

Embodied Memories of War: A Cognitive Feminist Reading of Yan Geling's *The Flowers of War*

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Abstract This paper examines Yan Geling's *The Flowers of War* through a cognitive-feminist framework to explore how the Nanjing Massacre is represented as an embodied female experience, not only as a military event. The novel places trauma within an American Catholic church where schoolgirls and prostitutes seek refuge, foregrounding the female body as both target of violence and medium of resistance. The prostitutes' self-sacrifice reframes heroism through gendered vulnerability, shifting memory of war from national narrative to intimate corporeality. Drawing on cognitive narratology (Herman 2013), grounded cognition (Barsalou 2008), and reader-response theory (Iser 1978), the analysis shows how sensory details, bodily imagery, the church as anticipatory anchor, and fragmented temporality shape the representation of trauma. As a result, memory takes on vivid, affective, and visceral dimensions. By integrating trauma research that foregrounds the sensory registration of experience (van der Kolk 2014) with feminist trauma studies (Osborne-Crowley 2021; Caruth 1996), this article argues that the novel's depiction of embodied knowledge and gendered vulnerability displaces conventional war narratives, reframing trauma as a situated, corporeal mode of agency. Ultimately, the novel's transnational circulation enables a cross-cultural engagement with WWII, mediated through the reader's embodied apprehension of women's experience of violence.

Keywords grounded cognition; cognitive narratology; reader-response; female embodiment; Nanjing Massacre.

1. Introduction

Yan Geling 严歌苓 (b. 1958) is a leading Chinese writer whose works interrogate the intersections of female subjectivity, embodied history, memory, and violence. Across her fiction, from *Lost Daughter of Happiness* and *The Secret Talker* to *The Flowers of War*, Yan Geling uses an omniscient yet tightly focalised narrative voice, one that renders experience at a microscopic, bodily level. Small gestures and reactions, moments when a character has just “flinched a little” (Yan 2021: 2), repeatedly foreground the fact that every bit of emotion is registered in bodily sensations. Her novel *The Flowers of War* (*Jinling shisan*

chai 金陵十三钗), set during the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, reframes wartime trauma not only through scenes of military brutality but through the embodied experiences of women, whose bodies become both sites of vulnerability and means of resistance and protection. The novel follows a group of schoolgirls and several prostitutes who seek refuge in an American Catholic church, where the adult women ultimately choose an extreme act of self-sacrifice to safeguard the girls, none older than fourteen. As in her other works, Yan Geling employs a direct, image-driven prose style, and enters in *medias res*, describing a scene internally focalised through a young girl's body rather than through macro-historical reference. Thus, the novel begins with intimacy and vulnerability, while historical trauma emerges obliquely, primarily through embodied perception and less through direct exposition. History is filtered through sensory perception and enclosed space: "Buildings all over Nanking were burning and light from the flames filtered through the blackout curtains that covered the small oval attic windows. Orange patterns rippled across the room" (Yan 2012: 1–2).

The novel briefly invokes Minnie Vautrin (1886–1941), the American missionary whose diary documented her efforts to shelter thousands of women and children at Ginling College during the massacre. Although not developed as a full character, her presence provides a moral anchor and a documentary frame, linking Yan's fictional reconstruction to the embodied experiences of women who survived the atrocities.

The Nanjing Massacre (*Nanjing Datusha* 南京大屠杀) remains one of the most painful collective traumas in China's cultural memory, continually reactivated in public discourse, education, and state-sponsored memory practices. As journalist Wang Fan observes in a recent BBC report (2025), the memory of the massacre persists through commemorations, documentaries, and a prolific visual-literary culture.

The Nanjing Massacre has been extensively studied by historians, journalists, and cultural critics, whose works have shaped a broad international discourse on violence, history, political interests, memory, and trauma (Fogel 2000; Berry 2008; Yoshida 2009; Denton 2014). As Berry argues in *A History of Pain*, alongside the persistent demand for proof driven by political and ideological interests, the massacre has generated numerous films and literary works that play a crucial role in mediating collective memory and shaping how the history of the massacre is publicly understood. In the Anglophone world, the revival of public memory surrounding the massacre is often associated with Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*

(first published in 1997; cited here from the 1998 edition), whose foreword by William C. Kirby underscores the book's corrective function against Western historiography. Yan Geling's novel expands this cultural memory beyond nationalist or documentary frameworks, mainly by reframing the violence through gendered embodiment and situated cognition.

Existing scholarship has approached *The Flowers of War* through several recurring frameworks. However, the body of research remains relatively recent, fragmented, and marked by very diverse methodologies. One influential article analyses the novel within historiographic and metacritical debates, examining the relationship between history, narrative form, and postmodern historiography (Matthews 2016). Other studies focus on memory, trauma, and postmemory, treating the Nanjing Massacre as a mediated historical trauma negotiated between personal memory and grand historical narratives, sometimes within a comparative literature lens (Wu 2023). A substantial part of the scholarship adopts gender perspectives and feminist theories, focusing on prostitutes and schoolgirls who become figures of sacrifice, marginalization, redemption, and national identity (Yang 2015; Li 2022; Sun & Yu 2023; Liao 2025). Some studies use psychoanalytic, archetypal, or ethical approaches (Wu 2024), while others emphasize religious symbolism and the meanings of violence, reading the novel through Christian ethics, scapegoat imagery, or Girardian theories of violence and witnessing (Zhang 2017; Hwang 2018). Finally, several studies focus on adaptation, comparison, translation, and global circulation (Agurruza 2016; Jiang 2024; Zhang 2024), showing how cinematic adaptation and English translation reshape the novel for international audiences.

