



A Tale of Hope: Memory and Resilience in Kyung-Sook Shin's I'll Be Right There

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Abstract

Written in Hangeul and translated to English, Shin's I'll Be Right There is a book that sets itself apart from her contemporaries both in style of writing and also with the topic being dealt with. Jung Yoon, our protagonist receives a phone call from an old friend about their ailing professor, and things starts unravelling from there. The narration is non-linear: the past and the present are woven very intricately and there's never a dull moment. Yoon's memory of her university days in the 1980s – her professor, friends and the campus - they pop up in between pages in the form of long narrations with vivid imageries, taking the reader down her memory lane. The violent and oppressive past of South Korea in the 1980s has been very effectively recorded in this novel by Shin with hints of her own life sprinkled here and there, intertwining hope and resilience in it through her diligent storytelling skills. The protagonist Yoon has found and lost so much in the past, and she takes us on this vulnerable yet persevering journey through her memory – a journey that instills hope in us. This paper aims to bring out the elements of collective, cultural and personal memory in this novel; and also will attempt to substantiate that this novel can be used as a mnemonic aid to recollect the history of South Korea.

Keywords: Memory, history, past, resilience, hope, remembering, mnemonic.

*"It seems that whether we are aware of it or not,
memory carries a dagger in its breast..."*

(Shin 14)

South Korea, now a country of great economic and democracy has a history of violence and bloodshed through the ages. The Koreans suffered tremendously in the hands of the Japanese during their colonial rule between 1910-1945; they were made to work in harsh conditions, forced to take Japanese names and to speak in Japanese. Thousands of women were pushed into being "comfort women," for Japanese soldiers during World War II. Many Koreans formed resistance groups to fight against the atrocities of the Japanese. This oppressive rule of the Japanese ended in 1945; and Korea split into two because of

the Russian influence in the north and American influence in the south. (Panwar 4) The Korean War between the North and the South led to the permanent division between them, establishing them as two separate nations with the North embracing communism and the South democracy.

Even after the traumatizing Japanese colonial rule and the Korean War, South Korea wasn't a land of peace and prosperity. In the 1960s, under the efficient leadership of President Chung-Hee Park, a lot of economic reforms were made and quite a few industries were set up in the cities, and people migrated in large numbers to Seoul to survive. The society was rapidly moving towards building the nation up – economically, and this phenomenon was



called “the miracle of the Han River.” But later, in 1972, Park established Martial Law and ruled the nation as a dictator. He was assassinated in 1979, and after a temporary President came the rule of an army general – Doo-Hwan Chun. Chun suppresses the freedom of the civilians, brought in a lot of restrictions and maintained law and order with the help of his brutal armed force who exercised extreme violence. Chun was later held responsible for declaring Martial Law unnecessarily during the Gwangju Uprising in 1980. South Korea achieved proper democracy only in 1987, after the June Democratic Struggle. This establishment of the South Korean government did not come easily. Students and the public protested, walked around demonstrating against the military rule of Chun and the need for democracy.

This period of South Korea was filled with violence, bloodshed – students being killed or beaten up brutally. Many students and civilians were arrested but never released – disappearing into nowhere. Beaten up bodies were found in the rivers, mountains and dams. Students raised their voices for various causes – for democracy, for equal wages for factory workers, for employees of an industry that makes them work in inhumane conditions. The streets were filled with the voices of protests and cries, and the smell of tear gas and blood. This is testimony to the fact that liberty can be achieved only at a very high cost. Here, the cost was the lives of the common men and women.

Kyung-Sook Shin – the author celebrated worldwide for her novel *Please Look After Mom*, lived in Seoul in the 1980s to early 2000 and has experienced the above-mentioned happenings firsthand. She has a writing career that spans for about three decades and has written about thirteen novels of which six have been translated into English. Shin won the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2012 for *Please Look After Mom*. Shin is one of the many South Korean writers who focuses on the trauma and history of the Korean people in general and women. Like her contemporary Han Kang who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2024, Shin writes about the historical past of South Korea and its effect on the people in a profound manner, by also intertwining her personal memory with the collective memory of the nation. Almost all of Shin’s novels

have autobiographical elements in them, in fact there are characters who are repeatedly mentioned across her novels. For example, the characters Mom, Dad, Elder brother, cousin and Dahn are seen in three of her novels.

