably also increased when even her own mother blames her for Noa’s end shortly before her death (cf. 459). She never gets over losing her son this way and carries a key ring with his photograph with her at all times (cf. 530). But when she finds out that Noa has visited Isak’s grave every year, even though he had cut ties with the family, it gives Sunja closure as she believes her son and husband must have reconciled and buries Noa’s photograph next to Isak’s tombstone (531). With this, she overcomes, or at least heals from, the trauma caused by her son’s death, and forgives him and maybe even herself.

Noa, Sunja’s eldest son, is the character struggling the most with the oppression of Koreans in Japanese society. He is bullied in school for smelling like kimchi, but tries his best by working hard and receiving a good education (cf. 183). All his teachers are impressed by his progress and Japanese the older he gets, but at the same time he is unable to read Korean (cf. M. Lee 234) – the mother tongue of his mother. This indicates Noa’s want to be seen as a ‘good’ Korean by straying away from his Korean ethnicity and becoming more Japanese. He also holds a very low opinion of the pachinko business, as it is associated with the yakuza and ‘bad Koreans’, and hence would not want to work there but rather “in a Japanese office and have a desk job” (267).

When he was little he suffered from being Korean, and kept it a secret that he “wanted to be Japanese” (M. Lee 196). But in university he “knew well enough from schools past that the Japanese didn’t want much to do with Koreans, so Noa kept to himself” (305). But instead of wanting to change himself like before, “he didn’t care about being Korean or Japanese” (341) in university, but just wanted to be himself. He understands this when his university girlfriend, a Japanese girl, tries to make him understand that she does not mind him being of Korean descent, and Noa realises that “[s]he would always believe that he was someone else, that he wasn’t himself but some fanciful idea of a foreign person” (341) and she just wanted to come across as a liberal and good person. This shows that even people saying that they do not discriminate against Koreans and do not mind being friends or associates of them still treat them “as second class” (Tai 357). It really affects Noa because he had loved her and thought her to be different, but was in the end let down – again – by Japanese society.

As it turns out, however, his attitude towards his identity only came about because he thought to come from a good family and made something out of himself by attending Waseda University¹⁴ out of his own effort. This is challenged when he finds out about the secret being kept from him by his mother. When he finds out about Hansu being his biological father, that the benefactor financing his university life is actually more than a family-friend, he feels lost and betrayed and confronts Sunja (cf. 342). Sunja has kept this secret from him and let him believe that Isak is his biological father, because she thought it unnecessary as it was clear to her that Isak was his father (cf. M. Lee 344). She also feared “that the secret will destroy him” (Bigman 21), as Noa really looked up to Isak. Sunja tries to explain the circumstances to him and that his biological father does not matter, but “Noa [acts] like he didn’t even hear her” (M. Lee 344). The fact that his biological father is part of the yakuza shatters Noa’s worldview and memories. He tells his mother that “[a]ll the worst Koreans are members of these gangs” (345) and that he will “never be able to wash [the] dirt from [his] name” (345) by having accepted Hansu’s money. Noa goes on saying:

All my life, I have had Japanese telling me that my blood is Korean – that Koreans are angry, violent, cunning, and deceitful criminals. All my life, I had to endure this. I tried to be honest and humble as Baek Isak was; I never raised my voice. But this blood, my blood is Korean, and now I learn that my blood is yakuza blood. I can never change this, no matter what I do. It would have been better if I were never born. How could you have ruined my life? How could you be so imprudent? A foolish mother and a criminal father. I am cursed. (345)

¹⁴ One of Japan’s most prestigious universities.

With this statement he not only emphasises the trauma he had to suffer, but also how those of Korean descent were treated in Japan because of its monoethnic ideology. By finding out that he was lied to and that the man he has looked up to and aspired to become was not his ‘real’ father, all of his hopes and memories come crashing down on him. He blames his mother for everything, even insulting her, as who he thought to be was not true anymore, claiming that Sunja “took [his] life away [and] [he] is no longer [himself]” (M. Lee 346). He is unable to come to terms with this revelation, which leaves a traumatic imprint on him, as trauma can also be caused by “the betrayal of a promise or an expectation” (Edkins 109). So, the only solution he finds is cutting ties with his family, rejecting any kind of discussion, and therefore fails to mourn his thought-to-be identity.