Due to the limited accessibility of Chinese-language scholarship, following Yan Geling's erasure from the Chinese Internet, this overview focuses primarily on studies available in international academic databases.

While the approaches mentioned above have shed light on the novel's historical, ideological, and symbolic dimensions, they tend to remain mostly focused on the text itself (its representations and dominant themes) or the author and her transnational identity. Far less attention has been paid to the role of the reader and to the cognitive and affective processes through which traumatic experience is produced, lived, and negotiated in the act of reading. Moving away from these frameworks, the present article foregrounds the reader and the reception of narrative trauma. Drawing on grounded cognition, cognitive narratology, feminist trauma theory, and reader-response perspectives on the implied reader, this article examines how *The Flowers of War* represents

trauma as a gendered, embodied experience, activated through narrative techniques that engage the reader in sensory and emotional simulation. I argue that this approach enables readers to experience trauma from within female experience, foregrounding forms of female agency even under conditions of extreme violence and limited choice.

The analysis is based on Nicky Harman's English translation of *The Flowers of War* (Other Press, 2012), as the article is concerned with how trauma is produced through narrative cues, sensory details, and readerly participation in the version through which anglophone readers encounter the novel. Nicky Harman is a well-established and award-winning translator of contemporary Chinese literature and has also contributed significantly to its promotion in English through her work with Paper Republic. She has translated works by several major women writers, including Yan Geling.

2. Readerly Construction of Trauma

2.1 Narrative Perspective and Storyworld Construction

The novel's portrayal of trauma depends on sensory perception, spatial affordances, and shifts in narrative perspective that invite readers to actively construct the experience of fear, anticipation, and vulnerability. The novel depicts a traumatic event anchored in collective memory, and its very structure reflects this collective dimension. However, several characters stand out through their individuality. The narrative thus also performs a recovery of the individual, even if in fragmentary and economical ways. By following the trajectories of characters such as Shujuan, Zhao Yumo, Cardamom, and Fabio both forward and backward in time, Yan Geling shifts the scope of war from the collective sphere into the personal and explicitly feminine, embodied one.

For Wolfgang Iser, the meaning of a literary text is not hidden content but an effect that emerges through the interaction between text and reader. The text functions as a "potential effect" realized through the reader's cognitive and imaginative activity, making reading a process of anticipation, frustration, and continual adjustment of understanding (1978: ix–xi, 4–5). This is particularly relevant to *The Flowers of War*, where violence is rarely presented frontally and traumatic meaning emerges through delay, suspense, and sensory detail, requiring the reader's active participation in its construction. In this way, Yan Geling moves away from nationalist or melodramatic representations of war

and foregrounds narrative strategies that draw attention to its embodied, affective, and gendered dimensions.

According to David Herman (2013), readers do not simply decode narratives but build *storyworlds* or mental worlds populated with characters, places, and events, using cognitive structures such as *scripts*, which encode expectations about typical event sequences, and *frames*, which organize spatial and situational understanding even when texts give little information.

Deictic shift theory further shows that reading involves continual changes of mental “vantage point,” as readers move from their own perspective into that suggested by the text, whether that of the narrator, a character, or other viewpoints. The storyworld is therefore not fixed but constantly reorganized according to the cognitive position adopted. A related mechanism is Emmott’s (1997, qtd. in Herman 2013) concept of *contextual frames*, which suggests that readers maintain an active spatiotemporal representation of the scene even when the text does not restate it explicitly. These frames function as anchors for the action, allowing readers to track events and recognize contextual shifts.

In his overview of cognitive narratology, Herman draws on earlier work by scholars such as Dorrit Cohn (1978, qtd. in Herman 2013), who argues that the representation of consciousness in narrative is not conveyed solely through the verbal reproduction of inner thoughts. Building on this line of thought, Alan Palmer (2004, qtd. in Herman 2013) shows that readers infer characters’ minds through a wide range of cues, including perceptions, dispositions, intentions, and gestures. During reading, they do not simply follow inner speech but reconstruct how characters perceive and orient themselves in their environment, as well as how they respond to other minds.

While Herman describes how readers organize fictional worlds through scripts, frames, and contextual cues, Lisa Zunshine shows that such cognitive mechanisms are also involved in acts of mind reading. Drawing on Theory of Mind (ToM), originally defined by Premack and Woodruff (1978) as the cognitive capacity to attribute invisible mental states to oneself and others, understood as a system of inferences enabling the prediction of behaviour (515), Zunshine argues that readers automatically infer characters’ “thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires” even when textual cues are minimal (30). In fiction, this means that even when explicit thoughts are absent, readers complete mental states from behavioural, discursive, or affective cues.

Drawing on Stearns’s (1995) concept of emotionology, defined as the set of culturally sanctioned norms that determine which feelings are valued or suppressed within a community, Herman (2013) shows how different genres

operate through recognizable emotional scenarios that help structure readers' affective interpretation of events. Narratives rely on emotional norms but can also challenge them, offering alternative ways of understanding emotional experience.

Beyond interpreting characters' minds, actions, and emotions, we also need to consider how these interpretations are made possible through the text, and how the text itself guides the reader toward them. In Iser's terms, the text does not present a fully accessible world but only a "limited availability" of information, since readers can never hold the whole narrative in view at once (1978: 16–17). Meaning thus emerges through the reader's activity, guided by what Iser calls the *implied reader*, a reading role prestructured by the text itself. The implied reader is a textual construct embodying the predispositions necessary for the text to produce its effects (34–35). The fictional world appears only in partial form and must be assembled through what Iser calls textual *blanks* and *negations*. The blanks leave the connections between perspectives open, making the reader coordinate them, while negations invoke familiar elements only to cancel them out, thereby modifying the reader's expectations and attitude toward the text (169–170).

