

Silent Echoes: An Introspective Journey of Trauma and Emotional Stillness in Han Kang's Fiction

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Received: November 6, 2025

Accepted: January 7, 2026

Online Published: April 10, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v16n4p404

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n4p404>

Abstract

This study examines Han Kang's articulation of trauma through stillness and non-verbal expression in her novels *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part*. Departing from Western paradigms that privilege narrative closure and verbal catharsis, Kang's works engage with trauma via silence, fragmentation, and embodied experience. *The White Book* creates a meditative space through sparse language and temporal suspension, in which grief is explored through white objects and quiet observation. Likewise, *We Do Not Part* presents trauma, particularly inherited and gendered violence, through the interior lives of characters whose suffering is registered somatically rather than spoken. This research argues that Kang's aesthetics of stillness function as a narrative and ethical strategy, offering an alternative mode of emotional expression and resistance. By situating Kang's work within trauma studies, affect theory, and Korean Seon philosophy, the study explores how her representations of suffering challenge Western assumptions about healing and testimony. Her work considers how Korean and East Asian philosophical frameworks, such as Buddhist and Zen notions of silence and stillness, alongside theoretical lenses of affect studies that explore embodied experience and intensity, may inform the author's literary approach. Ultimately, this project contributes to trauma studies and global literature by foregrounding non-verbal, bodily, and culturally specific forms of mourning in Kang's evolving oeuvre.

Keywords: trauma, stillness, silence, introspection, mourning, fragmentation

1. Introduction

Han Kang's fiction explores a profound sense of trauma related to individuals' identity and memory. She conveys the idea that individuals' awareness of their trauma can bring a plethora of options and coping strategies. In *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part*, introspection and stillness play a significant role as their characters confront traumatic memories. Kang's delineation of trauma is marked by specific, accurate details, as well as by stillness and introspective vision. Her work offers a profound meditation on the depths of human suffering, the quiet force of moral courage, and the complexities of resistance in both personal and political contexts. Through her spare, lyrical prose and unconventional narrative structures, she challenges traditional storytelling forms, creating emotionally charged spaces that invite the reader to confront uncomfortable truths. Her literature not only reshapes the contours of modern Korean fiction but also contributes meaningfully to global conversations about trauma, identity, and the power of the human spirit.

Kang, a contemporary Korean writer and winner of the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature, is known for examining the complex human psyche arising from traumatic experiences and for analyzing the tension between body and soul, life and death, and reality and dream. Kang is gifted at her precise and symbolic portrayal of life's instability and the contemplative method of mourning, which invites the reader to quiet self-examination and offers insight into one's psyche and life. Her works are reflective and poignant, heavily engaged with loss, trauma, self-conceptualization, and the process of integrating trauma and finding wholeness. Kang's fiction sketches the intervention between trauma and social/cultural influences. Her early stories, like *The Vegetarian* and *Human Acts*, tackle questions of subjectivity and issues of humanity. Kang's later works, *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part*, are more speculative and symbolic texts that focus on self-awareness and inner exploration. In both later novels, the characters' journey of trauma transcends the theme of challenging external circumstances to include the focus on their inner worlds. *The White Book* is a meditative and symbolic novel that immerses the reader into experiences of loss, deploying iconic representations and metaphorical images to guide them toward self-understanding, emotional balance, and spiritual insight. Meanwhile, *We Do Not Part* deals with life-threatening encounters and disappointments in connections, whereby the narrative revolves around minor occurrences and trivial moments, such as the protagonist meeting her friend at the hospital and answering her request to travel to her remote town to feed her bird; however, it carries the reader into an emotional journey and delves into Korean history.

This study examines Kang's representation of trauma and the process of coping and healing in her novels *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part*. Both works tackle trauma and distressing experiences by implementing tactics of stillness, non-verbal expressions, and fragmented reflection. *The White Book* explores life and death through a symbolic series of white objects, creating a space for grieving and profound reflection. Similarly, *We Do Not Part* investigates collective trauma, violence, and inherited pain through the representation of the inner lives of characters and their bodily experiences. By examining how stillness functions as a form of quiet resistance, this study seeks to

expand trauma theory by incorporating Kang's innovative approach to represent suffering and traumatic experiences. The aim of this research is, on the one hand, to examine how Kang employs stillness as an aesthetic, narrative, and ethical strategy to encounter trauma as it is depicted in *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part*, and to explore how this challenges dominant (especially Western) models of trauma narration by foregrounding silence, bodily memory, and non-verbal forms of emotional expression, on the other. The study explores how trauma is depicted, evolves, and changes throughout Kang's selected texts, identifying recurring formal and stylistic strategies for conveying this theme and mapping Kang's aesthetic and conceptual signature to demonstrate the development and evolution of narrative voice and figurative expression in her work. The study poses the following questions: How does Kang represent trauma in *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part*, and what alternative modes of emotional expression and healing do these novels suggest? How do silence, stillness, and bodily intensity generate affective responses that precede verbal articulation? How do techniques such as imagery, symbolism, and juxtaposition operate at the limits of language to articulate the affective dimensions of trauma and grief? How do Kang's representations of trauma challenge or complement dominant Western trauma theories and affect theory frameworks? Can Kang's aesthetics of stillness be read through a specifically Korean or East Asian cultural or philosophical lens, such as Buddhist thought or Korean Seon (Zen) philosophy that emphasizes direct experience, meditation as realization, and non-duality? This study contributes to literary scholarship by demonstrating how Kang develops an aesthetics of stillness that is marked by silence and fragmentation. By analyzing *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part*, the research expands trauma studies beyond Western paradigms that focus on voice, narrative recovery, and verbal expression, and emphasizes non-verbal responses or the minimal verbal exposure that reside within Eastern cultural contexts and Zen philosophy, alongside bodily and affective responses according to affect theory. Indeed, it draws attention to culturally situated forms of grieving and mourning, and deepens critical engagement with Kang's evolving literary style within the context of contemporary global trauma literature.

2. Literature Review

This literature review provides a comprehensive overview of key scholarly works on Kang's *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part*, which are widely regarded as powerful and influential texts. They have attracted significant attention from critics and academics specializing in Asian literature, postcolonial studies, and trauma theory. The selected authors offer diverse perspectives, examining the novels' central themes, historical contexts, and literary significance. Their analyses shed light on the complex cultural and historical backgrounds shaping the novels while highlighting their ongoing relevance to current discussions on trauma, feminism, and the use of symbolic language to depict loss and mourning. Collectively, this body of criticism offers a rich and detailed foundation for further academic exploration.