Noa hence decides to go by his Japanese name ‘Nobuo Bando’ (cf. M. Lee 362), tries “to conceal [his] Korean ancestry” (Bigman 21), moves away to Nagano and starts all over, taking on the identity of a Japanese man. He gets a job in a pachinko parlour, but only because his employer believes him to be Japanese as he “[does] not hire foreigners” (M. Lee 362). He is thereby forced “to pass as Japanese” (Tai 356), even in a business usually dominated by Koreans. This also shows how Japan’s monoethnic ideology affects Koreans and makes them pretend to be someone else just to get a job and survive. He builds himself a completely new life, keeping to himself, marrying a Japanese woman and having four children, without ever telling anyone about his real identity or ethnicity (cf. M. Lee 424). But because of this choice of living as a Japanese person, he has “to live in [constant] fear of discovery” (Bigman 21). His fear of discrimination and being seen as a ‘filthy and low Korean’ overthrows everything else, which implies that his trauma runs so deep that he rather erases his identity and background than to live as someone of Korean descent. He was even able to become a Japanese citizen because “[i]t is always possible” (M. Lee 425) somehow.

But after Sunja finds him and apologises again, it seems that all of his decisions and the struggle that “no one [in his new life] can know” (M. Lee 424) have become too much for Noa and he decides to commit suicide. Interestingly, the narrative never gives any reason or shows the other characters’ immediate reactions to this news, but jumps one year ahead to the next important event in a character’s life.

Noa’s decision can be interpreted as one of the consequences Stahl has explained for trauma-induced melancholia (21), as it can lead to suicide. Hence, Noa surely suffered trauma caused by discrimination, political oppression, and other forms of micro-aggressions – all unrecognised triggers of trauma. He just wanted to be himself (cf. M. Lee 341)

and not be discriminated against, but that hope failed. So, he tried to minimise and erase these oppressions by becoming Japanese when he had the chance, but that put another kind of pressure on him. By disregarding his ethnicity and family, he does not carry on their memory. He struggles with his identity because of that, as memories, whether family, collective or cultural memory, influence a person's identity and shape them; but disregarding them can lead to a traumatic identity crisis, which Noa experiences. So, it is possible, that when his new and old life collided by his mother visiting him, everything became too much and the only possibility he saw was taking his own life.

In complete contrast to Noa, his younger brother Mozasu accepts and embraces his background and ethnicity and builds a life for himself with the opportunities he was given, though he has also experienced trauma. He believes that there was no chance hiding his identity as he has “a first name from a Western religion, an obvious Korean surname, and [a] ghetto address” (M. Lee 269), so he does not even try. Mozasu is not as ambitious in school as his older brother, and he actually thinks that “[s]chool was a misery” (267) and his “teachers called him a Korean fool” (267), thereby indirectly attributing his disinterest in school to his ethnicity. He decides to “no longer [give] a shit” (269) about how he is viewed and thereby tries to counter-act the racism and discrimination he suffers. He did not go to university, but instead has started working at a pachinko parlour when he was sixteen. There, he not only “learned more about the world than in all his years of school” (281), but also was able to climb up the ladder of success, becoming a manager at the age of twenty-one (cf. 312). Over the years Mozasu is able to make “a career out of [the] popular if seedy phenomenon [...] *pachinko*” (Bigman 21), accumulating wealth by “setting up such parlors” (21) and climbed the social ladder to being one “among Japan's wealthy elite, living in a palatial home filled with Western luxury goods and even hiring a famous pop singer to perform at his son's extravagant birthday party” (Munson 57).

