

EXPLORING THE PROTAGONIST'S SUFFERING IN DENNIS BOCK'S *THE ASH GARDEN*

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Abstract

This research explores the multidimensional suffering of the protagonist, Emiko Amai, in Dennis Bock's novel *The Ash Garden*, using Quilao's theoretical framework on human suffering. Through a descriptive qualitative approach, the study identifies five types of suffering—physical, psychological, social, existential, and ethical—as reflected in Emiko's experiences before, during, and after the Hiroshima bombing. The analysis highlights how Emiko, as a war survivor, embodies the traumatic effects of violence, displacement, and physical disfigurement. Her journey reveals not only the pain and isolation endured in the aftermath of war but also the gradual process of resilience and self-redefinition. Emiko's coping strategies—both physical and psychological—demonstrate how human beings attempt to restore meaning and identity in the face of profound loss. By situating her suffering within a literary and humanistic context, this study contributes to the discourse on trauma narratives and deepens the understanding of war-induced suffering in postmodern literature.

Keywords: *Dennis Bock; literary analysis; postwar fiction; psychological resilience; trauma literature;*

1. Introduction

Human life is often marked by unavoidable challenges and suffering, particularly during times of conflict. War, as a form of large-scale violence, brings profound physical, psychological, and social consequences. According to Cassell (2004, in Tate & Pearlman, 2019, p. 96), suffering is defined as a state of severe distress resulting from events that threaten a person's integrity. It encompasses loss, both tangible and intangible, and often leads to a sense of absence and disconnection (Frank, 2001). The World Health Organization (2016) reports that one in sixteen individuals in conflict zones experiences mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Children, in particular, are highly vulnerable to the consequences of war. Their dependency on caregivers and disruption in education add to their developmental trauma. Barbara (2006, p. 891) identifies several war-related impacts on refugee children, including death, injury, disability, illness, sexual exploitation, psychological trauma, and cultural loss. These factors can cause lasting fear, instability, and identity disruption.

Suffering, as Cassell (2004) argues, is also shaped by personal interpretation. Two individuals experiencing similar symptoms may process and respond to suffering differently. The psychological impact can, in some cases, overshadow the physical symptoms, ultimately threatening relationships, diminishing desire, and eroding the sense of life's purpose.

The focus of this study is the suffering caused by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945—an event intended to force Japan's surrender before the Soviet Union entered the Pacific War. As Brown (1995, p. 2) reports, approximately 78,000 of the 343,000 people in Hiroshima were killed, while more than 51,000 were injured or went missing. The destruction extended beyond immediate casualties, leaving long-term trauma and homelessness in its wake.

Such historical tragedies are often explored through literature. Prose, particularly in the form of the novel, serves as a vehicle for expressing human experiences and social concerns. According to the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Thesaurus, prose refers to written language in its ordinary form, excluding poetry. Ate (1972) further categorizes prose into narrative and non-narrative forms, with novels falling into the former. Through character, conflict, and narrative, novels offer insight into the human condition.

Characters are central to any narrative. Laughlin (1989, p. 375) notes that fictional characters may serve as heroes, villains, allies, or victims. They are typically divided into major and minor roles, with the protagonist playing the central role in driving the narrative. Minor characters, meanwhile, serve to support or illuminate the protagonist.

In this context, Dennis Bock's novel *The Ash Garden* (2001) offers a compelling portrayal of human suffering through its protagonist, Emiko Amai. As a survivor of the Hiroshima bombing, Emiko embodies the multifaceted impact of war—physically disfigured and emotionally scarred, she endures loss, trauma, and identity fragmentation. Her suffering is compounded by her inability to seek justice or closure. She becomes a symbol of silent endurance, struggling to move forward in the aftermath of catastrophe.

