

# Exploring Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* Through Trauma Theory And Postmemory

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## Abstract

This paper examines Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory. It argues that Caruth's notion of trauma - as an event not fully experienced in the moment but reemerging through involuntary repetitions and disruptions - explains *Dictee*'s non-linear, fractured narrative. The text's frequent silences, gaps, and linguistic ruptures reveal how colonial, and war trauma remain unspoken, and resurface through fragmented testimonies and archival materials. Similarly, Hirsch's concept of postmemory demonstrates how Cha, born after Korea's colonial period, reconstructs a past she never directly experienced. Through multilingual experimentation, shifting narrative perspectives, and the integration of historical figures into personal and national memory, *Dictee* reflects postmemory by reinterpreting and embodying inherited trauma instead of merely narrating it. By engaging with both belated trauma and postmemory, *Dictee* deconstructs a linear historical narrative and instead presents a fragmented, multi-voiced testimony to the ongoing impact of colonial violence and displacement.

**Keywords:** Trauma, postmemory, colonial violence, fragmented narrative, displacement

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha'nın *Dictee* Eserinin  
Travma Teorisi ve Postbellek Üzerinden İncelenmesi

## Öz

Bu makale, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha'nın *Dictee* adlı eserini Cathy Caruth'ün travma teorisi ve Marianne Hirsch'ün postbellek kavramı çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Makale, Caruth'ün travma kavramının - an içinde tam olarak deneyimlenmeyen, ancak istem dışı tekrarlar ve kesintiler yoluyla yeniden ortaya çıkan bir olay olarak - *Dictee*'nin doğrusal olmayan, parçalı anlatısını açıkladığını savunmaktadır. Metindeki sıkça rastlanan sessizlikler, boşluklar ve dilsel kopuşlar, sömürge ve savaş travmasının dile getirilememesine rağmen parçalanmış anlatılar ve arşiv materyalleri aracılığıyla yeniden yüzeye çıktığını göstermektedir. Benzer şekilde, Hirsch'ün postbellek kavramı, Kore'nin sömürge döneminden sonra doğan Cha'nın, doğrudan deneyimlemediği bir geçmişi nasıl yeniden inşa ettiğini göstermektedir. Çok dilli deneyler, değişen anlatı perspektifleri ve tarihi figürlerin kişisel ve ulusal belleğe entegrasyonu yoluyla *Dictee*, miras alınan travmayı sadece anlatmak yerine yeniden yorumlayarak ve somutlaştırarak postbelleği yansıtmaktadır. Hem gecikmiş travma hem de postbellek aracılığı ile *Dictee* doğrusal bir tarihsel

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anlatıyı yapışöküme uğrattır ve bunun yerine sömürge şiddeti ve yerinden edilmenin kalıcı etkilerine dair parçalanmış, çok sesli bir tanıklık sunar.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Travma, postbellek, sömürge şiddeti, parçalanmış anlatı, yerinden edilme

## INTRODUCTION

**T**heresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* (1982) is an idiosyncratic work of literature that resists being easily classified or categorized into a single genre. The work is a hybrid of genres, which blends poetry, prose, historical documentation, filmic stills, and visual images as well as incorporating elements from several languages such as English, French, Korean, and classical Chinese. As an experimental text which offers a multifaceted exploration of memory, identity, history, and language, *Dictee* explores the experiences of disenfranchised subjects, particularly those within the Korean diaspora, colonial histories, and feminist narratives. The text is narrated in nine separate sections and each section is titled after one of the classical Greek muses: Clio/History, Calliope/Epic Poetry, Urania/Astronomy, Melpomene/Tragedy, Erato/Love Poetry, Elitere/Lyric Poetry, Thalia/Comedy, Terpsichore/Choral Dance and Polymnia/Sacred Poetry. In each of those sections, Cha explores various themes ranging from colonialism, language, exile, martyrdom, desire, silence, performance, body, memory, displacement to identity by blending poetry, prose, mythology, images, historical documents, film stills, diaries, testimonies, translation, letters and photographs.

