

“I Can’t Forget Those Eyes”: Witnessing, Testimony, and the Ethics of Memory in Sewol Ferry Literature

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Abstract—The Sewol Ferry disaster on April 16, 2014, remains a pivotal moment of trauma in South Korea, claiming 304 lives, most of them high school students. Sewol Ferry literature emerges as a powerful medium to process collective grief and preserve the memory of victims, emphasizing the ethical obligation to never forget. Through the recurring motif of "eyes," literature portrays survivors' moral duty to bear witness to the tragedy, transforming personal trauma into collective responsibility for justice. Tak-hwan Kim's works, such as *It's a Lie*, *The Beautiful One is Human* capture the profound psychological toll on divers and victims' families, shedding light on societal failures and calls for accountability. His narratives intertwine testimony, memory, and inquiry to critique systemic negligence. By blending human stories with ethical imperatives, Sewol Ferry literature transcends historical documentation, urging readers to engage in moral reckoning and sustaining the victims' voices against societal amnesia.

Keywords—Ethical memory, eyes, Sewol Ferry disaster, Witnessing

I. INTRODUCTION

How does Sewol Ferry literature construct ethical memory and cultivate social responsibility in the wake of South Korea's most traumatic peacetime tragedy? On April 16, 2014, the Sewol Ferry disaster claimed 304 lives, primarily high school students, marking a profound scar on Korean society. Beyond the immediate grief and anger fueled by revelations of regulatory failures, corruption, and inadequate safety measures, the tragedy ignited a national introspection into ethical accountability. In this environment, literature emerged as a crucial medium for processing trauma, preserving the memory of the lost, and advocating for justice. Sewol Ferry literature, therefore, functions as an ethical instrument against collective amnesia, offering a unique lens through which to examine individual and communal moral duties.

This study delves into the representation of trauma and the construction of ethical memory in selected Sewol Ferry narratives, specifically analyzing the recurring motif of 'eyes' to reveal how these literary works reinforce the moral imperative to remember and seek accountability.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: WITNESSING AND MEMORY

The theoretical distinction between "eye-witnessing" and "bearing witness," as articulated by John Durham Peters, serves as the foundation for analyzing Sewol Ferry-related literary works. While passive eye-witnessing denotes a sensory act of observing events, bearing witness involves active engagement in narrating experiences and contributing ethically to societal accountability (Peters, 2001, 708). Literature rooted in this framework transcends simple documentation, evolving into a platform for ethical testimony and moral confrontation.

Sewol Ferry literature thus operates within the paradigm of cultural trauma and ethical memory. Testimonial narratives intertwine individual grief with national memory, creating vessels for preserving the truth against political erasure. These literary works ask readers to shift from passive observation toward an active, ethical engagement with the tragedy. The recurring motif of "eyes" and "seeing" underscores this transformation, symbolizing the responsibility of the survivors and society to honor the memories of the victims through moral vigilance.

Additionally, critical perspectives on witnessing highlight its historical role in martyrdom, wherein the term "witness" denotes a willingness to sacrifice individual identity for collective ethical truth. This intersection between witnessing and sacrifice informs the ways Sewol literature frames ethical responsibility as a communal endeavor rather than individual obligation.

III. LITERARY APPROACHES TO THE SEWOL FERRY TRAGEDY

Sewol Ferry literature engages with the tragedy through two predominant narrative strategies identified by Jeong-Soo Son: direct representation and allegorical storytelling. While differing in form and scope, both approaches converge on highlighting ethical accountability within a fractured social fabric. Direct representation reconstructs the Sewol disaster with granular, precise details, embedding real-life testimonies into fictional narratives. These works delve deeply into the personal and structural realities of the incident. Chronicling survivors' raw emotions and systemic failures within these direct representational formats ensures that the truth remains unforgotten, resisting historical erasure while urging readers to engage in ethical remembrance. On the other hand, allegorical storytelling employs metaphorical strategies to explore

broader socio-political implications. These narratives critique societal indifference and interrogate grief's ripple effects, transcending the specifics of the Sewol incident while illuminating profound ethical and human truths (Son, 2017).

IV. TAK-HWAN KIM'S LITERARY RESPONSE TO THE SEWOL TRAGEDY.

Following the Sewol disaster, Tak-hwan Kim underwent what literary critic Myeong-In Kim described as a "leap of self-devotion," (M. Kim, 2017) transforming his literary focus to directly confront this national tragedy. His works represent the enduring impact of witnessing trauma through the symbolic use of "eyes" as a motif. The eyes serve as a haunting embodiment of the survivors' experiences, reflecting the deep moral and emotional implications of bearing witness to such a tragedy.

