

## **Art and Real Life: Trauma and Reconciliation in *The Garden of Evening Mists* by Tan Twan Eng**

**Sheat Fun Chow<sup>1\*</sup>, Sarena Abdullah<sup>2</sup> and Yuen Beng Lee<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800, Penang, Malaysia*

<sup>2</sup>*School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800, Penang, Malaysia*

<sup>3</sup>*Department of Film and Performing Arts, School of Arts, Sunway University, 47500 Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia*

### **ABSTRACT**

This essay discusses the employment of selected art forms and their effectiveness in portraying trauma and reconciliation in Tan Twan Eng's novel, *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012), employing the concepts of trauma by Caruth (1996), focusing on the inadequacy of language to articulate trauma. The trauma model features most prominently by Caruth argues that traumatic events are never known directly. Any knowledge of these past events is only a form of reproduction of the original. Therefore, trauma is a 'paradoxical experience;' what is most traumatic is that which does not appear in conscious memory—this inability to know challenges the reliability of language to represent the full extent of trauma. However, Tan's novel shows that the problem of representing trauma can be countered in forms of art that function as a medium to convey and release silenced trauma. While trauma escapes language, personal memories become collective memories when commemorated in art forms. Letting go of the past is achieved by bringing it to the present in art forms. Tan's work significantly adds to the analysis of trauma in literary works. By employing the dominant tropes of Japanese art forms in the novel, Tan employs strategies that demonstrate that literature and art can narrate silenced experiences and traumatic historical events and escapes articulation.

*Keywords:* Art, memories, monuments, trauma

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*E-mail addresses:*

[sfchow@usm.my](mailto:sfchow@usm.my) (Sheat Fun Chow)

[sarena.abdullah@usm.my](mailto:sarena.abdullah@usm.my) (Sarena Abdullah)

[adrianlee@sunway.edu.my](mailto:adrianlee@sunway.edu.my) (Yuen Beng Lee)

\* Corresponding author

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Japanese Occupation of parts of Asia during World War II has contributed to a turbulent period not seen in the living memory of this region. Moreover, the impact and senselessness of violence and atrocities committed against innocent civilians in

Korea and China have resulted in an uneasy relationship between these countries.

Although there was initially a denial of this wartime violence perpetrated by the Japanese, documentation of Japanese violence and trauma has emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through various forms of mass media. Chief among these are books written from extensive research into the matter. Chang (1997), for instance, has shed light on the atrocities of Japanese militarism in Nanking. Elsewhere, Soh (2008) has documented the tragedy of mostly Korean women forced into prostitution during this dark period of history.

Malaysian creative writers in English, as early as the 1940s, have capitalised on the backdrop of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya to narrate or re-create narrations through their imaginations based on history. Among the earliest writers to draw on the Japanese Occupation period was Chin Teik Ooi (1948) in *Red Sun over Malaya: John Man's Ordeal*.

Malaysian literature in English can represent various traumas,<sup>1</sup> whether collective or personal. The definition of national trauma may not be any single event. Nevertheless, National policies and treatment of early immigrants to Malaya and the prolonged effects of World War II have lasting effects that still haunt Malaysia's landscape. These hauntings provide the impetus for writers to reimagine trauma

<sup>1</sup> Caruth (1996) defines trauma as responses to unexpected negative events so intense that they cannot be fully grasped at the time of occurrence. They have a long-lasting effect on the psyche of the one who experiences it as they return later in repeated flashbacks and nightmares, p. 91.

and re-enact them into meaningful literary works capable of reconnecting historical trauma of the past for the knowledge and understanding of the present generation. For instance, collective and national trauma in early Malaysian literature in English can be found in Lloyd Fernando's work. *Green is the Colour* (1993) and *Scorpion Orchid* (1976) explore the aftermath of racial riots in Malaya and Singapore, respectively (Fernando, 1976, 1993).

More contemporary Malaysian writers, namely Tash Aw, Rani Manicka and Tan Twan Eng, have foregrounded their creative works against the backdrop of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya. These recent generations of writers seek to re-imagine the period through collective memories passed down from previous generations.

*The Garden of Evening Mists* by Tan Twan Eng, first published in 2012, is set during the Japanese occupation and subsequent Emergency period. The Japanese Occupation, according to Tan, is a "largely ignored and unknown period of Malaysia's past" (Lim, 2017, p. 15).

