

War Trauma and Spiritual Coping in Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists*

Assist. Lect. Huda Ali Jasim

College of Education, English Dep., Al-Farahidi University, 10001, Baghdad, Iraq
hudaali2022jasim@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the multifaceted nature of resilience in [Insert Protagonist's Name or Work Title], focusing on the transition from psychological trauma to integration. Through a qualitative analysis of coping strategies, the research investigates how internal and external resources contribute to character development. The study argues that resilience emerges through the interaction of social and spiritual coping mechanisms, rather than as an isolated psychological trait.

By analyzing the synergy between these two domains, the findings demonstrate the effectiveness of these dual-coping strategies in facilitating long-term psychological integration. The results suggest that the protagonist's recovery is not a static achievement but a dynamic process sustained by both communal support and personal belief systems. Ultimately, this research contributes to the understanding of trauma recovery by highlighting how the convergence of spiritual and social frameworks provides a robust foundation for holistic mental health.

Keywords: War Trauma, Grief and Loss, Resilience, Memory and Trauma

1. Introduction

The Japanese occupation of Malaya (1941–1945) remains a period of profound collective trauma; however, conventional historiography often fails to adequately capture the complexities of long-term psychological recovery. Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012) emerges as a seminal text in this discourse, offering a nuanced examination of the "afterlife" of systemic violence. While historical narratives prioritize the empirical facts of the invasion, Eng's narrative provides a critical lens into the psychological architecture of resilience.

Despite the novel's prominence, existing scholarship has predominantly focused on its postcolonial politics or its aesthetic contributions. Consequently, there remains a notable lacuna in academic discourse regarding the specific coping mechanisms that facilitate the protagonist Teoh Yun Ling's transition from a traumatized captive to a functional member of the judiciary. This study argues that Yun Ling's survival is not a product of haphazard endurance but the result of a sophisticated synergy between social and

spiritual coping resources. By repositioning the protagonist's sister as both a physical shield during internment and a spiritualized memory thereafter, this research delineates a "Social and Spiritual" framework as the primary catalyst for recovery. Through an analysis of memory, materiality, and the symbolic utility of the Japanese garden, this study demonstrates that resilience is a dynamic process of transmuting social support into spiritual agency, thereby reclaiming an identity previously obscured by trauma.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Current scholarship on *The Garden of Evening Mists* predominantly utilizes Postcolonial and Aesthetic frameworks, yet a critical oversight remains regarding the psychological mechanics of survival. Pellano (2016) explores the Nietzschean concept of resentment, focusing on internalized hatred and the body as a site of history. While Pellano identifies the protagonist's drive for justice, his analysis remains confined to internalized repression. This creates a significant research gap, as it overlooks the externalized coping mechanisms—specifically the social and spiritual utility of the sister's presence—that this study seeks to address.

Similarly, Poon (2014) and Fincham (2014) approach the novel through the lens of memory aestheticization and postcolonial ecology. Poon argues that the novel risks turning memory into a "rarefied artistic object," while Fincham highlights the "ecological view" as a source of hope. However, both authors treat memory as a political or artistic construct by treating memory not as an "object," but as a functional psychological resource. Unlike Fincham's focus on "collective ideals," this study centers on the individualized spiritual coping required to survive systemic brutality. Furthermore, while Lim (2015) provides a necessary historical critique of "Zen mobilization" and Japanese imperialism, his focus remains on the political subversion of the text. There is a persistent lack of inquiry into the psychological survival architecture of the victims.

Bridging the Gap: The Social and Spiritual Coping Framework

To address these scholarly voids, this research utilizes a multidimensional coping model grounded in the theories of Lepore and Evans (1996) and Ai et al. (2010). This framework moves beyond the "internalized repression" cited by Pellano to investigate the synergy between external and internal resources.

Social Coping as a Relational Buffer: Following the definitions provided by Lepore and Evans (1996), social resources include the networks and support systems available to an individual. This study re-contextualizes the protagonist's sister, Yun Hong, not merely as a character, but as a Primary Social Resource. During the war, their relationship provides "relational regulation"—a social buffer that prevents total psychological fragmentation in the face of atrocity.

Spiritual Coping and the Search for Significance: As defined by Pargament (2011), spiritual coping involves the search for meaning during times of extreme suffering. This study argues that after the sister's death, the protagonist's strategy shifts from a Social Resource to a Mental/Spiritual Resource. The memory of the sister is transformed into a cognitive mindset that dictates the protagonist's post-war actions.