Many references underscore his commitment to using literature as a conduit for survival, testimony, and ongoing moral engagement. In critically capturing the divers' experiences, the motif of "eyes" encapsulates the enduring psychological effects of witnessing trauma. Through such vivid depictions, his novels reinforce the profound obligation to remember and the relentless demand for truth and justice. The phrase "The driving force that pushes me to a new end is those eyes." (T. Kim, 2017, p.17) thus resonates throughout his narratives, embodying the interplay of human empathy, moral duty, and collective memory.

A. *It's a Lie : Chronicling the Divers' Trauma*

It's a Lie by Tak-hwan Kim is a work of literary reportage that confronts the Sewol Ferry tragedy through the voices of those directly and indirectly affected. Rather than relying on fictional invention, the novel is based on firsthand interviews, field research, and real-life encounters, which are then carefully restructured into a literary narrative. This reportage-style approach allows the work to bridge the realms of testimony and fiction, producing a powerful, ethical account of collective trauma. The novel introduces a wide range of characters—surviving students, teachers of the deceased, bereaved family members, lawyers, journalists, divers, government officials, and more—offering a multi-faceted exploration of the tragedy's emotional and social impact. Among them, Kyung-Soo Na embodies the trauma of survival. Following the unexplained sinking of a large passenger ferry, professional diver Na was urgently contacted by a fellow diver requesting assistance. Due to a severe shortage of personnel capable of entering the sunken vessel's interior, Na voluntarily participated in the recovery efforts. He descended into the submerged, claustrophobic corridors of the ship, where he encountered the tragic remains of young victims whose deaths occurred without clear cause or comprehension. Despite repeatedly entering the wreckage at great personal physical and psychological cost, Na soon faced public backlash. Rumors circulated that he had received 5 million KRW per recovered body, and his colleague, diver Chang-Dae Ryu, was indicted on charges of involuntary manslaughter. In the wake of these developments, both Na and his fellow divers were vilified as profiteers, accused of descending upon the Maenggol Channel for monetary gain. This narrative raises

critical questions: Why did these divers voluntarily commit themselves to such a perilous task in the absence of any official summons? What series of events unfolded for them from the depths of the ocean, through hospital wards, and eventually into the judicial system?

The author himself shares a similar burden. Reflecting on the difficulty of transforming the testimonies into literature, Kim writes, "Each voice was like a galaxy billions of light years away, separated by dark matter." (T. Kim, 2016, p.368) This metaphor illustrates not only the emotional distance but also the immense responsibility and impossibility of fully capturing the weight of such grief. By adopting the format of reportage fiction, Kim transforms testimony into narrative, creating a space where the unheard can finally be acknowledged. *It's a Lie* is more than a novel—it is an act of literary mourning, an ethical commitment to remember, and a resistance against silence and erasure. Through this work, Kim affirms that literature can serve as both witness and shelter for truth.

B. *The Beautiful One is Human : Honoring Stories that Refuse to Sink*

"In the eyes, not only emotions but also stories are condensed." (T. Kim, 2017, p.18) Kim listened to and wrote about the stories of individuals connected to the Sewol Ferry tragedy—bereaved family members, survivors, divers, social activists, investigators, photographers, and others. His aim was not only to convey their pain, but also to reveal the unique beauty of their souls. The short story collection *The Beautiful One is Human* consists of eight narratives that grew out of Kim's encounters with these people.

For example, let us take a look at the first short story, *Eyes*. A civilian survivor who had locked eyes with a schoolgirl standing on the railing of the quickly tilting ship was unable to save her and never forgot her gaze, which remained in his own eyes. Later, at a temple, he encounters a middle-aged woman with eyes exactly like the girl's and begins following her. When the puzzled woman questions him, he says that on April 16, on that ship, he had met a girl with the exact same eyes as hers. The woman takes him to her home, to her daughter's room, and shows him photos to confirm whether the girl truly had the same gaze. Falling to his knees, he begs her to forgive him for not being able to save the girl back then. The woman, however, comforts him instead, thanking him for coming such a long way to tell her about the final moments of her only daughter.

It is a literary achievement born from the collision between Kim's narrative sensibility and the ontological shock brought by the disaster. By focusing on the human dimension of the tragedy, Kim creates a space for their voices and preserves their lived experiences. The title itself signals his humanistic approach, emphasizing the dignity and value of each life lost. The work serves as both memorial and testimony—an ethical imperative to remember. In doing so, Kim resists the tendency to reduce victims to statistics or political symbols, and instead restores their individuality, ensuring each story is remembered not as a number, but as a life.

C. Ethical Restoration and Memory Preservation

Perhaps the most profound aspect of Tak-Hwan Kim's post-Sewol writings is their contribution to ethical restoration through memory preservation. His works establish literature as a site of remembrance, ensuring that the victims are not forgotten as public attention inevitably shifts to new concerns. Eight years after the disaster, Kim's writing continues to serve as a memorial to the victims and a reminder of unresolved questions about accountability.