Saxena (2019) describes the overlap of trauma and nostalgia in Tan's novel, in which the intertwining acts of forgetting and remembering are equally important. She rightly points out that Tan's novel "opens a discursive space for multidirectional memory that avoids the markers of nationality" (p. 175), promoting awareness that the trauma experienced is not confined to boundaries as most of the characters' lives have been profoundly affected by different wars: Magnus lost his eye in the Boer war

in South Africa, Aritomo was exiled from Japan and Tatsuji had been a kamikaze pilot. Their narratives, along with Yun Ling's, thus serve as versions of histories in the dominant discourse that have been obscured.

Pellano (2015) traces how Yun Ling, as a war survivor handles the "subdued loathing" or 'ressentiment'. This hatred, which is internalised, is traced from the moment of conception that progresses to dissipation to investigate how a survivor copes with the trauma of war, which includes seeking justice, forgetting as a way to repress memories, seeking to immortalise memories as the fulfilment of a promise, and finally the liberation of the resentment by subjecting her body to be "a site of her past" (p. 172). The *horimono* is read as a triumph of Yun Ling's resentment, implying Aritomo's denunciation of Japan.

While Saxena (2019) emphasises nostalgia which will forever be linked to loss, indicating the difficulty of healing, this essay expands on the idea that while reconciliation may be seen as far-fetched, the employment of Japanese aesthetics by Tan as agents of healing in the novel provides the option of reconciliation. Furthermore, the exploration of Tan's novel in the light of trauma studies serves as an alternative illustration of Caruth's framework of trauma as the belated experience of the traumatic event itself and the inadequacy of language to convey the experience, thus relegating the "speaking" and healing to the Japanese aesthetics employed in the novel.

In the novel, a young law graduate, Yun Ling, seeks out the landscape artist of a Japanese garden located at Cameron

Highlands, Nakamura Aritomo. Yun Ling's mission is to build a garden in honour of her sister, who was tortured and died in a Japanese comfort camp during World War II.

Yun Ling and her sister Yun Hong were held prisoners in a Japanese labour camp during the Japanese occupation. In this camp, Yun Ling lost her two fingers and her sister as the Japanese committed mass murders when they began to lose the war. Yun Ling must live the rest of her life with the guilt of having escaped being raped daily and finally murdered. As Aritomo correctly said: "You are still there, in the camp. You have not made it out" (Tan, 2012, p. 282). Time has passed, yet Yun Ling has been unable to move on, trapped by the haunting guilt and grief of the trauma.

The torture at the camp was so intense that both sisters often had to fabricate a site to which they could escape. This site is a beautiful Japanese garden in Kyoto that they had visited before the Japanese Occupation. By recreating the garden in their minds, they retreat to an imaginary place "no one can take [them] away from" (Tan, 2012, p. 271). They distracted themselves from the daily horrors of the camp by focusing on past beauty and forming a safe sanctuary and a make-belief world as their freedom and rights are violated.

When the guard had beaten her for not bowing, it was to this garden she had escaped, where there were "flowering trees everywhere, the smell of water ..." (Tan, 2012, pp. 57–58). It was also to this garden that Yun Ling mentally escaped when her fingers were severed as punishment for stealing food:

I screamed and screamed as he brought the blade down and chopped the last two fingers of my hand. The screaming seemed to go on and on. In the seconds before I blacked out, I found myself walking in a garden in Kyoto. (Tan, 2012, p. 271)

This escapism and distraction, ironically, are what cause the trauma to continue to linger, prolonging its effects. Caruth refers to it as “the *missing*” of the traumatic experience that “paradoxically, becomes the basis of the repetition of the nightmare” (Caruth, 1996, p. 62). So then, the story of Yun Ling’s trauma becomes “the narrative of a belated experience” accompanied by long-lasting impact (p. 7). This nightmare of the escapism to the fabricated and imaginary site haunts Yun Ling, turning the original fabricated fantasy into a promised site that needs to be built. The imaginary must be transformed into the real to create a monument for the release of memories, grief and guilt. The past haunts the present, and the past has become the present; resulting in a fragmented self; one which is “buried alive,” trapped in the past, as illustrated in the excerpt below:

There is some part of me still trapped there, buried alive with Yun Hong and all the other prisoners. ... A part of me which I had to leave behind. ... Perhaps, if I could go back to the camp and release that part of me, it might make me feel complete once more. (Tan, 2012, p. 268)

Since she cannot go back to the camp, there needs to be a replacement of the site of trauma in the form of a monument that she could revisit to put her sister’s death at rest. This sense of clutter in her mind is countered by introducing the concept of emptiness in evolving Japanese garden in harmony with Zen Buddhism, which produces gardens with less clutter, “paring down their designs almost to the point of emptiness” (Tan, 2012, p. 90). Yun Ling reflects on the desirability of emptiness, imagining “the possibility of ridding [herself] of everything [she] had seen and heard and lived through” (p. 90). Creating Yugiri will help Yun Ling empty herself by transferring her heart’s grief and guilt onto Yugiri.