In *The Flowers of War*, the fragmentary narrative, the lack of a totalizing perspective on Nanjing, and the focus on young and vulnerable characters such as Shujuan create precisely this sense of "limited availability" for the reader. Violence is seldom presented directly; yet it accumulates through absence and fragmentation: silences, ellipses, tense anticipation, repeated preparations for imminent danger, fleeting images of corpses, wounds, burning buildings, second-hand testimonies from soldiers, atrocious photographs, and survivors' accounts. Without a continuous narrative representation of the massacre, these narrative gaps activate the frames and scripts described by Herman, as well as Iser's open connections, making the reader fill textual silences with cognitive and affective inferences. The result is an intensified perception of trauma within the narrative, produced not through explicit depiction but through the reader's active participation in meaning construction.

One of the most persistent contextual frames in the novel is the church itself, which works at the macro level of the novel as a cognitive and embodied anchor. In a city where everything has collapsed, it becomes a fixed point that helps both characters and the reader orient themselves. The church activates a basic, yet powerful opposition: inside versus outside, shelter versus exposure, prayer versus violence. This spatial contrast stabilizes the storyworld in the middle of the chaos. The church organizes expectations: every sound,

movement, or interruption is interpreted in relation to the possibility of invasion. Although stable, this frame intensifies anticipation, because the reader must continuously evaluate how close danger is to getting inside.

The novel also constructs time in a fragmented manner. The story does not move in a straight line. Most of it remains in a tense present inside the church, but when a new character appears, the narrative briefly slips into the past to show who that person was and what kind of life they once imagined. Towards the end, the novel concludes with a short glimpse into the future, after the massacre. From a cognitive narratology perspective, this reflects how readers actually build a storyworld: not chronologically, but piece by piece, as new information becomes relevant.

The narrative also relies on readers' ToM capacities. Characters' inner states are often inferred from gestures and reactions, not merely through explicit introspection. Small bodily cues, such as Zhao Yumo's glances, Father Engelmann's hesitations, Father Fabio's flinches, or sudden silence invite the reader to reconstruct fear, shame, moral conflict, and determination. This activates the reader's capacity to attribute thoughts and emotions to the characters, intensifying the sense of embodied vulnerability.

One such moment occurs when Father Fabio finds himself increasingly destabilised by Zhao Yumo's presence, at once bodily, emotionally, with broader implications for his moral authority as well (Yan 2012: 39, 42–43). Yumo's body, especially her expressive eyes, triggers thoughts and sensations he had not anticipated, unsettling his sense of control. Her ability to read his reactions allows her to recognise the influence she has over him and the subtle power it gives her. This perceptiveness enables her and the other "sisters" to see him as a potential ally. Her beauty, combined with her dignified and composed demeanour, intensifies this dynamic. Nonetheless, when the Japanese soldiers return to seize the girls, Father Fabio declares that as long as he is alive, he will fight to protect them and stop the Japanese from taking them (233). Moments like these draw the reader into an embodied mode of perception that becomes central to the novel's representation of trauma.

2.2 Embodied Simulation and Narrative Perception

Embodied and grounded cognition argue that thinking does not rely on abstract, amodal symbols, but on the simulation of previously lived sensory, motor, and affective experiences (Barsalou 2008: 618). In his Perceptual Symbol System theory (PSS), Barsalou explains that cognition is implemented

through simulators, conceptual structures that “capture multimodal states and simulate them later” (622), allowing past experience to be reactivated when “knowledge is needed” (618).

In chapter seventeen, the moment when the girls and the prostitutes learn that the Japanese demand the schoolgirls for the Christmas “party” is first registered at the level of the body, before it becomes fully understood. The girls understand that something dangerous is about to happen, yet their reactions reveal confusion, denial, emotional overflow, and a form of uncertainty which amplifies the fear. Their responses erupt into insults, panic, and physical aggression, a chaotic outburst without a clear target. One of the girls, described as coming “from the countryside near Anqing” (Yan 2012: 226), clings to fragile hopes of finding flowers and food at the Japanese quarters, or even returning home after the party. Her attempt at reassurance is dismissed by the other girls, and the narrative briefly marks her as a “fool” (225), turning her into a scapegoat for the others’ rising terror. Denial becomes a desperate coping mechanism, and the violence remains pre-conceptual, experienced through bodily tension and contact with others in the confined space.

In contrast, the prostitutes respond with striking calm. Their blunt, pragmatic language reveals a different relationship to violence, shaped by prior experience. Instead of panic, they impose order, silencing the girls’ insults and restoring a fragile sense of normality. Zhao Yumo’s scolding voice resembles that of a tired mother or a strict class monitor, grounding the scene in everyday gestures rather than hysteria (227–228). The contrast reveals how danger is embodied differently depending on lived experience. Trauma thus appears first as a bodily and affective response, structured by experience, before it becomes a conscious understanding of what is at stake.