The ethical dimension of Kim's work is evident in his portrayal of the continued quest for truth and justice. As investigations have revealed, the Sewol ferry was carrying 2,214 tons of cargo—far exceeding its licensed limit of 987 tons—when it sank. Kim's narratives reinforce the message that 'if the vessel's operators had considered safety instead of profiting from the vessel's alterations; if they had properly secured the vessel's cargo; if they had closed the water-tight doors and manholes; if the crews and captain had been properly trained to respond to emergencies—we could have saved the lives of 304 people'.

D. Literary Techniques in Kim's Sewol Narratives

Tak-Hwan Kim employs various literary techniques to convey the complex realities of the Sewol disaster and its aftermath. His approach often blends journalistic reporting with fictional narrative, creating what might be termed "documentary fiction". This hybrid form allows him to incorporate factual details while also exploring the emotional and psychological dimensions of the tragedy.

In *It's a Lie*, Kim adopts a structure akin to reportage, providing an unflinching examination of the divers' struggles. Yet he moves beyond mere documentation to explore the ethical implications of witnessing such trauma. His narrative style in *The Beautiful One is Human* intertwines multiple voices and perspectives, creating a polyphonic account that reflects the complexity of collective grief.

His works stand as an artistic response to tragedy that transcends mere storytelling to become a form of ethical witnessing. As a committed writer who draws his themes from Korean history to denounce injustices and call for civic action, Kim continues to exemplify the potential for literature to serve as a catalyst for social change. His post-Sewol writings demonstrate how literary art can navigate the ethical complexities of representing trauma while honoring the experiences of those most directly affected.

V. THE ETHICS OF MEMORY IN LITERARY WITNESSING

Sewol Ferry literature deeply explores the ethics of memory through the lens of all those who witnessed the tragedy through the media, as well as the survivors, positioning them as central figures in bearing witness to the event. These narratives highlight the immense burden carried by those who lived through the disaster, emphasizing their transformation into ethical witnesses entrusted with preserving the memory of the victims. This ethical responsibility is intertwined with their personal struggles to cope with grief, guilt, and the trauma of witnessing such a profound loss.

The eyes are often depicted as haunted by the memories of those who perished, creating a powerful motif of enduring

trauma. In Sang-Ryul Park's short story *Eyes*, the testimony, "I cannot forget those eyes that looked at me so desperately that day" (Park, 2019, p. 83), encapsulates this burden. Similarly, Tak-Hwan Kim's narratives insist upon the haunting refrain of "the eyes," revealing the weight of memory left upon the survivors. As Park and Kim convey through their vivid storytelling, those gazes embedded in our minds emphasize the moral imperative to confront and share the weight of these memories.

The act of remembering becomes an ethical duty, illustrating how personal grief transforms into a demand for justice and accountability. The haunting image of the victims' eyes serves as a constant reminder of the survivors' responsibility to ensure that the tragedy is never forgotten and that those responsible are held accountable. The recurring phrase "I cannot forget those eyes" underscores the survivors' ethical reflection, symbolizing the transformation of personal trauma into a profound and universal moral obligation.

VI. CONCLUSION: LITERATURE AS ETHICAL MEMORY AND ACTIVE RESISTANCE

Sewol ferry disaster remains an enduring cultural trauma that transcends the bounds of a singular national tragedy. Korean literature has responded to this rupture not merely by recording grief, but by transforming sorrow into a critical ethical practice—one that insists on memory against silence, and on justice against forgetfulness.

Through the intertwined aesthetics of testimony and mourning, literary works create a space where collective memory is not only preserved but activated as a force of resistance. In bearing witness to the unhealed wounds of the Sewol generation, literature becomes a moral agent, confronting the failures of state and society while envisioning a more accountable and humane future.

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Jeong-Ae Park was born in 1970 in Cheongdo County, Gyeongsangbuk-do, South Korea. She earned a Bachelor's degree in Media Communication from Seoul National University in 1998, a Master's degree in the Department of Korean Language and Literature at the same university, and a Ph.D. in Korean Literature from Inha University. Her major field of study is Korean literature and Creative Writing.

She began her literary career in 1998 through the New Authors Contest by *Monthly Literature and Thought* and quickly gained recognition for reshaping feminist literature in South Korea. She has worked as a professor at Kangwon National University since 2003, where she continues to teach while actively writing. In 2001, she published the novel *Words of Water*,

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Currently, Prof. Park resides in Chuncheon, where she continues to teaching at Kangwon National University and remains a passionate storyteller who aims to inspire life and renewal through her works.