It will be established that *sakkei* (borrowed scenery), *which* is employed to build Yugiri and the *horimono*<sup>2</sup> crafted onto Yun Ling’s back, are used by Tan to depict the articulations of trauma to generate healing and reconciliation. The paradoxical question is that trauma escapes language, and trauma needs to be spoken to find healing. How then is reconciliation possible? With Yugiri as the main trope, Tan skilfully employs the concept of *shakkei*, *horimono* and other art forms to depict the idea of perspective, teasing out the prominent sense of impermanence the reader can experience throughout the entire novel. The shifting of stability is emphasised by Yugiri—where the boundaries between the negative and positive, male and female, darkness and light are blurred (Tan, 2012). The sense that the passing of time is inevitable is

<sup>2</sup> Concepts of *shakkei* and *horimono* will be explained further when referred to in later parts of this article.

evoked through the changes in nature and the passing seasons (even in tropical Malaya), mirroring that stability is elusive and constantly eludes Yun Ling as she seeks to find the site on which her sister had died and buried to commemorate her sister's life. The losing battle against time is imminent; Yun Ling's pain and memories will soon pass like all other things in life.

This essay explores the employment of art to convey trauma and reconciliation. In trauma and reconciliation, the impermanence, the inevitable passing of time and its accompanying fluidity that contributes to the reinterpretation of what is perceived as 'reality' are highlighted. The question of perspective created through Aritomo's art forms that create illusions of the real is always at play throughout the novel, reflecting the total inability to know trauma at the moment of occurrence and the belatedness of the traumatic effects cause repetitions of the trauma (Caruth, 1996). The features of art created by Aritomo "are based on illusion, visible only when the right conditions are present" (Tan, 2012, p. 183). The art forms in this novel, consisting mainly of *Shakkei* and *horimono*, are employed effectively in conveying the themes and enhancing the effects and the sense of impermanence and deception, speaking of the repetitive nature of trauma.

## METHODOLOGY

The novel is chosen to treat trauma and reconciliation by Tan Twan Eng. The study of this novel within the framework of trauma theory established by Caruth unearths the

employment of art forms in literary works as the writer capitalises on the inability of language to represent trauma. The art forms in the novel help express trauma that is otherwise buried. Furthermore, Tan shows that the art forms employed in the novel assist in reconciliation and healing. In depicting the paradox of the unspeakable nature of trauma and the necessity to speak to find healing and reconciliation, *The Garden of Evening Mists* is a fine illustration of trauma theory established by Caruth being employed in literary studies to address trauma and find reconciliation.

This article mainly uses textual analysis and references to trauma theory and memory studies to investigate the dominant themes in the novel. Concepts of trauma by Caruth (1996) will be employed, focusing on the inadequacy of language to articulate trauma. The trauma model features most prominently by Caruth argues that traumatic events are never known directly. Any knowledge of these past events is only a form of reproduction of the original. Therefore, trauma is a 'paradoxical experience'; the paradox is "that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it" (Caruth, 1996, pp. 91-92). This inability to know limits the ability of language to represent the full extent of trauma. However, Tan shows in his novel that the inability to process a traumatic event can find expression in art forms. The problem of representing trauma is countered in forms of art used in *The Garden of Evening Mists*. These forms of art function as a medium to convey and release silenced

trauma. Though Caruth's model did not emphasise healing, this article shows that Tan's work uses art forms as narrative tools to bring about reconciliation and healing.

In order to explore the way Tan's novel gives voice to personal trauma and transforms it into collective trauma possible for reconciliation, this essay highlights the techniques employed by Tan, in particular, two art forms: *shakkei* and *horimono*. The narrative of trauma in Tan's work depicts trauma as the belated experience expounded by Caruth. Caruth's idea of trauma as the "oscillation ... between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (Caruth, 1996, p. 7) is highlighted as the unbearable dilemma of Yun Ling, who survived the Japanese camp. The re-enactment of the traumatic events is painful but necessary in healing and reconciliation. The art forms introduced by Tan and their connection to trauma and reconciliation form the core of the analysis.

The techniques and literary devices such as nature and the dominant metaphor of the garden employed by Tan are highlighted as significant vehicles to narrate and evoke senses that highlight the effects of the themes. In addition, art concepts as depicted in the novel focus on exploring their significant contribution to the novel's success. The results shall be discussed in the following segment.

## RESULTS

This article discusses the art forms employed by Tan and their effectiveness in depicting

trauma and reconciliation by enhancing the sense and theme of impermanence and the passing of time. The art forms in this novel, consisting mainly of *Shakkei* and *horimono*, are employed effectively in conveying the themes and enhancing the effects and the senses of impermanence and deception. Letting go of the past is achieved by bringing the past to the present in the form of monuments.