But even though he was able to achieve all of this, he and his family were still facing micro-aggressions and discrimination because of their Korean ethnicity and him being in the pachinko business. He tells his girlfriend that “at a ward office, a clerk told [him] that [he] was a guest in [their] country” (M. Lee 437) and that he had accepted the constant fear of deportation. He believes the only way to survive is by adapting to Japan's rules (cf. 437) and that it is something everyone of Korean descent must learn. That does not mean that Mozasu likes the treatment and discrimination he and his family experience, jokingly – or not so jokingly – telling his son Solomon after his completed registration on

his fourteenth birthday that they will “get [his] dog tags” (437), implying the leash the Japanese government has on every Korean’s life. But, though it bothers him and he suffers under the constant oppression, Mozasu makes the best out of these dire circumstances, deciding not to succumb to the trauma they ensue. Nonetheless, he wants a better life for his son, and for Solomon not to take over his pachinko business, as society looks down on it and associates it with criminal activities (cf. 505). This shows that he does not want his traumatic memories to be passed onto the next generation, and also not for them to suffer ‘postmemory’ from them.

The difference between how these two brothers handle their background shows, how different a life can turn out just by reacting differently to the trauma induced by racism, discrimination, and political oppression. Like Noa, one can chose to try to impress the oppressor or discard one’s identity when something happens or does not fit the social norm, which can cause other sufferings. Or be like Mozasu, accept the situation, make the best out of it, and be able to provide for one’s family and give the next generations better opportunities. Whichever way one choses, trauma will always be part of it. But how one choses to deal with their trauma is what matters.

Mozasu’s son Solomon has grown up in a different environment than his father and uncle. Due to Mozasu’s success in the pachinko business, Solomon has known wealth, shown by his father being able to hire a popular singer for his fourteenth birthday party (cf. M. Lee 447). He also goes to “the international school in Yokohama” (446), his friends are the “sons and daughters of diplomats, bankers, and wealthy expatriates from America and Europe” (446), and he is able to go to university in New York too (cf. 473). However, even though his circumstances growing up were different to those of his father and uncle, he is nonetheless an ‘alien’ in Japanese society and faces discrimination.

On his fourteenth birthday he has to go get fingerprinted and “must register with the Japanese government as a ‘resident alien’” (Munson 57). Apart from the fact that fingerprinting is generally associated with criminals (cf. Bigman 21), he now lives in fear of deportation and has to “request permission to stay in Japan” (21) – the country of his birth. At his age, Solomon is unaware of the gravity of this process, even telling a clerk the origin of his name (cf. M. Lee 435), as his father had not warned him about it because nobody can “change his fate” (437) of being of Korean descent living in Japan. It is how Japanese law works, and even the clerk says that “fingerprints and registration cards are vitally important for government records” (438) and that there is “no need to feel insulted by this [process]” (438), though it is exactly that: insulting and humiliating. After

understanding what this process implies, Solomon is wary and asks whether they can really deport him (cf. 451). It is the first time Solomon encounters and understands discrimination, and the fact that he is an 'alien' in Japanese society is underlined by the fact that the ink he had to use for the fingerprints sticks to his fingernails and has to be scrubbed off (cf. 451).

