

THE ARTISTIC RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF THROUGH PERSONAL MEMORY AND HISTORICAL TRUTH IN PARK WAN-SUH'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVELS

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Abstract. This article analyzes the autobiographical novels “*Who Ate Up All the Shinga?*” and “*Was That Mountain Really There?*” by Park Wan-suh through the framework of contemporary autobiography studies. The research is based on the theoretical approaches of Philippe Lejeune (autobiographical pact), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (autobiographical self), Judith Butler (subjectivity), Paul de Man (language and autobiography), Serge Doubrovsky (autofiction), Mikhail Bakhtin (exotopy), Lidiya Ginzburg (the “third reality”), and Cathy Caruth (trauma theory). The study demonstrates that Park Wan-suh reconstructs personal memory through literary narration while integrating individual experience with Korea’s collective historical memory shaped by colonialism, war, and national division.

Keywords: Park Wan-suh, autobiographical novel, autobiographical pact, memory, trauma, autofiction, exotopy, third reality, Korean War, historical memory.

Annotatsiya. Mazkur maqolada Pak Vansoning “Shuncha shinganing gulini kim yegan?” hamda “Tog‘ chindan ham o‘sha yerda bo‘lganmi?” avtobiografik romanlari zamonaviy avtobiografiya nazariyalari nuqtai nazaridan tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotning nazariy asosini Filipp Lejenning avtobiografik pakt konsepsiyasi, Sidoni Smit va Juliya Uotsonning avtobiografik “Men” haqidagi qarashlari, Judit Batlarning subyektivlik nazariyasi, Pol de Manning til va avtobiografiyaga oid yondashuvi, Serj Dubrovskiyning autofiksiya konsepsiyasi, Mixail Baxtinning ekzotopiya nazariyasi, Lidiya Ginzburgning «uchinchi reallik» konsepsiyasi hamda Ket Karutning travma nazariyasi tashkil etadi. Tadqiqot natijalari Pak Vanso badiiy rivoyat vositasida shaxsiy xotirani qayta qurishini hamda individual tajribani mustamlakachilik, urush va milliy bo‘linish ta’sirida shakllangan Koreya xalqining kollektiv tarixiy xotirasi bilan uyg‘unlashtirishini ko‘rsatadi.

Kalit so‘zlar: Pak Vanso, avtobiografik roman, avtobiografik pakt, xotira, travma, autofiksiya, ekzotopiya, uchinchi reallik, Koreya urushi, tarixiy xotira.

Аннотация. В статье автобиографические романы Пак Ван Со “Кто съел все цветы шинги?” и “Неужели та гора была там?” рассматриваются в свете современных теорий автобиографии. Теоретическую основу исследования составляют концепция автобиографического пакта Филиппа Лежена, представления Сидони Смит и Джулии Уотсон об автобиографическом “Я”, теория субъективности Джудит Батлер, подход Поля де Мана к языку и автобиографии, концепция автофикции Сержа Дубровского, теория экзотопии Михаила Бахтина, концепция «третьей реальности» Лидии Гинзбург и теория травмы Кэти Карут. В ходе исследования показано, что Пак Ван Со посредством художественного повествования реконструирует личную память, соединяя индивидуальный опыт с коллективной исторической памятью корейского народа, сформированной колониальным прошлым, войной и национальным разделением.

Ключевые слова: Пак Ван Со, автобиографический роман, автобиографический пакт, память, травма, автофикция, экзотопия, третья реальность, Корейская война, историческая память.

History has long served as one of the principal aesthetic sources of literary creation. Writers of every historical period reinterpret the past through the prism of their own worldview, aesthetic vision, and lived experience. Consequently, historical events in literature do not appear as a mere collection of objective facts but rather as a reconstructed reality shaped by the author’s individual memory, artistic imagination, and aesthetic conception. In genres such as allegorical narratives, memoirs, novellas, and novels, historical reality is intertwined with the author’s personal experiences, observations, and reflections, thereby acquiring new artistic significance.

