

Life Writing and Asian Women Narratives

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Abstract

Life writing and its contemporary forms adopted by Asian women life writers in English is diverse in nature. It is a covering term for genres of biography, autobiography, memoirs, diaries, letters, i-novel, testimony and many other forms of life writing. This paper aims to examine the new literary voices of culturally, racially and religiously distinctive Asian women writers through the various forms of life writing genres which they have adopted to record their experiences. Authors like Yūko Tsushima (1947-2016), Hitomi Kanhera (1983-), Chanrithy Him (1965-), Loung Ung (1970-) register their voice through the form of i-novel, memoir, testimony, graphic memoir as framework. Majority of the chosen representative texts, that the paper discusses, are produced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Here, this commodious term 'life writing' reflects the variance of personal narrative and how these writers adopt and negotiate with different forms of life writing to engage and invent the self. It grants women writers a scope for voluntary self-revelation and self-referentiality. As a result, they turned their back on autobiography and switched to life writing. Asian life writing encompasses various sub genres. As it progressed over time, these numerous forms of personal narrative gave freedom of speech and literary expression unveiling their silenced voices. Asian life writing brings womens' life straight from reality to the pages and takes their narrative into the heart of others worldwide, where they somehow ultimately find a place to reside.

Keywords: 1. life writing, 2. autofiction, 3. i-novel, 4. Asian-writing, 5. memoir, 6. testimony

Introduction

Life writing as a genre holds various forms pertinent to Asian women's issues. As Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan says in her book *Speaking for myself: An Anthology of Asian Women's Writing* (2009): "Large regions of Asia share a common repertoire of myths and legends, epics and religion as well as similar traditions of storytelling. Physical proximity, many historical and cultural movements and socio-political contexts have contributed in creating a similar philosophical strain and among the people of various countries of Asia, while modernity and a pragmatic approach to the idea of progress and development kept the West on a somewhat separate track" (Introduction xxi). Lately, there has been a rapid emergence of a huge body of life writing in the past three decades. Life writing and its contemporary forms adopted by Asian women life writers in English is diverse in nature and its reception in the reading public over the last few decades is quite considerable. Only a bunch of writings were produced before the 1990s, such as the publication of *Right of Way* by The Asian Women Writers' Collective (AWWC) in 1988 as its first anthology^[1] Yūko Tsushima's *Territory of Light* (1979), publication of monographs, essay collections, a number of scholarly articles and a handful of translations.

Since the past three decades, 'life writing' has been used as an overlaying term for different forms of life narrative, such as i-novel, graphic memoir, autofiction, biofiction, testimonies and blogs. These forms not only started receiving critical attention but welcomed the generation of varying connotations. Life writing was initially referred to a specialized branch of textual criticism that considered some biographies and autobiographies, and a few letters and diaries; to the same literary- critical scrutiny that focused on poetry, drama, or fiction. With the progress of time, life writing as a literary genre gave birth to an extended compilation of rich, scholarly and authoritative works having discrete outlook. It deals with purposeful recording of personal memories, experiences, emotions and opinions for different reasons. Life writing as a huge corpus encompasses large categories of personal and self narrative- autobiography, biography, memoir, diary-writing, travel writing, autofiction, biofiction, autobiographical fiction, letters, collective biography, poetry, case history, personal testimony, illness narrative, obituary, essay, blogs, pictorial art and reminiscences. The growth of this compilation helps us to develop an understanding of life writing as a multi-disciplinary network. With its multiplicity, it moves beyond a desire for fixity and canonization as it embraces dynamism and undergoes constant evolution. The broader context of life writing as practice and texts in Asia involves love and loss; about family, friendship, marriage, children, divorce, separation; it reflects particular events of history in an individual's life and sometimes it is a representative of collective memory of a definite time period in history. Life writing has a lot to do with life, emotion, experience, memory and identity. It is a vital form of cultural communication and representation of life. It builds and deepens our cross-cultural understanding of self, identity and experience. With its growth, as a genre, there is an unavoidable tension that comes with more particular works, highlighting points of variations and departures from those established patterns.