In grounded cognition, perception is an active, reconstructive process. As the experiments cited by Barsalou show, the brain combines present stimuli with traces of past experience, completing patterns, anticipating possible actions and responses, or even distorting what is perceived (2008: 624). In the novel, spatial perception follows a similar logic: danger is largely anticipated as coming from the front, refuge is imagined behind the protective walls, while lateral space remains an uncertain, unreadable territory. In this sense, the body shapes not only emotion and strategy but also organizes space according to possible actions, showing that perception under threat becomes a sensorimotor predictor, not a form of abstract reasoning. Characters’ bodily memories reactivate entire war scenarios from a single cue. One telling example is the scene in which the warning that Japanese soldiers are approaching on

horseback, soon followed by the actual sound of cavalry outside the church, immediately produces defensive reflexes, fear, and heightened alertness among those inside (77–79). A sound, a gesture or a glimpse is enough to reactivate internalized patterns of violence and masculine power, setting off responses such as self-protection, negotiation, manipulation, and solidarity.

The same logic applies not only to the characters' perception, but also to the reader's experience of narrative. Simulations can occur automatically during reading. When a text describes an action, the brain activates motor and affective systems as if the reader's own body were preparing for action (Barsalou 2008: 628–629). In narrative contexts, this can enable readers to "see" a scene from a specific point in the narrative space, sometimes even from the focal character's position.

The novel opens with a scene that introduces one of its major themes and offers a clear example of embodied simulation for the reader: the female body as a site of transition, vulnerability and knowledge: "Then she noticed a warm stain on her cotton nightgown. She stood barefoot and dazed. Blood. The wetness quickly turned icy cold. So, it had finally happened to her, as it does to every woman" (Yan 2012: 1). Menstruation becomes a boundary between girls and women; it marks a shift in perspective: between the girls in the attic and the women who will later occupy the cellar lies a spatial, moral, and cognitive divide. The moment of blood signals her transition out of protected childhood into embodied womanhood, where vulnerability and perception become inseparable. From an embodied cognition perspective, the body itself becomes a source of information, altering how Shujuan perceives danger and her own position in the world. At the same time, this echoes Osborne-Crowley's account of the body moving from something incidental to something seen, judged, and sexualized by others, a source of shame and unease (2021: 23–24). In the scene, she senses her body transformed into "fertile soil... where any demon could implant a seed" (Yan 2012: 5), revealing an immediate association between menstruation, sexual vulnerability, and real danger. Her body is the first to inform her, signalling that she now belongs to a newly exposed category during wartime, even before the Japanese soldiers arrive.

Perspectives on menstruation have varied across cultures, but a shared idea is the tension surrounding the visibility of the female body. Chris Bobel notes that menstruation often produces anxieties about bodily exposure (2010: 31). In the Chinese context, menstruation must be concealed in order to comply with long-established moral expectations that have encouraged women to adopt restraint and control over their own bodies. Shujuan's reaction in the novel

follows this same logic. Her immediate concern is to hide the stain and manage her body discreetly, especially since she was instructed not to leave the attic, to remain unseen and unheard (Yan 2012: 2). Menstruation thus places her in a doubly vulnerable position: it marks her entrance into womanhood and, at the same time, threatens to make her visible at a moment when visibility means danger.

At the same time, Shujuan begins to stand apart from the other girls' naiveté: she repeatedly breaks the attic rules, observes the women in secret (32–37), and forms her own judgements. Her relation to Xiaoyu is also more ambivalent, shaped by attachment, pride, rivalry, and the uneasy possibility of dependence. This growing distance from Xiaoyu (80, 160–161) culminates in her refusal to beg for rescue when Xiaoyu is given the power to choose who will leave with her father. Even though she feels humiliated and inwardly desperate, she refuses to submit herself to Xiaoyu's superior position (172–173). These small transgressions suggest an early autonomy, still fragile and mixed with insecurity, as well as the formation of an embodied moral awareness.

The spatial arrangement of the prostitutes and the schoolgirls in the same building, but in two distinct spaces, creates two separate modes of perceiving and interpreting the war. The schoolgirls, protected and suspended above the scenes of violence, experience the war indirectly, through rumours, prohibitions, and filtered impressions of the burning city outside. Their agency remains minimal, and fear becomes their primary mode of orientation, reinforced by their naive social games and limited knowledge. Therefore, the novel marks a powerful contrast between two forms of embodiment and two epistemologies of war: one innocent and sheltered, the other shaped by lived experience. The physical separation between attic and cellar becomes a cognitive separation: the girls cannot know because they have not seen, while the women know how to read the environment because their bodies have been trained through repeated exposure to violence. Cardamom's reaction after the beating illustrates this point. Instead of collapsing in fear, she declares that she has endured beatings since childhood, and that the girls' blows are insignificant by comparison (61). Violence is already part of her lived bodily experience, shaping her ability to endure pain and read hostile situations. By contrast, her tender care for the dying soldier, and her decision to repair her *pipa* to offer him one final beautiful song (169), reveal another form of embodied knowledge: compassion learned through hardship.

This constant contrast also has consequences at the level of reading. It resonates with Lisa Zunshine's perspective on source-monitoring, a key socio-

cognitive mechanism through which readers track information in a narrative (2006: 30–31). In *The Flowers of War*, scenes of violence, fear, and protection are filtered through multiple voices (schoolgirls, prostitutes, soldiers, priests, servants) and through brief temporal shifts that reveal the characters' pasts. As a result, source-monitoring becomes essential for evaluating the status of each claim, tracking who knows what and when, assessing how reliable each piece of information is, and following the suspense and gradual construction of impending trauma.