This research focuses on Emiko's experience of suffering and the strategies she employs to survive. The study is guided by Quilao's (2018) theoretical framework, which identifies five dimensions of human suffering: physical, psychological, social, existential, and ethical. Through this lens, the research aims to explore how suffering is represented in literature and how it contributes to broader discussions of trauma, healing, and human resilience.

The significance of this study lies in three key aspects: first, it highlights a universal human issue—suffering—through the lens of a literary narrative; second, it examines the enduring impact of war on individuals, particularly women and children; and third, it contributes to the academic discourse on trauma literature by applying Quilao's framework to a contemporary postwar novel. By understanding Emiko's journey, readers are encouraged to reflect on the broader implications of war, memory, and recovery in both personal and collective contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Protagonist

One of the intrinsic elements included in a literary work is character. As stated by Minderop (2005: 2), character can also be a person, community, race, mental and

moral attitude, the quality of reasoning, and famous people and characters in literature. Characters are divided into three roles, such as protagonist, antagonist, and tritagonist (Lutters, 2006: 81). The protagonist becomes the central figure in the scene. Meanwhile, an antagonist is the opposite of a protagonist. It represents negativity in the story. When a protagonist is created to elicit sympathy, an antagonist is created to elicit hatred from the audience. Another supporting character is the tritagonist. Its role can be that of a protagonist's supporter or opponent. This character is called the mediator as it defends the figure they accompany. In a literary work, the story revolves around the protagonist. It becomes more important than the other characters involved. In other words, the protagonist becomes the central figure of the story. Those events that occur in the story are viewed from the perspective of the protagonist.

There are some definitions of protagonist. As stated by Perrine & Arp (1988: 42), the protagonist is the central character in the conflict, whether a sympathetic or an unsympathetic person. Protagonist, according to Gagan Raj (1991: 134), refers to the first actor in a play. This definition is similar to the previous one, as stated by Arthur Ganz (1990: 27), in which the protagonist is defined as the first actor who plays the leading part. Based on the definitions, it can be inferred that the protagonist is the main character who becomes the central part of a literary work.

2.2 Suffering

Suffering is an intimate experience. Meanwhile, the sufferer is often isolated from her surroundings and peers (Tate & Pearlman, 2019: 96). It can lead to frustration and withdrawal (Back, 2015). The definition of suffering is the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of the person (Cassell, 2004). There are various causes of suffering, such as pain, humiliation, diagnostic uncertainty, constrained perceptions of the future, or the actions of the physician, and it can occur with either the threat of injury or the actual injury to a person's intactness or integrity (Cassell, 1991).

Frank (2001) stated that suffering is unspeakable and impossible to reveal. Suffering is a loss. Through the experience of suffering, the sufferer has the opportunity to find the meaning of life, even though it is challenging and painful (Quilao, 2018). This is related to what Frankl (1992) has stated that life has meaning up to the last moment of one's life when people accept the challenge to suffer bravely.

According to Quilao (2018), suffering is not a homogenous concept. Instead, it is a diffuse term that includes innumerable ways of dealing with depression, pain, loss, and adversity.

There is an article written by Quilao (2018) that states that suffering arouses painful isolation and the feeling of being worthless. The unbearable feeling of fear that the sufferer might burden and bring shame to their family is so unbearable that it may lead to the desire to commit suicide. In this article, it is said that suffering occurs when an impending destruction of the person is perceived. This suffering continues until the threat of disintegration has passed or the integrity of the sufferer can be restored in some other manner.

As stated by Shaygan and Jaber (2022), sufferers have different reactions to pain. Internal reactions are invisible to other people. For example, sufferers have terrible thoughts about their pain, thinking that it is their fault and that the suffering cannot be healed anymore. These terrible thoughts can cause sufferers to become overwhelmed with sorrow and grief. Sometimes, they fear being unable to fit in with their peers.

Meanwhile, other sufferers can have positive internal reactions to pain, such as trying to replace negativity with positivity in order to not become more anxious.