The recurring themes in Kang's novels vary, using different perspectives; however, the focus remains on trauma and memory, nature and ecocritical readings, symbolic language, and ecofeminism. Judd contributes to trauma discourse in Kang's novels in her master's thesis titled: "Wit(h)nessing trauma in Han Kang's *The White Book*" (2020), which explores how maternal and womb imagery, along with the color white, serve as aesthetic strategies for depicting trauma and mourning, drawing on Bracha Ettinger's concept of "wit(h)nessing." It offers a new interpretation of *The White Book* as not just a trauma story but a feminine framework for understanding loss, bearing someone else's trauma, writing about the unexperienced life of the sister, and viewing the book's aesthetic form as a witness. However, it primarily focuses on motifs of whiteness/maternity and the female body through a single, specific lens. Other research centers on Kang's symbolic language, especially the analysis of whiteness and its connection to trauma, such as "An Expression of Color Psychology and Human Consciousness: Deconstructing the Binarism of White Color in Han Kang's *The White Book*" (2020) by Sruthi and Mukherjee, who examine the symbolic meanings of whiteness through object-based meditations in the text, revealing how the color embodies dualities of life and loss. The article positions itself where color psychology meets literary analysis, arguing that whiteness in *The White Book* functions through binary oppositions (e.g., white/purity versus white/death, stillness versus movement) and aims to "deconstruct the binarism of the color white." The study examines how the novel juxtaposes white objects with the narrator's trauma. Because of its limited focus on color psychology, this research may not deeply explore other important aspects of *The White Book*, such as its historical background, Korean philosophy, or cultural associations of white (like white as mourning in Korea).

Additionally, the study by Zolkos titled "Transposition, Generationality, and Trauma: From Psychoanalytic Holocaust Studies to Post-mnemonic Cultures" (2024) critically engages with the existing discourse on trauma in Kang's novels. This article traces the concept of transposition (a psychoanalytic term used in Holocaust studies), explaining how traumatic experiences are transposed into the psychic and cultural lives of subsequent generations. The author uses psychoanalytic theory to analyze how Kang handles inherited trauma and mnemonic inheritance, especially through symbols like whiteness and memory transmission across generations. The article argues that, in moving from clinical to cultural and literary contexts, the concept of transposition offers new possibilities: as an epistemic tool to understand how traumatic inheritance functions in culture, how generationality operates, how language and voice are implicated, and how mourning or its absence is processed.

Another influential study also considers and integrates psychoanalytic approaches, blending them with ecocritical perspectives to understand Kang's strategy of mourning. This is exemplified in the article titled "Examining Eco-Psychological Connections in the Work of Han Kang: A Comparative Study of the novel *The Vegetarian* and *We Do Not Part*" (2025), which applies an eco-psychological lens to both works, emphasizing themes of bodily disconnection, landscape as silent witness, and narrative silence as a form of ecological memory. The study employs ecopsychology, as conceptualized by Theodore Roszak, and conducts a comparative textual analysis of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and *We Do Not Part*. It examines how human psychological states connect with nature, ecological degradation, and societal norms. While the ecological and psychological framework used in this study may be rooted in Western traditions

(ecopsychology, Roszak), the cultural context of South Korea might not be mentioned or may not align perfectly with those traditions.

Kang's *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part* emerge as significant novels that depict trauma at both personal and collective levels, linked to stillness and silence. The articles in this literature review highlight the theme of trauma in *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part*, offering new insights into Kang's work, from trauma studies to ecocritical interpretations. However, the authors may not fully address cultural specificity, which could limit their analysis of stillness in the two novels to nature and ecocritical perspectives. Although there are few academic articles about Kang's *The White Book*, there is a shortage of full-length journal articles offering deep theoretical or comparative analyses, especially in trauma theory or postcolonial studies of *We Do Not Part*, where most writing appears in literary reviews, newspaper essays, or general-interest criticism. This study aims to position Kang's novels within three interconnected fields: trauma studies, affect theory, and Korean Seon philosophy. Kang's selected texts tend to offer quiet and indirect responses to pain and trauma, emphasizing what remains unspoken or suggestive rather than explicitly stated. Her novels explore trauma alongside coping strategies, introspective perspectives, and moments of stillness. This theme is highly significant and warrants further research in the context of Korean culture.

3. Theoretical background

Trauma, within psychological and literary frameworks, is a profound disruption of one's sense of self, time, and language caused by overwhelming experiences. Scholars like Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, and Judith Herman offer insights into trauma. Caruth describes trauma as "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but returning in flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (1996, pp. 91-92). Herman sees trauma as a "shattering of identity and meaning", especially with violence, betrayal, or powerlessness (1992, p.51). Laub also focuses on self-fragmentation. When trauma causes an existential crisis from overwhelming events, it is called existential trauma. This distress involves deep questions about life's meaning and one's place in the world. This study emphasizes existential trauma's core—the inner crisis related to life, death, and existence.

Stillness is also a crucial idea in this study, representing recovery and silent resistance. In literature and philosophy, it means contemplation, mourning, silent protest, or resisting speech or action. In Eastern aesthetics, stillness is appreciated as healing, connected to inner clarity, peace, and acceptance of impermanence, as seen in Zen philosophy and Korean tradition. Adrianna Cavarero explores silence and listening ethics amid violence, criticizing over-narration or sensationalism of trauma. She advocates embracing stillness and listening to suffering without trying to control it. Thinkers like Elaine Scarry, Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes, and Brian Massumi influence this view.

Kang's *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part* examine trauma at both personal and collective levels, emphasizing silence and stillness. This approach places the works within the frameworks of trauma studies, affect theory, and Korean Seon philosophy. Trauma studies analyze how trauma influences memory, language, and storytelling, viewing it as "a rupture in perception" (Caruth, 1996, p. 61) characterized by fragmentation, dissociation, and silencing. Due to its unspeakable nature, trauma is often represented through fragmentation, gaps, and bodily responses, sometimes reappearing as flashbacks, highlighting the connection between trauma and failure of representation. LaCapra differentiates "acting out" from "working through" trauma, while Laub underscores storytelling's healing role despite survivors' challenges in integrating trauma into their identities (2001, p.21). Many trauma novels depict fragmentation and paradoxically weaken storytelling, as in *We Do Not Part*. Kang's novels respond to pain with silence and subtlety, focusing on what remains unspoken.