At the same time, for readers, knowledge emerges not only through source-monitoring, but also through situated interaction between body, environment, and other people (Barsalou 2008: 619). Through repeated interaction with the environment, perceptual, motor, and cognitive systems form stable patterns of response for recurrent situations (attractors), which the system reactivates to meet situational demands and action goals (621–622). Grounded cognition also emphasizes the role of *affordances*, the action possibilities that the environment offers to an embodied agent (Gibson 1979: 127). Anthony Chemero (2009) reframes affordances not as fixed properties of objects but as dynamic relations between an agent's abilities and situational contexts.

In the novel, the prostitutes operate through cognitive and behavioural patterns that, in Barsalou's terms, resemble attractors, which are entrenched action tendencies shaped by experience and activated automatically in high-pressure situations. Their lives have generated efficient responses based on social intelligence, emotional acuity, and rapid context assessment, adapting continuously to an unpredictable environment. They first attempt to enter the American church and obtain shelter (6–11), then negotiate the conditions of their continued stay (38), and finally, after reading Father Engelmann's inability to ask directly for their sacrifice (228–229), decide to replace the schoolgirls (230–234). By the end, they manage to exert affective control within the church: they calm the girls, manage escalating tension, and provide directions when the priests falter (225–234). Even when switching places with the girls to leave with the Japanese soldiers, they must activate internalized action patterns to imitate the girls' posture, gestures, and outward appearance, thus reshaping their own bodies and appearances (233–236).

The prostitutes perceive the affordances of the setting not as fixed properties but as dynamic relations between their abilities and the immediate situation, in Chemero's sense of affordance (2009). They exploit these affordances with skill: identifying vulnerabilities in others, sensing hesitation, reading micro-expressions, and rapidly interpreting surrounding tensions. They

know when to reveal themselves and when to recede, when to provoke, flatter, negotiate, or remain silent. Their responses draw on embodied patterns shaped by experience, which they can rapidly reactivate within extreme constraints. Through this, Yan Geling transforms the figure of the prostitute from a morally marginal presence into a cognitive and ethical agent, showing that survival and protection of others draw upon forms of embodied knowledge that are often overlooked.

This portrayal is not an attempt to idealize the characters; rather, it shows that their cognitive resources are shaped by their bodily and social histories. The novel thus suggests a subtle form of agency grounded in perceptual and relational competencies, reconfiguring the role of female characters within a narrative space otherwise dominated by military force and trauma. In contrast to many war narratives in which women are rendered passive or purely vulnerable, Yan Geling attributes to the prostitutes a form of situated intelligence that turns them into active participants in a world where every option involves violence and where their strategies offer the only meaningful chance of survival.

3. Female Agency, Moral Reversal, and Cultural Trauma

3.1 Embodied Trauma and the Work of Shame

If the mechanisms discussed above explain how readers generally construct meaning, perspective, and emotion during reading, traumatic narratives create a powerful disturbance in these processes.

In trauma studies, Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) remains foundational, even though its psychoanalytic model is no longer empirically adequate. Its relevance for literary analysis lies in the insight that trauma manifests through recognizable narrative effects. Drawing on Freud's notion of "repetition compulsion" and illustrated through her rereading of Torquato Tasso's tale of Tancred and Clorinda, Caruth defines trauma as an event not fully registered at the moment of violence, which reappears belatedly in intrusive images, scenes, or dreams. Formally, Caruth identifies trauma in narrative through ruptures, repetitions, fractures, compulsive returns, overlapping voices, and ghostly images, in other words traces of tension between what can be known and what remains inaccessible. Literature becomes a site where trauma is perceived not through

direct representations but through the fragmentary effects of language that reveal a delayed truth (1996: 1–9).

In a Caruthian sense, collective trauma in *The Flowers of War* becomes visible in the narrative itself, through rhythmic breaks and constant returns to memories from the characters' former lives. Through these shifts between the present and fragments of the past, Yan Geling constructs a temporal oscillation that simulates key features of traumatic memory. Although the plot is never chaotic, this oscillation creates the impression of a fragmented collective consciousness that operates through reappearances, partial details, and affective snapshots. Memories such as Yumo receiving the scissors after being falsely accused and beaten for stealing them (Yan 2012: 198–199), her sale to the brothel as a child (132), Cardamom's childhood beatings (61), or Fabio's recollection of his parents' death (62) function like the situated perceptual cues discussed by Barsalou. Each recollection is anchored in a sensation, an object, or a bodily gesture; these are not merely biographical episodes but somatically lived traces that shape the way characters perceive and respond to imminent violence. At the same time, the novel maintains continuous suspense: the women's sexual trauma is not shown directly from the beginning but gradually prepared through signs of danger and through what remains afterward: mutilated bodies, horrific photographs, or a single survivor who testifies at the Japanese War Crimes Tribunal in 1946 (245–247). Taken together, this rhythmic and repetitive construction, marked by fractured identities, evokes a form of collective trauma that continues to activate past episodes through embodied pattern completion whenever the present triggers similar perceptual cues.

This narrative dimension of trauma remains important even within a cognitive framework, as it allows us to articulate how disrupted cognitive processes (attention, memory, somatic reactivity) are reflected in the text and shape narrative engagement. However, the underlying mechanism of trauma itself can be approached from a contemporary neuropsychological perspective. Instead of a spectral return of an experience that cannot be known, trauma can be understood as a combination of disrupted modal processes, somatic reactions, and dysfunctions in emotional regulation systems, a model compatible with Barsalou's theories of embodied and perceptual cognition. From this perspective, traumatic traces are stored multimodally, and their reactivation involves both cognitive and bodily responses.

