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Memory, Trauma and the Construction of Identity in Susan Choi's Flashlight

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Introduction:

Susan Choi's Flashlight is a complex family novel that explores the relationship between memory, trauma, identity, disappearance and the search for truth. The novel begins with a seemingly simple event: ten-year-old Louisa goes for a walk with her father, Serk, near the Japanese coast. Later, Louisa is found alive near the shore, but her father has disappeared. Because Serk's body is not found, his disappearance remains surrounded by uncertainty. Louisa herself remembers very little about what happened that night. This incomplete memory becomes one of the most important elements of the novel. The official explanation and Louisa's fragmented recollections do not completely agree, leaving both the characters and the reader searching for a fuller understanding of the past.

The novel, however, is not simply a mystery about finding out what happened to Serk. Choi uses the mystery of the disappearance to examine how human beings remember, forget and reconstruct important events. Louisa's inability to remember the night clearly affects her understanding of herself and her family. Her memories are incomplete, sometimes contradictory and separated from the emotional context in which they were originally formed. The novel therefore presents memory not as a perfect record of the past but as something that can change, disappear and return unexpectedly.

Serk's own life makes the question of identity equally complicated. He is born into a Korean family in Japan and grows up with a Japanese identity before discovering more about his Korean background. Later, he moves to the United States and becomes known by another version of his name, "Serk." His different names and cultural experiences demonstrate how identity can be influenced by history, geography, language and other people's perceptions. Anne, too, carries a complicated personal history. Her separation from Tobias, her relationship with Serk and her role as Louisa's mother all influence her understanding of herself.

The novel's narrative structure is particularly important. Instead of presenting events in a simple chronological order, Choi moves backwards and forwards across different periods and perspectives. The past is gradually revealed through memories, photographs, diary pages, letters, recordings and

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personal recollections. The reader therefore participates in the process of reconstruction.

In this context, the title Flashlight becomes significant. A flashlight illuminates only a limited area. It does not remove darkness completely. Similarly, the characters can see only parts of their past. They must move through uncertainty with incomplete knowledge. The flashlight therefore provides an appropriate image for the novel's treatment of memory: it gives enough light to see something, but never everything at once.

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Objectives:

1. To examine memory as a narrative device in Susan Choi's Flashlight.
2. To analyse the impact of trauma on the psychological lives of the characters.
3. To investigate the relationship between memory and the construction of identity.
4. To explore how the past is reconstructed through fragmented memories, objects, documents and different perspectives.

Memory as a Narrative Device:

Memory is one of the central narrative devices in Flashlight. Rather than presenting the past as a fixed and completely knowable reality, Susan Choi allows memories to emerge gradually. The reader receives information through different characters at different moments. As a result, an event that initially seems simple becomes more complicated as additional memories and evidence appear.

Louisa's memory of the night of Serk's disappearance is particularly important. She remembers being with her father, the flashlight and his concern for her safety, but she cannot initially remember the complete sequence of events. Her memories are fragmented. She cannot provide the adults with a clear explanation, and sometimes she even contradicts earlier statements. Her memory has been affected by fear, shock and time. This fragmentation is important because Choi does not treat memory as a straightforward source of information. Louisa possesses pieces of the truth, but she does not initially understand how those pieces fit together. The reader is placed in a similar position. We also have fragments, and we must wait for later sections of the narrative to understand them.

The diary page is another important example. Tobias discovers a page written by Louisa when she was young. The page describes water and Serk, but Louisa later does not remember writing it. The document therefore becomes an external form of memory. Although Louisa has forgotten the experience associated with the writing, the physical page continues to exist.

The photograph of Serk and Louisa also performs a similar function. Anne discovers a photograph that she does not remember taking. The photograph preserves a moment that has

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disappeared from her conscious memory. Objects in the novel therefore become carriers of memory. They hold pieces of the past when human memory fails.

Later, Louisa's experience in Hawaii becomes particularly important. She experiences a feeling of recognition and discovers that she had previously visited Hawaii as a child. She had forgotten an important part of her childhood journey. This discovery makes her reconsider the possibility that other forgotten memories may also exist within her.The novel thus presents memory as selective rather than complete. A person may remember an image while forgetting its location or context. A person may remember an emotion without remembering the event that caused it. Choi uses these limitations to construct the narrative itself.

Memory also changes as characters grow older. Anne discovers old letters and documents and realizes that the woman described in them is partly unfamiliar to her. The documents provide evidence of a former version of herself that she can no longer completely access through memory.

Therefore, memory in Flashlight is both a theme and a structural technique. It determines what the characters know, what they do not know and what the reader is allowed to discover. The novel's fragmented structure reflects the fragmented nature of human remembrance.

Trauma and Its Psychological Consequences:

Trauma is closely connected with memory in Flashlight. The disappearance of Serk is not an isolated event. It affects Louisa, Anne and the wider family for many years. The traumatic event becomes something that continues to influence their relationships, choices and understanding of themselves.