Affect theory is an important perspective that deepens our understanding of how trauma functions in Kang's novels. This theory is interdisciplinary, connecting psychology, philosophy, cultural studies, and literary criticism. It explores how emotions operate beyond language through intensity, sensation, and atmosphere, with a focus on the unspeakable, precocious, and relational facets. Silvan Tomkins proposed that humans are born with nine innate emotions, such as joy and fear, which are biologically expressed and motivate us. His ideas influence literary studies by shaping our understanding of identity, secrecy, and intimacy. Sara Ahmed expands on this by examining how emotions attach to bodies, identities, and objects through repetition and cultural association, arguing that feelings are social and historical forces. Lauren Berlant emphasizes affect in everyday fatigue and despair, highlighting slow, chronic suffering over dramatic peaks. Her work helps analyze texts with silence and stillness. Applying affect theory to works like Kang's *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part* shows how emotions can function without words, creating quiet care through non-verbal presence and stillness.

Kang's novels feature Korean Seon Buddhist philosophy, which deeply influences Korean thought and Kang's storytelling. It emphasizes meditation, enlightenment, and principles like impermanence, non-duality, and mindful awareness. The philosophy values silence and stillness, reflecting aesthetic and ethical themes such as "nothingness," "sunyata," "Dukkha," and imperfection. These themes connect with ideas of trauma and loss, as seen in *The White Book*, where everyday objects evoke emotion and history. Jinul, who combined sudden awakening with gradual practice, shaped Korean Buddhism with a focus on mind-only awareness. Huineng, a prominent master of Seon philosophy, highlights the concepts of 'non-attachment' and 'non-duality' by stating that "to be free from any attachment means not to abide in form or matter or any attribute" and "Buddha-nature is the non-duality teaching of real Buddhism... which is indivisible into such conceptual opposites as good and evil, eternal and temporal, material and spiritual. To see dualism in life is only due to confusion of thought" (Pine 2006, p. 34,45), and the concept of direct experience. Scholars such as Robert Buswell Jr. helped bring Jinul and Seon philosophy to Western audiences by emphasizing practical, intensive meditation rather than purely intellectual study, which is seen as an "impediment to true knowing and seeing" (Buswell 1989, p.79). Modern thinkers like D.T. Suzuki, Eckhart Tolle, and Alan Watts

highlight direct experience and the present moment, while Cage emphasizes silence and form in meaning. Kang's novels embody Seon-inspired stillness, honestly explore trauma, and foster quiet attention, sensitivity, and restraint.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative-interpretive method to examine the representation of trauma, silence, stillness, and affective intensity in Kang's *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part*. This method allows the researcher to analyze and interpret data in terms of narrative elements, character structure, and trauma representation, drawing on relevant theories. The primary data consist of selected quotations and passages from two novels used as units of analysis, while the secondary data include theoretical and critical works in trauma studies, affect theory, and Seon philosophy.

Data are collected through close textual reading of the texts, focusing on the identification of recurrent patterns of language and narrative structure through which trauma, silence, and stillness are articulated. The study analyzes selected quotations and passages as units of analysis, focusing on excerpts that foreground linguistic and narrative features of trauma, affect, or contemplative awareness. Textual evidence is purposively selected for its formal, linguistic, or narrative significance, focusing on passages that demonstrate fragmentation, repetition, silences, heightened emotion, or moments of reflective insight. Such a strategy allows the study to focus on specific passages and narrative segments where trauma, affect, or contemplative awareness is most clearly encoded in linguistic and structural features. The process of data analysis involves several steps: Firstly, formal or linguistic features such as syntax, imagery, narrative, voice, and structural arrangement are identified. Secondly, these features are examined in context to determine how they function within the text. Finally, their contribution to the representation of the central idea is interpreted through three complementary lenses.

Interpretation of these formal features is guided by three interconnected theoretical frameworks. Trauma theory, drawing on the work of Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman, and Dominick LaCapra, informs the reading of narrative disruption, belatedness, and resistance to narrative closure. Affect theory, particularly the contributions of Silvan Tomkins, Sara Ahmed, and Lauren Berlant, provides tools for analyzing emotional intensity, bodily response, and the circulation of affect across narrative moments. Seon philosophy functions as a conceptual and ethical framework for interpreting stillness, silence, and non-verbal presence, emphasizing mindful attention, impermanence, and relational care without operating as a religious or doctrinal reading.

Interpretive claims are validated through the recurrence of formal patterns across multiple narrative segments and across both novels, through close contextual analysis of each segment's narrative and symbolic environment, and through theoretical triangulation among trauma theory, affect theory, and Seon philosophy. By observing the recurrence of formal patterns across multiple narrative segments and across both novels, and by systematically linking textual features to these theoretical lenses, the study ensures that thematic claims are grounded in the text, demonstrating rigorous representation of trauma and consistency of the analysis. In this way, the research results are expected to be academically reliable and develop trauma studies in modern literature.

5. Analysis

Kang's fiction examines personal trauma, loss, and collective violence, linking personal and collective experiences. Her works highlight trauma's relation to difficult narration and emotional revelation through disrupted storytelling, symbolism, imagery, and stylistic techniques such as fragmentation and non-linearity. Both *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part* depict existential trauma, arising from fears of death, loss of safety, and identity, rooted in internal philosophical struggles. Characters in two novels face threats to their existence, trust, and self-understanding, often feeling isolated and alienated, and confronting mortality. While death brings fear and despair, it also offers potential for growth, new meaning, and deeper self-awareness as characters navigate the tension between life and death, reality and dreams. The characters' trauma journey in *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part* involves emotional and psychological struggles as they seek self-understanding amid danger, loss, and crises. In *The White Book*, the unnamed narrator reflects on her sister's death while in an unnamed European city, using symbols such as white and black, and a non-linear structure to explore life's contradictions and trauma. Her meditative reflections help heal her trauma and save her from being drowned in the vicissitudes of life. *We Do Not Part* depicts another trauma involving sacrifice, hope, and loss during a stormy journey to her friend's house, ending in disillusionment. Kang uses fragmentation, imagery, juxtaposition, repetition, and symbolism to reflect the narrator's traumatic journey, which oscillates between hope and fear, reality and dream, and body and mind. However, she involves her character in practices such as cultivating the present moment, cultivating awareness through meditation, accepting the impermanence of all things, and emphasizing the interconnectedness of beings, inspired by Seon philosophy. The trope of stillness is the primary strategy both novels employ to confront and overcome emotional and psychological challenges, conveying the characters' resistance to trauma, insecurity, and imbalance.