In *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Bessel van der Kolk shows, drawing on contemporary neuroimaging

research, that while the mind may suppress a traumatic event, the body retains it through sensations, pain, and a range of physiological reactions. Emotions do not reside solely in the mind but are distributed throughout the body, and traumatic memory often returns in bodily, sensory, and nonverbal forms that escape rational control (van der Kolk 2014: 53–59). Van der Kolk notes that trauma patients often display physical and emotional difficulties, such as clumsiness, bodily rigidity, awkward gestures, constrained facial expressions, and a general lack of coordinated engagement with their surroundings (38). Beyond painful memories, outbursts of violence, and altered neurochemistry, trauma can reshape identity and trap individuals in a time that no longer moves forward (18–24). Because trauma persists through automatic physical and hormonal responses, healing requires teaching the body that the danger has passed and allowing it to return to the present (32–33).

Osborne-Crowley's *My Body Keeps You Secrets* extends this view by introducing the concept of structural oppression, the ways in which social rules, cultural norms, and institutions produce and sustain injustice that is ultimately inscribed on individual bodies. Shame and silence operate as an invisible force of suffering, often more enduring than the initial traumatic event (2021: 13). Drawing on Lisa Feldman Barrett, Osborne-Crowley argues that emotions are socially constructed: the brain does not “feel” spontaneously but builds emotions from past experiences and cultural norms (13–14). As Osborne-Crowley suggests, emotions are both structural and individual, each new experience carrying traces of the previous ones. She also describes a form of collective, structural shame that enters the body from the outside (through violence, discrimination, social expectations, or institutional authority) and teaches individuals that their bodies or lives are worth less. In response, people develop protective mechanisms to hide what they have been made to perceive as defectiveness or unworthiness (14).

In the novel, this structural shame and bodily devaluation become visible in the way women's bodies are treated as already available to violence under Japanese occupation. As Susan Brownmiller (1975) argues, wartime sexual violence is often validated on the assumption of female bodily availability, a logic causing both fear and power asymmetries. Within this framework, the prostitutes' moments of agency and Zhao Yumo's later testimony at the 1946 War Crimes Tribunal (Yan 2012: 242, 245) acquire greater force. They disrupt the expectation of the passive, violable female body and reframe female embodiment as a site of moral and political authority. This can be seen in the scene where Zhao Yumo comes under the male gaze when the other women ask

her to dance for the wounded Chinese soldiers. Yet as she begins to move, the performance slips away from the audience: she dances less for them and increasingly for herself, transported into her own past and into the memory of her love affair with Zhang Shitiao (124–125, 129–136). The scene points to the tension between objectification and agency: even within a performance demanded by others, her body becomes a site of self-retrieval, the embodied memory briefly overrides her vulnerability.

At the end of the book, Yumo refuses to recognize herself as Zhao Yumo, despite the bodily signs that reveal her identity, suggesting an inability to integrate a traumatized self (243–244). As a survivor of sexual violence, she cannot claim a continuous self. This refusal functions as a protective mechanism consistent with trauma theory: the body reveals what the mind cannot yet fully acknowledge. Yet she still testifies at the 1946 tribunal, embodying a paradoxical position: she cannot reclaim her former self, but she can still transmit the memory of what happened.

As this section has shown, trauma takes shape in the body through neural, somatic, and sensory mechanisms, but the way it is lived in the body is also shaped by social norms and cultural expectations. In Yan Geling's novel, while trauma affects all characters, women bear it doubly: somatically and culturally. It therefore becomes necessary to examine the cultural and moral frameworks that determine how female characters are judged, valued, and constrained in *The Flowers of War*.

3.2 The Female Body as Cultural and Moral Site

Bodily reactions to trauma are never purely individual but shaped by cultural norms that determine what kind of body is considered valuable, shameful, or expendable. These expectations were still strongly shaped by Confucian moral frameworks in early twentieth-century China, where the female body functioned as an emblem of chastity, family honour, and social order. Terms such as *funü* 妇女 (“woman”) and *xian qi liang mu* 贤妻良母 (“virtuous wife and good mother”) preceded the modern notion of *nüxing* 女性 (“female identity” or “womanhood”) which only gained wider cultural circulation in the 1920s. Until then, the female body was understood less as an individual, autonomous entity and more as a symbolic site shaped by collective norms. As a result, female identity was frequently negotiated, contested, or fragmented.

This framework remained influential in Republican China of the 1930s, despite debates over modernity and women's emancipation. Confucian norms

concerning the body, filial piety, and female chastity continued to shape everyday expectations and produce collective, structural shame. These continuities matter for understanding how women in *The Flowers of War* are judged and valued. In the Confucian tradition, the body was not regarded as a private possession, but as something received from one's parents and ancestors, and therefore subject to moral as well as social regulation. More broadly, classical Confucian thought places strong emphasis on bodily conduct and emotion, since uncontrolled impulses were seen as disruptive to both personal virtue and social order. Within this framework, sexualised female bodies, such as the prostitutes in *The Flowers of War*, become markers of disorder and moral failure rather than autonomous subjects.

In the context of trauma, shame, or social pressure, the female body is not merely observed; it is pointed at, judged, and condemned. Yet it can also become a site of resistance. This dynamic appears in Ding Ling's 1941 story *When I Was in Xia Village* (Wo zai Xia cun de shihou 我在霞村的时候), through the character Zhenzhen, a young woman kidnapped and forced to "comfort" Japanese soldiers for five years. Upon returning home, she becomes the target of blame and communal shame. Rumours circulate about how many men she "comforted," whether she contracted disease, and whether she is "unclean," while she herself insists she has not changed much, only that her heart grew "harder" (1995: 151). In the end, she leaves home to pursue an education. Although Ding Ling's story is embedded in nationalist-communist ideology and Zhenzhen becomes a prototype of the "new woman" *xin nüxing* 新女性, the broader moral landscape at the time remains shaped by long-standing cultural norms.