*Dictee* centers on the dislocation and fragmentation that accompany the experiences of diasporic individuals, especially women, and their struggles with identity because of colonialism and the patriarchal structures that silence their voices. The language is profoundly influenced by Cha's own biography as a Korean American immigrant whose family escaped from Japanese-occupied Korea. In the text, individual experiences of resistance and displacement are so intricately woven together with more general collective narratives of displacement that Cha has constructed what Josephine Nock-Hee Park (2005) describes as "an aesthetic framework that is both rigorously ordered and flexible enough to delve into a single body and survey a historical landscape" (p. 214).

Although *Dictee* is often categorized as a modern autobiography because of its references to Cha's and her mother's lives, its structure and content surpass the boundaries of conventional autobiographical formats. *Dictee*, as Anne Anlin Cheng (1998) observes, speaks through fragmented, disembodied voices, borrowed quotes, and photographs without captions. Although it presents itself as an autobiography, it delivers a confession that reveals nothing, dictation without a clear source, and history without identifiable figures. The narrative fragments it provides seem partially revived, yet remain partially obscured, as if caught between memory and erasure (p. 119). Thus, *Dictee* resists a linear autobiographical interpretation. Instead, it uses fragmentation and ambiguity to reflect the complex, multi-layered nature of personal and collective memory that is shaped by historical trauma.

This paper analyzes Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* through Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma and Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory.' The paper argues that Caruth's notion of

trauma, according to which the traumatic event is not fully experienced in the moment but returns through involuntary repetitions and disruptions, explains *Dictee's* non-linear, fractured narrative, which resists conventional historiography. The text's frequent silences, gaps, and linguistic ruptures reflect how colonial, and war trauma remain unspoken, and they emerge later in fragmented testimonies and archival materials. Likewise, Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory' explains how Cha, born after Korea's colonial period, reconstructs a past she never directly experienced. Through multilingual experimentation, shifting narrative perspectives, and the incorporating of historical figures like Yu Guan Soon with personal and national memory, *Dictee* reflects postmemory by reinterpreting and embodying inherited trauma instead of merely narrating it. Through its exploration of both belated trauma and postmemory, *Dictee* deconstructs a linear historical narrative and instead, it offers a fragmented, multi-voiced testimony to the deep-rooted impacts of colonial violence and displacement.

### THE INTERSECTIONS OF CARUTH'S TRAUMA THEORY AND *DICTEE'S* NARRATIVE FORM

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* intersect in terms of their emphasis on fragmentation, a non-linear structure, and the novel's exploration of generational trauma. According to Caruth (1996), "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature - the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance - returns to haunt the survivor later on" (emphasis original, p. 4). This concept of trauma is helpful to interpret *Dictee* in which the trauma of colonialism, war and displacement is not narrated extensively and directly in a linear structure but through fragmented, detached voices and silences, which is a reminiscent of Caruth's belated nature of trauma: "*It murmurs inside. It murmurs. Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say. Larger still. Greater than is the pain not to say. To not say. Says nothing against the pain to speak. It festers inside. The wound, liquid, dust. Must break. Must void*" (emphasis original, *Dictee*, p. 3).

In that regard, the concept of time in *Dictee* is non-linear, fragmented and circular, in which memories and events keep returning. It reflects the fractures of diaspora by blending ancient myths, historical events, and personal memories in a fragmented order in an attempt to verbalize the repetitive occurrences of trauma that marginalized people experience. Through this reconfiguration of time, we as readers are made to confront the persistence of historical trauma and see how it continues to exist as unresolved and unaddressed in the present. Caruth defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (p. 11). This description of trauma parallels the fragmented experience of diasporic identity in *Dictee*, in which the past and present are constantly coalesced since time is perceived by marginalized subjects as a sequence of upheavals and displacements rather than as a continuous flow.