Kang's *The White Book* is a reflective, meditative story that mirrors the narrator's contemplation of life and her practice of stillness amid traumatic experiences. Kang depicts the narrator's life as a distressful but compelling adventure, dividing her novel into three parts: one focuses on the narrator's life in a foreign country (Poland) while preparing to write her book, then the family memory of her sister's death, and at last her reflection on the color of whiteness. Each part examines a certain practice of coping with her personal trauma and loss. Kang involves the narrator in the process of writing at the beginning of the novel, aiming to uncover her feelings and gain insight into the complexity of life and death. The process of writing coincides with being in a foreign country, where the narrator decides to write a book about white things, beginning with "swaddling bands" as the first object to discuss. The goal of this process is to transform herself and heal her wounds, as the whiteness of these objects can veil all senses of bleakness. However, she finds herself lost in a storm of troubling recollection. The list she made to write about involving "newborn gown" and "swaddling bands" brings back memories of a bitter childhood,

as the narrator's mother recounts how her baby sister was born prematurely during a time of poverty and emotional distress. These memories dominate her mind and influence her thoughts at every moment, as she wonders how they have drifted away in "an unfamiliar city" (Kang 2016, p.21). Moreover, the impact of these family memories becomes profound, manifesting in her body and feeling like "a prison, a solid, shifting island threading the crowd. A sealed chamber carrying all the memories of the life I have lived" (Kang 2016, p.21). To her, this place, in connection with these memories, evokes a dark and gloomy image in her mind and soul. The narrator's emotions are not solely cognitive reflections but are experienced as embodied sensations, aligning with affect theory's view that affect operates beneath or beyond language, manifesting physically before it can be consciously understood. Despite her attempts to quiet her mind, she finds herself flooded with haunting memories, causing her headache and fatigue, and a persistent sense of exhaustion. Her reading of an account of a man born in this city, living there, and remembering his brother's voice, who died at age six in the Jewish ghetto, triggers her memory of her mother giving birth to her older sister and pleading with the baby, saying "Don't die. For God's sake don't die" (Kang 2016, p.34), which is repeatedly mentioned in the novel. The unnamed narrator wants, at times, her sister to be alive and take her place, where "death and life resemble her own" (Kang 2016, p.37). Her words here emphasize Seon philosophy, which challenges the dualistic perception of reality and emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things and the ultimate unity of existence. By acknowledging death and contemplating its inevitability, the narrator can free herself from the fear of death and appreciate the present moment. In the act of recollection, her vision interrogates the tensions between life and death, hope and despair as a way of processing her trauma. The bleak image of death and loss dominates her feelings as she feels a sense of guilt over the death of her sister, even though she has a living brother, wishing that she could bring her back to life. However, it is also an effort to mourn her sister and heal her ongoing trauma, which seems to never end unless she resists, stays present, and realizes that nothing is permanent.

Reflections on life and death prevail in the second part of *The White Book*, entitled "She". The narrator questions reality and its dualistic nature, allowing her to pause her thoughts, gain perspective, and accept the present moment as she both thrives and suffers from the loss of her loved ones while digging deep into the past. By dissolving the line between life and death, the text implies that the narrator's greatest challenge—though difficult—is to go beyond duality in order to attain peace and stability. The window that has rime on its frame, the frozen sea that is replete with static fish, the father who chose Seoul which means snow as a name for his daughter, and the images of snowflakes or the man who had fallen in an alley and felt depressed by loneliness or the hell brought by falling snow and the man who had fallen on the icebound Himalayas are all ruminations about life and death, attempting to transcend the illusion of separation between the opposing forces, especially life and death. The narrator compares the nature of life and its impermanence to waves of water in which everything will vanish, and nothing is eternal, "The endless recurrence of the waves", she illustrates, "(though this eternity is illusion: the earth will one day vanish, everything will one day vanish) the fact that our lives are no more than brief instants is felt with unequivocal clarity." (Kang 2016, p.59) The narrator, Kang herself, recognizes death as a transition or change of state, highlighting its connection to life to form a continuous cycle. By juxtaposing life and death and placing images of life alongside death, the author reflects the character's inner conflict and reinforces the idea that mortality is an inescapable part of the human experience. She explores the themes of life's changes, which serve as a central axis in her novel, through the imagery of snow, aiming to address philosophical questions such as the role of change in understanding the inevitability of death. The recollecting story of gathering her mother's ashes in a box to be moved by her younger brother and herself to the small temple embodies her certainty and acceptance of the inevitability of death and changing life. Transcending the illusion of separation between life and death is also evident as the narrator attempts to create a contrastive analysis of black and depressing images to something bright and optimistic when she finds hope within the image of the moon, its reflection and light in her bedroom, the white bird and "handkerchief that drifted down, slowest of all, finally to the ground. Like a bird with its wings half furled. Like a soul tentatively sounding out a place it might alight" (Kang 2016, p.83). The narrator attempts to slow the pace and catch a glimmer of hope within a holistic vision, but she finds herself overwhelmed by an endless list of black images. The Milky Way, for example, gives her headaches, and yulan trees, which were planted in memory of the narrator's classmates who died at a young age, serve as living memorials to their brief lives and bring back gloomy memories. The narrator's drift and oscillating feelings between hope and despair are evident in the second part as she struggles like a wave of the sea, rising and falling without warning, or like a "house of sand" that repeatedly shatters (Kang 2016, p.107). Everything—objects, places, and people—evokes a sense of existential trauma and the image of death; yet she aims to see death as the counterpart to life, embracing a more holistic view in her effort to heal personal wounds and find a meaningful life.

