

# International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies

ISSN: 2308-5460



## Trauma and Memory in Krys Lee's 'A Temporary Marriage'

[PP: 84-90]

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### ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the concepts of trauma and memory connected with the main female character in Krys Lee's "A Temporary Marriage". Using Cathy Caruth's method of interpretation, Mrs. Shin's actions and interactions are observed and analyzed. Despite the positively implied meaning of marriage as family formation or unification especially in the eastern culture and tradition, the female character goes through agonizing experiences which challenges her identity and perception. The exercise of power over the heroine, her inability in conceptualizing the current situation, the unconscious and conscious shadow of the past combined with the act of diasporic marriage contributed to themes of inferiority, subjugation, implicit or explicit violence and fear which are the result of her wounds. By considering and amalgamating different disciplines, this article focuses on the substantive perspective of a haunting past on the marriage of a Korean woman to a Korean man residing in America which signifies the fact that although traumatic memories of the past constantly transform and re-transform themselves and their nature; they, remain unchanged. The wound of traumatic experiences is never healed and the woman character's movement from the beginning embodies her instability and irrationality and to a larger extent agitation and anxiety.

**Keywords:** *Trauma, Memory, Immigration, Diasporic Marriage, Gender*

| ARTICLE INFO | The paper received on | Reviewed on | Accepted after revisions on |
|--------------|-----------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|
|              | 14/05/2019            | 25/06/2019  | 07/07/2019                  |

### Suggested citation:

Farivar, M. (2019). Trauma and Memory in Krys Lee's 'A Temporary Marriage'. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*, 7(2), 84-90.

### 1. Introduction

Having been entitled as an interdisciplinary subject, trauma is profoundly associated to memory and culture and literature. Undoubtedly, literature is a phenomenon through which one may observe the challenges that a human being has encountered in a variety of reflections. These reflections are the presentations of different kinds of feelings and emotions one of which is the process through which the psychic suffers which is referred to as trauma. Originated from Latin, the word trauma means injuries or wounds to the body (Abubakar, 2017). According to Dejonghe (2008), trauma is "experiencing or witnessing an event involving threat or fear or physical integrity that results in feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror" (p. 294). Trauma, according to Craps (2013) "results from a single, extraordinary, catastrophic event" (p. 31) from which one may experience events from another perspective. For this reason, trauma can be called an agent which "breaks the continuity of everyday secure life and takes away the feeling of safety a person might have" (Aarelaid-Tart, 2006, p. 35). This is the place in where trauma study can be applied

owing to the fact that it involves insightful perspectives so that the root of such feelings and the implications connected to it can be recognized and comprehended.

In "Cultural Trauma and Life Stories", furthermore, Aarelaid-Tart (2006) mentions that despite the fact that the traumatic event does not last long; the rupture created in the life impedes individuals' activities. This according to Jeffrey Alexander (2004) in "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma" means shattering the "sense of well-being" (p. 2). In other words, he argues that "the power to shatter, the trauma, is thought to emerge from the events themselves. The reaction to such shattering events which means being traumatized" (Alexander, 2004, p. 2) is felt and thought to be "an immediate and unreflexive response" (p. 3). Understanding the signs and symptoms in the form of the responses is utterly a delicate task since the revelation can be implicit or explicit and in different forms. Neller et al. (2006) believe that it is considerably "logical" and "intuitive" (p. 6) to assume that traumatic experiences lead to crimes and violent actions. The writers claim that those who have experienced trauma "are at increased risk for affective flattening and

callousness" (Neller et al., 2006, p. 6) in addition to "hostility, anger moderation difficulties, and other emotional regulation problems" (p. 6). In the same way, "anxiety and depression" (Neller et al., 2006, p. 6) are highly unavoidable.