In literary studies, historicity is generally understood as the principle of authentically representing the spirit of a particular historical period, its social relations, and the human condition within a literary work. The primary function of historicity is not to reproduce historical events with documentary precision but to reinterpret historical truth through artistic imagination. From this perspective, the balance between

historical authenticity and artistic creativity constitutes one of the principal criteria determining the aesthetic value of historical fiction.

Among Korean writers who successfully integrate historical memory with personal experience, Park Wan-suh occupies a distinctive position. She belonged to the generation that directly experienced some of the most turbulent periods in twentieth-century Korean history, including Japanese colonial rule, national liberation, and the Korean War. The premature death of her father, the loss of her brother during the war, her family's repeated tragedies, and the hardships of wartime life profoundly influenced both her personal life and literary career. Consequently, history in her fiction is narrated through personal memory, while individual destiny becomes inseparable from the collective history of the Korean nation.

Park Wan-suh's autobiographical novels *Who Ate Up All the Shinga?* and *Was That Mountain Really There?* are widely regarded as representative works of autobiographical fiction in modern Korean literature. Through these novels, the final years of Japanese colonial rule, the period of national liberation, ideological conflict, and the devastating consequences of the Korean War are artistically reconstructed from the perspective of the author's personal memories. Childhood recollections, family bereavement, displacement, famine, and the horrors of war are closely interwoven with historical reality, transforming individual memory into a powerful medium for understanding national history.

This characteristic closely corresponds to Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the historical novel. Bakhtin regarded historicity as one of the central categories of novelistic poetics, arguing that literary texts do not merely reflect history but recreate it through a new aesthetic form. Viewed from this perspective, historical reality in Park Wan-suh's novels functions not as documentary evidence but as an aesthetic truth reconstructed through the interaction of human memory and artistic consciousness. [4. Бахтин М. М. 1986:Р.182]

Uzbek literary scholar Bahodir Karim likewise emphasizes that the analysis of a literary work should take into account the writer's biography, social environment, psychological experience, and the circumstances that motivated the creation of the text. This methodological approach is particularly relevant to the study of Park Wan-suh's autobiographical fiction, since her personal experiences constitute the primary source of her artistic narratives. [5. Карим Б. 2011:Р.166]

The autobiographical novel is one of the most complex literary genres because it reconstructs historical reality through the prism of individual memory. While recounting the author's own life, it simultaneously offers an artistic representation of the social, political, and cultural realities of the period in which the author lived. Consequently, autobiographical writing emerges as an aesthetic space where individual experience intersects with collective history.

As a syncretic literary genre, autobiography combines documentary authenticity with artistic imagination. It enables the author to reinterpret personal experiences, inner emotions, and the process of self-formation from a retrospective perspective. Although autobiographical narratives are grounded in real-life events, they should not be regarded merely as biographies or historical records; rather, they constitute artistically reconstructed representations of lived reality.

One of the defining characteristics of autobiographical writing is the centrality of the author's subjectivity. Events are typically narrated in the first person, tracing the protagonist's psychological and moral development from childhood through successive stages of life. Historical events, family experiences, and personal emotions become closely intertwined, establishing an inseparable relationship between individual memory and historical memory.

In literary scholarship, autobiography is also recognized as a border genre. Although it shares certain features with documentary literature, memoirs, diaries, essays, and narrative prose, it cannot be fully identified with any of them. Unlike documentary writing, autobiographical narratives transform factual events through artistic imagination. Unlike memoirs, where historical events occupy the foreground, autobiography places the author's self and the formation of personal identity at the center of narration. Whereas diaries record events as they occur, autobiographical writing evaluates the past from the temporal distance of retrospection. Therefore, autobiography may be understood as a complex aesthetic space where historical truth, individual memory, and artistic imagination converge.