As a critical term, it gained momentum in the late twentieth century onwards, but its origin can be located back in the first half of sixteenth century when women started crafting their own personas through diaries, which later came under life writing. It became popular with the 18th century Asian writers who turned to the genre either through autobiographies or memoirs or any other form of life writing, partly as a challenge towards existing dominant discourses on race, slavery, empire and as a mode of self-expression. The foundational works of life writing were the studies of auto/biography; those were conceived with the limits of life writing in relation to its course of hybridity. This self narrative overcomes the limits concerned with the studies of auto/biography, the limits between the self and the other, memory and forgetting, past self and present self, and so on. Traditional autobiographies were usually by men about their lives in the public sphere except few women who operated in the public sphere as most women's lives revolved around the household domain involving their relationships with family members. According to Dr Rae Luckie, Biographies were then mostly focusing on "‘factual’ accounts of the public life of a significant person written by another." At the time of social upheaval of world wars, mostly women were not independent until the second half of the twentieth century. During such times, women basically expressed themselves and about their lives in letters and/or diaries; the forms which were then not included in the traditional form of auto/biographical genre. In contemporary times, there is a paradigm shift from the western canonical genre i.e. from autobiography to life writing. The writers, whose work comes under the capacious term of 'life writing' no longer abides by traditional auto/biographical boundaries. The concept of self is no longer within the capacity of autobiography as autobiography has its own limitations to incorporate the diverse life narratives within its scope. Asian women writers not just copy their experiences but invent create and skillfully manipulate their life stories through their life narratives. They are constructing specific subjectivity focusing on selfhood whether in personal, public, or historical contexts using an enormous variety of primary and secondary experiences that find articulation in different modes of life writing which is clearly visible in the writings from Asia. When the curtain of foginess prevailing for literature from nations within Asia is drawn away as confronted with greater visibility of these literatures in English across the continent, it gets reflected with its voluminous appearance in the bookstores and libraries within and outside Asia. Though they write on multiple themes such as gender

oppression, cultural and religious biases, and mostly about growing up as a minority, many of them engage with themes of self-discovery. This is how life writing serves as a catalyst in articulating vibrant reality and this paper makes a modest attempt in bringing the diversity of lives in Asia together by making a conscious exclusion of male writers to permit the writer's experience of being a woman to validate other Asian women's presentation of themselves and their experiences through their narratives of life.

Voice of Asian and Asian-Diasporic Women

In Asia, life writing developed in various regions and in every nation in this continent has its own unique style and story to offer. Many women writers here tend to revisit women's lives in respective cultures. The major life writings from different regions of Asia not only represent the continent but also revise the stereotypical image of Asian women as passive and diminished. With the disclosure of the truthful voice of Asian women, researchers and scholars of life writing have invested themselves in tracing the voices unique to the form, culture and different regions of Asia. Voice is part and parcel of an individual's identity, may it be about someone else or themselves. Each and every individual's voice speaks a great deal about them and as a result it is possible to make all sorts of assumptions about them because of this. Undoubtedly, women are more visible now in expressing themselves in the public arena and today they occupy a short space between tradition and modernity. Asian women life writers' narrative voice about their lives, bodies, illness and disabilities within Asian social context finds expression in their life writing. In one of the chapters of *The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr writes about voice: "a voice conjures the human who utters it."^[3] Voice being a key element in all writing, she says "each great memoir lives or dies based 100 percent on voice. It's the delivery system for the author's experience- the bi bandwidth cable that carries in lustrous clarity every pixel of someone's inner and outer experience. Each voice is clearly fashioned to highlight a writer's individual talent or way of viewing the world."^[4] Since the emergence of post-colonialism and post-modernism, women's voice serves as a revision of the western canon. Voice is one such element that contributes to a subject's personal language represented in any form of life writing. In the literary sphere, generally a woman's personal voice permits to be an active participant in the cultural, social and political aspects of life. Through their definitive voice women writers and critics build a possibility to relocate largely unwritten past till present day by exploring and disclosing those mechanisms and forces that have structured and in fact structure the mainstream history today. These voices have a great impact in redefining women's selfhood. Revision and revisiting is vital in present times. By looking at the past, critics successfully unveils how literary representations have persistently reproduced and sustained condescending assumptions of long persisting patriarchal society that condemned and assigned women to a subordinate position in society. It not only helps to dig at the past but helps research scholars to explore how women transit across time and space to put an end to the prevailing symbolic order. They also find many artistic representations of women conditioned by culture act as hindrance to individual and professional growth. This opens up to foresee possible new forms to create women's identity and subjectivities through a distinctive voice and narrative. In other words, through the methodology of deconstruction critics focus on generating new perspectives to analyze the female subjectivity and self by creating the appropriate language, developing a cordial bond between Nature and female nature, their private and public domains, and revisions of the body, and the female body to be precise.