The "Garden" as an Environmental Resource: Finally, this framework integrates the physical environment. The memorial garden is analyzed as an Environmental Resource—a bridge where spiritual

coping (the memory of the sister) becomes a tangible reality. By synthesizing these psychological categories, it becomes evident that while the political and aesthetic dimensions of the novel are well-documented, the specific intersection of Social and Spiritual Coping as the primary mechanism through which the protagonist transfigures traumatic memory into a sustainable framework for psychological endurance and restorative justice.

3. Research Questions

1. How does the protagonist use the presence of her sister during the war to help her feel less pain?
2. How does the protagonist use her sister's memory and her spirit to cope with the effects with the war, i.e. trauma?
3. How effective is the coping strategy used by the protagonist in overcoming the war trauma? Dynamic survival strategy remains the essential, under-theorized heart of the narrative.

4. Analysis

4.1. The Phenomenology of Trauma

The protagonist's internal landscape is defined by the enduring echoes of the Japanese invasion of Malaya. Her trauma is not merely a memory of the past but a lived experience that has fractured her sense of self and severed her connection to her sister. This unresolved pain is encapsulated in her reflection: "He did not apologize for what his countrymen had done to my sister and me" (Eng, 2012, p. 11). Here, the lack of an apology signifies a "moral injury" that complicates the healing process. Yun Ling's grief is presented as an irreversible state: "What words could have cured my pain, returned my sister to me? None" (p. 11).

Furthermore, her trauma manifests as an identity crisis; she views her survival not as a gift, but as a dislocation of destiny: "I wondered what I was doing here, living the life that should have been my sister's" (p. 103). This survivor's guilt is compounded by PTSD symptoms—sleeplessness and intrusive auditory flashbacks: "There were so many voices in the dark: the moans of the prisoners, the shouts of the guards, my sister's crying" (p. 142). This suggests that the trauma is "inscribed" both on her mind and the environment around her.

4.2. The Capacity to Cope: Seeking Recognition

Yun Ling's initial coping strategy is characterized by a search for external validation and sympathy. While she expects an apology from Aritomo, she finds his face "barren" (p. 60). This emotional vacuum forces her to look toward other social buffers. Magnus, for instance, provides the initial catalyst for her resilience by suggesting a tangible outlet for her grief: "'Build it for her.' ... 'You could make it a memorial for her'" (p. 53). This marks the transition from passive suffering to active "meaning-making

4.3. Social Coping: The Sister as a Relational Buffer

The relationship between Yun Ling and Yun Hong serves as the primary Social Resource during the war. Their bond functions as a "shared micro-reality" that protects them from psychological fragmentation. They experience the trauma as a collective unit: "I glanced at my sister. Our eyes met for a moment. We were worlds away from anything we had ever known" (p. 284).

Even in the depths of the internment camp, Social Coping is utilized through "anticipatory resilience." Yun Hong encourages the prisoners by describing the gardens of Kyoto in meticulous detail: "This is how we'll survive... this is how we'll walk out of this camp" (p. 61). By sharing these mental images, the sister

transforms from a sibling into a social "navigator," guiding the group toward a psychological exit from their physical imprisonment.

4.4. Mental and Spiritual Coping

a. Memory and Forgetting

The novel's epigraph from Richard Holmes introduces the "twin powers" of memory and forgetting. In Yun Ling's case, memory is a tool for empowerment, while forgetting—specifically the loss of her sister's face—is her greatest fear. As Magnus notes, "As you get older, you start remembering the old things" (p. 100), suggesting that memory is a cyclical, rather than linear, resource.

b. Material Objects as Anchors

Yun Ling utilizes material objects, such as her sister's watercolor painting, as physical anchors for her mental resources. She "steals glances" at these objects (p. 205)

because they represent a peaceful pre-war identity. These objects serve as a bridge between the "shattered self" of the present and the "whole self" of the past.

c. The Garden as Heterotopia (The Critical Shift)

The Garden of Yugiri represents the most complex symbol in the novel. It is a "Heterotopia"—a space where the protagonist attempts to "prune" her chaotic trauma into a controlled aesthetic environment. Yun Ling's dedication to building the garden serves three distinct psychological functions:

Restorative Justice: Fulfilling Yun Hong's dream.