Throughout *The White Book*, Kang turns language into a landscape of mourning, where words like 'white', 'silence', and 'stillness' depict trauma through repetition, symbolism, imagery, and grammatical stillness. 'White' appears frequently, naming sketches and reappearing in solid imagery. The book begins with a list of white objects, such as swaddling bands, salt, snow, rice, and paper, which are described in fragmented and verbless phrases such as "White bird", "White dog", "White paper", "White hair" (Kang 2016, pp. 5-6). Repeating these minimal phrases creates a rhythm of suspension that echoes trauma's cyclical nature. This fragmentation mirrors mourning's stasis, suggesting meaning emerges through enumeration rather than narrative. From the start, whiteness is linked to trauma, connected to the death of the narrator's newborn sister. The first white object, "swaddling bands," which represent "wound around the baby," even though "white as snow" (Kang 2016, p. 15), encases both the body and grief. It symbolizes purity, fragility, loss, and mourning, comparing a newborn's wrapping to burial shrouds. This paradoxical image blends innocence with mourning, using whiteness to conceal and reveal the wound, reflecting trauma's grammar when language fails. Whiteness in *The White Book* suggests purity, peace, renewal, but also absence, erasure, and obliteration, resonating with Cathy Caruth's (1996) and Dominick LaCapra's (2001) ideas of trauma's dual nature as haunting and resistant. Kang describes snow covering the city at the memorial hall, "the city...appeared as though mantled with snow. A grey-white sheet of snow or ice on which a light dusting of soot had settled, sullyng it with dappled stains" (Kang 2016, p.25). The image is calming yet

overwhelming, cleansing yet threatening erasure. It reflects the thought that mourning and living are inseparable. The white city may symbolize purity or rebirth, but the stains show trauma's enduring marks. Kang's philosophy is that healing means learning to see beauty in what is damaged and lived, not restoring untouched purity. Through sparse prose, blank space, and page whiteness, she visualizes memory's emptiness. But whiteness also transforms into healing and resistance through aesthetic control. Repeating 'white' mediates loss and life, making trauma bearable. Echoing Adriana Cavarero (2009), Kang suggests pain is conveyed through delicate voicing or writing whiteness: "Now I will give you white things...Only white things will I give. No longer will I question whether I should give this life to you." (Kang 2016, p.40). She grants her sister a life via writing, acknowledging emptiness and facing absence. Seeing whiteness as a living and changeable entity, she understands it can be marred but remains beautiful—like life itself, imperfect and complex. Her gift is acceptance, no-attachment, and no-self, offering a world of beauty and contamination, light and darkness. Despite feeling guilty about living, she chooses to embrace life and honor her sister through creation rather than dwelling on guilt and denial. This moment shows an emotional and ethical resolution articulated within Seon's philosophical thought. When the narrator moves beyond a self-centered perspective, she can attain "miraculous awareness" because "life is an art, and like perfect art it should be self-forgetting" (1994, p. 61), as stated by Susuki. By giving her sister "white things," she shares her life instead of mourning silently.

Silence that recurs throughout *The White Book* is not just a stylistic element, but a purposeful technique Kang uses to express the profound trauma, reflecting the narrator's difficulty in articulating the unspeakable. Kang emphasizes absent sounds over present ones; scenes are shaped by what is not heard. Early on, silence appears wounded and restless, haunted by memory and pain. After childbirth, silence is described as "shot through with the smell of blood" (Kang 2016, p. 15), becoming violent and unbearable as the mother expects her baby's cry, heightened by blood and loss. This evokes a world where silence and blood speak trauma. Kang uses brief, verbless clauses to mirror traumatic gaps, making thoughts incomplete and space unoccupied. This minimalist style reflects trauma and uncertainty. When sensory elements fail to evoke and remember, the narrator hopes, "If silence could be condensed into the smallest, most solid object, this is how it feels" (Kang 2016, p. 101), transforming silent memories into tangible objects filled with emotion. This shift from silence to emptiness to presence symbolizes moving from erasure to feeling. Describing silence as "condensed" and "solid," she shows grief as a weight that occupies rather than surrounds. Kang's minimal punctuation and fragmented syntax, with trailing clauses and fading verbs, emphasize this by letting meaning rest in pauses. Imagining silence as a tangible object turns loss into something to hold and endure. These structural choices make silence both the medium and substance of mourning, where language struggles but reveals its genuine form. Silence reappears when the narrator says, "when long days finally come to a close; a time to be quiet is needed. I hold my stiff hands out to the silence, fingers splayed in its scant warmth," (Kang 2016, p.153). This captures silence shifting from emptiness to embody trauma's burden. It becomes "shot through" with blood, offering faint warmth. Kang redefines silence as a form of survival, holding pain and perseverance. Through its frequency, fragmentation, and material change, silence becomes the language of healing and resistance, with stillness conveying what cannot be spoken.

'White' structures the visual world of *The White Book* while 'silence' organizes its soundscape, and 'stillness' governs its bodily and temporal rhythm. Stillness in *The White Book* is a visual cue that evokes emotional resonance, enabling the narrator to fathom grief and memory through deliberate and focused introspection. Moments of stillness are repeatedly depicted in such images as the stillness of falling snow, a held breath, and the body after death. Amidst the noise and turmoil of the world, Kang espouses reflective intervals and stillness practices in the narrator's life and surroundings to develop cognitive functions and balance emotional responses. In one scene, when Kang writes, "yet those lights will be frozen white, in the clarity of their stillness, in their isolation" (Kang 2016, p. 95), she evokes an image of lights rather than darkness, appearing pure, still, motionless, and tangible, like suspended crystals in time, blending visual beauty with a sense of stillness and timelessness. According to Seon philosophy, attachment to time produces suffering and delusion, and awakening is realized only in the immediacy of the present moment. As Tolle states, "the present moment is the doorway to enlightenment" (1997, p.67). The calmness of these lights reflects the narrator's internal state, where grief is momentarily paused yet deeply felt, emphasizing how traumatic memories can be vivid but isolating. By using fragmented phrasing and repeated prepositional structures, Kang slows the reader's perception of time and emphasizes the division between memory and lived experience. Later in the novel, stillness evolves into a practice and a meditative, healing force rather than just an absence, showing how the narrator's vulnerable inner thoughts turn silence into a space of self-reckoning. By allowing interior reflection to unfold within this stillness, the text suggests that healing emerges not through action or resolution but through mindful presence and introspection, as evident in the following moment:

When the day of her leaving draws near,
and she stands in the darkness of this house, there
are words she will want to speak to its stillness,
which she is no longer permitted to dwell inside.
When the night that had seemed without end is over
And the northern window is a swatch of deep
-blue twilight,
when the sky then brightens to ultramarine and the
clean bones of poplars are slowly outlined,

there will be something she wants to say to the
stillness, in the early hours of Sunday morning
when the building's other inhabitants have yet
to stir.