Moral judgement in the novel is constructed primarily through the eyes of the St Mary Magdalene schoolgirls and the two Catholic priests, who embody Christian moral authority. Both Confucian and Catholic moral frameworks operate as forms of "emotionology" (Herman 2013), shaping which feelings, bodies, and behaviours are sanctioned or condemned. These learned moral expectations form the basis for schoolgirls' and priests' reactions to the prostitutes, before any direct interaction takes place. The prostitutes' sudden appearance with "bright satin dressing gown," a "tight cheongsam" (Yan 2012: 7), "baskets, bundles and satin bed quilts from which tumbled hair ribbons, silk stockings and other intimate articles" (11), "silk quilts in impossible pinks and greens" (33) is visually disruptive, vulgar, and chaotic; it also destabilises the symbolic hierarchy that structures the church space as morally pure and culturally superior. Their language ("fucker!" (8), "there's nothing wrong with

my arse, Jade!” “I bet he’d like a bit of it too!” (15)) further disturbs the sanctity of the church, exhausts its already scarce resources, and destabilizes the refined, disciplined world that shelters the girls.

Shujuan’s reaction is particularly revealing of the moral positioning imposed on these women: “She even began to hate herself, now it turned out she had the same body and organs as those women downstairs, and the same cramping pains expelling the same unclean blood from her body” (23). She experiences her shared female corporeality as contamination, feeling ashamed of being like them, as if she committed some sort of sin. Moreover, after seeing these women, she begins to suspect her family loves her less: “How could her parents have left her to witness such a vile scene? It could only be because they were selfish and loved her less than her sister” (11).

Neither priest welcomes the women wholeheartedly. In fact, Father Fabio calls them “animals” (12) and invites George, the cook, to beat them (10). Although they eventually allow them into the compound, their presence remains a source of unease. In fact, they try as much as possible to shield the girls even from seeing them, as if the perception of these women were dangerous. Then spatial separation reinforces this moral boundary: the girls remain in the attic, sheltered from the chaos unfolding in Nanjing, while the women are relegated to the cellar below. This spatial and moral segregation aligns with Mary Douglas’s argument that “dirt offends against order” (2001: 2), meaning that it represents an anomaly that threatens the established structure, disturbs cultural categories, and produces a form of moral shock. After Hongling is struck by mahjong tiles thrown by the schoolgirls, Yumo remarks that “we’ve got no face to lose” and that “we can be beaten and humiliated by anyone at will” (29). In doing so, she makes clear that the prostitutes fully understand the position they occupy in the eyes of others. Their bodies are not only sexualised, but also treated as bodies with less value, less protection, and less right to dignity.

In chapter six, the schoolgirls even physically attack Cardamom, beating her severely (60–61). Shujuan considers throwing hot coals at the women’s faces (122–123), blaming the prostitutes for Ah Gu’s death, since he had gone out to fetch water. After the altercation, the girls appear more disturbed than Cardamom herself, who is covered in blood (61). Their distress is not rooted in physical harm but in a sense of moral violation. Confronting Cardamom’s sexuality and vulgarity inside a space associated with purity, religious discipline, and cultural refinement feels like an intrusion and a form of symbolic pollution in Mary Douglas’s sense of a disruption of cultural boundaries (2001: 3).

The girls also contemplate with a mixture of fear and fascination “the business they did with that secret place between their legs” (Yan 2012: 32), which they associate with sin and wrongdoing. They experience a double consciousness: they judge the prostitutes according to the moral codes they have internalized, yet the resemblances between them destabilize their sense of purity.

Through Shujuan’s and her friend Xiaoyu’s furtive glances, the reader gains access to the cellar world arranged by the prostitutes: their vivid belongings (“their fur, scarves, wraps and brassieres” (34)), their mahjong games, their wine drinking, and their sexually suggestive jokes. The girls assess the women’s beauty through these hidden observations: first Cardamom with her pipa, and then Zhao Yumo, the leader of the group (33–37). Even under wartime conditions, the prostitutes are not reduced to pure vulnerability. Their conduct shows an ability to preserve forms of affective and social life even within violence.

This mixture of fascination, admiration, and moral unease becomes more intense in the case of Zhao Yumo. She is perceived through a complex mixture of allure and moral judgement: she appears distinguished, sharp, intelligent, even arrogant. Most importantly, in the girls’ perception, her greatest quality is that she does not behave like a “shameless slut.” Even her changed clothing, different from what she wore upon arrival, makes her appear “neat and tidy” (36–37), a sign that moral value is inferred from visual cues and bodily behaviour.

Other actors in the novel perceive the prostitutes through very different moral lenses. The Chinese soldiers and even the cook George, who has a brief relationship with Hongling, interact with them without the same anxiety about purity, suggesting a more pragmatic or affective attitude toward their bodies. By contrast, the Japanese soldiers represent the extreme opposite: for them, the female body is stripped of all moral value and reduced to an object of conquest. In this sense, it is the schoolgirls’ and priests’ reactions that most clearly expose how moral shame is culturally constructed and projected onto the female body.

These moral frameworks, which determine how the female body is seen, judged, and valued in *The Flowers of War*, also shape the affective and cognitive logic behind the women’s responses to violence, vulnerability, and sacrifice. The next section examines how embodied trauma comes to function as collective meaning and cultural memory.