For Louisa, the trauma begins during childhood. She survives an experience that she cannot fully understand or describe. She is left with fragments of memory rather than a complete narrative. As a result, her childhood becomes associated with uncertainty. She grows up angry and troubled, while adults around her struggle to understand her behaviour.

The psychological effect of this uncertainty can be seen in Louisa's strong reaction whenever people treat an uncertain event as if it were completely known. The disappearance of her cat, for example, becomes emotionally significant because she refuses to accept an explanation that is based only on assumption. Having grown up without definite knowledge about Serk, Louisa becomes extremely sensitive to the difference between evidence and belief. This suggests that trauma has changed the way Louisa interprets reality. Her behaviour is not simply the behaviour of a difficult child or rebellious young woman. Her personality has been shaped by an unresolved past.

Anne experiences trauma differently. She loses her husband but never receives definite information about his fate. The absence of a body prevents conventional closure. She has to live with uncertainty rather than a clearly defined loss. Anne also carries earlier emotional wounds. Her separation from Tobias creates guilt and regret. Her marriage to Serk contains secrets, and Serk refuses to discuss important parts of his family history. Thus, Anne's experience of loss is connected with earlier experiences of separation.

Serk himself carries psychological consequences from his childhood and political

history. He grows up in Japan as the child of Korean parents and later discovers the complexity of his Korean identity. His family becomes separated when some relatives move to North Korea. He does not know whether they are safe. This uncertainty remains a source of emotional pain.

When Serk is eventually abducted and held captive, his psychological struggle becomes even more severe. His survival depends partly on creating routines and observing patterns in an environment where he has very little control. The narrative shows how he attempts to create order when external circumstances are unpredictable.

The important point is that trauma does not simply remain in the past. It changes the characters' relationships with the present. Louisa's adult behaviour is influenced by childhood uncertainty. Anne's life remains connected to the disappearance of Serk. Serk's own past influences his cautious behaviour and his inability to discuss his history openly.

The novel therefore presents trauma as something that can travel across time. A past event can continue to influence people long after the original event has ended.

Memory and Identity:

Memory and identity are deeply connected in Flashlight. The novel repeatedly asks whether a person can understand who they are without understanding where they have come from.

Louisa's identity is strongly influenced by the disappearance of her father. During childhood, she cannot explain what happened to him. As she grows older, the absence becomes part of her personal identity. She is not simply a daughter whose father is missing; she becomes someone who has spent much of her life trying to understand that absence. Her search for Serk is therefore also a search for herself. When she begins to question the official explanation of his disappearance, she is also questioning the story she has been given about her own childhood.

Serk provides another important example of identity as something unstable. He is born as Seok in a Korean family living in Japan. At school he is known as Hiroshi, and later he becomes Serk in America. These different names correspond to different stages of his life. The novel shows how names can represent cultural expectations and personal adaptation. Serk's identity is complicated because he does not belong completely to one cultural world. Japan is the country of his childhood, but it is also a place where he experiences the consequences of being Korean. America provides professional opportunities, but he remains conscious of being an outsider. His identity is therefore shaped by movement and displacement.

Anne's identity is also connected to memory. Her experience with Tobias remains part of her understanding of motherhood. Although she attempts to move forward, her past decisions continue to influence her relationships with Tobias and Louisa.

The relationship between memory and identity becomes particularly clear when Louisa begins recovering forgotten parts of her childhood. The discovery that she had been to Hawaii changes her understanding of what memory is capable of preserving and hiding. If an important journey can disappear from conscious memory, then perhaps her memories of Serk's disappearance may contain more than she initially realizes.

The recovery of memory does not simply give Louisa information. It changes her understanding of herself. She realizes that her childhood story is more complicated than the version she has carried for decades.

The novel therefore suggests that identity is not created from one complete story. It is constructed from memories, forgotten experiences, family stories and interpretations of the past.

Reconstruction of the Past through Narrative:

The reconstruction of the past is one of the most important features of Flashlight. Choi does not give the reader the complete truth at the beginning. Instead, she gradually assembles the past through different characters and different forms of evidence.

Part I provides the histories of Serk, Anne and their families. Part II brings the family to Japan and presents the night of Serk's disappearance. Part III follows Anne and Louisa after the disappearance. Part IV begins an investigation into the possibility that Serk survived. Part V reveals Serk's experience after his disappearance, while Part VI brings Serk and Louisa together again.

This structure is significant because the truth is not presented in chronological order. The reader first sees the mystery, then learns the histories that produced it, and only later receives information that explains the mystery.

Different forms of evidence help reconstruct the past. Photographs, diary pages, letters, radio recordings and personal memories all become part of the investigation. None of these sources is necessarily complete by itself. Their significance appears when they are placed beside other fragments.

The diary page is a particularly good example. At first, Louisa believes that it may relate directly to Serk's disappearance. Later, her memory of Hawaii allows her to reinterpret it. The meaning of the document changes because her understanding of the past has changed. This demonstrates an important feature of memory: the past does not simply remain unchanged while the present develops. People reinterpret earlier experiences according to new knowledge.