In connection with trauma and literature, what we call the trauma novel is, in fact, the demonstration of the detachment of the self and others, both fictional and non-fictional, regarding different matters in a specific environment in the form of disruption. This disruption shows itself in a way that the traumatized character tells his/her story by means of silence, soliloquies and the distance which he/she considers for his/her relationships. This traumatised character is called a "haunted character" (Heidarizadeh, 2014, p. 294) who might rebel against the hunter in order to avoid more victimization. Trying to avert from the traumatic situation and contexts can be regarded as the noteworthy objective of trauma narratives which is manifested in character's struggle to find peace while suffocating and being rotten from inside. In this way, a specific literary text functions as both "the workings of memory at the individual and collective level" (Krieg, 2018, p. 24) and the carrier and container of the cultural incidents which pass through time.

Regarding this matter, memory is playing a pivotal role because the individual's experiences are structured in the cultural context and embedded in the identity of that individual (Balaev, 2008). Astrid Erll (2011) in "Memory in Culture" explains that although memory is a heterogeneous term, one essential idea is unavoidable and that is its subjectivity and selectivity which highly depends upon its dependability on the present issues. What we mean by the memory of the past is how we try to connect it to the current present. Remembering can be called an act of assembling the current data which takes place at the moment and is influenced by any recalls from the past. This can imply that memories, if revealed, are not the images of the past but they indicate how and why an individual is trying to remember for the present (Erll, 2011). An undeniable characteristic of memory is that it is not intentional as Foster (2009) called it "unintended" and that it "may pop into our mind unexpectedly" (p. 6). This feature holds the idea that behaviours, feelings and thoughts stay within us and can be transferred.

Trauma, based on the mentioned implication, moves from one generation to another generation. Geographical locations can remind the individual of the degree of violence which had been experienced in the first place. In addition, if an individual's location in terms of properties are taken away, the traumatic consequence will not be different. "Being without a place ensured an uncontested disentanglement to the rights of citizenship" (Oikawa, 2000, p. 45). Oikawa (2000), further, stated that dispossessing one of his/her place is an effective way of making him/her lose identity. According to this, one may consider the memory of a place as intimate and attached; so that when one encounters the similar location, the same fear or anxiety can be re-experienced. Memory of the place may suggest the idea of its collectiveness in the sense that the people of a region or a specific gender have been associated with some traumatic memories as if those memories have been stored (Eerinen, 2016).

Regarding the theory considered in this paper, Cathy Caruth (1996), one of the pioneers in studies concerned with trauma, in "Unclaimed experience" explores "the ways in which texts of a certain period—the texts of psychoanalysis, of literature, and of literary theory—both speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience" (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). She, further, intends to pin point the fact that it is literature that can enable us both to observe the event that cannot be normally seen and to allow us to experience all the feelings, emotions and thoughts that are unheard and unsaid. Caruth (1996) elucidates that the traumatic events are hugely intense and unbearable which exist in our memory for a long time even when they are not knowingly recognized. She explains that some events can lead to consequences which cannot be convincing based on everyone's routine and, hence, their expression is significant within the act of interpretation. One of the significant points stated by Caruth (1996) is the use of language in expressing the unseen traumatization due to the overwhelming emotions of fear and anxiety. This expression can be a symbolic representation of what the individual has been experiencing owing to the fact that that moment plays a crucial role in disclosing the feelings and emotions connected to the suffering. Considering that, I attempted at mapping and analysing the main character of story, Mrs. Shin in order to show how her



background and memory have shadowed her current affair.

## 2. Discussion

Krys Lee (2012), born in South Korea, was brought up in the US and studied in England. Her first book, with the metaphorically suggestive title of the "Drifting House", a fiction debut, is a collection of short stories which are set in North Korea, South Korea, and the US. The story portrays the marriage of an Eastern (Asian) woman, whose life is full of doubts, chaos, and despair, to a Korean man, living in a western society, who is the key to solving her problems and agony. Being addressed in this article, "A Temporary Marriage" is the first story in this mesmerizing collection which is about Mrs. Shin, from Korea, whose husband has abandoned her and has taken their daughter with him to America. She married Mr. Rhee, a formerly Korean man, an American citizen now, who came from a disturbed broken marriage. This marriage is for the reason of her legally entering the country and having enough time to search for her daughter. Mrs. Shin found her daughter with the help of Detective Pak, another Westernized immigrated character. This was not promising since the daughter had a different name and her memory of her mother was vague or even harsh. A surprise encounter with her ex-husband revealed her extreme dejection and disillusionment in a sense that she has long been forgotten as a wife and as a mother so there are no recuperative functions of memory here and she returned to her assumed role as a woman.