Voice and Forms of Life Writing

Since the 1990s Asian and Asian diasporic women writers have turned to various forms of life writing not only to express on their own but also to register their own voices and subjectivities. Another reason to reside in this genre is to use it as a tool to ponder on their artistic development. Women's writings as Dr Kapila Vatsyayan claims that: "Women's writing that insists on the dignity of Asian women shown by the sheer strength of women's identities lived in a variety of roles, with many of them breaking the stereotype and seeking to come into their own" (Introduction xxvii). Few of them who turned to this broad genre of literary expression to

narrate individual and collective experiences in different modes of life writing, such as testimony, autobiographical fiction, historical fiction, graphic memoir are Haley Esfandiari (1940-), Anees Jung (1944-), Moni Mohsin (1963-), Hitomi Kanhera (1983-), Min Jin Lee (1968-), Maxine Hong Kingston (1940-), Michelle Zauner (1989-), Han Kang (1970-), Nicole Chung (1981-), Celeste Ng (1980-). At times the voice is affirmative while at other times it is a voice of resistance towards the social construct that comes in the way of self-affirmation to women's identity or a voice of being commodified. Through life writing often they express and establish individual subjectivities with the larger communal representation of identities. Inevitably these writings bring the tone of inquisition and a delicate and sometimes not so delicate representation of resistance to fixed ideas and belief systems. This paper in the following lines will scrutinize women writers' voices and forms of life writing adopted by them from different countries of the Asian continent.

Voice from Japan

Recently, more Japanese authors have been coming to the forefront. With more translations possible now and entering into the literary space yearly and many of them being presented with literary awards, the voices of Japanese women are finally audible to a broader English speaking audience. As a result there is a ignition of a dialogue between experiences that, though separated by miles and language but have much in common. In a century, with the flooding of Japanese female writings in libraries and bookstores there is a vibrant flow of tradition and culture visible in every conceivable genre and style. There is a continuous rush of new perspectives and new voices that expand and challenge established approaches. In the early twentieth century women started enjoying certain privileges such as women's education was then introduced "focusing on producing "good wives and mothers" as a concept. The Japanese law did not grant its women full equality until in 1946 with its post- World War II constitution that granted women equal rights in politics and family life"^[5](Yunan, p.105). It is interesting to note that in the present era the voice of women writers is quite assertive in nature. Hitomi Kanhera is quite bold and her voice as a form of resistance to commodification is clearly visible in her writings as she speaks about her protagonist Lui trying out new things without taking into consideration the outcome of it. For example: Lui experiments on her body by piercing her tongue as she "anticipated to have "forked tongue" like her boyfriend"^[6] (Yunan, p.108) Yunan further comments on Kanhera's protagonist Lui as "daring and rebellious by molding the character as such" (p.109). Kanhera's voice in *Snakes and Earrings* (2005) shapes its discourse in the form of metafiction, a subgenre of life writing. Ponce argues that "Fiction in the sense that Lui is not a real person and *Snakes and Earrings* is not a fully true-to-life story and reality in the sense that the author, Hitomi Kanhera's experience influences the character's disposition. Kanhera claimed that Lui's self-harm was based on her own experience." (Ponce) Kanhera vents out her pent up emotions in her narrative which parallels her protagonist, Lui's consumption of alcohol as an outlet to her pain. This is not the first life narrative by a Japanese woman. If we look back at Japanese literature, in the very beginning of the twentieth century the I-novel came into being around 1907 and was at its peak during the 1960s and 1970s. It rose out of the naturalist movement that was at the forefront during the early decades of twentieth century Japanese literature. The genre became popular in Japan in the early twentieth century with the development of the commercial bond of trade by the United States with Japan. With the beginning of trade, Japanese writers got access to European and American authors. This resulted in blending realism with the prevailing Japanese diarist tradition or the tradition of writing from one's own experience. (Buchanan)'I-novel' is a unique Japanese form of subjective fiction in today's global literary field. 'I-novel' speaks of its specific local traditions and plays a vital role in the construction of the nation. This is how 'I novel' is reflective and it helps in shaping its own culture and nationhood. Minae Mizumura is one such author to use the long established form of Japanese literature i.e. shishōsetsu. It was originally published in 1995. With its publication it was promoted as the first bilingual novel in Japan printed horizontally from left to right (shishōsetsu). The title *An I-Novel* refers to a literary genre unique to Japan, a genre that revolves around the aesthetic ideals of truth. Mizumura's *An I-Novel* is a fictionalized autobiography that narrates the