I’ll Be Right There was written in the year 2010 and translated to English by Sora Kim-Russell in 2014. The novel resembles Haruki Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood* in its plot structure and deals with issues of trauma like that novel but that is where the similarities end. The novel is set in the 1980s, with the protagonist Jung Yoon living in Seoul as a university student. With the political unrest of the 1980s as the backdrop, this novel focuses on the lives of Jung Yoon, her friends Dahn, Myungsu and Miru, and their Professor Yoon. The collective trauma of living through such times of turmoil, and the personal trauma of each of the characters are portrayed in the form of Yoon’s memories. This paper will attempt to analyze Shin’s *I’ll Be Right There* (from now on IBT) by employing concepts from Memory Studies and bring to light how her memories shape her identity – bridging personal and collective memory, and also to how these memories can have aspirational qualities – such as being used as a mnemonic tool for the future generations.

It all begins with Jung Yoon receiving a phone call from her ex-lover. It has been eight years since she lost touch with her university friends and now Myungsu (her ex-lover) calls her to inform that their professor is at the verge of death. This one phone call leads to Jung Yoon think about her past - her university days with the Professor, Myungsu and Miru. With the turbulent student protests of the 1980s as the background, the novel explores the traumatic memory of Jung Yoon. The memories of the past unravel one after the other, taking us through the life of Jung and her friends. “Let’s remember this day forever” (Shin 10) – Myungsu insisted eight years ago, and it seems like Jung remembers not just that day, but everything. The descriptions are very minutely detailed. The colour and pattern of Miru’s skirt, the conversations she had with the Professor, Myungsu, her cousin, her parents and her classmates, the basement room of Miru, Miru’s grandmother’s house – everything is stored away in Jung Yoon’s brain and surfaces with that one phone call.



The narrative is fragmented as it usually will be with traumatic narratives (Caruth 19). Yoon keeps oscillating between the past and present, and she also jumps from one memory to another. While she is narrating one incident from her past, another memory surfaces from it; the memories are embedded within other memories. Hence, the narration is non-linear and quite complex like a Russian nested doll – one memory after the other keeps popping up as she navigates her memories. These nested memories are proof that Jung Yoon's memory is fragmented due to the trauma she had to go through in the 1980s, as a university student. The memories unfold in a cascading manner, following one after the other, overwhelming Yoon but also helps her to rethink her past and how it shaped her.

In the novel Yoon thinks about the university she attended and that leads to her memories of her mother being sick with cancer. She remembers how her mother sent her to the city as soon as she was diagnosed with cancer (Shin 17). Yoon takes a semester break once her mother passes away. She very keenly recollects the grief she felt when mother died, and how disoriented and lonely she felt returning to the city. This memory leads to the memory of her classmate called Pedal, and that of her childhood friend Dahn. In the first chapter of the novel itself she moves from one memory to another – that of her father, Dahn's fear of spiders, her newly we cousin and her husband. In this manner, throughout the novel we find memories unravelling other memories – several crucial memories nested within one another. This reaffirms the idea that memory does not work linear, we remember things in a non-linear manner.

Time also does not work linear in memories, according to Henri Bergson's concept of *duree* (lived time) past and present coexist rather than being separate entities, and it is shaped by consciousness, memory and emotions, making it fluid rather than fixed (Bergson 113). To expand, when one remembers their loved one, they do not retrieve a static image of them but instead they re-experience emotions and impressions from different moments, merging them into continuous living experiences. So, instead of a linear, chronologically ordered sequence of events we see Yoon's subjective memories shaped

by her emotions and traumas. A good instance for this would be Yoon addressing Dahn's death in a muddled manner, she talks about him writing letters to her and her not replying; and after a few chapters we see her sitting down to reply to his letters. We would not have a second thought about this until her cousin meets Myungsoh and tells him that Dahn has been dead for six months. The readers will be able to recognize the passage of time only with this clarification.