The text's fragmented and repetitive style reflects the cycle of memory and trauma, which demonstrates that the past cannot be fully left behind: "Why resurrect it all now. From the Past.

History, the old wound. The past emotions all over again. To confess to relive the same folly. To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion. To extract each fragment by each fragment from the word from the image another word another image the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion" (*Dictee*, p. 33). Here Cha emphasizes the perpetual nature of trauma and its cyclical reappearance, which intersects with Caruth's idea of the repetitive nature of traumatic experience. Cha repeatedly revisits history and personal experiences, and blends them to reveal how unresolved historical tragedies, displacement and colonialism shape both individual and social identities. In that, Cha creates a distinct realm where the identity of a disenfranchised individual cannot be separated from their generational history of trauma as described by Caruth. In the text, accordingly, the trauma of the mother is passed down and felt by the daughter as she comes to inherit the mother's sense of exile and loss:

Our destination is fixed on the perpetual motion of search. Fixed in its perpetual exile. Here at my return in eighteen years, the war is not ended. We fight the same war. We are inside the same struggle seeking the same destination. We are severed in Two by an abstract enemy an invisible enemy under the title of liberators who have conveniently named the severance, Civil War. Cold War. Stalemate. (p. 81)

*Dictee's* blend of familiar, testimonial, and public discourses, as Juliana M. Spahr (1996) suggests, disrupts conventional notions of what constitutes political or historical content. By incorporating various perspectives, *Dictee* recognizes that history is both personal and subjective. In the text, Cha blurs the boundaries between public and private life, as well as political and domestic spheres. By reinterpreting the history of women's responses, she highlights overlooked significant histories with equal focus on revision (p. 36). Through this approach, Cha in *Dictee* challenges traditional historical narratives, and instead she puts emphasis on the complexity and multiplicity of lived experiences and the traumas that accompany them. This notion of history as fragmented and subjective parallels Caruth's exploration of trauma, which suggests that historical understanding is not only based on direct experience, but it emerges through reinterpretation and belated recognition. Caruth suggests that the experience of trauma, "both in its occurrence and in the attempt to understand it," reveals the possibility of a history that is not purely based on direct experience and reference. Caruth argues that rethinking reference does not erase history but instead reframes it "in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not" (emphasis original, p. 11).

The blending of personal and historical boundaries is central to *Dictee*, as in the text the voices of real historical figures, such as Cha's mother and the Korean revolutionary Yu Guan Soon, coexist with mythological and fictional ones. As a result, the text offers a comprehensive exploration of how identity of a marginalized subject (in *Dictee's* case, the identity of a disenfranchised woman) is shaped not only by personal memory but also by the violent traumas of history and colonialism. As Kun Jong Lee (2006) highlights, Cha, by concentrating on Guan Soon, critiques and challenges the male-centric assumptions embedded in Korean historiography that have disregarded women's roles and silenced their voices (p. 84). In *Dictee*, Cha does not just narrate historical events but rather, she relays the feeling of trauma that constantly returns and haunts subsequent generations. Caruth's trauma theory also demonstrates how the trauma of the

past re-emerges in the present in unexpected manners: "What returns to haunt the victim [...] is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (p. 6). When viewed from aspect, it is evident that *Dictee* not only reimagines history, but it also shows how the unresolved trauma of the past continues to influence and shape the lives of the descendants on both social and individual aspects: "I am in the same crowd, the same coup, the same revolt, nothing has changed" (p. 81).