course of a single day, the day she decides to take her graduate school oral exams and then return to her native Japan as she has always planned. Though the text is based on true events, its very form of i-novel in which the narrative is shaped gives the author adequate opportunities to play with her imagination. Narrator's negation to be considered as Asian or American itself makes the text fit for the local form of Japanese literature i.e. I-novel because in her very negation there is an underlying wish to belong to Japan. Text's unique feature that blurs the world of Japan and the world of English is possible as Minae Mizumura's voice takes flight through her narrative with a hope to find freedom in America and to belong to her mother land. Another important text from 1970s Japan is Yūko Tsushima's *Territory of Light* which was originally published in 1979 as a novel but before that was published from 1978 to 1979 as a series of 12 stories in the Japanese literary magazine *Gunzō*. (Buchanan).

In the English translation of *Territory of Light* (2017) translated by Geraldine Harcourt we can see the typical pronouns used in Japanese have only been translated into 'I'. There is a gap which is difficult to bridge and convey the same from its original Japanese narrative. Even J.W. Kasza points out the same in *The Autofictional* which the authors of *Shishōsetsu Handbuku* have suggested: "Nonetheless,... scope...analyses...forms of life-writing...autofiction, Japanese researchers...pointed...of "untranslatability,"...emerges...of comparative analysis. The question...what happens...narrating subject, the "I" (watashi), when... translated...foreign languages?...neither...English "I,"... French "je,"...German "Ich"...direct...accurate translations... Japanese "watashi" "(Kasza, p. 251). The *Territory of Light* (2017) is a feminist text which is semi-autobiographical in nature. This novel or story sequence speaks of gender victimization of women as a gender and how they are taught to behave in the society of Japan. It's difficult not to feel empathetic for the narrator as her emotions are intensely felt even though sometimes she seems to be growing detached from reality. Yuko Tsushima's text *Territory of Light* (2017) is in the form of an I-novel, blurring the line between fact and fiction. To write in this form is purely her individual choice or a literary trend or a new wave of Japanese post-war literature that emerged in the middle of the 1970s, suits her voice. Tsushima's first person narrative voice reveals the plight of a single mother and peeps into the inner lives of women while engaging in social conflict from outside.