Among the scholars who established the theoretical foundations of autobiography, the French literary critic Philippe Lejeune occupies a central position. He defines autobiography as “a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his or her own existence, with particular emphasis on the history of the formation of his or her personality”. Central to Lejeune's theory is the concept of the *autobiographical pact*. According to this framework, the author, narrator, and protagonist of an

autobiographical work must be understood as one and the same person. This identity establishes a relationship of trust between the author and the reader, thereby determining the autobiographical status of the text.

Lejeune's theoretical framework was subsequently expanded by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, who argue that autobiography should not be regarded merely as a collection of personal recollections but as a dynamic process through which individuals reconstruct their identities within specific historical and cultural contexts. From their perspective, autobiographical writing integrates individual experience with collective history, transforming the narrative of a personal life into a broader representation of a particular historical period. Consequently, autobiographical texts function not only as records of self-understanding but also as artistic models of historical consciousness. [3. Smith S., Watson J. 2010:P.409]

This perspective is clearly reflected in Park Wan-suh's *Who Ate Up All the Shinga?* and *Was That Mountain Really There?* In both novels, the author intertwines memories of her childhood and adolescence with the historical realities of Japanese colonial rule, the Korean War, and postwar Korean society. As a result, individual destiny becomes inseparable from national history, while personal memory evolves into an artistic medium through which the collective memory of an entire generation is expressed.

The relationship between the individual and historical reality can be further illuminated through Judith Butler's theory of the subject. Butler argues that the self is never constituted as an autonomous or self-sufficient entity; rather, it emerges through relationships with others, social interactions, and historically specific conditions. Accordingly, the autobiographical “I” should not be understood as the product of isolated individual consciousness but as a historically and culturally constructed identity.

This theoretical perspective is equally applicable to Park Wan-suh's autobiographical fiction. The protagonist's process of self-discovery unfolds in constant interaction with Japanese colonialism, war, family bereavement, ideological conflict, and social transformation. Consequently, the author's personal history cannot be separated from the broader history of modern Korea but instead constitutes one of its integral dimensions.

The poetics of autobiography cannot be explained solely through the identity of the author and the protagonist. Equally important are the reconstruction of memory, the reinterpretation of the past from the standpoint of the present, and the transformation of lived experience into artistic representation. In this regard, the contributions of Mikhail Bakhtin, Lidiya Ginzburg, Paul de Man, Serge Doubrovsky, and Cathy Caruth have significantly enriched contemporary theories of autobiographical writing.

Bakhtin's conception of the relationship between the author and the hero provides an important methodological framework for understanding the internal structure of autobiographical narratives. According to Bakhtin, individuals are capable of comprehending the totality of their lives only from a certain temporal distance. Consequently, autobiographical texts simultaneously contain two subject positions: the “experiencing self”, who lives through events, and the “narrating self”, who retrospectively recounts and interprets them. The distance between these two perspectives enables the author to reassess past experiences, uncover their deeper meanings, and organize them into an aesthetically coherent narrative.

This exotopic perspective is clearly manifested in Park Wan-suh's autobiographical novels. The young girl portrayed within the narrative directly experiences war, famine, and ideological conflict. Yet these experiences are recounted by the mature writer, who reinterprets them through historical reflection and philosophical insight. The novels therefore present not merely a sequence of memories but an ongoing dialogue between lived experience and retrospective understanding.

Lidiya Ginzburg's reflections on autobiographical prose provide another important framework for understanding the aesthetic nature of autobiographical writing. She argues that autobiography is neither a purely documentary record nor an entirely fictional narrative. Instead, it creates what she describes as a “third reality”, in which historical facts and artistic imagination interact to produce both documentary credibility and aesthetic significance. Consequently, autobiographical writing should be understood not as a simple record of historical events but as an artistic model of reality reconstructed through the author's consciousness.

Park Wan-suh's novels exemplify this characteristic. Although they portray the streets of Seoul, the routines of wartime life, family bereavement, and historical events with remarkable documentary precision, these elements acquire broader artistic meaning through literary transformation. As a result, historical truth and personal memory become inseparably intertwined within a unified aesthetic structure.