Again, when Yoon narrates how she met Miru and how their friendship blossomed over bathhouse visits and having food together at her house, we are exposed to Miru's memory of her dead sister Mirae and time blurs here. Yoon recounts Miru's memories of her sister with precision – even the day that Mirae committed suicide on top of a building amidst a student protest – “all I could do was panic. All I remember is black smoke, the sounds of the crowd below who had finally noticed us, anguished screams... Finally, my sister shook off my hands... Her body went over the railing and I saw her float midair for the moment” (Shin 195). Similarly, Myungsoh's memory of growing up with Miru and her sister and living with them in the same house is narrated by him to Yoon and she recollects it as her memories of the past keep surfacing one after another in a fluid manner.

Throughout the novel Jung Yoon looks at her past with reflective nostalgia and not reformative nostalgia. According to Svetlana Boym, restorative nostalgia focuses on idealizing and reconstructing the past, it attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home (Boym 14) and reflective nostalgia focuses on visiting the memories in a retrospective manner knowing well that the past cannot be re-lived. The past is irreversible but there can be space for a new understanding of the events that occurred and the experiences and emotions they created. Boym also talks about how nostalgia can not only be retrospective but also prospective, meaning that “the fantasies of the past determined by the needs of the present have a direct impact on the realities of the future” (Boym 17). This gives us a space to imply that memory has aspirational qualities also – memories shape us into the person we become. It is not just about looking back into the past, but also



about using that past to construct one's identity, goals and life decisions.

Jung Yoon undergoes loss, grief and turbulent times in the past – she loses her mother to cancer, her childhood best friend Dahn dies of a mysterious bullet wound in the army, Miru kills herself by starving herself and Myungsuh, her then boyfriend becomes an alcoholic trying to cope with the death of Miru, her sister and Dahn, and the fruitless efforts of the student protests. In real life, Shin also lost her mother to cancer when she was a university student and had also experienced firsthand the 1980s – the protests, the industrial development and the effects of these on the common people. In an interview with PP Wong, Shin was quoted as saying “I was very young, and those events (the Gwangju Massacre) affected me deeply. I feel the time given to me doesn't belong only to me. In everything – my writing, my travelling, my happiness – I live partly on behalf of those who weren't able to survive. I feel like I'm living their share of life” (Wong). She was also quoted as saying:

“Why them, not me?”

After contemplating this painful question, I ended up thinking that those who were not able to survive surely have a share of life. I could have been part of the horrible event instead of them. As I survived, the event affects me deeply for the rest of my life. In this way, what they experienced or suffered became my life and experience as well.

.... Even if someone created such a magic pill, I would not take it. Whether it was painful or sad, the past I lived through is part of my life. I won't be myself longer” (Wong).

These sentiments are reflected in almost all novels of Shin, and in this novel, it is reflected through the life of Yoon. She remembers the past and grieves the loss of her friends and their hopes and dreams but does not attempt to romanticize or relive the past. She embraces those memories as a part of her, “long-forgotten memories kept cropping up and surprising me, like pulling on the stalk of a potato plant after the rain and seeing endless clusters of potatoes pop out of the soil” (Shin 12).

As the novel progresses, we can clearly see the amalgamation of Yoon's personal memory and the collective memory of South Korea as a nation.

Yoon is a living witness to the student protests that happened in the university and in the streets of Seoul. In the beginning though she does not directly involve herself with the protests, she joins Myungsuh and Miru in the later part of the novel protesting in the streets. In chapter three she recalls the memory of her being stuck amidst the protesting crowd near City Hall (Shin 77), tear gas is thrown and in the chaos that ensues she loses her bag and shoes, is pushed down and bleeds from scraping her knee. She is bewildered and stands scared until Myungsuh finds and rescues her. This incident is the closest she gets to undergoing and understanding what the protesters were going through for the cause of the nation. Every day she reads the newspaper and hears about students and citizens disappearing from the streets to never return. Stories of students being arrested, being taken away by armed men and their bodies being dumped near waterbodies are what Yoon remembers. The tragic story of Mirae's boyfriend being taken away by suspicious men, Mirae spending the rest of her living days searching for him and finally immolating herself in a sense of fury and hopeless very aptly captures the spirit of the 1980s in South Korea.

