

FROM SILENCED VICTIMS TO NATIONAL  
HEROINES: ACTS OF IMPERSONATION  
IN NARRATIVES OF LE LY HAYSLIP  
AND NORA OKJA KELLER

CHOW SHEAT FUN

UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
ABSTRAK	vi
ABSTRACT	viii
<b>Chapter 1 – Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Statement of the Problem .....	3
1.3 Objectives of the Study .....	12
1.4 Scope and Limitations .....	16
1.5 Significance of the Study .....	17
1.6 Methodology .....	20
1.7 Definition of Some Key Terms.....	21
1.7.1 Silenced Victims .....	21
1.7.2 National Heroines .....	22
1.7.3 Nation.....	23
1.7.4 Sexuality .....	23
1.7.5 Identity .....	24
1.7.6 Acts of Impersonation .....	25
1.8 Organization of the Study .....	26
<b>Chapter 2 – Situating Le Ly Hayslip and Nora Okja Keller as Asian American Women Writers .....</b>	<b>29</b>
2.1 Introduction.....	29
2.1.1 Asia America.....	29
2.1.2 Asian American Literature.....	31
2.2 Asian American Women’s Sexuality – “History of Denigrating Stereotypes” .....	36
2.3 Nation, Nationalism and Women .....	39
2.4 Transcending Victimization – Narratives of Le Ly Hayslip and Nora Okja Keller.....	42
2.5 Conclusion .....	49
<b>Chapter 3 – Literature Review .....</b>	<b>50</b>
3.1 Introduction .....	50
3.2 Review of Related Literature .....	50
3.2.1 Race, Gender and Sexuality .....	50
3.2.2 Memory .....	54
3.2.3 “transnational feminist solidarity” .....	58
3.2.4 Silences .....	61
3.2.5 “re-visioning” .....	64
3.2.6 “flexible strategies” .....	67

3.2.7 Haunting.....	69
3.3 Conclusion.....	70
<b>Chapter 4 – Theory and Method .....</b>	<b>72</b>
4.1 Introduction .....	72
4.2 Deconstruction .....	73
4.3 Silences in Women’s Writing .....	77
4.4 The Complexities of the Act of Remembering .....	81
4.5 Acts of Impersonation and Performance .....	83
4.6 Autobiography – “Authentic” Representation of the Personal? .....	92
4.7 Methodology .....	96
4.8 Conclusion .....	103
<b>Chapter 5 – Le Ly Hayslip: Acts of Impersonation and “Performance of Stereotype” .....</b>	<b>105</b>
5.1 Introduction .....	105
5.2 Hayslip’s Strategic, Multiple Positionings .....	108
5.3 The Performance of Stereotype .....	114
5.4 The Complexity of the Production of Memory.....	120
5.5 The Complexity of Her Co-Author as Her Performative Act.....	123
5.6 Conclusion .....	132
<b>Chapter 6 – Le Ly Hayslip – From Victim to Betrayer to National Heroine .....</b>	<b>133</b>
6.1 Introduction.....	133
6.2 Women’s Social Role – “Indistinguishable from her Sexed and Gendered Body”.....	133
6.3 Le Ly’s Alterity, Underclass and Poverty.....	139
6.4 The Figure of the Victim.....	142
6.5 Le Ly’s Father - Symbol of Vietnamese Patriarchal Castration .....	146
6.6 Strategic Commodification of Sexuality.....	152
6.7 From Betrayer to Maternal Nurturer.....	159
6.8 Intersections of Identity .....	165
6.9 Conclusion .....	171
<b>Chapter 7 – Re-writing the Meanings of Sexuality of a Colonized Nation - <i>Comfort Woman</i> by Nora Okja Keller .....</b>	<b>173</b>
7.1 Introduction.....	173
<b>Part I – Performance of Passivity .....</b>	<b>176</b>
7.2 Colonialism, Sexuality and Nationalism.....	176
7.3 Akiko and Beccah – Representational of Multiple Positionings .....	177
7.4 The Performative Setting .....	180
7.5 Beccah – Embodiment of East-West Conflict .....	185
7.6 Death and Rebirth .....	190
7.7 Silences and Articulations.....	193