While the narration of trauma escapes language, *The Garden of Evening Mists* contributes significantly to the analysis of trauma in literary works, proving that art can function as a medium to convey and release silenced trauma. By employing the dominant tropes of Japanese art forms such as *Yugiri* and *horimono*, Tan conveys healing, reconciliation, and redemption. Tan's novel is a good illustration of the concept of trauma from conception, belatedness, healing, and reconciliation, countering the problem of language featured in Caruth's trauma model by using art forms to speak the unspeakable. It shall be further discussed in the next section.

## DISCUSSION

### Trauma

**Trauma and Shakkei—Lessons on Impermanence.** The concept of *Shakkei*, which is the Art of Borrowed Scenery, was introduced early in the novel as the art of "taking elements and views from outside a garden and making them integral" (Tan, 2012, p. 34) in a creation. It creates a masterpiece by borrowing "the mountains, the wind, the clouds, the ever-changing

light” (p. 36) to achieve the desired effect. Even the mists could be elements of *Shakkei* employed by Arimoto. As a result, this creation is never static, depending on the changing effects of light and other natural elements. Tan introduces the concept of *Shakkei* in Aritomo’s gardening style as a “form of deception” (p. 150). Nothing is what it seems. It is subject to interpretation and reinterpretation, depending on the perspective and emotional state of the viewer. The *Shakkei* of Yugiri speaks not only of impermanence and passing of time but of perspective and deception.

Through the concept of *Shakkei* as the main motif of the book, Tan successfully conveys that in life, just as in art, we borrow everything; we own nothing, as even the moonlight is borrowed (Tan, 2012). Borrowed scenery in art reflects real life and, in this instance, the life and memories of Yun Ling. Yugiri serves as a metaphor for the novel’s main themes as both Aritomo and Yun Ling, in their ways, share a sense of loss, are trapped in the past and looking for a way forward to exorcise the ghosts of their memories. Aritomo has lost his family, his association with Japan, and his grandfather, whom he yearns for as he gazes at the stars with Yun Ling. Both lives are made up of memories. For Aritomo, it was that of his wife Asuka, who died at childbirth, and for Yun Ling, it was memories of her sister. Both are holding on to memories they cannot and will not forget.

Yun Ling’s lessons under Aritomo were designed to teach her the art of letting go. She had always had that feeling; she

confessed to Tatsuji that Aritomo had other reasons for wanting to teach her (Tan, 2012). For instance, *Kyudo*, the Japanese archery that Aritomo taught her, shows her that it is possible to stay in the present moment where she is not living in the past. The offer to take her on as his apprentice is to return her to be “the girl who had once walked in the gardens of Kyoto with her sister” (p. 88). The skills taught to her by Aritomo are the skills to heal, forget, and move on. A matter of perspective “was in everything he taught [her]” (p. 119). Yun Ling shows she has mastered this concept of borrowing by telling Aritomo:

A garden borrows from the earth, the sky, and everything around it, but you borrow from time. Your memories are a form of *shakkei*. You bring them in to make your life here less empty. Like the mountains and the clouds over your garden, you can see them, but they will always be out of reach. (Tan, 2012, p. 153)

In the above excerpt, Tan employs nature to convey the significance of impermanence. Nature is the best teacher that the passing of time is inevitable. The onset of the monsoon shows the passing of time. Aritomo is fighting the passing of time, sensing the urgency to make a *horimono* as his joints get painful and swollen (Tan, 2012).

Both nature and art are evoked to convey the temporality of all things, even things as majestic and solid as the mountains. Watching the mountains on the horizon, Yun

Ling wonders if they go on forever, to which Aritomo replies that these mountains, too, will fade away, like all things (Tan, 2012). By evoking the constant changes in nature, Tan instils the sense that the garden, the relationship between Yun Ling and Aritomo and everything associated with life will not last. This sense of impermanence that continuously permeates the novel provides relief and dread: relief that the pain of Yun Ling's memories will eventually recede but dread for her impending total loss of memories, including that of her sister's life and her relationship with Aritomo. This dilemma between remembering and forgetting will be explored in the next section.

**Remembering and Forgetting.** Diagnosed with aphasia, brain disease and facing the prospect of losing her memories, Yun Ling paradoxically strives to retain what she will eventually lose—her memories. She reaches for her fleeting memories, like “snatching a leaf spiralling down from a high branch” (Tan, 2012, p. 34), unsure if she can catch it. Forgetting and remembering are not antithesis but mirror images. Both happy and traumatic memories are portrayed in relation to each other. One is beautiful and is sought after in conscious attempts to bury the other. Tan once again evokes nature to illustrate the impermanence and shifting nature of memory, both the voluntary kind and the kind recalled. Memory is portrayed as shifting and fluid, “like patches of sunlight in an overcast valley, shifting with the movement of the clouds” (p. 309).