The other reaction to pain is an external reaction. It is observable or can be seen by people. For example, when sufferers consider that their pain lasts too long and the help that they receive is ineffective, it leads to aggression. The hormonal change causes aggression. Another example of an external reaction to pain is crying, since sufferers feel that they accept less empathy from people.

2.3 The Kinds of Suffering

According to Quilao (2018), there are five dimensions of suffering: physical, psychological, social, existential, and ethical. These dimensions of suffering can be described as follows:

2.3.1 Physical Suffering

Physical suffering is the suffering experienced when a physical symptom is overlooked (Quilao, 2018). Forms of physical suffering can take the form of hunger, disability, disease, thirst, etc. As in disease, excessive pain can cause any number of symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, and dependency on family. This can also cause sufferers relationships with other people to become bad. The conflict might arise when sufferers feel that their peers do not listen to what they have to say. Being ignored by peers as they consider the pain one has to be not serious impacts sufferers badly. Being an alcoholic to numb the pain, having the desire to stab themselves to cut the pain out, and having a sense of being a burden can lead to hopelessness.

2.3.2 Psychological Suffering

Psychological suffering or psychological distress is a lasting, unsustainable, and unpleasant feeling resulting from a negative appraisal of an inability or deficiency of the self (Meerwijk & Weiss, 2011). One of the reasons it can occur is when sufferers feel isolated from their families. They consider the treatment they receive to not be enough for them as human beings. Therefore, sufferers feel neglected.

Depression is a consequence that sufferers might have as a result of losing good health, experiencing excessive pain, or having a traumatic life experience. Sufferers also feel embarrassed when they feel that health professionals do not listen to them. (Hagedorn & Quinn, 2004). Therefore, health professionals are required to serve with openness and an approachable attitude so that sufferers will not feel ashamed.

2.3.3 Social Suffering

Social suffering, as stated by Woods et al. (2019), is collective and individual human suffering associated with life conditions shaped by powerful social forces. Family and peers are often considered a gift to sufferers. But if the support is not enough, it affects those who suffer. It can impact bad relationships, insensitive communication, and the fear of being rejected by loved ones. Therefore, family and peers have a crucial role.

2.3.4 Existential Suffering

Existential suffering is an experience that includes the following: loss of personal meaning, loss of purpose in life, fear of death, anxiety, hopelessness, fear of

burdening others, loss of dignity, and loneliness (Boston et al., 2011). Sufferers usually feel worthless, which may result in a desire for a hastened death (Quilao, 2018).

2.3.5 Ethical Suffering

Ethical suffering is a loss of dignity (Quilao, 2018). A person who faces ethical suffering feels that their respect or value is being violated. For example, according to Baumann et al. (2013) in their research, two men with Hansen's disease in Korea lived in a prison-like shelter. It violates a human's dignity. Therefore, this case is included as one of ethical suffering.

2.4 Overcoming Suffering

Pain caused by suffering takes a long time for a person to heal. Pain is an unpleasant sensory or emotional experience. Therefore, sufferers attempt to find an effective strategy to manage their pain. According to Shaygan & Jaber (2022), there are three factors that affect pain management: gender, family education, and the subjective burden of pain.

First, gender plays a big role in managing pain. Males and females have different personality traits. When the majority of males avoid expressing their pain, females have a more difficult situation, and they try to cope with pain by crying. The way they cope with emotional pain is different than the way they cope with physical pain. Males are more impatient and aggressive, while females are calmer.

Second, family education plays a significant role in managing pain. Family is important. Based on his or her tolerance, an individual who has faced difficulties since childhood has a greater pain tolerance. A child with a father also tolerates pain better than one who does not.

Third, there is the subjective burden of pain. Sufferers' perception of pain plays an important role in managing pain. Therefore, patients are always encouraged to believe that they can overcome the pain.