What makes our horizon of expectation as readers fall into confusion is the level of illusion within the woman character as she assumed that she would be able to build her family again. The concept of marriage for her embodies what Caruth (1996) mentions as "referentiality" (p. 6) in terms of linking the experiences. The fact is that our expectation must have been adapted to the notion of patriarchal society as the background of the reality due to the fact that fairytale happy ending never applies here. In this regard, I am to point out at the narrative as being real. Its tangibility creates a sense of sympathy for both characters who are constrained within the institution of marriage. The reality of the story presents the unsuccessful attempt of a woman who failed to achieve happiness in both marriages and the traumatic effect of the first one infected the other one highlighting the "ghostly traces of unresolved sorrow and

melancholia" (p. 38) as Nicky Sa-Eun Schildkraut (2012) mentioned. The word "traces" (p. 38) echoes the memory and the theories of memories are in association with trauma studies because remembering plays a pivotal role in traumatic expressions. That is what we can refer to as flashbacks in response to the conscious thoughts (Caruth, 1996).

The point is that any individuals would change while experiencing trauma whether a man or a woman; yet when it comes to the gender-based discourse, the changes occurring to the women are beyond our expectation because of the nature of the wound it creates in the memory. To clarify that, one may remember the traumatic silence, the sense of avoiding, the imposed sense of guilt and the unspoken assault that women may experience afterward. Lee's story depicts such an aggrieved yet expected insight into each character's traumatic memories as the story moves on towards disappointment, despair, and recognition of the traumatic reality. Although discussion of trauma is originally rooted in the studies concerned with the Holocaust, its flexibility and extensions are incredibly advantageous in any interdisciplinary research.

The marriage of convenience is essentially traumatic. Trauma as a psychological phenomenon which is much stronger than the physiological wounds or pains is internalized which can be hidden behind the concept of marriage which is considered as a happy event of everyone's life. Mrs. Shin's marriage to Mr. Rhee is of that sort; so after Mrs. Shin's being financially depleted in order to get the visa to enter America, they decided that "they would share the common space, nothing more" (Lee, 2012, p. 1). Such a decision, on the one hand, echoes the subjectivity of both sides and, on the other hands, keeps them in constant anxiety of the other one's presence. This idea is well established at the beginning of the story when the narrator commented upon the vulnerability of the flat because the distant couple could have seen each other quite often while they were simply at home (Lee, 2012, p. 1).

This situation has not been that of her choice. A woman always encounters irreconcilable situations through which the patriarchal society plays a determining role. The senses of loyalty and affections along with the sense of history play pivotal roles as if each woman inherits the legacy of being inferior which devastates the woman unconsciously. Ruth Leys (2007) argued that

the traumatic experience encompasses the components of shame, repression, guilt, and recollection as inseparable parts. Mrs. Shin "had subordinated herself to her husband's will, rivaled her mother in law for his affections and accepted all blame when she remained childless the first six years of marriage" (Lee, 2012, p. 4). This is what Susan G. Bell (2004) called "a world of claustrophobic fear in an alien environment, populated by an unloving husband she seldom saw" (p. 163) and difficult in-laws. Such a condition and catastrophic domestic events "seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them" (Caruth, 1996, p. 1) and for this reason both of the characters of story are unable to perceive and accept their marriage as a second chance.

The feminine is inevitably the other. Being conscious of such a fact as an established notion "she did not want to look at him, understanding that she was aware of him as a man, and that gave him an immediate advantage over her" (Lee, 2012, p. 2). Yet this is not all since she carried the unforgivable guilt of being abandoned and the fact that ".....she had not allowed herself public displays of grief" (Lee, 2012, p. 2). The fear and denial of the past bitter incident and the current arranged marriage exposed her to a new type of agitation. She described Mr. Rhee as bony just opposite to his ponderous ex-husband which made her disappointed revealing the idea that she was unconsciously searching for some consolations with regards to what had befallen her.