From the Standpoint Theory developed by theorists like Sandra Harding and Nancy Hartsock, (borrowed from Feminist theory and critical Social Theory) which implies that a person's knowledge is shaped by their social position, experiences and identity we can attempt to arrive at a conclusion that Yoon's recollection of her past represents the collective memory of the women and common people during the 1980s in South Korea. Her memories and Myungsuh's memory (as recorded in his Brown Notebook that Yoon possesses) are the collective memories of the civilians as opposed to the elites of that time. Many elites who lived during the 1980s considered the period to be a time of economic prosperity and urbanization (Bryan 53) and refused to acknowledge the struggles of the wage workers and the protests of the students. The dominant political and cultural ideology of that time did not accommodate the needs and voices of the civilians. Hence, the memories of Yoon and Myungsu play a major role in representing the voices of the marginalized of the then South Korean society. Yoon's memories represent the



trauma, pain, grief and reality that many women had to undergo – losing their family members and friends to the political scenario of that time; and Myungsuh's memories represent the mentality of the students who participated in the protests and the trauma they had to face losing their comrades and friends in the process of democratizing their nation. From this theory's point of view, this novel can be used as a mnemonic artifact in obtaining an inclusive understanding of the political and social history of South Korea in the 1980s.

Another crucial observation is that Shin employs landscapes and physical objects as mnemonic sites to sustain Yoon's memories. According to Halbwachs, places serve as anchors for memory and these locations trigger memories of political happenings and personal struggles (Halbwachs 87). Pierre Nora has contributed a similar concept when it comes to remembering collective memories – *lieux de memoire*. Sites of Memory or *Lieux de memoire* are places that preserve collective memory in the absence of natural, everyday remembrance, they could be physical locations (monuments, cemeteries), symbolic elements (national anthem, anniversaries) or cultural practices (rituals, art, literature) (Nora 18). These sites of memory exist because objective history has taken over the subjective memories in order to record its own version of events.

The university, the classroom, the Namsan Tower, the streets of Seoul, the Myeongdong Cathedral, the Gyeongbokgung Palace, the books, office and house of Professor Yoon, Myungsuh's Brown Notebook, Miru's diaries, the phone calls, the letters from Dahn, Emily (Miru's cat), Miru's grandmother's home, the western authors and their books such as Emily Dickinson's book of poems (mentioned throughout the novel) – they all act as mnemonic aids, helping Yoon to restore her memories of the past unscathed. At the beginning of the novel, Yoon recalls the first class of Professor Yoon that she attended “whenever I was alone, my memories from a year ago were hazy and indistinct; now that I was back in the same classroom, the old me was as sharp and clear as if she were sitting right in front of me. Professor Yoon called each name in turn” (Shin 45). The smell of the tear gas and the shouting of the student protesters came back to her when she remembered her university.

The office and house of Professor Yoon play a major role in Yoon's memories, both in the beginning and the end of the novel. The Professor's office seems to be drab and has a bookshelf (Shin 54), and this is where Yoon meets Myungsuh and Miru for the first time. This friendship which will turn the trajectory of her life begins in this office. Therefore, we could affirm that this place is a significant anchor of memory for Yoon. Later, after Miru's suicide by starvation Myungsuh and Yoon visit the Professor's office to leave Miru's diary amongst his books. Miru had the habit of writing down everything she ate in a day to “feel alive” (Shin 67), “I wondered if recording everything she ate was her way of battling the part of her that didn't want to eat” (Shin 277); and also the three of them used to build stories by writing one sentence after the other. This diary, Emily the cat and her sister's skirt are part of Miru's identity, we could also look at this as her way of coping with the trauma of losing her sister. Emily the cat was named after Emily Dickinson by Mirae and Miru takes care of the cat after Mirae's death; in the present Yoon is taking care of this old cat and we can boldly assume that this cat is a living reminder of Yoon and her friends' past.

Yoon also has safeguarded Myungsuh's Brown Notebook which he presented to her during their courtship. This notebook preserves the memories of Myungsuh and acts as an anchor to Yoon's memories. Also, the Brown Notebook enables the reader and Yoon to know how Myungsuh dealt with the trauma he faced in the 1980s. We see Myungsuh narrating stories from the books and articles he has read, and very often we see him pondering on philosophical questions about what it is to be human and to survive in a world filled with violence and human selfishness (Shin 122). The Brown notebook is essential to understand the seriousness of the trauma inflicted on these young people, and how it significantly affects their entire existence. Myungsuh, a bright young man has demons of his own – he is recovering from the death of his childhood friend Mirae and feels like he is living a fruitless life. “Human beings are imperfect. We are complicated, indefinable and by any wise saying or moral” (Shin 294).