To overcome suffering, according to Devik et al. (2013), each person needs to demonstrate a strong will and hope for survival. One must get used to it or accept it. People have strategies to conquer the pain and fight it. There are two attempts to overcome pain as in suffering described according to Shaygan and Jaber (2022), namely physical and psychological strategies.

2.4.1 Physical Strategies

According to Shaygan and Jaber (2022), the strategies applied by sufferers to manage pain are analgesics, heat therapy, and topical ointments. The use of herbal medicine is also recommended in this strategy.

2.4.2 Psychological Strategies

Besides physical strategies, there are psychological strategies. By using this strategy, sufferers attempt to forget the pain by thinking about other things. The activities they can do to avoid or distract themselves from pain can be watching television, singing, painting, communicating with friends, going to the beach, going on a trip, keeping pets, etc. The two examples of psychological strategies are described as follows:

a. Resilience

Even though sufferers have survived the bad experiences in their lives, that does not mean that the negativity will haunt them forever. According to the perspective of the American Psychological Association (2014) in a research article by Denckla et al. (2020), resilience is defined as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress. Therefore, in developing resilience, sufferers think that their pain is trivial, so they try to tolerate it.

Resilient people consider themselves survivors because they believe that when the situation gets hard, they are still able to keep going. They still recognize and experience strong emotions like anger, sadness, and fear. Those emotions are controlled until they pass.

Resilient people have the ability to regulate their emotions. They have good coping skills to deal with their problems. Sufferers treat themselves with kindness so that they have good self-acceptance when they face problems in life.

The availability of a support system plays an important role in overcoming suffering. It empowers sufferers to move forward and adapt to the situation.

b. Optimism.

By using this strategy, the participants involved in the research done by Shaygan and Jaberi (2022) attempt to have positive thoughts that the pain or suffering will not be permanent. So, they could avoid stress, anxiety, and negative thoughts. Therefore, they are optimistic about continuing their lives.

As stated by Lyubomirsky (2007: 102), there are six approaches to increasing personal optimism. First, imagining a bright future and setting goals. Second, looking for the good things that will happen. Third, savoring the presence. In line with this, Seligman (2002) defines savoring as focusing on thoughts or behaviors that create, intensify, and prolong enjoyment. Fourth, reframing the negativity and replacing it with positive thoughts. Fifth, contemplating the alternatives by thinking back on positive moments in life. Sixth, being grateful helps people cope with stress.

In order to overcome the suffering, the sufferers expect support. There are three kinds of supports, namely as follows:

a. Family support.

Sufferers expect their family to provide them with sympathy or to provide them with professionals if needed. For example, talking about good memories, playing, giving massages, and telling stories are all kinds of kindness that a family member can give.

b. Peer support.

Sufferers expect their peers to never avoid them. They require their friends to give them emotional support without making fun of them.

c. Spiritual management.

Some sufferers consider resorting to spiritual or religious rituals to make themselves feel better. For example, a sufferer likes listening to someone recite the Holy Book.

3. Research Method

Bhattacharya (2006) defines research as a careful and systematic process aimed at solving problems and acquiring new knowledge. In line with this, research design, as explained by Hakim (2000), involves the aims, purposes, intentions, and plans of a study, all within the practical constraints of location, time, financial resources, and the availability of the researcher. According to Asenahabi (2019), the research design also determines the type of analysis to be conducted in order to obtain the desired results.

Generally, research design is categorized into three main approaches: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. This study adopts a **descriptive qualitative method**, as the analysis centers on quotations extracted from Dennis Bock's novel *The Ash Garden*. Mitchell and Jolley (2007) state that the purpose of descriptive research is to test hypotheses and answer questions. However, unlike experimental research, descriptive research is not designed to establish cause-and-effect relationships. Instead, it is more appropriate for answering questions related to "what," "who," and "where" (Mitchell & Jolley, 2007, p. 234). Similarly, Kim et al. (2017) argue that the descriptive qualitative method produces data that portray the "who, what, and where" of events or experiences from a subjective perspective.