7.8	Rewriting the Feminine Construction of a Nation .....	195
7.9	Performance of Passivity .....	197
<b>Part II – Performance of Transcendence.....</b>		<b>202</b>
7.10	Introduction .....	202
7.11	From Performance of Passivity to Articulation of Transcendence .....	203
7.12	Shamanism and Princess Pari – Transcendence .....	206
7.13	Identity Reclaimed: “She was, uh, Korean” .....	212
7.14	Conclusion .....	222
<b>Chapter 8 – Conclusion .....</b>		<b>223</b>
8.1	Introduction.....	223
8.2	Summary of the Study .....	223
8.3	Findings and Implications.....	225
8.3.1	Silences as Acts of Impersonation .....	225
8.3.2	Acts of Remembering as Acts of Impersonation .....	228
8.3.3	Acts of Impersonation – Reinvention of Identity.....	232
8.4	Contributions of the Study .....	236
8.5	Suggestions for Further Studies .....	237
8.6	Conclusion .....	239
APPENDICES		
	Works Cited .....	240

**DARIPADA MANGSA BISU KEPADA WIRAWATI  
NASIONALIS: ACTS OF IMPERSONATION DALAM KARYA-  
KARYA LE LY HAYSLIP DAN NORA OKJA KELLER**

**ABSTRAK**

Kajian ini tertumpu pada karya-karya Le Ly Hayslip dan Nora Okja Keller yang meninjau peristiwa traumatik sebagai hasil sejarah transnasional, iaitu Peperangan Vietnam (1959-1975) dan Kependudukan Jepun di Korea semasa Perang Dunia Kedua yang melahirkan isu *comfort women*. Berdasarkan autobiografi-autobiografi Hayslip berjudul *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* dan *Child of War, Woman of Peace* dan juga novel Keller berjudul *Comfort Woman*, maksud seksualiti wanita dan interaksinya dengan isu memori, negara dan nasionalisme dikaji sebagai landasan tema-tema utama.

Oleh sebab ketaatan nasional wanita Amerika keturunan Asia senantiasa ditentukan melalui hubungan seksual mereka, seksualiti dan identiti merupakan tapak aktif pertikaian dan pentafsiran semula. Atas sebab definisi yang bercanggahan tentang identiti mereka yang pelbagai, penulisan kreatif wanita Amerika berketurunan Asia mendedahkan perundingan mereka dengan ketaatan nasional yang pelbagai. Pelbagai strategi subversif seringkali digunakan sebagai bentuk penentangan dalam karya mereka. Hal ini bertujuan merundingkan kedudukan dan identiti watak-watak wanita mereka sebagai rakyat pada peringkat nasional dan bukannya sekadar objek atau mangsa seksual.

Lantaran itu, berdasarkan kajian-kajian memori, autobiografi, dekonstruksi dan feminisme, kajian ini menunjukkan *acts of impersonation*

sebagai strategi-strategi subversif dalam karya penulisan. *Acts of impersonation* ini digunakan untuk bertindakbalas terhadap tafsiran identiti wanita Amerika keturunan Asia yang berbau perkauman dan seksis. Penulisan mereka merupakan *performative acts* yang mencabar konsep-konsep “keaslian” dan “kebenaran” yang seringkali dihubungkan dengan hasil-hasil daripada memori. Seterusnya, memori, sama ada yang bersifat individu ataupun kolektif dikaji bersama-sama dengan tema dan hasrat penulis. Dapatan yang diperoleh mengesahkan ketidakstabilan hasil-hasil memori.

Di samping menunjukkan cara mengintepretasikan *acts of impersonation*

yang terdapat dalam *teks* dan dalam *aktiviti menulis*, kajian ini mendedahkan bahawa *acts of impersonation* dapat digunakan secara berkesan oleh penulis wanita Amerika keturunan Asia bagi mencabar tafsiran patriarki terhadap seksualiti mereka. Oleh itu, secara signifikannya, *acts of impersonation* membolehkan imej stereotaip tentang seksualiti dan identiti wanita Amerika keturunan Asia dirombak semula dalam hasil karya seni budaya. Dalam usaha mendefinisi semula maksud simbolik seksualiti wanita Asia yang berhubungkait dengan patriarki Asia tradisional serta kolonialisme, Hayslip dan Keller mentransformasikan watak wanita Amerika keturunan Asia dalam teks daripada mangsa bisu menjadi wirawati nasional.