Through a fragmented and multi-layered structure, Cha in *Dictee* breaks away from traditional autobiographical and historical storytelling. This approach corresponds with the nature of trauma, which is incomplete, elusive and recurrent. Cha's *Dictee* incorporates personal experiences, historical periods and various languages and these reflect the delayed and fragmented nature of trauma. As Caruth points out,

[...] trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (p. 4)

Here, Caruth's view of trauma as a wound that calls for an expression and discloses an inaccessible truth parallels Cha's fragmented narrative. This fragmented narrative corresponds to the nature of trauma which keeps recurring through interruptions, silences, repetitions, archival fragments and non-linear history. The trauma in *Dictee* extends beyond personal, temporal and spatial spheres. This trauma encompasses the past, present and future of a divided and scattered nation: "There is no destination other than towards yet another refuge from yet another war. Many generations pass and many deceptions in the sequence in the chronology towards the destination" (emphasis original, *Dictee*, p. 80). In this regard, as Hyo K. Kim (2013) suggests, by redefining the "I" as open and perpetually relational, *Dictee* serves as a potent reminder of the harrowing history of modern Korea - one that resulted in a divided nation and millions of its people dispersed worldwide. Thus, *Dictee* reflects the experiences of intercultural bodies whose connections to social reality have become profoundly uncertain. This demonstrates how traditional modes of unified identity, whether familiar or familial, become inaccessible to those existing between different subjectivities (p. 135). In this manner, Cha challenges fixed constructs of identity because the self in this case is shaped by displacement and historical trauma, which leads to the continuous struggle of the subjects that exist between cultures, histories, and nations. In this continuous struggle we find generational trauma as described by Caruth:

That is, described in terms of a possession by the past that is not entirely one's own, trauma already describes the individual experience as something that exceeds itself, that brings within individual experience as its most intense sense of isolation the very breaking of individual knowledge and mastery of events. This notion of trauma also acknowledges that perhaps it is not possible for the witnessing of the trauma to occur within the individual at all, that it may only be in future generations that "cure" or at least witnessing can take place. (p. 136)

In *Dictee*, we find the traces of this healing process in Cha's employment of language. For Cha, language serves as a site of trauma in addition to being a tool for resistance. In the text,

language becomes a tool for reclaiming identity and subverting the dominant forms of communication and expression. Cha, by dismantling language, reveals the limits of communication and how marginalized groups are excluded from dominant discourses: "She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words. Since she hesitates to measure the accuracy, she resorts to mimicking gestures with the mouth" (*Dictee*, p. 3). This disruption of language, where meaning is fragmented and language is left incomplete, is not only a reflection of trauma but also a resistance to the dominant discourse. Cha's *Dictee*, as Evan Chambers (2012) argues, thoroughly disrupts, deconstructs, and ignores conventional reading habits. The opening page upends our usual reading rhythm by rejecting standard punctuation and instead writing out the words "period," "comma," or "quotation marks." Cha employs such techniques throughout the work, in both form and content, to craft an open, multifaceted text that challenges the idea of a single, definitive meaning (p. 123). The experimental use of language in the text is thus a reflection of the fragmented identities in addition to being a means of resisting the erasure and silencing of those identities.

When Japan occupied Korea in 1910, the Korean language was banned in the country which meant the oppression and silencing an entire nation: "The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue. You speak in the dark. In the secret. The one that is yours. Your own. You speak very softly, you speak in a whisper. In the dark, in secret. Mother tongue is your refuge. It is being home. Being who you are. Truly" (*Dictee*, p. 45). On the other hand, Cha transforms language into a tool of resistance, using it to reclaim and reconstruct the past. Language and writing, as Jill Darling (2021) states, are crucial for the (re)construction of history and for shaping relationships in both the present and the future (p. 156). Cha's use of language as a sign of both trauma and resistance evokes Caruth's theory of trauma, which underlines the paradox of destruction and survival in the aftermath of catastrophic events. According to Caruth, "trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival. It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience" (p. 58). In this light, *Dictee* not only exposes the violence of linguistic erasure but also demonstrates how language, despite its fractures, becomes a means of survival and a way to bear witness to historical trauma.