The investigation also becomes collective. Tobias becomes involved with families searching for missing people. Their experiences show that personal memory can become part of a larger historical record. The families refuse to allow disappearance to become silence. The story therefore connects private memory with history. Serk's disappearance is connected with the political circumstances surrounding North Korea, Japan and Korean communities in Japan. The personal story becomes part of a wider historical reality.

Serk's own narrative in Part V changes everything the reader previously believed. Earlier, his disappearance appears to be a possible drowning. Later, the novel reveals that he was abducted and held captive. This does not simply add another fact to the story. It changes the meaning of Louisa's fragmented memories.

When Louisa finally remembers more clearly what happened, her memory provides an emotional form of truth. She realizes that her childhood confusion was connected to a real experience that she had been unable to explain.

The reunion between Louisa and Serk further complicates the idea of truth. Even after Serk is found, he cannot completely restore the past because his own memory is failing. Louisa

wants recognition from him, but he sometimes mistakes her identity.

This is one of the most significant ironies of the novel. Louisa spends decades trying to recover her father's memory, but when she finally meets him, his own memory is disappearing.

The novel therefore refuses to suggest that discovering the truth can repair everything. Louisa learns what happened, but she cannot recover the lost years. The past can be understood more clearly, but it cannot be lived again.

The Flashlight as a Symbol of Memory and Knowledge:

The title Flashlight provides an important symbolic framework for understanding the novel. A flashlight produces light in darkness, but the area it illuminates is limited. This makes it an effective metaphor for memory.

Serk carries a flashlight during his walk with Louisa. The object initially reflects his cautious personality. He wants to see where he is going and protect his daughter. Later, other flashlights become connected with Louisa's memories of her father. The flashlight therefore moves from being an ordinary object to becoming a symbolic object connected with memory and uncertainty.

The symbol can be connected to the way human beings search for knowledge. People do not normally see their entire past clearly. Instead, particular moments become illuminated while other moments remain hidden.

Louisa's recovered memories work in the same way. One image leads to another. A photograph creates a question. A diary page creates another question. A remembered place provides a new interpretation. Gradually, the circle of knowledge becomes larger.

However, darkness never disappears completely. Even after Louisa meets Serk, some things remain unknowable. She cannot recover all the years they lost. Serk's damaged memory prevents complete recognition. Therefore, the flashlight does not represent perfect knowledge. It represents limited but meaningful knowledge.

In this sense, the flashlight is a metaphor for the novel itself. Choi reveals the story gradually, illuminating one part of the past before moving into another area of darkness. The reader, like Louisa, has to continue searching for meaning from incomplete pieces of information.

Conclusion:

Susan Choi's Flashlight presents memory, trauma and identity as deeply interconnected aspects of human experience. The novel begins with a disappearance, but its larger subject is the effect of that disappearance on the people who remain. Louisa's incomplete childhood memories shape her personality and her understanding of her father. Anne's memories of Serk and Tobias influence her understanding of motherhood, loss and responsibility. Serk's memories of Japan, Korea, his family and his captivity shape the identity he carries across different countries.

Memory in the novel is not presented as a perfect recording of the past. It is fragmented, selective and sometimes unreliable. Yet this does not mean that memory is useless. On the contrary, fragments of memory become essential to the reconstruction of truth. The diary, photograph, letters, recordings and

remembered places all contribute to the gradual reconstruction of events.

Trauma complicates this process because traumatic experiences can make the past difficult to remember and even more difficult to explain. Louisa's inability to remember the night of Serk's disappearance becomes part of her identity. For years she lives with an incomplete story. When fragments of the past finally return, they do not erase the trauma, but they help her understand it.

The novel also shows that identity is constructed through personal and collective history. Serk's different names and cultural experiences reveal the instability of identity. Louisa's identity is shaped by her relationship with a father who is both physically absent and psychologically present throughout her life. Anne's identity is similarly influenced by her history as a mother and wife.

The reconstruction of the past therefore becomes a reconstruction of the self. Louisa's search for Serk is also a search for an explanation of her own childhood. When she finally meets him, she discovers that truth does not necessarily produce a perfect ending. Serk cannot completely remember her, and the lost years cannot be returned.

Yet the reunion provides another form of understanding. Louisa begins to recognize that memory is not the only measure of love. Serk's inability to remember everything does not necessarily mean that his relationship with his daughter meant nothing to him. The final relationship between father and daughter is based less on recovering the past perfectly and more on accepting the present. The flashlight therefore becomes an appropriate final symbol. It does not illuminate the entire world. It gives only enough light to see the next part of the path. In the same way, Louisa does not receive every possible answer about her childhood. She receives enough understanding to see her father, her family and herself differently.

Ultimately, Flashlight suggests that human beings often have to live with incomplete memories and unresolved questions. The past cannot always be recovered exactly as it happened, and identity cannot always be reduced to a single history. What matters is the continuing effort to understand the fragments we possess. Through memory, trauma and narrative reconstruction, Louisa gradually moves from confusion toward a more compassionate understanding of herself and her father.

The novel therefore presents the search for truth not simply as a search for what happened, but as a search for meaning. The past remains complicated, but it no longer has to remain completely dark.

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