Voice from India

In India, since the second half of the nineteenth century there is an upsurge in varied life writing sub genres by women based on domestic life and an extension of familial relationship. Dipesh Chakrabarty writes: "they seldom yield pictures of an endlessly interiorized subject. Our autobiographies are remarkably "public" (with construction of public life that are not necessarily modern) when written by men and tell the story of extended family when written by women" (Chakrabarty, p.35). In the nineteenth century life writing was mostly centered on public life written in the form of novels, diary, letters and autobiographies. Colonialism, patriarchy and caste system made it conducive for life writing by women to flourish. One of the earliest emerging typical autobiographies of late nineteenth century women based on their private, domestic life typical to women is Rasundari Devi's *Amar Jiban (My Life)* published in 1876. One from the early twentieth century is *Amar Katha (The Story of My Life)* published in 1913. In this autobiography the voice of alienation predominates. However, the second half of the twentieth century noticed the coming up of a number of memoirs and autobiographies by women such as *Memoirs of an Indian Woman* (1989) by Sudha majumdar, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani's memoir *Jiboner Jhara Pata (Life's Fallen Leaves)*, *I Follow After* by Laxmibai Tilak and *In Search of Freedom* by Manikuntala Sen. One Indian author's life writing this paper takes delves into is Anees Jung as the author belongs to the same state as of the writer i.e. Odisha. She was born in 1964 in Rourkela, Odisha, India. *Unveiling India* (1987) by Anees Jung is a collection of stories and testimonies that sheds light on the intrinsic and extraneous motives behind the writer's decision to use a specific literary genre. This chosen text is basically a string of testimonies stitched into one that inadvertently leads to normativisation of the available truth about their lived experiences. It is an autobiographical narrative which according to critics can be widely

categorized as a collection of stories and testimonies. So, this text *Unveiling India* can be read and understood as representative life-stories. In another sense the author as an individual and as a representative mirrors the collective as she presents a shared narrative. She speaks about different versions of the past in the present narrative using a first person narrative technique. This written narrative of stories and testimonies are comprehended and understood as a subjective truth whose authenticity comes into question. This autobiographical narrative aims at bringing together the stories and testimonies of diversified women of various cultures and religions. Through her narrative along with her collective unity and consciousness the narrator selectively engages the reader with her lived experience. This is how she pushes the women located in the periphery into the center. This narrative also takes account of childhood, family, growing up, and coming of age stories and of education. By remembering, reconstructing and deconstructing the memory the narrator is not only distorting but also creating a better description of the past events. Here, Anees Jung's voice is a representative one against injustices. All these life narratives have a voice, a voice against suppression, condescending patriarchal society and gendered politics. The emergence of such life narratives by Indian women was definitely a challenging one but these stereotypical Indian life writings bear an essence of Indian worldview, distinct Indian culture and tradition. The contemporary life writings by women are woven around the dichotomy of female subjectivity and identity as a construct and as actual life lived by women. (Sadhu) With our reading narratives from the periphery it gives us a clear apprehension about marginal women's voice seeking for affirmation and social recognition. These writings open up undaunted truths of marginalized women and a desperate attempt at connecting with the rest of the world. For example, A Revathi's *The Truth About Me* published in 2010, in which the narrator seeks to unfold the truth about a marginalized individual who was born in a male body but constantly struggles to be accepted as a woman by the society. The voice of Sonia Falerio in *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance Bars*, which was published in 2010, also shapes her narrative nonfiction. Sonia Falerio, an acclaimed narrative nonfiction writer and an award winning journalist of India in present times. Her first work of such narrative nonfiction is *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance Bars* (2010). It is an investigative account of dance bars of Bombay through the reporter's eye view. It chronicles many bar dancers who lost their livelihoods with the rustling of a ban on Bombay's dance bars and implementation of an act on August 15, 2005. According to the act, the Maharashtra state government had banned all dance bars in Bombay to prevent immoral activities, trafficking of women and to ensure the safety of women in general. Almost seven hundred bars throughout Bombay and Maharashtra were shut down. This book reflects Falerio's struggle to present the latent disgusting truth of the world of dance bars. Falerio did her research about the world of dance bars, sex trade and conducted hundreds of interviews with sex workers, bar dancers, pimps and other such people involved in flesh trade during and after the ban, for five long years. Through her protagonist Leela Falerio captures the distinctive voice of bar dancers. The language of the narrative is the very own language of the bar dancers. For example the use of words produced by mixing English and Hindi such as 'bijness', 'hensum', 'fillums', 'bootiful', 'klass', 'Yurope', 'Lundun' etc. Falerio uses such words to suit the subject and make it more real. There are also complete Hindi sentences and obscene words followed by their English translation to keep the narrative essentially true to the characters and theme. Being a representative voice of these bar dancers Falerio transcends the reader into another world of reality i.e. the secret world of sex, desire, want, passion etc. Falerio becomes the voice of million marginalized women such as bar dancers, sex workers, prostitutes, concubines and waitresses, those who are actually condemned in the Indian society. Another work by Jameela discusses society's contempt at sex-workers and thereby rejects the prevalent stereotypical image "by bringing out the tension between her domestic sphere as a woman and mother, and as a sex-worker in 'public life' " (Sadhu, p.8). Therefore, Sadhu persuasively claims that "The narration of lives in the life-writings follows both syntagmatic and pragmatic structures i.e. the life-writings are as much about the aspects of a particular self as they are parallel telling about the lives and times of others, the society and tradition at large, often the syntagmatic being subsumed by the pragmatic" (p.9) Voice of resistance, seeking for social recognition, constructing self are the threads neatly embedded in the very fabric of contemporary life writings by Indian women.