### **READING *DICTEE* THROUGH POSTMEMORY: FRACTURED IDENTITY AND THE LEGACY OF TRAUMA**

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory describes how the descendants of people who have experienced traumatic events inherit and internalize traumatic events through cultural, familial, and historical narratives and representations. Unlike memory, which is personally experienced, postmemory is the process through which the emotional effects of traumas and memories lived by antecedents are passed on to descendants who did not directly or personally experience the traumatic events. Those inherited memories resurface as emotional reactions or

fragmented recollections which strongly influence the lives and identities of future generations. As Hirsch (1997) explains,

I propose the term “postmemory” with some hesitation, conscious that the prefix “post” could imply that we are beyond memory and therefore perhaps [...] purely in history. In my reading, postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. I have developed this notion in relation to children of Holocaust survivors, but I believe it may usefully describe other-second generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences. (p. 22)

Postmemory is an important concept to understand generational trauma as it signifies the effects of traumatic events on subsequent generations that have not witnessed the historical events, such as war, colonization, or genocide, since they were not born at the time of the event. Postmemory thus shows us that trauma is not just limited to a personal experience but rather it is a collective one that has huge impacts on both collective consciousness and unconsciousness, and in this case, it influences future generations of disenfranchised groups. In this respect, Cha addresses the inherited trauma through postmemory as she was born after the Korean war and thus did not personally experience the violent events that took place at that time. In *Dictee*, Cha brings both personal and collective memories together and she links her experiences of a diasporic individual with the larger history of Korean colonialism and resistance: “Eighteen years pass. I am here for the first time in eighteen years, Mother. We left here in this memory still fresh, still new” (p. 85). In this light, Cha blends personal memories of her family and historical narratives of figures such as Yu Guan Soon, a symbol of Korean resistance, to suggest that memory and identity are never limited to an individual’s lifespan, but they are shaped by the wider historical and cultural dynamics.

At first glance, as Anne Anlin Cheng (1998) reports, *Dictee* resembles a documentary, since it records historical events through a mix of textual and visual references, almost serving as an archive that bears witness to the traumatic history of modern Korea. Cha, however, presents evidence detached from its original context. For example, the book includes a grainy, unidentified black-and-white photo of a large protest, leaving readers to question its origins. Upon closer inspection, we come to see that the image is from the 1919 Korean Independence Movement, during which more than 200 students were violently suppressed while protesting for democracy, an event later distorted by the Korean government as a communist uprising. Yet, even with this context, the task of interpreting such decontextualized material remains challenging (p. 121). *Dictee* combines personal and historical narratives, but its documentary-like form is subverted by a lack of explanation, which forces the reader to cope with gaps and ambiguities. According to Hirsch, “[p]hotographs, ghostly revenants, are very particular instruments of remembrance, since they are

perched at the edge between memory and postmemory, and also, though differently, between memory and forgetting" (p. 22). Therefore, Cha's use of decontextualized images, such as the blurred protest photo, serves as a fragmented archive that suggests multiple interpretations. Cha detaches historical artifacts from their original contexts and by doing so, she not only challenges traditional documentary certainty, but she also manifests the hidden histories of diasporic and colonial subjects. The subject of *Dictee* thus, as Sue-Im Lee (2002) argues, is both physically untraceable and socially invisible. This non-identity is largely a result of the lack of a physical presence in the text; throughout the nine chapter-like segments, the subject is not portrayed as a physical entity. As she moves through different times, spaces, histories, and personal memories between chapters, she remains geographically elusive in her expression (p. 243). This absence of a fixed identity and physical presence demonstrates the fragmented and diasporic nature of the subject whose experiences are shaped by colonialism and displacement.