After returning from New York for university, he is able to get a job at a British bank and even receives "benefits of being hired as an expat rather than a local" (M. Lee 481). "As a Korean Japanese educated in the States, Solomon was both a local and a foreigner, with the useful knowledge of the native and the financial privileges of an expatriate" (482), letting him hope for his life to only get better, but unfortunately, even with his academic background and working at a foreign bank, he is still discriminated against for being of Korean descent. At the bank, without Solomon ever saying anything, people know about Mozasu being in the pachinko business because "[i]n Japan, [one's] either a rich Korean or a poor Korean, and if [one is] a rich Korean, there's a pachinko parlor in [one's] background somewhere" (491-492). Solomon is startled and tries to rebut the accusation against his father being a shady businessman, but without any success (cf. 492-493). This shows that even in 1989 there were no changes in the treatment of Koreans and those of their descent in Japan. They were still viewed as 'other' or were the victims of exploitation. This also happens to Solomon, who gets fired from his job after he had made an arrangement with his father's old boss being the middleman of the sale, because the Korean lady selling the land only wanted to sell it to another Korean. A few days after the sale, the lady dies and Solomon is let go because "they weren't looking for a run-in with the yaks" (508), indirectly accusing his father's friend of being a member of the yakuza and having killed the lady. This is when Solomon realises that they "brought [him] in on purpose [b]ecause [they] wanted [him] to get the Korean lady to sell" (509). They used his ethnicity and connections, but when something unexpected happened, Solomon is the one to shoulder the 'blame' and his ethnicity is the reason for it all. This shows the extreme prejudices and discrimination Korean-Japanese people had to endure and suffer from. It affects their identity, beliefs, memory and life to be treated like that, which could take a toll on them.

In the end, Solomon decides to go into the pachinko business. Mozasu did not ever want him to go into it because he never wanted anyone "to look down at [his] son" (M. Lee 525), but Solomon is fixed on taking the business over from his father. He wants to stay in Japan because he "was Japanese, too, even if the Japanese didn't think so" and

believed there to be “more to being something than just blood” (522). He knows his father wanted something ‘better’ for him – to break out of this cycle of oppression and discrimination – but he is tired of the discrimination. Even though no real reason for this decision is narrated, it is possible that he wants to accept his *zainichi*¹⁵ or Korean-Japanese identity, facing the discrimination head-on and also following in his father’s footsteps at the same time. Thereby, he carries on generational and family memory of life as someone of Korean descent being born and living in Japan. He accepts the political and social circumstances and lives with his own trauma as well as that of past generations. Therefore, he embodies ‘postmemory’ as well as first-hand experiences of trauma.

All of *Pachinko*’s characters suffer mostly unrecognised trauma caused by what is classified as ‘micro-aggressions’, as they “face constant discrimination” (Dilworth and Morefoot n.pag.), racism, as well as social and political oppression. Though they are unrecognised in theory, these experiences affect them. In contrast to *The Mountains Sing*, in which trauma is shown very explicitly and is directly talked about, it is expressed and narrated in a very subtle and undetected way in *Pachinko*. There are few instances where a character’s emotions get out of hand and traumatising events are narrated, one example for this is when Noa confronts Sunja about Hansu being his biological father (cf. M. Lee. 342-346). Otherwise, one is only able to pick up on a character’s trauma through context and some remarks, as when Mozasu calls the registration cards ‘dog tags’ (cf. 437). Noa is the only character for whom theory might recognise part of his trauma as ‘valid’, as the feeling of betrayal (cf. Edkins 109) and suicide most likely caused by melancholia (cf. Stahl 21) are recognised trauma sufferings.

Most, if not all, trauma in *Pachinko* is influenced to some extent by historical or political events the characters have no control over. Sunja’s move from Korea to Japan, for example, was influenced by the Japanese occupation of Korea. With the defeat of the Japanese in World War II, the Koreans living in Japan were stripped of any rights and chances they had, because they could no longer be called ‘Japanese colonial nationals’, and “were placed in an insecure legal category” (Tai 358). But, unlike in *The Mountains Sing*, the characters’ trauma is linked to historical events contextually as a figure of cause-and-effect, as they do not experience the events first-hand. They are experienced belatedly, which affects their generational, family, and cultural memory, which can also lead to ‘postmemory’. Solomon for example does experience ‘postmemory’ as he is still

¹⁵ The literal translation of ‘*zainichi*’ “would be ‘residing in Japan,’ [...] but the term refers almost always [...] to a population of colonial-era migrants from the Korean peninsula that settled in the Japanese archipelago and their descendants” (Lie x).

affected by being of Korean descent over 50 years after his grandmother Sunja came to Japan.