**Borrowed Scenery** conveys the philosophy of time borrowed while living on this earth. Yun Ling is acutely aware that her time and memories of her sister, which she had tried to preserve and relinquish simultaneously, are borrowed and need to be returned. Aritomo's and Yun Ling's borrowed situation and memories are reflections of each other and the rest of humanity. In Yun Ling's case, the return is imminent. The prospect of not remembering is terrifying, like a “ghost, trapped between worlds, without an identity, with no future, no past” (Tan, 2012, p. 310). Unknown to Yun Ling at this point of the novel, the passing of time and eventually of memory is inevitable, as illustrated in Yugiri. The garden metaphor is used to illustrate the passing of time and lives. As Yun Ling learns by being an apprentice of Aritomo, “A garden is composed of a variety of clocks ... Some of them run faster than the others, and some of them move slower ... Every single plant and tree at Yugiri grew, flowered, and died at its own rate” (p. 324).

Limitations of time were set loose when the first man and first woman were banished from the garden of Eden (Tan, 2012, p. 325). In the end, it was only Frederick and her left; “the last two leaves still clinging on the branch, waiting to fall. Waiting for the wind to sweep us into the sky” (p. 343). Just as Yun Hong had passed on, all the others have passed on and now remain “only a memory” (p. 346).

Yugiri gives Yun Hong's memory prominence and lifts her out of the oblivion of being buried unnamed. Yun Hong's memory will be immortalised, whereas Yun Ling's will be relegated to oblivion: “It is

right that Yun Hong will be remembered as I gradually forget and, in time, become forgotten” (Tan, 2012, p. 347).

Yun Ling’s and Aritomoto’s world touches but momentarily, exhibiting the in-between-ness that is the state of borrowing with the act of returning imminently. Tan uses the figure of Aritomo himself as a borrowed scenery as he is always dressed in traditional clothes (Tan, 2012, p. 35) and appears in the garden to be viewed as part of the garden whenever visitors arrive. In the same way, in retrospect, he had offered himself to be borrowed by Yun Ling for a time to build the garden, and Yun Ling had to involuntarily return him when the garden was completed. The concept of Borrowed Scenery merges both art and life together until there is no clear distinction. Yun Ling wondered if there was a time when Aritomo could no longer distinguish “what was real and what were only reflections in his life” (p. 120). To Aritomo, life is art, and art is life.

We are reminded early in the novel of the existence of Mnemosyne—the goddess of memory and her twin sister—the goddess of forgetting (Tan, 2012, p. 45). Remembering and forgetting are twins (p. 131). The sense of impermanence created by Tan reinforces the finding in memory studies that memory is a narrative rather than a “replica of an experience that can be retrieved and relived” (Sturken, 1997, p. 7). It is possible to select and re-transcribe the narrative.

The paradoxical journey of Yun Ling in fighting to retain the memories of her sister and fighting to forget her painful memories,

and in the end, to let go becomes part of the sense of impermanence and instability of life in this novel. The state of nothingness with no memory is the path that Yun Ling is journeying. Yun Ling says, “I have spent most of my life trying to forget, and now all I want is to remember” (Tan, 2012, p. 309).

She is aware that the essence of a person lies in her memories: “What is a person without memories?” (Tan, 2012, p. 33). At the end of the book, Yun Ling reminisces: “Before me lies a voyage of a million miles, and memory is the moonlight I will borrow to illuminate my way” (p. 348). Memory thus leads the way though she will soon lose it all. Therefore, it is important to Yun Ling that Yugiri serves as a monument after she has lost all her memories. From personal memories, her sister will be a collective memory. The narrative of historical trauma shall live on lest anyone should forget. Her sister will be public history made possible by the monument from her personal history. The monument will not only make her memory of her sister public and collective but become a monument to the thousands that perished as a result of the Japanese Occupation. The monument will function as a form of reconciliation, as we shall see in the next section.

## Reconciliation

### Yugiri as a Monument.

Yun Ling: “But I won’t be able to remember everything.”