Voice from China

According to new research, China visualizes the rising of subjectivity in the first half of the twentieth century as East encounters with West. With Chinese literary modernity climbing to towering heights in the 1950s and 1960s because of the art for art's sake movement, the individual voice of the subject initially was lost in the oblivion of nationalistic spirit from 1917 to 1960. Even until the 1970s the predominating voice that murmured of a utopian world was- 'we'. The 'New Culture Movement' that was shipped into China in 1917 from the West set the 'New Chinese Literature' in motion. 'New Chinese Literature' is basically based on two components. One of them is the quest for an individual 'I' by asserting its subjectivity. With the 'I' of New Chinese Literature coming into being a tension between the subjective 'I' and collective 'we' arises. In Chinese literature, the narrative of *Diary of a Madman* (1918) by Lu Xun is considered to be the first instance of I. Later after almost six decades the voice of I echoed in the novel *Oh man, man* by Dai Houying, a Chinese woman novelist and one of the first Chinese writers to criticize the devastating decade-long Cultural Revolution. (Siyan) According to the new research by Liu Yixin, During the Republic of China (1912-1949), women writers mostly adopted two forms. One is the diary and another is epistolary mode. Both diary and epistolary mode are forms of life writing. Republican women writers opts these two forms to provide themselves a space to showcase the interior monologue of the narrator or protagonist. In such forms the plot may fall short as it solely depends on the narrator/ protagonist's psychological activities. Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman* (1918) is considered to be the first in modern Chinese literature revealing the character's interior monologue in the form of a sequence of diaries. It consists of thirteen diaries of which ten of them reflect the protagonist's interior monologue. In the opinion of Amy Dooling, a scholar of modern Chinese literature, the letter or epistolary form flourished with Guo Moruo's translation of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* into Chinese *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers* in 1921. Women writers made a huge contribution in the production of an extensive body of epistolary literature. With the extension of epistolary form of narrative nonfiction, the concept of 'New Women', as a representative of womens' repositioning as social subjects, emerged in early Republican China. Through both these dominant forms of life writing, women writers often try to convey their self-introspection by using the narrator or character's interior monologue in a private existential closed space. These forms not only gave enough space to women writers but also protected them from the possible forthcoming criticisms while trying to open up their pent up emotions, feelings and thoughts with their female awareness.

Conclusion

Life writing as a genre commits to fulfill the stated intention of honest representation as is often expected from the forerunner of life writing i.e. the studies of auto/biography. Life writing as a literary device and narrative is more appropriate and logical to define or present an author's personal history and identity with that of a partial or completely fictional persona. The foundational works of life writing were the studies of auto/biography, those were conceived with the limits of life writing in relation to its course of hybridity that this umbrella term embraces. Life writing as a genre overcomes the limits concerned with the studies of auto/biography, the limits between the self and the other, memory and forgetting, past self and present self, true self and fictional self, and so on. The move from the studies of auto/biography to life writing has therefore helped in expanding the object of study from a certain way of literary narrative to life narrative by reflecting the variance of personal narrative. Asian women's life writing fits more accurately to this huge corpus as women writers thereby adopt and negotiate with different forms of life writing to engage and invent the self. It grants Asian women writers a scope for voluntary self-revelation and self-referentiality. As a result, they turned their back on autobiography and switched to life writing. Its numerous forms of self narrative gave freedom of speech and literary expression unveiling their silenced voices.

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