The subject of this study is the protagonist's experience as a sufferer. The descriptive qualitative method is considered appropriate for this research because it focuses on exploring "**what**" kinds of suffering are depicted and "**how**" the protagonist overcomes them. Thus, the analysis and conclusions are presented within the framework of this method.

In terms of data collection, this study follows several systematic steps to ensure the validity and relevance of the findings. The primary data are drawn from *The Ash Garden*, specifically by identifying and highlighting passages that relate to the protagonist's experiences of suffering. The process involves:

1. Identifying key excerpts that reflect different types of suffering;
2. Gathering textual evidence that corresponds to these themes, supported by relevant theoretical perspectives; and
3. Categorizing the data by grouping the quotations according to the types of suffering and the strategies used to overcome them.

The analysis is presented in the fourth chapter of this research. It begins by classifying the collected data in relation to the research questions. The analytical process includes several steps:

1. Identifying relevant themes in the data,
2. Organizing the data according to the stated problems,
3. Interpreting and explaining the findings, and
4. Drawing conclusions based on the analysis.

This structured approach enables the researcher to comprehensively explore the dimensions of suffering experienced by the protagonist in *The Ash Garden*, using a descriptive qualitative method that aligns with the aims of the study.

4. Discussion

4.1 Kinds of Suffering

4.1.1 Physical Suffering

Physical suffering is one of the kinds of suffering described in Quilao's theory. The symptoms of this kind of suffering are visible to others. The examples of physical suffering quoted from Dennis Bock's novel *The Ash Garden* are as follows:

I was left with only my grandfather to take care of me, a scarred and disfigured girl of six with only half a face. (Bock, 2001, p. 23)

The quote above explains that Emiko's parents passed away due to the Hiroshima bombing. Before her grandfather dies, her younger brother is also hospitalized. Therefore, her grandfather is the only family member who can take care of her. As a result of the bombing and radiation, her face is broken. As a result of this, Emiko's grandfather asks her to go to America for reconstructive surgery. In line with this, the aftereffects of the medication are quoted below:

Many nights I could not sleep for the pain that occupied my body like a razing army and for the news my grandfather had brought soon after he found us here, almost three weeks after the bomb.
(Bock, 2001, p. 29)

4.1.2 Psychological Suffering

The effects of the atomic bombing caused Emiko, the protagonist, to have a broken face. Scars are all over her skin. Anger, fear, guilt, and shame are felt by her. Due to her suffering, she feels unfortunate because she is still alive. Before her grandfather died, he made her promise to begin a journey to America to get surgeries. Emiko's grandfather wants her to get her face back. This is shown in the following quotation:

Before I left for America, he had made me promise I would not, no matter the circumstance, return to him before the surgeons had completed their work and I was again, his beautiful granddaughter.
(Bock, 2001, p. 23)

During the process of recovery, the thoughts of her family being killed at war kill her silently. In America, Emiko gets information that says that her parents were killed at war. She tries to remove as many negative thoughts as she can in order to relax herself.

He told me that our parents had been killed. ... I tried to destroy the image of their deaths that I held in my head. I did all I could to forget the feeling that came over me. (Bock, 2001: 30).

Emiko Amai also faces psychological suffering. Since war made her lose her beautiful face, she is getting used to the idea that she deserves to feel guilty. This is in line with the following quotation:

By the age of fifteen, I was already used to the idea that I was not special, so this knowledge did not disturb me. I was accustomed to the doctors and their tests and to the whispered taunts that followed me wherever I went. "Oni," the other children called me, something like "ogre" or "blackface." I cannot say I blame them; ignorance and fear

had made them treat me this way. I might even have reacted the same way if the shoe had been on the other foot. But it was not.
(Bock, 2001, p. 109)

Because of her terrible condition, people around Emiko often make fun of her. Being called a monster is what she has to face. Based on the quotation, it implies that before this, Emiko found it difficult to accept her condition. But Emiko is getting used to it. She responds to the negativity with ignorance. Emiko, in other words, believes that she deserves to be called ugly. Based on the quotation, Emiko has been facing many pressures in her life.