3.3 From Embodied Trauma to Cultural Memory

Trauma, van der Kolk argues, leaves traces not only in the psyche of the affected individual but also across families, communities, and sometimes entire generations (2014: 13). In Yan Geling's novel, trauma likewise exceeds the individual suffering: it is constructed gradually, through narrative fragments, sensory cues, and an atmosphere of anticipation, first in the tense moments leading up to violence, and later in its aftermath.

As historian Joshua Fogel (2000) notes, the Nanjing Massacre became central to Chinese identity only in recent decades, not immediately after 1937–1938. Postwar reluctance in China to adopt a victim position, combined with rising nationalism and persistent denial on the part of some Japanese, transformed the event into a key site of collective traumatic memory, especially for the Chinese diaspora seeking a shared identity (2000: 1–3). In this sense, the Nanjing Massacre exemplifies what Jeffrey Alexander (2012) defines as cultural trauma: not an event that is inherently traumatic, but one that is publicly reinterpreted and socially attributed as such, until it becomes a defining moral reference point and a core component of a group's collective identity (13–14).

Yan Geling's novel participates directly in this narrative reconstruction of collective trauma. The massacre is not portrayed simply as a historical event but as a pervasive atmosphere of violence, in which each character carries part of the collective wound in their body. Narrative fragmentation, interwoven memories, and the continuous return to somatic, especially visual, detail transform individual experiences into shared suffering, precisely the process through which cultural trauma is constituted.

This process becomes more visible in the moral reversal that occurs after the prostitutes choose to sacrifice themselves. Initially portrayed as immoral, diseased, or sinful, their final act forces every character who had previously condemned them to reassess this judgement. Their decision to go in place of the schoolgirls becomes an act of radical moral agency. The shift is especially evident in Father Fabio, who had earlier dismissed the women as "animals." Once he learns of their intentions to sacrifice themselves, he firmly opposes the plan and even confronts his superior, Father Engelmann (232–233). His reaction reveals how the prostitutes' decision destabilizes the moral hierarchy that had only days before placed them at the bottom. The experience marks him permanently: after the war, he leaves the church, becomes a teacher, and continues to search for the women who sacrificed themselves (242), unable to forget their moral example.

In analysing how *The Flowers of War* articulates women's embodied trauma in times of military violence, Lucy Britt and Wilson Hammett's theory of trauma as cultural capital offers a useful perspective. They argue that in contemporary public discourse, trauma can be strategically instrumentalized by privileged subjects, reinforcing existing hierarchies and diminishing the trauma of the less powerful (2024: 921–922, 929). Read through this lens, Yan Geling's novel appears to resist the familiar cultural processes that convert trauma into symbolic or political capital. The novel keeps women's suffering anchored in the embodied, rather than abstracting it into national allegory or moral prestige. In this sense, the text foregrounds trauma as testimony rather than cultural currency, preserving its force within a register shaped by female vulnerability, solidarity, and embodied memory.

4. Conclusions

This article has shown that *The Flowers of War* constructs trauma through a narrative mode that draws the reader into its gradual production. One of the central insights of cognitive narratology is that readers do not need full access to a character's inner life in order to understand emotions, fears, and intentions. They infer mental states naturally, from partial cues, gestures, silences, and shifting contexts, and literature offers a particularly powerful space for this kind of participation. Yan Geling's novel makes full use of this capacity. It does not offer a complete or totalizing image of the Nanjing Massacre. Instead, it relies on fragments, small actions, pauses, limited focalization, noises, memories, and shifting perspectives, rather than on direct violence, and in doing so sustains a tense atmosphere of anticipation in which trauma emerges through the act of reading itself.

At the same time, this process is deeply embodied. The novel repeatedly offers small perceptual cues that lead both characters and readers to activate broader scenes of possible danger, fear, or action, especially in relation to female experience. The opening scene centred on menstruation is especially important in this respect: by beginning with a female body in transition, vulnerable yet powerful, the novel establishes from the outset a sensory and intimate mode of perception. The contrast between the schoolgirls in the attic and the prostitutes in the cellar further develops two different forms of embodiment and two different ways of knowing the world. Fear, anticipation, and survival are all registered through the body. Read in this light, the prostitutes become far more than morally stigmatized figures. Their practical,

bodily, and experiential knowledge allows them to read situations quickly, adapt to danger, and judge what remains possible within a violent and tragic environment. Even their final decision is shaped by this kind of situated judgement: they do not simply sacrifice themselves, but assess what is most likely to happen, what can still be done, and what kind of action still carries meaning. This analysis makes especially visible their transformation into agents of practical judgement and moral action. The novel therefore challenges inherited moral codes while also showing how trauma can reshape the body into both a target of violence and a source of action.

This embodied mode of reading clarifies the novel's treatment of trauma. Yan Geling's novel is better understood through approaches that emphasize the body and the social shaping of suffering. Trauma is carried in bodily reactions, shame, silence, and dissociation, while the female body remains burdened by violence as well as by moral judgement. Yet the same body becomes a site of protection, sacrifice, endurance, and testimony. Finally, although the novel gestures toward cultural memory, it does not dissolve women's suffering into abstract symbolism or nationalist rhetoric. Bringing together cognitive narratology, grounded cognition, and feminist trauma theory, this article has proposed a reading of *The Flowers of War* that shifts attention from trauma as representation to trauma as lived and simulated experience. More specifically, it shows how Yan Geling's narrative allows readers to simulate, at both cognitive and affective levels, the embodied reality of women's fear, endurance, and agency in wartime, making gendered suffering, moral complexity, and forms of survival more visible in the process.

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