Global history is seldom directly mentioned in *Pachinko*, as everything in the novel is depicted “exclusively from the perspective of the main characters, ordinary people with a very limited understanding of the world beyond their immediate experience” (Munson 54). However, any events that would or could affect their lives are always found out, for example when Hansu warns Sunja about World War II soon reaching Japan and helps her and her family to flee to the countryside in time (cf. Lee, M.J. 220-223). But even though they are mentioned incidentally, none of these global historical events are discussed in-depth. This not only shows the novel’s focus on the characters’ struggles with the omnipresent discrimination, oppression, and racism, but also their “will to survive in a country often hostile to their very existence” (Newell 68). Nonetheless, historical and political events do affect the character’s lives, and sometimes they themselves casually mention them, like when Solomon alludes to the possibility of becoming a Japanese citizen by naturalisation¹⁶.

Similarly to *The Mountains Sing*, *Pachinko* also does not use any experimental syntax or semantics for depicting trauma and thereby matches decolonised trauma theory’s beliefs (cf. Craps, “Beyond Eurocentrism” 50). Additionally, the omniscient and continuous narrative “often skips years ahead from one chapter to the next, focusing on the next major conflict in a character’s path” (Newell 68), which can affect the narration of an event’s effects, like when Noa commits suicide and only Sunja hearing this news (cf. M. Lee 426) is narrated, but not her reaction. This might cause the narration to feel distant and dry, as it can feel as though things are missing from the story. On the other hand, Min Jin Lee has explained that she has chosen this form of narrating because she believes that “you don’t have to give a reader everything they know; they can fill in the blanks for you” (Krull 71).

By choosing to focus on a marginalised, non-Western minority that is still insufficiently remembered and represented, *Pachinko* reappraises the history of Korean-Japanese people. That there is a need for reappraisal of their history is also explicitly mentioned in the novel as its first sentence is: “History has failed us, but no matter” (M. Lee 3). This already shows the imbalance of what is remembered about that time in history and what is not, as Munson believes that “the author refers to what [one] might think of

¹⁶ Naturalisation “required assimilation and the adoption of a Japanese identity” (Tai 355), implying that they would completely lose any ties to their Korean ethnicity.

as ‘history with a capital H’” (57), meaning the study of history as a subject. As the story focuses on an ordinary family and its struggles through generations, the history and the treatment of Koreans in Japan are reappraised, which not only adds to Japanese and Korean cultural memory, but also to the global one.

5 Conclusion

The Mountains Sing and *Pachinko* not only depict trauma and its effects, but also reappraise parts of history often forgotten or insufficiently talked about from a marginalised perspective of an ordinary family just trying to live their life and survive, but having to overcome many historically and politically induced struggles respectively. Trauma and traumatic memory are themes in both novels, though they are much more discussed, narrated, and directly mentioned in *The Mountains Sing* than in *Pachinko*. This may or may not be because theory classifies the characters’ traumas differently, and generally accepts or recognises the sufferings in *The Mountains Sing* as trauma, which is not the case for the sufferings the characters experience in *Pachinko*. This differentiation is something that theorists like Craps, who call for a shift and broader inclusiveness in trauma theory, strive for: decolonialising trauma theory and including sufferings such as micro-aggressions like discrimination and racism as trauma triggers, with the focus on that of marginalised and minority populations, groups, and people – mostly from non-Western countries. By doing that, these theorists want to give these groups back their voices, also regarding their take on trauma and its recovery, without pressuring and pushing them onto Western standards and a Westernised approach to these topics.