4.1.3 Social Suffering

Living in a prolonged war makes the sound of sirens, the drone of high-flying airplanes, and men in uniform seem normal. Men are forced to join the army, with an exception in some cases. Emiko's father is unable to join the army because of his health condition. This problem makes Emiko's father feel worthless.

One night I heard my father admit to my mother that he had brought shame to his family and to himself by failing to gain entry into the war. (Bock, 2001, p. 24)

Emiko's father is embarrassed since he is not qualified enough to join the army. He thinks that he has brought shame to his family. In the novel, Emiko is envious because she does not get the same special treatment as her friends whose fathers joined the war. This impact is shown in the following quotation:

It would have been a great honor for us. The fathers of many of the children in our neighborhood were away at war, and at school, these children were awarded a special status that I envied.
(Bock, 2001, p. 26)

From the quote above, it shows that children get different treatment. Having a father who joined the army is considered a big honor. Emiko's friends get special status at school. This problem leads to social suffering, where Emiko feels she is unable to fit in with society. It happens because she cannot make the same sacrifice as other people do during war.

4.1.4 Existential Suffering

The impacts of war experienced by Emiko, the protagonist, lead to existential suffering. Due to unbearable pain, sufferers may doubt their own existence. In the novel, Emiko experiences a loss of purpose in life.

No healed bodies ever left this place. The dead were wheeled away at all hours of the day on that endlessly squeaking gurney. There was no use in trying to obscure their presence from the many children whose home this place had become. Death was now more common than life, and soon those lifeless forms wheeled along the single corridor splitting the ward in half did not matter to me either way.
(Bock, 2001, p. 34)

The above quotation describes Emiko as having witnessed many deaths around her. In the Red Cross Hospital where she is recovering, she rarely sees fully recovered people. She lost her family. She loses her motivation to live. Her grandfather is the only reason she is in America for plastic surgery. But, after her surgery, the nurse tells her that her grandfather died.

Next, in the story, the hopelessness of Emiko, the protagonist, increases. Emiko finds out that her brother Mitsuo is not in bed. She does not even know when or how Mitsuo died. She only remembers that last night she tried to comfort him by telling him stories before bed. Emiko is alone now.

“Your brother died in the night,” the lilac-smelling nurse told me. “I am sorry. Many people have died. You must remain strong.” I closed my eyes and attempted not to cry. (Bock, 2001, p. 39)

4.1.5 Ethical Suffering

Emiko the protagonist feels a loss of dignity when she is in recovery. In this case, the suffering occurs because the person feels their right to be respected has been removed by another person. Dignity is the right of a person to be valued and respected. The ethical suffering that Emiko faces can be shown in the quotation below:

One morning, an American leaned over my back and began to inspect my burns. I was an object of fascination. He spoke to the man beside him, another American. I could not understand their language. The first man touched my shoulder. I turned my head away. He lifted the light gauze that covered my wounds. I bit my lip until it bled—yet his hands continued. He spoke to his colleague with great calm. He did not stop what he was doing to me. Another man approached and began to make photographs. (Bock, 2001, p. 31)

Based on the quotation above, Emiko, the protagonist, feels uncomfortable being treated that way. Most of the time, people holding notebooks and cameras come to Emiko to record what is happening. It triggers her pain, but she chooses to remain silent.

4.2. Overcoming Suffering

4.2.1 Physical Strategies

The use of external medication is important for overcoming suffering. Consuming medicines, applying topical ointments, and doing therapy are needed. In the novel, it shows that Emiko feels down when the nurse tells her about her younger brother's death. Because of her weak condition, the nurse urges her to drink tea in order to feel better. This description can be seen in the quotation below:

I closed my eyes and attempted not to cry. “Take your tea. You must keep your strength.” (Bock, 2001, p. 39)

Emiko, in the novel, is also forced to make a big decision in her life. Her grandfather gets her to fulfill the promise that she is about to get her face restored in America. The process of the surgery is painful. But Emiko is ready to face this challenge in order to fix her broken face. This description can be seen based on the following quotation:

She turned her head back.