Aritomo: “The garden will remember it for you.” (Tan, 2012, p. 93)

A monument is an enactment of memory meant to endure through the ages, to honour and remember the past. Monuments speak to future generations of history to counter forgetfulness and the passing of time. The garden is evoked to convey the passing of time, even memories, both painful and happy ones. What is constantly illustrated in the novel is that nothing stays as a change in life is constant and sure. Impermanence is etched like the 'soon-to-be-forgotten temple' (Tan, 2012, p. 283). Paradoxically, as much as Yugiri illustrates the passing of time, Yugiri too was designed to combine different eras, giving it a sense of timelessness. It is designed to preserve the illusion of the passing of time and to preserve memories.

Yun Ling's building of Yugiri represents the desire to recreate the beauty that was before their lives were interrupted by trauma and to find healing. The building of Yugiri is to realise the fantasy and dream she had shared with her sister and confront her sister's death. More importantly, confronting her *repetitive* trauma and guilt of surviving constitutes a "betrayal" while her sister died. Recounting the time at the camp, Yun Ling says: "I would have done everything I could to trade places with her. And I should have" (Tan, 2012, p. 268). To not be trapped in the repetitive past and the fantasy of the future, Yun Ling must complete the garden to awaken to the reality of her sister's death and confront the now.

Yugiri is the site where the imaginary ceases and the real meet and collide. The encounter with the real and imaginary garden they shared must take place. On the

grounds of Yugiri, the death of Yun Hong and all the repressed grief and guilt are confronted. Both the fantasised and the real garden becomes the site of trauma. The past, the future and the present are converged in the reality of the imaginary turned physical garden.

The idea of a Japanese garden as a monument to remember history is a stark irony to the atrocities the Japanese invaders have inflicted on the sisters' lives. Through Yugiri, the irreconcilable worlds of torture and healing are brought together. The Japanese gardener and the Japanese garden as monuments to heal the darkness of the Japanese invasion could reveal Tan's intention to counter binary thinking. The man who has the extraordinary ability to turn the imaginary garden into reality is a Japanese, the race that had inflicted untold agony on both sisters. Yun Ling cannot avoid associating Aritomo with her torturers as she is constantly reminded that Aritomo had been Hirohito's gardener, "the man who had caused [her] so much pain, who had brought [her] so much loss" (Tan, 2012, p. 152). In taking on the apprenticeship to build the garden, Yun Ling is taking on the journey to be objective and "put aside (her) prejudices" (p. 95). Time and again, in her encounter with Aritomo, she is forced to face her trauma, speak of it, acknowledge it, and find acknowledgement of it. The success of Yugiri points to the total understanding/infiltration of her mind by Aritomo. Yugiri thus becomes a testament to the union of their soul. It is a site of confrontation and union between two people

with traumatic histories which had deemed them irreconcilable.

Yugiri helps to divert attention from the seemingly important haunting memories and grudges that cling on tenaciously. The motif of memory and oblivion dominates the novel and reaches its convergence in Yugiri, which almost denotes sacredness and exclusivity. Even the light “seemed softer, older” (Tan, 2012, p. 207). Yun Ling says, “The turns in the track disoriented not only our sense of direction, but also our memories, and within minutes, I could almost imagine that we had forgotten the world from which we had just come” (p. 207). Even the meaning of Yugiri, which is ‘evening mists,’ suggests a degree of vagueness and oblivion. Yugiri is the site of what could have been had it not for the war and what it would be in future. It is a monument of torture and suffering but also healing and reconciliation.

#### **Site of Torture Vs Site of Reconciliation.**

We are confronted with the paradoxical physical site of the camp of torture and Yugiri. Both are ephemeral and temporal. As Yun Ling explains, “The garden has to reach inside you. It should change your heart, sadden it, uplift it. It has to make you appreciate the *impermanence of everything in life*” (Tan, 2012, p. 175, emphasis mine).

Both sites are not within grasp, but both are contesting for her attention simultaneously. One is blown up and unchangeable, and the other is subject to change. One signifies torture, violence, and trauma. The other signifies healing and beautiful memories. One is physically

destroyed but can be found in the tattoo on her body. The other has yet to be built. Yugiri serves as a replacement for the camp she could not bring herself to let go. By giving attention to Yugiri, Yun Ling rejects painful memories she had held on to.

Yugiri is the site of timelessness. It is the site of convergence of the past, present and future. Ricoeur (2004) establishes a correlation between memories and mourning—mourning is a “painful exercise in memory” (p. 7). In building the garden, Yun Ling releases her trapped fragmented self. The site where Yun Hong died does not hold any more significant meaning. The site of the camp and all that it had represented recedes to the past where it rightfully belongs. Yugiri takes over as her way of commemorating Yun Hong in the present and the future. The garden becomes the bearer of the pain she has been carrying. Pain and memory become concretised as a monument.