And this is what *Pachinko* and *The Mountains Sing* accomplish: These novels give voice to the historically and politically induced trauma suffered by Korean and Vietnamese people through the perspectives and experiences of the novels’ characters and thereby not only help the historical reappraisal of these events by adding a marginalised perspective on the matter, but also by showing the imbalance of what and who is being remembered. The novels depict the lives of ordinary people living in the 20th century in Japan and Việt Nam respectively, and how they deal with the events of that time. As both novels focus on the lives of ordinary families, they do not give voice to important, well-known, or heard-off people, but to the ones not mentioned in History textbooks and therefore seldom remembered. The characters’ stories represent the ones that are told from generation to generation in a family, and if not recorded they will one day not be remembered

at all. Because of the novels' perspectives of that of ordinary families struggling with traumatic memories and having to face traumatic events, one might question whether these events might have happened to one's own family, if not due to one's geographical location; or if a family or person has experienced something similar, they are able to relate to the sufferings even more.

Both novels shed light on events and people seldom focused on in history. *The Mountains Sing* depicts how the American War in Việt Nam has affected Vietnamese families and the nation, with a focus on the events that happened in North Việt Nam – before, during, and after the war – which is a perspective not often voiced, also due to a lot of information having been withheld from the public until now. In *The Mountains Sing* it is for example mentioned, that the Land Reform is not addressed in school textbooks and talking about it was forbidden. And in *Pachinko* the focus is on the lives of Koreans and those of Korean descent in Japan, a minority group not only overlooked globally but in Japan itself. This insufficient focus on this minority group is already stated with *Pachinko*'s opening line “History has failed us, but no matter” (M. Lee 3). *Pachinko* hence sheds light on the struggles of Korean, *zainichi*, and Korean-Japanese people, the discrimination, oppression, and racism they had and have to face, and the effects those had on them.

Additionally, historical events such as the Great Hunger and the Land Reform in Việt Nam that the character Diệu Lan has experienced are not often examined, if at all, and hence does reappraise (North) Vietnamese history even more. What happened during these events and especially the Vietnamese perspective on the American War add another perspective to the discussion of trauma theory and trauma history. This is because the American perspective and how much American soldiers have suffered because of the war is plastered all over trauma studies and trauma media, but what Vietnamese people went through during that time, especially in North Việt Nam – the American enemy – and the sufferings they had to endure, during and after the war, is often left out. This shows how little the West seems to care about the people they deem as less or ‘other’ and therefore unworthy of recognition and remembering.

The reappraisal of history is done a bit differently in *Pachinko*, as great historical events such as World War II or the Korean War are only mentioned indirectly through minor characters, talks about media reports, or in context, and are hence not a focal point of the storyline. Instead, how Koreans living in Japan are treated and what they have to endure is the focus, and thereby reappraises a completely different history of 20th century

Japan, which does not include the Japanese involvement in World War II, nor the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Instead it focuses on the people in Japanese society who were impacted by Japanese occupations, Japan's role in World War II and its defeat, and wanted nothing more than to survive in the margins. *Pachinko*'s characters belong to a minority group with few rights in Japan, which not only emphasises their standing but also the imbalance of who is remembered, as *zainichi* or Korean-Japanese people are quiet marginalised and often overlooked.

Though both novels take place in the 20th century, the traumas of the characters are different and neither novel can actually be categorised as 'trauma fiction', which is described as "literary works which can be classified as narrating a destructive experience that ruptures selfhood" (Tancke 6). This is because trauma is inherently not the focal point of either story, though both narrate traumatic experiences in their own way; rather, the focus of both novels is 'the family': How an ordinary family grows and survives times of struggle, war, and loss – how they survive trauma – is at both novels' core. And the representation of trauma in both novels adheres to Craps notion that trauma does not have to be "represented through the use of experimental, modernist textual strategies" ("Beyond Eurocentrism" 50), as neither novel represents trauma as something 'other', something abnormal, but rather lets its representation weave into the rest of the storyline seamlessly.

Furthermore, both novels show that the Vietnamese people and Koreans living in Japan have been "preoccupied with historical trauma that they themselves suffered, in many cases those of Western imperialism" (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 80) as neither mentions the great historical events happening in the (Western) world, but focuses on their own people and what they go through. This also acts as a counter-narrative for who and what is remembered in Eurocentric history, as those points of interest are disregarded in both novels. Rather, the perspective of Asian trauma – and any other marginalised trauma – should be made more prominent and these two novels pave a way for bringing their stories and traumas into the world.