The broader significance of *Dictee*, as Juliana M. Spahr (1996) argues, lies in how Cha's collection of narratives demonstrates that women and minorities have more options than simply remaining silent or compromising by adopting dominant discourse (p. 39). We find an elaboration on this in "Clio History" chapter which is not only about Korean history and the biography of the Korean female revolutionary Yu Guan Soon, but also about time, language and post/memory. The "Clio History" chapter questions history and identity through a collaged narrative: old photos, Chinese characters, a handwritten draft, historical documents and a letter to the American president. In her experimental style, Cha tries to reconstruct the past to make us think about history and the past in a new way by challenging and playing with traditional modes of historical and autobiographical narrative. This approach relates to what Linda Hutcheon (1998) describes as historiographic metafiction, a mode of writing that not only questions but also reinterprets historical representation. Historiographic metafiction, according to Linda Hutcheon,

refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity. This kind of postmodern fiction also refuses the relegation of the extratextual past to the domain of historiography in the name of the autonomy of art. (p. 93)

Clio, one of the nine muses in Greek mythology, is the muse of history and means 'teller'. Cha, in this chapter, retells the history of Japan's invasion of Korea in parallel with the biography of Yu Guan Soon. The chapter starts with a picture of the Korean revolutionary Yu Guan Soon who, after Japan's invasion of Korea and assassination of Queen Min, forms a resistance group and starts her revolutionary work, yet the nationally organized movement does not take her seriously due to her gender. However, in her non-linear narrative, Cha "manipulates the historical facts in order to situate Guan Soon at the origin of the March First Movement, to portray the woman soldier as an active agent of history, and to recenter the feminine voice from the margins of Korean nationalism" (Lee, 2006, p. 37). Thus, Cha provides readers with a feminized version of Korean history by rewriting historical events. In this reinterpretation of historical events, the traditional linear narrative of history is challenged, narrative continuity is distorted, and historical events are

randomly incorporated into each other. This approach encourages readers to perceive history as an active, interpretative process rather than a rigid, unchanging narrative. The text, therefore, challenges them to reconsider how stories and histories are told and whose voices are included.

By placing a female heroine in the center of her narration of Korean history, Cha “criticizes and rejects the androcentric assumptions encoded in Korean historiography that has negated female roles and silenced female voices” (Lee, 2006, p. 84). Unlike traditional historiographies, in “Clio History” a woman has the central position. In the very beginning of the chapter, Yu Guan Soon makes references to other heroines and heroes such as Jeanne d’Arc and Ahn Joong Kun, a Korean independence fighter who assassinated a Japanese Prime minister. Together with these intertextual references, Cha incorporates her ideas about history into the narrative: “There is no people without a nation, no people without ancestry. There are other nations no matter how small their land, who have their independence. But our country, even with 5,000 years of history, has lost it to the Japanese” (p. 28). Then, she gives historical facts about how Korea was invaded by Japan and how Yu Guan Soon, the only daughter among four siblings, leads the resistance movement until she is arrested as a revolutionary leader and fatally stabbed in the chest. Although she is given a seven-year prison sentence, she replies that the nation itself is imprisoned. Here, it is obvious that Cha mocks the narration as her portrayal of Yu Guan Soon’s story is filled with irony and critique. She exposes the rigid and often reductive language through which nationalist histories are constructed. By recounting Yu Guan Soon’s courage and martyrdom in a stylized tone, Cha points out the limitations of traditional historical narratives that tend to idealize or simplify complex figures into symbols of national pride: “Child revolutionary child patriot woman soldier deliverer of nation. The eternity of one act. Is the completion of one existence. One martyrdom. For the history of one nation. Of one people” (*Dictée*, p. 37).