Please, a little longer than this.

To give it time to wash me clean. (Kang 2016, p.123)

Stillness here links to time and sensory details, such as the ultramarine sky and the quiet Sunday morning, creating space for reflection and emotional renewal. The narrator's wish to linger in stillness helps heal grief. Kang conveys a sense of stillness in these free-verse lines through paratactic structures, repetition, and liminal language, creating a vivid, tangible experience. The narrator's physical engagement with the quiet serves as a tactile and ritualistic practice. These lines mirror Blanchot's assertion that "may what is written resound in the stillness, making silence resound at length, before returning to the motionless peace where the enigma still wakes" (1995, p.43). Stillness is the realm where language fades, and writing endures. In this space, trauma and narrative become frozen, and stillness transforms into an ethical stance of restraint. Kang's use of ellipsis (stylistic and semantic), fractured clauses, and personification transform stillness into a participant in mourning, where memory, loss, and calm coexist. The repeated focus on stillness, which is combined with minimalist syntax, fragmented clauses, personification, and temporal extension, highlights its dual role as both trauma reflection and contemplative renewal. Kang's stylistic choices and formal strategies do not merely describe stillness quietly; they enact it. The novel serves as a vessel for silence and stillness, with its white pages symbolizing pause and blankness at the core of trauma.

Kang's *We Do Not Part* mirrors the parallel journey of trauma depicted in *The White Book*, urging its protagonist to adopt certain strategies of holistic healing. As Kynugha or Kynug-ha, the main character, faces a torrent of complications and challenges, she tries to understand and heal herself from past wounds throughout the writing process. Kynugha's decision to write a book about Korean trauma stems from learning forgotten historical details of Jeju Island's suffering from her friend, Inseon; however, she begins to experience violent nightmares and visions of violence and death that trigger migraines, stomach pains, fever, and feelings of isolation. At the beginning of the novel, Kyungha moves between reality and dreams, inhabiting a liminal space where boundaries blur indistinctly. She imagines her 2014 summer dream really happened when she encounters a similar place in town. She has difficulty distinguishing dreams from reality and recognizing familiar people from strangers. Despite completing her book on a massacre in Inseon's village, Jeju, and hoping it would heal her trauma, her loneliness and disappointment dominate her life, causing sickness and fatigue, migraines and spasms. Her emotional struggles are both internal and outwardly expressed physically. By manifesting trauma through physical symptoms, the novel suggests that psychological pain cannot be separated from the body, as demonstrated in the subsequent lines:

I don't know what set it off, the shaking. My body seemed to be racked by sobs, though my eyes remained dry. Was this terror? Or anxiety, agitation, perhaps an abrupt anguish? No, it was a bone-chilling awareness. That a giant, invisible knife - the weight of its heavy blade beyond any human capacity to wield it—hung in the air, with me as its target. As I lay pinned and staring. (Kang 2025, p.5)

Emotional suffering is inscribed onto the body, challenging the notion that trauma exists solely within the mind and presenting the body as the primary site of memory and pain. These bodily signs align with affect theory, as outlined by Brian Massumi, who defines affect as "a bodily intensity" involving preconscious, biological responses that occur before cognitive and emotional processing. Moreover, emotions are more than individual feelings; they flow between people and surroundings, shaping our experience of the world, as Sara Ahmed explains. In this context, Kyungha's migraines, stomach spasms, and insomnia are physical signs of trauma and anxiety. Her body acts as the main channel for her emotional expression, influencing every place she visits. Her distress intensifies when her friend and photographer, Inseon, sends an unclear message from a hospital asking her to come, prompting her to travel to her distant hometown to rescue her bird. Writing a book seems inadequate to fully process trauma, so Kang attempts another method by engaging the narrator in experiencing it directly through a snowy journey to Jeju. However, the snow and whiteness engulfing the town are not symbols of purity but remnants of pain and the aesthetic stillness that masks underlying chaos.

Kang uses whiteness as a motif of trauma, transforming it into a visual and linguistic structure that shapes the reader's understanding of suffering. Scenes of snowfall, bone, storm, and sky saturate the text with emotional stillness and memory. Snow blankets everything—covering the graves, casting shadows on the wall, lingering in shared meals, and filling the sleepless nights. The images of the "white bones of the hundreds buried there", "the waves couldn't steal away," and "Black trees stood their ground" (Kang 2025, p. 17) suggest past violence enduring beneath the surface, where snow and bone merge into a cold memory. This fragmentation reflects trauma's static perception. Whiteness spans time and space, as in "snow that had been falling for decades—no, centuries" (Kang 2025, p. 17), capturing trauma's temporal distortion, where the past never melts but endlessly descends. When "patients and guardians alike [gaze] at the snowfall, their blank faces suggesting familiarity with pain and endurance," (Kang 2025, p. 31), snow's whiteness mirrors emotional emptiness hardened into endurance. Similarly, the image of "white mass of storm clouds and snow mist" (Kang 2025, p. 52) and a woman watching snow, with "flakes like white birds that grow heavier as they descend" and "her eyes glistened with soundless tears" (Kang 2025, p. 145), embody trauma's stillness or movement without progress and an expression without sound. Through patterns of fragmentation and syntactic or semantic ellipses, Kang consistently portrays grief as whiteness to conceal, expose, freeze, and preserve trauma. It functions as

both the wound and its cover, the memory and its erasure.