Atonement: Navigating her survivor's guilt.

Spiritual Continuity: Ensuring her sister is "still there" (p. 96).

By apprenticing under Aritomo, she uses the "art of the oppressor" to honor the victim, creating a paradoxical space where nature acts as a link to trauma recovery. The "scarred" earth of the garden mirrors her own scarred psyche, allowing for a symbolic "re-planting" of her identity.

d. The Evolution of the Spirit

Aritomo ignites the transition from Mental to Spiritual Coping when he asserts that Yun Hong is "Deep inside... still there" (p. 96). This shift allows Yun Ling to move beyond the pain of "haunting" memories toward a "spiritual bond." The garden

becomes the temple for this spirit, a public testament that ensures her sister's story is not forgotten but integrated into the historical narrative of Malaysia.

4.5. The Effectiveness of the Coping Strategy: From Victim to Judge

The efficacy of Yun Ling's coping strategy is evidenced by her ability to transition from a prisoner to a Supreme Court judge. This move from Private Memory to Public Justice signifies a successful reclamation of agency.

Her resilience is not a total "cure" for trauma, but a successful integration of it. While she eventually stops building the garden because of its association with Aritomo, this is not a failure; rather, it shows she is no longer "trapped" by the past. As she states, "Law was the only thing I knew I was good at" (p. 345). By choosing the law, she externalizes her internal spirit-bond with her sister, transforming her personal grief into a societal pursuit of fairness and order. Her success lies in the fact that she no longer lets hatred control her life; she has built a "new life" on the foundations of the one she thought she had lost.

5. Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that Teoh Yun Ling's resilience in *The Garden of Evening Mists* is not an innate trait, but a dynamic psychological process predicated on the transition between social, mental, and spiritual coping mechanisms. By applying the framework of Lepore and Evans (1996) and Ai et al. (2010), this study has identified a critical trajectory in the protagonist's recovery: the transformation of a 'social resource' (the physical sister) into a 'spiritual and aesthetic anchor' (the memorial garden).

The analysis reveals that while the trauma of the Japanese occupation initially resulted in a fragmented identity and profound survivor's guilt, the presence of Yun Hong functioned as a vital relational buffer. The subsequent 'spiritualization' of the sister's memory—facilitated by the creation of the garden—allowed the protagonist to externalize her grief, moving it from a site of internal repression to one of public memorialization. This trajectory proves that the 'Garden' is more than a setting; it is a functional coping architecture that bridges the gap between the victim and the survivor.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of these coping strategies is confirmed by Yun Ling's professional transition into the judiciary. By choosing the Law, she moves from the private struggle of memory to the public pursuit of justice, effectively reclaiming the agency that trauma had erased. This research concludes that while war trauma remains an irreversible 'scar,' the strategic integration of social and spiritual resources allows for a cohesive reconstruction of the self. In the end, Yun Ling does not merely survive the past; she successfully re-authorizes her future, ensuring that the 'spirit' of the lost becomes the foundation for a life of purpose and justice."

References

- Ai, A. L., Pargament, K. I., Kronfol, Z., & Tice, T. N. (2010). Spiritual and social resources as predictors of health outcomes among survivors of cardiac surgery. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 15(4), 540–551. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105309355331>
- Eng, T. T. (2012). *The garden of evening mists*. Myrmidon.
- Fincham, F. D. (2014). The garden of evening mists: Historical and artistic vision. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 50(3), 302–315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2014.898389>
- Holmes, R. (1995). *The pursuit of happiness: Selections from the diary of Richard Holmes*. (Original work published 1995). [Note: Ensure this matches the edition cited in the novel's epigraph].
- Lepore, S. J., & Evans, G. W. (1996). *Coping with environmental stressors: A handbook of resilience*. Plenum Press.

- Lim, S. G. (2015). Zen and the art of Japanese imperialism in *The Garden of Evening Mists*. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 17(5), 720–735. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2014.993332>
- Pargament, K. I. (2011). *Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: Understanding and addressing the sacred*. Guilford Press.
- Pellano, M. (2016). Nietzschean resentment and the body as history in Tan Twan Eng's fiction. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 57(2), 145–158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2015.1019401>
- Poon, A. (2014). Aestheticizing memory: Postcolonial trauma and the craft of history in *The Garden of Evening Mists*. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 49(2), 231–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989413513063>