Cha questions how historical knowledge is acquired and how we access and understand the past. By asking how one can truly know distant historical events, Cha challenges the assumption that history can be authentically represented or fully understood through conventional sources like official documents, photos, or books. These artifacts, often regarded as objective records, are instead depicted as limited and potentially distorting lenses through which history is selectively framed, interpreted, and presented. In questioning whether we can unravel a past we have not experienced, Cha draws attention to the gaps between lived reality and historical narrative, particularly for marginalized groups whose stories are often excluded from dominant historical accounts. This idea resonates with Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, as she states: “I prefer the term “postmemory” to “absent memory,” or “hole of memory” [...] Postmemory – often obsessive and relentless – need not be absent or evacuated: it is as full and as empty, certainly as constructed, as memory itself” (p. 22). In that regard, Cha’s text puts a great deal of emphasis on the fact that both personal and inherited memory is continuously shaped by absence and reconstruction as our post/memory is more about “what unfolds temporally, not simply historically” (Alvergue, 2016, p. 439). Cha thus invites readers to reconsider alternative ways of connecting with the past - through memory, storytelling, and personal narrative, which brings about a critique of traditional historiography and instead encourages readers to view history as a space of subjective

interpretation rather than an absolute truth. According to Cha, “other nations who are not witnesses, who are not subject to the same oppressions, they cannot know. Unfathomable the words, the terminology: enemy, atrocities, conquest, betrayal, invasion, destruction. They exist only in the larger perception of History’s recording” (*Dictee*, p. 32). Cha emphasizes the idea that the true weight of suffering that emanates from oppression and colonization remains incomprehensible to those who have not directly experienced it. Words like ‘betrayal’ and ‘invasion’ become abstract concepts, existing only as distant entries in historical records for outsiders, while for those affected, they carry the profound scars of lived reality. By claiming that “everyone knows to carry inside themselves, the national flag” (*Dictee*, p. 37), Cha focuses on nationalism in her narrative through official documents, photographs, political petitions and a handwritten manuscript. According to McDaniel (2009) “collaged together, these texts provide the memoir with a heterogeneous foundation, presenting the reader with a self-representational archive” (p. 72). Cha here questions Korean historiography. After narrating the distorted historical facts about the role of Yu Guan Soon in the revolutionary work against the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1919, Cha quotes from ‘Suppression of Foreign Criticism’ dated from 1907, and then she puts the petition that North Koreans sent to US President Roosevelt in 1905 in the narration. She, thus, narrates Korean history in a non-chronological order. Besides, the photo at the end of the chapter shows how three Koreans are crucified and executed by Japanese soldiers and then the chapter ends with Cha’s handwritten draft without corrections. Therefore, the draft manifests not only how the narration of Korean historiography is a human construct but that as a metafictional novel, it is also aware of its fictional status. In this context, Hirsch explains that “Photographs in their enduring “umbilical” connection to life are precisely the medium connecting first- and second-generation remembrance, memory and postmemory. They affirm the past’s existence and, in their flat two-dimensionality, they signal its unbridgeable distance” (p. 23) The photo and draft together thus demonstrate the gap between historical reality and its representation, which puts emphasis on the constructed nature of memory and history.

Postmemory in *Dictee* plays a central role, not as a static recollection of the past, but rather as a fragmented and reconstructed process. Cha’s text refuses the authoritative, singular narrative that often characterizes official histories, particularly those that have silenced the voices of colonized, diasporic, and female subjects. Therefore, *Dictee* is a polyphonic and multivocal work that offers multiple, frequently contradictory memories that defy consolidation into a single, coherent whole. By doing so, Cha disrupts the hegemonic versions of history, opening space for the voices of the oppressed and the marginalized groups. Colonialism and patriarchy, as Kun Jong Lee (2006) points out, were closely intertwined in the Japanese justification for the colonization of Korea (p. 85). However, in *Dictee*, memory is about more than just looking back; it’s also about taking back control and rewriting the narratives that have been imposed on marginalized people. In the text thus as Kun Jong Lee (2006) observes, the divergent voices of the women coalesce into the singular voice of Korean American writer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. By positioning herself within a broader female lineage that transcends familial, religious, national, and historical boundaries, Cha foregrounds the lived experiences of colonized and postcolonial Korean

(American) women. She amplifies these narratives, asserting their pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of humanity's future. Through this elevation, Cha affirms the transformative potential embedded in the histories of these marginalized women (p. 95).