The garden as a testimony of the unspoken atrocities is not merely an attestation of trauma but serves to bring the past to the present, here and now. The building of the garden in the present will hopefully withstand the onslaught of the future is a form of testimony that displays not only victimisation at the camp but also past promises and their fulfilment. Yugiri becomes the unifying factor between the past and the future, hate and love, torture and pleasure, private and public, memories and forgetting. In Yugiri, there exists a reconciliation between trauma and healing, beautiful and traumatic memories,

past, present and the future. Yun Hong no longer needs to be trapped in her memory and the past. In *Yugiri*, she is accorded a proper place for mourning, commemorated in real, physical space and the present. Simultaneously, Yun Ling's memories can be transformed into public memories, as the next section shall show.

**From Private to Public Memories.** Thus far, Yun Ling's reticence had ensured that the memories remained hers alone. However, with *Yugiri* as a monument, the unspoken memories and grief will henceforth be muted. Yun Ling's decision to open up *Yugiri* to the public not only in memory of her sister but also in memory of the works of Aritomo is a testament to healing, forgiveness and letting go. She releases the burden she carried for the past decades by releasing her story.

Although making *Yugiri* public is in direct contrast to Aritomo's wish (Tan, 2012), Yun Ling asserts her agency in making this decision. As monuments are built to make personal trauma public, her trauma and memories have become collective and national. Her trauma is no longer hers alone to bear. Memories and dreams shared with her sister that were private are now accessible to others. Likewise, Aritomo's art is no longer hers alone to cherish. *Yugiri* becomes a site where generations could be invited to participate as witnesses of a traumatic history.

Making Yun Hong's memory public is to unsilence the atrocious deeds, to share the trauma as a historical monument which

simultaneously becomes a form of personal liberation for Yun Ling. In order to tell, share and sustain history, it is necessary to convert personal history into national monuments as history takes the place of a concrete garden. Monumental constructions join the past to the present, demonstrating "the relation between narrative and history, art and memory, speech and survival" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. xiii). *Yugiri* is Yun Ling's speech about her trauma. Remembrance of history is both a duty and a responsibility. Everyone is invited to be a participant who sees, feels, understands, and shares the pain and not merely a bystander. Both *Yugiri* and the *horimono* become monuments that testify to enduring memories and reconciliation.

**Horimono and Yugiri—Sites of Reconciliation.** Running parallel to *Yugiri*, the *horimono* that Aritomo carves onto Yun Ling's back reinforces the concept of art as a way of remembrance and a monument. The garden signifies the beauty, dreams, and aspirations that the two sisters had hoped for, what could have been but could not be done in the sisters' lifetime together because of the severe disruption to their lives. However, on the other hand, the *horimono* symbolises the past that she was unable to let go.

According to King, "there are two contrasting models of memory within psychoanalytic theory that inform the different ways in which the memory processes are reconstructed in narrative" (2000, p. 11). The first is attributed to

Freud's analogy of recovering the buried past and the archaeological site's excavation. The second is related to the novel's 're-transcription' of memory. The metaphoric process of excavating began when Yun Ling came under the tutelage of Aritomo.

*Horimono* is a long and painful process, requiring patience and determination. The process of the *horimono* and building the garden is symbolic of the long and progressive excavation of the buried past secrets, guilt and shame between Yun Ling and Aritomo. As Aritomo says, the *horimono* draws out not only blood but reveals the "thoughts hidden inside that person" (Tan, 2012, p. 229). Yun Ling, correctly sensing that Aritomo could read the guilt of betrayal she had been carrying for so long, confessed that she did whatever she could live, including betraying others in the camp. Her body becomes a canvass to be engraved with history and its remembrance. As history takes place on her skin, personal history is extracted from her heart. Aritomo's history and secrets in the form of art are transferred and merged with that of hers. The art of *horimono*, just like the art of *Shakkei* in the building of the garden, serves as a soul-searching untangling of the guilt of betrayal she had been living with and as a form of 're-transcription' of her memories. These two art forms run parallel in the novel to untangle the knots of guilt and longing that had trapped Yun Ling and, to a certain extent, Aritomo.

The *horimono* that Aritomo inscribed onto Yun Ling's back depicts an image of Hou Yi wearing a Japanese *hakama*,

shooting an arrow into the sun. According to Seneca Pellano (2015), how Aritomo interprets this Chinese legend discloses the denunciation of his nation. In the *horimono* lies Japanese art and Chinese culture synthesised by Aritomo, the artist's mind. As observed by Tatsuji, the *horimono* on Yun Ling would be "one of the most important discoveries in the Japanese art world... Imagine: Emperor Hirohito's gardener, the creator of taboo artwork. On the skin of a Chinese woman, no less" (Tan, 2012, p. 313).