Paul de Man offers an even more radical interpretation of autobiographical writing by emphasizing the mediating role of language. In his view, autobiography does not transparently reproduce the past but

reconstructs it through language. Human beings are incapable of recovering the past exactly as it occurred; instead, memory inevitably reshapes experience through linguistic representation and imagination. Historical truth in autobiographical writing is therefore always reconstructed rather than directly recovered.

This perspective is particularly evident in Park Wan-suh's symbolic imagery. In *Who Ate Up All the Shinga?*, the image of the *shinga* flower symbolizes the loss of childhood innocence, harmony with nature, and national identity. Likewise, the mountain in *Was That Mountain Really There?* functions as a metaphor for the trauma of war, collective memory, and historical suffering. Rather than reproducing history as documentary fact, Park reconstructs historical experience through memory, symbolism, and artistic interpretation.

The reconstructive nature of autobiographical narrative can also be explained through Serge Doubrovsky's concept of *autofiction*. Doubrovsky argues that human memory cannot preserve every event with complete accuracy. Consequently, autobiographical narratives inevitably supplement lived experience with imagination, creating texts that occupy an intermediate space between factual documentation and literary fiction.

Park Wan-suh's autobiographical novels likewise exist at the intersection of classical autobiography and autofiction. Childhood and adolescent experiences are not reproduced exactly as they occurred but are reconstructed through the author's accumulated life experience, mature perspective, and artistic vision. Historical events and subjective memory therefore become mutually constitutive rather than mutually exclusive.

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory provides an additional methodological framework for interpreting Park Wan-suh's autobiographical prose. Caruth defines trauma not simply as a painful memory but as a psychological wound that cannot be fully comprehended at the moment of its occurrence. Instead, traumatic experience returns belatedly through fragmented memories, recurring images, and repetitive emotional responses. [1. Butler J. 2005:P.208]

This theoretical perspective corresponds closely to Park Wan-suh's own literary biography. Although she experienced the devastation of the Korean War in her early twenties, she did not begin to transform these experiences into literary narratives until nearly two decades later. Her war memories therefore remained psychologically active for many years before eventually being articulated through fiction. In this sense, her autobiographical novels represent not only acts of historical remembrance but also processes of working through traumatic experience by means of artistic creation.

Within Caruth's theory, the concept of testimony occupies a particularly significant place. Although narrating trauma cannot entirely eliminate psychological suffering, it enables traumatic experiences to be articulated, witnessed, and preserved within historical memory. The literary significance of Park Wan-suh's novels lies precisely in this function. By transforming her personal tragedies into narrative, she reveals the devastating impact of war and national division on an entire generation. Consequently, individual memory transcends personal experience to become collective memory, while autobiographical fiction simultaneously functions as historical testimony.

Korean literary critic Kim Byung Ik likewise emphasizes this defining characteristic of Park Wan-suh's literary career. According to Kim, from her debut novel *The Naked Tree* onward, Park consistently developed a critical narrative style distinguished by its uncompromising portrayal of her characters' inner lives. He regards her fiction as one of the most authentic literary chronicles depicting the everyday experiences of ordinary civilians who remained in Seoul during the Korean War. Kim further argues that Park's persistent engagement with the historical realities of her own lifetime, her focus on female subjectivity, and her sustained use of autobiographical elements constitute the defining features of her literary poetics.

Park Wan-suh herself confirmed this interpretation in several interviews, explaining that she could not have continued living with the burden of wartime memories without writing about them. She even suggested that silence might have resulted in psychological collapse. Her autobiographical novels should therefore be understood not only as literary representations of history but also as therapeutic narratives through which traumatic experience is confronted, interpreted, and transformed into artistic expression.