The scene of taking a picture for their marriage "predicament" (Lee, 2012, p. 2) is symbolic for the wounded body and a traumatized soul. During a few seconds of waiting for the camera to operate, they both inspected each other closely but when Mr. Rhee commented on her skin, she responded "I'm not looking for a real husband. I thought that was clear" (Lee, 2012, p. 3) and she preferred if the world could have been without men. Caruth (1996) believed that despite being apparently unharmed in the mentioned situation, Mrs. Shin felt her experiences might have been repeated (p.17). Avoiding any feelings and emotions towards Mr. Rhee was depicted later when he made an effort to kiss her for the second time, "she turned to his second kiss missed her lips and descended on her neck" (Lee, 2012, p. 6). For Mrs. Shin, the act of kissing not only lacks intimate and close relationship but also is a reminder of violent

narration. In addition, her sensitivity towards not being in contact with whichever object Mr. Rhee has touched or used sounds to be meaningful which repeats the notion of the unconscious remembered pain and fear. This idea is confirmed when the narrator referred to Mrs. Shin's locking the bedroom door. Such an indirect referentiality of history, according to Caruth delineates that the experiences are dissoluble and that what slithers on the surface in the form of a memory is profoundly and ominously unendurable (Caruth, 1996, p.18).

Mrs. Shin's constant feeling of failure at her life functioned as the barricade which separated her from moving forward in life. At her current status, she was a woman without a country and she could not reconcile herself to be satisfied with life, highlighting the fact that she has had the experience of fear, frustration, and anxiety in her former marriage. Mrs. Shin's background story of the marriage can justify her expressions because as a bride, she had to live under "surveillance and criticism" (Lee, 2012, p. 4) of in-laws. A wife's inability to communicate speedily with the outside world and her own family greatly hampered her chance of improving her situation (Bell, 2002). "After nine years of a difficult life together, her husband had said that he could not do it anymore, that they were not healthy for each other..." (Lee, 2012, p. 4). Her first night in her new life in America was an appalling reminder of wounds of those nine years of violent treatment. On the first morning in America, she thought that she had come to live in America differently so she had to avoid domesticity (Lee, 2012). This, whether narrator's or Mrs. Shin's voice, re-played the fact that Mrs. Shin considered herself a survivor; hence she had no intention to be a victim of her womanhood for another time.

Mrs. Shin is indifferent towards Mr. Rhee's explanation of the area that she might have been moving within certain miles and his comment upon the insecurity of America. Mr. Rhee's reasoning upon being enclosed in the Koreatown encompassed the reference to Mrs. Shin's dark years of her former marriage. This scene signifies her rejection of a man's word revealing the status of turning down the patriarchal notions. Later she met Detective Pak and the narrator sarcastically commented that despite the fact that he had been a resident of America for most of his life, he had kept "his patriarchal ideas intact" (Lee, 2012, p. 8). Mrs. Shin's



vulnerable situation and her confidence inadequacy were the halts in making any effective interactions. When Detective Pak asked her if she had married again after her divorce, she was petrified in the sense that another delicately frightening feature of her life was conspicuously questioned.

“...her shudder” in that situation conveys another traumatic expression in Mrs. Shin (Lee, 2012, p. 9). This expression was connected to two different thoughts that occurred to Mrs. Shin at that moment highlighting her proneness to anxiety and agitation. Her second marriage, despite being legal, is scrutinized because of its nature. “That she was another Korean mother who had abandoned her daughter in order to re-marry” (Lee, 2012, p. 9). Such a perception is disturbing in itself and Mrs. Shin’s exposure to it vibrates the historical understanding of so-called marriages. This is what Caruth (1996) calls the “full impact of history” (Caruth, 1996, p. 23) denoting the fact that no matter how much an act is established, as far as there are historical implications, there are hints and consequences. In addition, she observed detective Pak’s family picture which was located on his table. The vision of his perfect domestic life in which the family’s feeling of warmth and affection was experienced brought about some confusion in Mrs. Shin’s thought; “she wanted to want it; she loathed it” (Lee, 2012, p. 9). The family photo signifies and symbolizes the fundamental desire in human being for having a family and a home; however, in Mrs. Shin, it arose the feeling of fear as if she felt uncertain about desiring it. Caruth (1996) highlights the reason of such an encounter and confusion in these words:

“For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (p.18).

The baffling situation here is that Mrs. Shin was experiencing constant blames regarding her marriage, her legal re-marriage and searching her daughter. Caruth (1996) defines this feeling as “it has been written twice over” (p.19) and in each situation she never healed sufficiently to move forward implying that in each one, some traces are left in the history of her memory which haunted her “like a ghost” (p. 19) as she continued. When Detective Pak said: “So you gave up and agreed, and now you don’t?” (Lee, 2012, p. 10), she felt

exhausted for the never-ending misjudgments. The persistent reference to the mentioned subjects, either explicitly or implicitly, had destroyed “her face” (Lee, 2012, p. 10). Caruth (1996) justifies such a conscious and “unconscious repetition” (p.18) as acknowledging the memory and the history which gives rise to some “lingering anxiety” (p.18). And when the story reached to this point that Mrs. Shin believed that no hope could be found “because hope was painful, dangerous” (Caruth, 1996, p. 11). This hopelessness contributes to her relationship with Mr. Rhee in the sense that she could not be his friend and company.

Switching back to her relationship with Mr. Rhee, one must refer to it as unsteady, unconfident or tentative. Being already psychologically incapacitated, Mrs. Shin distrusted any connection with Mr. Rhee; however, after four months into her new life in the United States, she strangely and unconsciously began to find out some feelings about him (Lee, 2012). Inside his bedroom did she observe his former wife’s appearance from the photos and her clothes. “She tried on one of the polyester washing-machine-safe dresses. She pinned her hair to the right and smoothed it into place until the mirror gratified her. Finally, she was freed from herself” (Lee, 2012, p. 14). Mrs. Shin imagined herself as a new person in another frame for some minutes and she was experiencing a different character as if she was seeking to find out what was left in her own frame of character or identity. This according to Caruth (1996) meant the isolation of the memory from the current discourse (p. 34). However, Mr. Rhee’s return brought her back to what she had always known during her first marriage and her life with the in-laws. Her reaction of staying on her knees and asking for a “slap” (Lee, 2012, p. 15) pointed out to her pre-assumed determined perception of being treated in that manner indicating her faithfully having the memory, as Caruth puts it (Caruth, 1996), The narrator commented on this picture that “She offered him her body” (Lee, 2012, p. 15) which is, I am firmly affirmative, the climax of the story revealing Mrs. Shin’s darkest return to her memories especially when she disclosed the thought of being deserved. In Mrs. Shin’s past life the physical punishment, a slap, had been established. It has been “the physical reality”, in Caruth’s words, of her life (Caruth, 1996, p. 42). Caruth (1996) continues:

“Indeed, in a corrected seeing or in the mere physical reality of a seen hand, but in the very way in which the hand, in its slap, surprises sight and interrupts the continuity of the face-to-face encounter of the lovers locked in a narrative- without-history” (p. 42).

After the slap, however, the history changes and the interrupted moment were engraved in the history of the memory. This traumatic reviewing brought about a different kind of relationship for both of them.