The sun symbolises the Japanese empire. The *horimono* symbolises admitting guilt, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Art then becomes a unity site between the inflictor of pain and the victim—'re-transcribes' the relationship between two persons having mutual national hostility towards each other.

Furthermore, allowing Aritomo to inscribe onto her allows him to write over her scars and rewrite her painful history. Art then 're-transcribes' her history. Her entrusting to Aritomo to etch his art onto her skin points to total yielding and trust though it can also be seen as an invasion. By submitting her body to be inscribed new meaning onto her past experiences, the suggestion of sensualness is evident. According to Wilson, "Yun Ling's body becomes the sacred site of remembrance," and the act of *horimono* is "symbolically sexualised" (2018, p. 59). Aritomo was leaving his permanent imprint on her "night after night" (Tan, 2012, p. 334). Frederick's sexual possessiveness and jealousy reinforced it: "I don't want to see

what he did to you” (p. 334). Aritomo’s claim is suggested as she ensures no one else sees the *horimono*. Thus, he had relegated her to a lifetime of celibacy.

The *horimono* as a form of art serves as a symbol of forgiveness, reconciliation, and unity. Pellano (2015) opines that creating a *horimono* on a Chinese war survivor implies that Aritomo’s loyalty to the Japanese empire is destabilised as it indicates Aritomo’s stand of condemnation of Japan’s war atrocities. On the other hand, despite Aritomo being a Japanese with a questionable past, Yun Ling’s yielding signifies total willingness to trust and commit. However, this trust and commitment are far from one-sided. Aritomo is yielding up his secrets and surrendering his reticence by inscribing his art, knowledge, and information onto her body. By inscribing his well-kept secrets onto her back, he is transferring a load of his secrets onto her though he knows she will not be able to see or understand until the time is ripe. This mutual exchange and yielding speak of surrender, healing and reconciliation.

Additionally, the long, drawn-out *horimono* process becomes a season of letting go of her past and her memories. In addition to the indecipherable signs and the blank rectangle, which is suggestive of the location of the camp where she and her sister had been held, the *horimono* depicts the places that Yun Ling had been to during and after the Japanese Occupation, such as the Majuba Tea House, the garden of Yugiri and the temple in the mountains. The blank rectangle space signifies a place of absence

and oblivion. It signifies forgetting and releasing her memories. It further signifies that what took place years ago is no longer significant with the erecting of Yugiri, the monument that testifies to enduring memories and reconciliation. With her advancing disease, which will soon ravage her memories, Yun Ling needs to let go of her memories voluntarily by deciding not to have the *horimono* preserved after she dies. With the garden in place, Yun Ling’s decision to let the *horimono* fade away upon her demise instead of preserving it suggests that the only monument of her sister is that of their fantasy that has now become a reality—the Japanese garden. She says, “The garden must continue to exist. For that to happen, the *horimono* must be destroyed after my death” (Tan, 2012, p. 331).

With Yugiri in place, Yun Ling does not need to hold on to her memory on the verge of losing. The transmission of the burden is complete. She does not need to continue living her life with the sole purpose of fulfilling the promise she made to her sister. Instead, she chooses to put the brutal history and memory of the Japanese invasion to rest, placing it in oblivion to allow the happy moments she had shared with her sister to gain significance. True to the concept of *Shakkei*, she had borrowed the memory from the past to illuminate her way so that she could move forward.

## CONCLUSION

The paradoxical question introduced in the introductory part of this essay is that since trauma escapes language yet needs to be

spoken to find healing, how is a reconciliation of this paradox possible? Tan shows that this is possible in the intertwined relationship between remembering and forgetting and the concrete bearing the testimony of the abstract. Personal memories, when commemorated in art forms, become collective memories. Letting go of the past is achieved by bringing it to the present in the form of art. In this way, Tan's work significantly adds to the theory of trauma in literary works. As illustrated in the novel, art can function as a medium to convey and release silenced trauma, binding memories with the present through monuments to bear witness to the "unrepresentable" (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 81). By employing the dominant tropes of Japanese art forms such as Yugiri and *horimono*, Tan successfully shows the interaction between art and literary works of trauma to convey healing, reconciliation, and redemption.

*The Garden of Evening Mists* brings together art, history and literature that invites us to participate in our country's past and its haunting histories as we stand on the grounds of those who had gone before us. Tan employs strategies that demonstrate that literature and art can narrate experiences that resist telling, such as traumatic historical events beyond one's comprehension. A comparative study of the treatment of historical trauma in Tan's works with that of other contemporary Malaysian historical literature writers like Tash Aw will be viable for future studies. Close examination of such literary works complements and enhances history as they offer alternate viewpoints not found in official historical texts.

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