Kyungha's trauma is viewed through different lenses, causing emotional dissonance, silence, and fragmented identity. An urgent message from Inseon urging her to go to the hospital triggers panic and anxiety. Thoughts race, especially about Inseon's self-injury in her workshop. At the hospital, Kyungha appears brave and composed, despite the bloody scene and her unusual request to save her bird, Ama. She is initially surprised but begins to unravel emotionally and physically during the journey, even losing consciousness. She feels "her jaw throbbing from incessant chatter, biting her sleeve to still her teeth." (Kang 2025, p.101) At her friend's house, she feels shattered, hallucinating Inseon's presence and criticizing her ignorance of birds. Though warmed by Inseon's house, she sinks into muddled thoughts, feeling exhausted yet dreaming of her friend, who keeps asking her to care for the bird. Finding the bird dead in the cage triggers grief and sadness; she feels numb and disconnected from reality. Her journey and her presence in her friend's house are defined by an all-encompassing silence that permeates every corner. Kang turns silence into the most truthful form of speech available after an atrocity. Silence is not absence but endurance; it is the echo of the dead, the weight of memory, and the condition of survival. It is both wound and witness, and repression and remembrance. Kang uses silence as the most profound expression of trauma's persistence, transforming it from a simple lack of sound into a vivid presence that defines the landscape and the self. The narrator describes the persistent quietness of daily life, showing how it appears both in her depiction of everyday existence and her experiences at her friend's house, where she notes, "we finished our food in silence," (Kang 2025, p.56) and "we walked the streets in silence" (Kang 2025, p.61). This illustrates how trauma has permeated ordinary moments and how speech has broken down under the burden of the unspeakable. This silence extends into the outer world, as the phrase "flooded graves and silent headstones" (Kang 2025, p.5) evokes death and a buried past, forming a landscape of erasure where the dead go unacknowledged, and their stillness symbolizes the collective silencing of history. At the same time, the "shadow of a bird, flying soundlessly over the white wall" (Kang 2025, p. 156) shows silence as a haunting, ghostly visitation of the lost, in which their presence moves across the blank surfaces of memory. The bird's soundless flight brings silence into the realm of the uncanny. The soundlessness mirrors how the dead communicate through shadows and fleeting images rather than through speech. When the narrator, in another scene, wakes to find that "the silence and the darkness are still waiting, unchanged" (Kang 2025, p. 189), the outer quiet becomes inner reality and a psychological condition of life suspended in trauma's aftermath. Silence and darkness here are personified as patient companions waiting constantly. This line captures the temporal paralysis of trauma, where the survivor's world remains trapped in recurrence, and waking does not bring renewal but rather ongoing return. Through this accumulation of images, Kang turns silence into both symptoms and language of suffering and trauma, creating an ethical space where words fail but memory persists, and the unspeakable is not erased but endures soundlessly within and around the living.

Kang's novel, *We Do Not Part*, presents traumatic experience as a force that reshapes consciousness, producing not only physical and emotional numbness but also intrusive memories that distort the narrator's sense of self and reality. When Kynugha arrives at Inseon's house, she is flooded with memories and caught in a downpour of recollection. Every corner in her friend's house reminds her of her friend and their conversation. These past and mostly depressing memories coincide with the scene of falling snow that grows heavier, suggesting the burden of the severe shock and pain caused by the upsetting experience of her friend's hurt and the death of the bird, Ama. Kynugha feels her friend accompanies her every moment, talking to her and revealing her honest emotions as she states, "I almost felt sure that what I imagined she was now thinking might be true ... everything I had experienced on this island was only the illusions of a dead soul." (Kang 2025, p.147) Kynugha's presence in her friend's house is paired with her friend's absence and the agitation of recalling accounts of collective historical trauma in Jeju. Although the novel's ending leaves it unclear between accepting her friend's imminent death or denying it, Kynugha's feelings of having closure and not leaving the side of her friend when she arrives at Inseon's house seem interchangeable, at least mentally and emotionally, especially when she dives deep, thinking about parting and wondering about the sense of separation and its essence. To her, the parting could be like the steam that escapes from the kettle, which hits the lid seemingly saying, "the goodbye, or the closure." (Kang 2025, p.149) Anxiety over the possibility of losing her friend, separation, and loneliness strike Kynugha as she recalls the confession that they "Do Not Part" (Kang 2025, p. 148) and will not leave each other, especially when they were isolated in the snowy village. However, she reached a profound communion when she revealed that "Our eyes meet in the stillness" (Kang 2025, p. 220). The stillness embodies the paralysis of trauma, but within it, the act of meeting eyes signals shared endurance, empathy, and remembrance. In a world where language has failed, that silent gaze becomes the sole form of communication, a delicate, wordless affirmation that, despite devastation, human bonds remain. Her stay at her friend's house, marked by reflection on memories shared between them, allows her to quiet her mind and deepen her understanding of life and her people's history.

The remains of notes that Kynugha finds in her friend's house are also signs that provoke images of death and despair; however, they are represented as tools to heal her trauma or resist and change. As her friend works as a producer of films and a photographer, she finds some documents that narrate the sufferings of civilians during the civil war or wives struggling with their husbands, the harm that they received from mass killings, both at home and in caves where they were hiding. The wind that strikes the window and shatters everything in the yard of Inseon's house calls up stories of instances of mass killings, such as Inseon's father and his three sisters with his mother, which embody an image of violent killings and sufferings of civilians. When her father was nineteen, sickness struck most of the family's children. Rumors had spread that the police would conscript young men into service. Her father has been sent to the cave to hide while he studied and applied to a college in Seoul. Each evening, he returns to his house to steal food, only to find out that there are burning houses in the area. He reaches the yard and finds that it is streaked with blood. Kynugha recalls the moment when Inseon brought the boxes and CDs to show her, demonstrating the devastating civil war and mass killings in Jeju Island. The violent and inhumane images color most of