Though they are fiction, both stories are representations of what actual people had to go through in their respective countries. They both shed light on marginalised traumas, memories, and events and by that help reappraise and remember these histories in a tangible way. *The Mountains Sing* thereby represents trauma that is already recognised, just from the opposite perspective, and *Pachinko* represents currently unrecognised trauma, its triggers and effects, which in both instances also helps decolonise trauma theory. Not only do the novels' characters and their trauma belong to marginalised non-Western

groups, but they also show that trauma can be triggered by circumstances other than life-threatening events, which strengthens the arguments of Craps and other decolonised trauma theorists. Additionally, both novels contribute to cultural memory as “they [...] shape the collective imagination about specific historical periods, people and events and bear on modes of collective identification” (Neumann 135) by narrating marginalised perspectives of the 20th century.

There is still a lot of work to do in the future, not only regarding decolonising trauma theory and including more triggers and types of trauma, but also regarding the reappraisal of marginalised and minority histories and perspectives. *The Mountains Sing* and *Pachinko* already help by taking a step in this direction, and more and more novels and other types of media involving minority perspectives are being published or produced, which help this reappraisal and re-membering. It is a long way to go, but it is not impossible. If people really want to, they can, and if they succeed, a novel will one day start with: “History has [not] failed us” (M. Lee 3).

Works Cited

- Andermahr, Sonya. “Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism - Introduction”. *Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism*, edited by Sonya Andermahr. MDPI, 2016, pp. 1-6.
- Assmann, Aleida. *Shadows of Trauma: Memory and the Politics of Postwar Identity*. Translated by Sarah Clift, New York, Fordham University Press, 2016.
- Bell, Duncan editor. *Memory, Trauma and World Politics*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- . “Introduction: Memory, Trauma and World Politics”. Bell, pp. 1-29.
- Bigman, Fran. “Shadow of the stain: Min Jin Lee’s moving saga of a Korean family in Japan”. *TLS*, 24 March 2017.
- Boulter, Jonathan. “Introduction”. *Melancholy and the Archive: Trauma, History and Memory in the Contemporary Novel*, London, Continuum, 2011, pp. 1–20.