Do you know these procedures will mean more time in the hospital?
There will be more operations.
Yes.
Some of these operations will be painful.
Yes.
You are willing to undergo these painful operations?
Yes.
(Bock, 2001, p. 260)

4.2.2 Psychological Strategies

Besides physical strategies, Emiko, the protagonist, also needs psychological strategies in order to survive. To overcome suffering, Emiko attempts to be optimistic that the pain does not last forever. This description can be seen in the following quotation:

Be silent, put your thoughts elsewhere until this goes away. There will be better times. One day, the pain will be gone. (Bock, 2001, p. 38)

From the quote above, it can be explained that even though Emiko suffers alone, she still believes in what her mother says that there will be better times.

But I would never really understand. Clearly, I'd never see things as he did or as he wanted me to. Some facts, I decided, and most lives must remain mysterious and unsolvable. Intentions were forever obscure. But who could look at me now and see more than a burned child, fully grown, held hostage in another world? Who could see beyond the history I have survived and factor into that the loves and terrors and banalities of normal experience? (Bock, 2001, p. 275)

The quotation above shows that Emiko is tormented by the prolonged negativity that has become her question all of this time. She has chosen to keep some things mysterious to be at peace. Emiko realizes she has gone through rough times. The image of her being a burned child whose history is bad keeps remaining in her mind. Emiko realizes that she has survived. She tries to start a new life as a new person.

I would truly never know who I'd been before being brought here. Sure, certain memories of myself would remain; but they suggested another person's life to me now, not my own. Yet somehow, I was not saddened by this thought. Now that the girl I'd been was released from me, I felt unburdened by her pain and solitude and by my need to remain that girl. At once, the stern and brutalized face with which I'd confronted the world was no longer representing me. I was someone else now. My history was no longer my own. (Bock, 2001, p. 276)

The quotation above says that Emiko realizes she cannot forget the terrible events in her life. The memory will always remain. Emiko, as quoted from the novel, tries to learn to accept her fate. Emiko finds that there is hope in her life. She does not draw herself as a disfigured young girl anymore. Meanwhile, she describes herself as a stronger person. Emiko released herself from the negative thoughts that used to be in her mind. She feels free from the burden. She finds her life more peaceful.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of *The Ash Garden* by Dennis Bock through the lens of Quilao's theory of suffering reveals the profound and multifaceted nature of trauma experienced by individuals, especially those deeply affected by war. Emiko, the central character, endures not only physical suffering caused by the Hiroshima bombing and its aftermath, but also grapples with psychological wounds—feelings of anger, shame, guilt, and isolation that linger long after the physical injuries fade. The narrative also uncovers Emiko's social suffering, where societal judgments and unequal treatment based on wartime contributions deepen her sense of exclusion and alienation. Furthermore, her experiences are marked by existential suffering, as repeated encounters with death and loss challenge her sense of meaning and purpose. Lastly, ethical suffering emerges from the loss of dignity and autonomy during her medical treatment, where she is reduced to a spectacle rather than treated with empathy and respect.

Despite the immense pain she faces, Emiko demonstrates resilience through both physical and psychological coping strategies. She endures painful surgeries with determination and combats despair by clinging to the belief that healing—though slow and uncertain—is possible. The novel ultimately portrays suffering not merely as an experience of pain, but as a transformative process that shapes identity, challenges ethical boundaries, and tests the limits of human endurance. Through Emiko's journey, Bock illustrates that recovery from suffering requires not only medical intervention but also emotional strength, dignity, and, above all, the will to move forward despite overwhelming loss.

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