Judith Butler's philosophy of subjectivity provides an additional methodological perspective for understanding the formation of the self in autobiographical writing. Butler argues that personal identity is never constituted independently but always emerges through relationships with others and within historically specific social conditions. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, she maintains that every act of self-

narration presupposes the existence of an interlocutor—a “you” to whom the “I” is accountable. Selfhood, therefore, is fundamentally dialogical rather than autonomous. [2. Caruth C. 2016:P.82]

This principle is vividly illustrated in Park Wan-suh’s autobiographical novels. Rather than merely recounting the events of her own life, Park enters into a continuous dialogue with the historical forces that shaped her identity, including Japanese colonial rule, the Korean War, and the national division of Korea. Memories of war are presented not as coherent chronological narratives but through discontinuities, silences, and recurring fragments characteristic of traumatic recollection. Instead of attempting to reconstruct the past in its entirety, Park openly acknowledges that her identity has been formed through historical circumstances beyond her control. In Butler’s terms, the autobiographical “I” emerges as a subject constituted by historical forces greater than itself. Consequently, Park’s autobiographical fiction reconstructs not only the story of an individual life but also the profound impact of history on human subjectivity.

Whereas Philippe Lejeune established the generic criteria of autobiography, Butler illuminates the philosophical nature of the autobiographical subject. In Park Wan-suh’s fiction these two perspectives complement one another. The identity of the author, narrator, and protagonist confirms the autobiographical pact, while the historically constituted nature of the autobiographical self provides a compelling literary illustration of Butler’s theory of subject formation.

Taken together, Bakhtin’s concept of exotopy, Ginzburg’s theory of the “third reality”, Butler’s dialogical conception of selfhood, Paul de Man’s linguistic theory of memory, Doubrovsky’s concept of autofiction, and Caruth’s theory of trauma provide a comprehensive methodological framework for analyzing Park Wan-suh’s autobiographical novels.

These theoretical perspectives are clearly reflected throughout Park Wan-suh’s autobiographical fiction. By integrating her personal memories with pivotal moments in modern Korean history, the author situates her individual destiny within the broader historical tragedies experienced by the Korean people. This synthesis is especially evident in *Who Ate Up All the Shinga?* and *Was That Mountain Really There?*, where the protagonist’s personal life unfolds simultaneously as a narrative of national history.

The spatial settings depicted in these novels also correspond closely to the author’s biography. Park reconstructs the village of Bakjeokgol near Kaesong, where she spent her childhood, as well as Hyeonjeodong in Seoul and the foothills of Inwangsan, where she later lived, using authentic geographical references. Likewise, historically verifiable events—including the outbreak of the Korean War on 25 June 1950, the arrival of tanks in the streets of Seoul, the panic among civilians, and the confinement of her family within the city—are represented with remarkable historical accuracy. Rather than inventing fictional settings, Park reconstructs historical reality through the medium of personal memory.

The convergence of individual and collective history is particularly evident in *Who Ate Up All the Shinga?* The novel portrays the Japanese colonial assimilation policy, the suppression of the Korean language, and the family’s migration from the countryside to Seoul as decisive forces shaping the protagonist’s identity. In *Was That Mountain Really There?*, the death of the narrator’s brother during the Korean War, the repeated occupation of Seoul by opposing military forces, and the devastating consequences of war for ordinary civilians are all reconstructed through deeply personal memories. As a result, the suffering experienced by Park’s family becomes inseparable from the collective historical memory of the Korean nation.

Ultimately, Park Wan-suh’s autobiographical novels do not present war as a sequence of objective historical facts but reconstruct it through the interaction of personal memory, traumatic experience, and artistic imagination. Memories are not organized according to strict chronological order but emerge as they persist within the author’s consciousness. Individual life stories thereby transcend the boundaries of private experience and become part of the collective memory of an entire generation that endured the Korean War. Consequently, Park Wan-suh’s autobiographical fiction offers a profound psychological and aesthetic interpretation of historical reality while providing a valuable foundation for contemporary scholarship in autobiography studies, memory studies, trauma studies, and Korean literary criticism.

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