- Buelens et al. "Introduction". *The Future of Trauma Memory*, edited by Buelens et al., Abingdon, Routledge, 2014, pp. 1-8.
- Butler, Judith et al. editors. *Vulnerability in Resistance*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2016.
- Caruth, Cathy. "Introduction". Caruth, Cathy editor. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 3-12.
- . *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Craps, Stef. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- . "Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age". *The Future of Trauma Memory*, edited by Buelens et al., Abingdon, Routledge, 2014, pp. 45-61.
- Dilworth, Dianna, and Addie Morefoot. "Texas Book Festival 2017: Rewriting History – PW Talks to Cristina Garcia and Min Jin Lee". *publishersweekly.com*, Publishers Weekly, 13 October 2017, URL: <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/75110-texas-book-festival-2017-rewriting-history-pw-talks-to-cristina-garcia-and-min-jin-lee.html>. Last accessed on 13 September 2022.
- Edkins, Jenny. "Remembering Relationality: Trauma Time and Politics". Bell, 99-115.
- Fierke, K. M. "Bewitched by the Past: Social Memory, Trauma and International Relations". Bell, pp. 116-134.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. 1997. Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Hirsch, Marianne, and Nancy K. Miller. "Introduction". *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, edited by Marianna Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 1-20.
- Kain, Geoffrey. "Introduction". *Ideas of Home: Literatures of Asian Migration*, edited by Geoffrey Kain, East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1997, pp. 1-16.
- Krull, Ryan. "Boulevard Craft Interview: Min Jin Lee". *Boulevard: Journal of Contemporary Writing*, vol. 101-102, 2019, pp. 67-74.
- Lee, Krys. "Home but Not Home". *The New York Times Book Review*, 5 February 2017, p. 18.
- Lee, Min Jin. *Pachinko*. London, Head of Zeus, 2017.
- Lie, John. *Zainichi (Koreans in Japan): Diasporic Nationalism and Postcolonial Identity*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008.
- MacLean, Ken. "History Reformatted: Vietnam's Great Famine (1944-45) in Archival Form". *Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, August 2016, pp. 187-218.
- Moise, Edwin E. "Land Reform and Land Reform Errors in North Vietnam". *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 49, no. 1, spring 1976, pp. 70-92.
- Munson, Todd. "Contextualizing Min Jin Lee's Pachinko". *Education about Asia*, vol. 24, no. 3, winter 2019, pp. 54-57.
- Neumann, Birgit. "Anglophone World Literatures and Transcultural Memory". *Handbook of Anglophone World Literatures*, edited by Stefan Helgesson et al., Berlin, De Gruyter Verlag, 2020, pp. 133-148.
- Neumann, Birgit and Yvonne Kappel. "Music and Latency in Teju Cole's *Open City*: Presences of the Past". *ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 50 no. 1, 2019, p. 31-62.
- Newell, Charles. "Pachinko". *Education about Asia*, vol. 23, no. 2, fall 2018, pp. 68-69.
- Nguyễn Phan, Quế Mai. *The Mountains Sing*. 2020. London, OneWorld Publications, 2021.
- . "Book Club Kit". London, OneWorld Publications, 2020.
- . "Climbing many Mountains". *Book Club Kit*, London, OneWorld Publications, 2020.
- Schwab Gabriele. *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Soble, Jonathan. "A Novelist Confronts the Complex Relationship Between Japan and Korea". *The New York Times*, 6 November 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/06/books/book-pachinko-min-jin-lee-japan-korea.html>. Accessed 7 March 2022.
- Stahl, David C. *Trauma, Dissociation and Re-enactment in Japanese Literature and Film*. London and New York, Routledge, 2018.
- Steininger, Rolf. *Der Vietnamkrieg*. 2004. Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2011.
- Tai, Eika. "'Korean Japanese': A New Identity Option for Resident Koreans in Japan". *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2004, pp. 355-382.
- Tancke, Ulrike. *Deceptive Fictions: Narrating Trauma and Violence in Contemporary Writing*. Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.
- Visser, Irene. "Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects". *Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism*, edited by Sonya Andermahr. MDPI, 2016, pp. 7-23.
- Winter, Jay. "Notes on the Memory Boom: War, Remembrance and the Uses of the Past". Bell, pp. 54-73.

Plagiatserklärung

Folgende Erklärung ist ab sofort allen Hausarbeiten beizulegen:

Von Plagiat spricht man, wenn Ideen und Worte anderer als eigene ausgegeben werden. Dabei spielt es keine Rolle, aus welcher Quelle (Buch, Zeitschrift, Zeitung, Internet usw.) die fremden Ideen und Worte stammen, ebenso wenig, ob es sich um größere oder kleinere Übernahmen handelt oder ob die Entlehnung wörtlich oder übersetzt oder sinngemäß ist. Entscheidend ist allein, ob die Quelle angegeben ist oder nicht. Wird sie verschwiegen, liegt ein Plagiat, eine Täuschung, vor.

In solchen Fällen kann keine Leistung des Studierenden anerkannt werden: Es wird kein Leistungsnachweis (auch kein Teilnahmechein) ausgestellt, eine Wiederholung der Arbeit ist nicht möglich und die Lehrveranstaltung wird als "nicht ausreichend" bewertet.

Ich erkläre hiermit, diesen Text zur Kenntnis genommen und in dieser Arbeit mit

dem Titel Trauma in the Asian Anglophone Novels Pachinko and The Mountains Sing

kein Plagiat im o.g. Sinne begangen zu haben.

16.09.2022 A. Schmitz
Datum, Unterschrift