the documents that Inseon brought to Kynugha, narrating genocide and mass killings of women holding babies or giving birth, the dread experience that the old lady went through when she was young, and how the soldiers who came to Jeju village destroyed the village, its people, and all services. Kynugha is overwhelmed by feelings of loss, death, and blackness once she remembers Inseon and her absence. Living between dream and reality, Kyungha is overwhelmed by pain and silence, recalling her surroundings in the space between sleep and wakefulness. The journey, though for her friend's sake, deepens her connection to her friend's roots, collective trauma, and Jeju's history, even amid silence and unconsciousness. Kang involves Kyungha in a journey to discover and understand the truth beyond mere textual learning and to practice being present amid the chaos. It reflects Jinul's view, a Seon philosophy master, who believed that the essence of practice is to eliminate delusions to attain direct insight. Zen's focus on the present moment and direct experience into reality is summarized by Dr. Suzuki when he states that "the truth of Zen really lies in the concrete things of our daily life [not in intellectual understanding]. The truth of Zen is on its practical side and not on its irrationality" (1994, p.83). Living in the present moment deepens her understanding of reality and the collective historical trauma of Jeju and lessens her personal and individual traumatic experience. Kynugha wonders about the hope that could remain within the people who have been hurt, or whose organs and muscles have decayed, and asks about their souls and humanity that could be gone. To her, she could not bear thinking about her friend being wounded or might be lost one day because she would not find someone who could ease her pain as she demonstrates "where your wounds will be pierced with needles once more. Where blood and electricity will flow together anew," yet no body will be beside her and support her (Kang 2025, p.255). Her fear of losing her friend is her main concern, but it is overshadowed by the collective and historical disaster in Korean society. Kynugha is caught between movement and immobility, between the pull of the past and the impossibility of remaining in silence. It is a moment of inner conflict that mirrors the emotional and historical paralysis at the heart of the novel, clearly evident when she reveals: "I stood still, hesitating. I didn't want to go there. But I didn't stay here in this stillness anymore either." (Kang 2025, p.238) To refuse to remain in stillness is to refuse numbness and to risk confronting pain. This moment signals the faint stirring of agency and the first movement toward re-engaging with the past. This line captures the novel's reflection on what it means to live after trauma; in other words, to balance between remembering and forgetting, between speech and silence, and between survival and mourning.

6. Conclusion

Kang's fiction examines the emotional and psychological dimensions of trauma, employing silence and bodily intensity as key narrative strategies to articulate suffering while simultaneously tracing practices of stillness, recovery, and resistance. These motifs—silence and bodily intensity—shape Kang's distinctive approach to representing her characters' traumatic experiences. Whether facing the direct loss of a loved one or undertaking a life-threatening challenge that awakens past trauma, Kang's characters are burdened by trauma in its most overwhelming forms—physically, emotionally, mentally, and deep within their souls. In *The White Book*, the narrator mourns the brief life of her infant sister, whose death highlights unresolved wounds from Korea's violent history, quietly echoing through the ruined landscape of Warsaw. Silence haunted by memory and pain, alongside the attempts to render memories into tangible forms, functions as a key medium to trauma and mourning in this novel. In *We Do Not Part*, Kyungha's journey to Jeju Island to care for her friend's bird becomes an emotional and mental turmoil as she confronts buried traumas from the Jeju uprising, resulting in hallucinations and physical breakdown. In this novel, trauma is presented as an embodied and effective experience, rather than a purely psychological condition. Nevertheless, Kang weaves powerful healing and resistance techniques into her characters' journeys to overcome trauma, offering a deep philosophical and emotional reflection on how trauma resides in the body, memory, and landscape—concepts explored in Seon philosophy. Writing to release negative emotions, practicing direct experience, embracing non-duality and a holistic everyday perspective, and connecting personal trauma to collective and ancestral roots serve as vital tactics used by characters in both novels. By intertwining personal loss with collective history and employing stillness and silence as core narrative tools, Kang invites the reader to view mourning not as a single event but as a shared, ongoing process. This process echoes across generations, crossing borders and transcending the divide between life and death.

Kang adopts a distinctive approach to representing trauma and mourning by foregrounding silence, stillness, and embodied, affective experience while employing a range of structural and linguistic techniques that shape how trauma is perceived and felt. In her novels, silence and stillness do not function as absences of meaning; rather, they operate as conditions in which affect emerges before language. Moments of stillness generate affective responses that resist verbalization, echoing Barthes's notion of photographic stillness and how immobilized images provoke affect. Techniques such as juxtaposition, symbolism, imagery—particularly white objects and snow—work alongside fragmented and non-linear structure to translate bodily intensity and articulate and resist what is omitted via verbal expression. These techniques operate when language fails, converting trauma into a visceral experience encounter. Through detailed sensory descriptions, *The White Book* and *We Do Not Part* draw the reader into the characters' experiences, fostering an emotional engagement that reflects their feelings and physical sensations aligned with affect theory. This immersion is further reinforced through formal strategies of silence, including fragmented syntax, repetition, gaps, ellipses, a minimalist style, and the use of white space, all of which register trauma and mourning as forms of rupture. By intensifying bodily reactions and provoking affective responses while suspending storytelling, Kang questions mainstream trauma frameworks that favor speech and coherence. She redefines recovery as a continuous engagement with lingering emotions rather than seeking narrative resolution. Kang's affective method of depicting trauma is strengthened by integrating essential Seon philosophy principles—like direct experience, gradual cultivation, enlightenment, non-attachment, no-self, and non-duality—across both novels. In *The White Book*, these concepts are expressed through the narrator's actions of writing and offering "white things" and life to her deceased sister, symbolizing non-attachment, meditation as enlightenment, and the experience of non-duality inherent in the realization of 'no—self'. Also, the emphasis on direct experience over theoretical knowledge is illustrated in *We Do Not Part*,

where Kynugha's visit to her friend's city leads her to gain a firsthand understanding of the Korean massacre, drawing on her friend's family experiences in Jeju and the historical documents she composed from those experiences rather than perpetuating mistaken accounts. Kang, in both texts, espouses the technique of stillness, harnessing principles of Seon philosophy to ease the characters' traumatic dilemmas. Stillness functions not merely as a moment of pause, but as a deliberate practice through which the characters confront pain, regulate emotional turbulence, and cultivate inner balance. Through this process, the characters' journey toward peace and stability is framed as gradual and introspective, emphasizing presence, acceptance, and embodied awareness rather than resolution or closure. Within the practice of stillness informed by Seon philosophy, trauma is not erased but reframed as silent echoes that coexist with moments of calm and acceptance. Kang does not reject Western trauma approaches but extends them through Seon philosophy, offering a more holistic framework that fills theoretical gaps in existing models of trauma and healing by foregrounding stillness, embodied awareness, gradual cultivation, and non-dual models of understanding suffering and recovery, life and death, mind and body.

Acknowledgments

Sincere thanks to the Department of English language and literature, College of languages and Humanities, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia and the Deanship of Scientific Research, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia.

Authors' contributions

Not applicable

Funding

The researcher would like to thank the Deanship of Scientific Research, Qassim University, for funding the publication of this project.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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