Myungsuh faithfully records his encounters with Jung Yoon, the Professor, Miru, Dahn and Jung



Yoon's cousin. Though they all are suffering with their troubles, he tries his best to be there for them and to hope for a better tomorrow. We see Myungsuh's gradual shift from an optimistic yet hopeful youth to a lost, alcoholic man. He starts drinking with the death of Miru and sabotages his relationship with Jung Yoon who tries her best to be there for him. "He and I were like twins. I had lost Dahn and now he had lost Miru" (Shin 273). These physical objects of Yoon, Myungsuh and Miru also bring to light as to how these three dealt with their respective trauma. Yoon is in a helpless state filled with regrets that she could not love Dahn like he wanted, and that she did not try harder with Miru. She is at a loss, not knowing how to move forward with the loss of her friends. Myungsuh too is lost "I can't wait for the years to pass, Jung Yoon," he said in a hollow voice. "Can't wait to be older, when I will understand, even if I can't forgive. Can't wait to be strong" (Shin 287).

By studying this novel from the perspective of memory, we can positively say that the personal and collective memory of Shin and the nation in the 1980s have been penned masterfully and painstakingly through the characters of Yoon, Myungsuh and Miru. The novel might seem heavy with personal loss, public violence and unrest but it also has an underlining of resilience and hope woven in between the plot. From the beginning of the novel, we can see that Jung Yoon is a survivor despite what has happened to her and her friends. It has been eight years since the events happened and it is evident that Jung Yoon has not moved on but had learned to live with these memories residing inside her brain. One phone call is all it takes to open the flood gates of memory, and we see that Yoon embraces these memories as a part of her. She does not wish for things to have been better or the past being changes. Instead, she looks back at their past with a sense of acceptance and resilience. She and her friends had gone through so much, but the point is that they never gave up. Even Miru who committed suicide, does not do so without putting up a fight for a long time; though life defeated her in the end her legacy lives on in the memories of her friends. Even with Dahn's death, though it took quite some time for Yoon to accept his death she now is asking her family to file a petition and investigate his suspicious death in the

army. (Shin 315).

This sense of resilience and hope begins with Professor Yoon's first class with them in the university, when he narrated the story of Saint Christopher – the saint who carries Child Jesus on his back. A student questions the Professor whether they were Saint Christopher or Jesus in this story, and he replies,

"Each of you is both Christopher and the child he carries on his back" (Shin 50). "We cross by becoming Saint Christopher to one another... sometimes you are the Christopher and other times you are the child – you carry each other across the river. So you must treasure yourselves and hold one another dear" (Shin 51).

This advice by Professor Yoon is what carries the three friends through their adversities. Yoon holds on to this story and tries her best to be there for her friends through it all. On his death bed the Professor traces the message "All things must end" (Shin 303) onto Yoon's palm and she gets closure there. The Professor himself acts as Saint Christopher to these students and his words help them to resiliently push forward.

In the epilogue we see that Jung Yoon has become a writer, and Myungsuh a prominent photojournalist. We also find Yoon travelling around the world, visiting the places that she, Dahn and Miru used to talk about. It can be observed that Yoon's memory of the past has aspirational qualities – they push her forward, making her the person she is now – living the unlive lives of her friends. She ends the novel with the note that even in the future she will always be there for her friends, holding onto their memories. In the author's note, Shin talks about how hope, friendship and love can be found even amidst violent times and how these bonds that we create are the ones that will define our lives. She emphasizes on the fact that hope can be found even in the darkest days, and someday things will change for the better; and also that we are not just defined by our tragedies but by also the resilient life we lead through it all, "we may be the protagonists of tragedy, but we are also the heroes of our most beautiful and thrilling experiences" (Shin 324).

To conclude, this novel deals with the painful memories of South Korea and its people told from the



perspective of a female narrator who is a civilian. It also reflects on how trauma can shape an individual's identity and personality; and how hope and resilience are inbuilt in humans. Further study can be done on this novel by expanding on Standpoint Theory – focusing on how gender plays a role in history and memory. Theories on trauma can also be employed to adequately analyze the psyche of the characters while enduring life altering and painful events. The narrative techniques employed by Shin could also be studied.

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