Memory in *Dictee* is not merely a recollection of the past but an active, creative process that reconstructs and reinterprets history. As Anne Anlin Cheng (1998) suggests, the act of memory in the text is challenging and resistant, involving a dual process of attachment and detachment, recovery and burial (p. 120). In that regard, Cha reconstructs what Hirsch describes as "a past that will neither fade away nor be integrated into the present" (p. 40). Cha's text blends personal and collective memories, and often blurs the boundaries between the two. Cha suggests that memory is a dynamic and contested process rather than a single, stable entity by representing the multiplicity of memory through a variety of voices, languages, and narrative forms. This exploration is particularly evident in her portrayal of women's lives, as Kun Jong Lee (2006) observes, where Cha searches for a universal meaning that connects their experiences. Many of these women express a shared discontent with their roles due to patriarchal beliefs embedded in nationalist beliefs, religious instructions, mythological texts, cultural standards, and colonial indoctrination. Essentially, their voices have become "*Dead words. Dead tongue. From disuse. Buried in Time's memory. Unemployed. Unspoken*" (emphasis original, p. 95). In this way, Cha's narrative becomes a reclamation of these silenced voices.

*Dictee* emphasizes the bodily aspect of memory as well. In that, trauma is felt both physically and psychologically and that memories are imprinted on the body. The text's fragmented form reflects the fractured nature of traumatic memory, which resists coherent narrative and linear temporality. Through this, *Dictee* reclaims memory as a space of resistance where disenfranchised groups can challenge dominant historical narratives and assert their voices. As Josephine Nock-Hee Park (2005) argues, *Dictee*, using avant-garde techniques, interweaves various forms of suffering: personal bodily ailments, mythic struggles, and political oppression. Cha has crafted an aesthetic structure that is both meticulously organized and adaptable, allowing her to explore both the individual body and the broader historical context (p. 214). In light of Hirsch's concept of postmemory, which refers to the way second-generation individuals inherit the memories of those who experienced trauma firsthand, Cha's work brings together personal suffering, mythic struggles, and political oppression.

## CONCLUSION

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* offers a profound engagement with trauma and postmemory, through which it demonstrates how history's wounds continue to shape and construct identity across generations. With its fragmented form, polyvocal narration, and non-linear temporality, *Dictee* resists closure, and it reflects the disorienting effects of trauma as conceptualized by Cathy Caruth. Cha's narrator functions as both a witness and an intermediary, which epitomizes Caruth's notion of trauma as an experience that challenges direct representation. *Dictee* offers a powerful critique of the ways in which history is written, remembered, and erased, and a radical reimagining of how those stories might be reclaimed and retold by those who have

been silenced. At the same time, *Dictee* engages with Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, particularly in its exploration of inherited trauma and the role of language in shaping collective remembrance. The text does not simply narrate historical suffering but reconstructs and reinterprets it through an experimental literary form that illustrates the fragmentation that is inherent in diasporic and postcolonial identities. By reconfiguring language and genre, Cha challenges the erasure of colonial history and creates a space where suppressed memories can be recovered. In this way, *Dictee* reflects the crucial element of postmemory, which is to emphasize the duty of later generations to confront the past's unacknowledged experiences, and make sure they are not forgotten or lost in dominant historical narratives. Ultimately, *Dictee* presents literature as both an artistic and political act to resist patriarchy and historical erasure. In the text, Cha disrupts linear history and offers a new way to understand trauma and displacement. By seeing memory as a continuous, active process, *Dictee* emphasizes the need to confront unresolved histories, question fixed identities, and reclaim silenced voices. In this way, Cha's work encourages readers to engage in a continuous process of witnessing, remembering, and reinterpreting through Caruth's concept of trauma and Hirsch's concept of postmemory.

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# Yazma Sanatı

Türkçe Doğru ve Etkili Yazma Teknikleri

Prof. Dr. Önder Göçgün



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