Mrs. Shin, afterwards, experienced a short interval of happiness “as if there was the possibility of love” (Lee, 2012, p.17) until detective Pak informed her about her daughter’s address. Seeing her daughter, Yuri, at school and remembering her past made her feel pressure especially when she recognized how Yuri has had changed to almost an adult. Visualizing the fact that Yuri had been growing up beside another woman agitated her. Calling her signifies another traumatic memory that reminded of her leaving at three years of age. Knowing about her new American name weighted her. The narrator carried on describing Mrs. Shin’s pessimistic anticipation about her daughter’s future which implies her traumatic point of view as if the future would hold the same destiny as hers: “the years ahead would work to undo her girlish certainty” (Lee, 2012, p. 19). From her talking to Yuri and confronting her former husband arose severe anxiety; yet one could recognize the way she sought evading the reality due to the fact that every single incident triggered her traumatic memory of humiliation, loss and alienation. The former husband called her a disturbance to the process of adaptation to the new situation and environment (Lee, 2012).

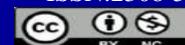
Mrs. Shin’s interactions with her husband marked another turning point in her memory. She believed that what she had become was what her former husband desired and at that moment she found out that she was “the other woman” (Lee, 2012, p. 21). This is understandable because from the beginning of the story the narrator has expressionistically presented the mind of Mrs. Shin and her perceptions of the environment and people which appeared to be patriarchal with less space for her to find herself. Touching his shoulder was odd and distant and the rest of their conversation was ominously threatening which brought about some halt in her well-being. “The clock had mercifully stopped its ticking” (Lee, 2012, p.

22) is the expression of her anxious confusion; she would not have recognized the time and the place.

The final paragraphs of the story are profoundly self-reflective of the inferior status of Mrs. Shin to the level in which she felt that no identity and integrity had been left. Her action based on Caruth (1995) is an attempt “to speak out from a crisis that is not yet over” (Caruth, 1995, p. 156). Referring to her female breasts as lumps as if they were masses of a disease and to her “monstrous desire” (Lee, 2012, p. 23) despite of her aging body, Mrs. Shin disclosed her lack of femininity. The violent behaviour and the feeling of self-hatred epitomized her traumatic situation. This could be interpreted as the moment through which Mrs. Shin tried to confront and accept her situation. Caruth (1995) comments that the knowledge of a certain horrifying event which has been the source of trauma cannot “become a matter of “intelligence”—and thus continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time” (p. 153). In fact, Caruth (1995) is trying to fill the gap which is between the event and the character’s expression in a way that Mrs. Shin’s prolonging sense of confrontation and acceptance did not incapacitate the traumatic pressure. Hitting herself by the scissors, feeling the physical pain and screaming are what she did following encountering her daughter whose whole existence was the meaning of her life and what she had been integrating into her existence. The revelation here is that Mrs. Shin’s understanding of the reality and recognition amplified her traumatic pain to the level of senselessness: “The pain erased her grief, stripped her of camouflage” (Lee, 2012, p. 23). Describing the wound as being bright and blossoming and ironically commenting on the lack of symmetry of the wound reflect Mrs. Shin’s consciousness about herself at that time, remembering her whole background of the married life. The narrator said that “her wounded body continued its ancient song” (Lee, 2012, p. 23) which emphasizes the similitude of such physical pain and the psychological pain that she had been through for many years.

### 3. Conclusion

The idea of memory and the phenomenon of trauma are interrelated. Based on the comprehensive analysis of Lee’s “A temporary Marriage”, I demonstrated the hidden frights of Mrs. Shin after she entered the United States by means of her constant expression of fear of being close to or intimate with Mr. Rhee, her



silence, the account of her background and the violent actions she did to herself. The disruption of identity and consciousness which took place in the character brought about delusion in the memory resulting in confused memories. Therefore, although Mrs. Shin was seen in her best status with logical doubts, the traumatic expression of her dissociated memories made her unable to believe the reality of her life. By disclosing maladaptive attitudes towards her divorce, re-marriage and her daughter's new life in the US, exhibiting anxiety and fear in connection with the strange surrounding, cognitively misperceiving her coming to America and finally showing the sort of aggression at the end of the story, I may conclude that Mrs. Shin, the Korean woman, was a traumatised character who had refused to actively accept what had happened to her and the narrative provided the traces and the evidence perfectly and some sparks of emotional intimacy with Mr. Rhee was unhelpful in her perpetration of violence to herself.

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