**FROM SILENCED VICTIMS TO NATIONAL HEROINES:  
ACTS OF IMPERSONATION IN NARRATIVES OF  
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**ABSTRACT**

This study focuses on the narratives of Le Ly Hayslip and Nora Okja Keller as they explore traumatic events that resulted from transnational histories; the Vietnam War (1959-1975) and the Japanese occupation of Korea during World War II in which the issue of comfort women emerged. Through Hayslip's autobiographies *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and *Child of War*, *Woman of Peace* and Keller's novel, *Comfort Woman*, the meaning of women's sexuality and its interaction with issues of memory, nation and nationalism are explored as thematic anchors.

As Asian American women's national loyalty is often determined through their sexual alliances, their sexuality and identities are active sites of contestation and revision. As a result of conflicting definitions regarding their multiple identities, Asian American women's narratives reveal the negotiation of multiple affiliations. Various subversive strategies as forms of resistance are often employed in their narratives to re-negotiate the positions and identities of their female protagonists as national subjects and not merely sexual objects or victims.

Drawing on memory, autobiographical, deconstruction and feminist studies, this study shows how Hayslip and Keller employ "acts of impersonation" as subversive strategies in their writings to counter racist and sexist construction of Asian American women's identities. Their writings are performative acts that reveal the negotiations of multiple affiliations and challenge the notions of "authenticity" and "truths" associated with productions of memory. Both personal

and collective memories, when investigated against the themes and intentions of the authors/narrators affirm the instability of the production of memories.

Besides demonstrating ways of reading into acts of impersonation that are present in both the *text* and in the *writing act* itself, this study reveals that acts of impersonation can effectively be employed by Asian American writers to challenge patriarchal inscriptions upon their sexuality. This significantly rewrites the stereotypical images of Asian and Asian's women's sexuality and identity in cultural productions. By re-defining the symbolic meanings of Asian women's sexual bodies in relation to traditional Asian patriarchy and colonialism, Hayslip and Keller transform the Asian American women characters in their texts from silenced victims into national heroines.

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

America's relationship with Asia has been shaped by numerous wars which have generated literary works that reflect the impact of these wars on the lives of people of Asian descent. This chapter will situate the two selected authors of this study within the contexts of America's historical involvement in Asia in World War II and what is often known as the most unpopular war in the history of the United States – the Vietnam War. Focusing on Asian women affected by the wars, this chapter will establish the relevant background information regarding the relationship between gender and nationalism, sexuality and stereotypes of Asian women in America's cultural productions.

Literary critics like Huang and Sato agree that wars contribute the “subject or impetus” for a large proportion of Asian American literary works in the second half of the twentieth century (Huang 2005, 3). The Vietnam War for instance, has resulted in the “recent burgeoning of Vietnamese American writing and translations of Vietnamese American literature” (Sato 2005, 15). America's military presence in Korea after World War II has also generated multidisciplinary studies on the issue of comfort women.

“How does Asia America remember America's wars in Asia, and how do Asian American writers represent this memory?” asks Sato (2005, 15). The representations of “this memory” by marginalized Asian/American figures can be discussed in various ways. For instance, the trope of haunting is employed to describe the traumatic memories created by America's military presence in Asia

(Gordon 1997). The terrain of official history is haunted with the language of “ghosts” in the form of marginalized figures who tell alternative stories. Another study which explores the haunted landscape that forms American ethnic literature is Kathleen Brogan’s (1998). It explores the ghosts and haunting of traumatic memories of colonized communities as a result of “American histories of slavery, internal colonization, or (to varying degree) voluntary immigration” (15). Literary criticism has an important role to play to enable the “testimony and counter-memory articulated at these sites to perform their political and psychological work” (Sato, 35). Sato suggests that forms of cultural memory that address the entanglement of the United States’ history with the histories of various Asian nations are located in literary reenactments of “relocation,” “resistance,” and “survival”. These texts are the “bearer and construction sites of Asian American cultural memory” (34-5).

In this study, “From Silenced Victims to National Heroines: Acts of Impersonation in Narratives of Le Ly Hayslip and Nora Okja Keller,” the texts of Hayslip and Keller are categorized as a specific type of narrative by Asian American women haunted by war, sexual trauma and the challenge of subsequent immigration to the United States. They are not only analysed as literary reenactments of “relocation,” “resistance,” and “survival” but as texts of transformation and transcendence. These texts are not merely narratives of traumatic victimization as a result of wars. They are, more importantly, documentation of subversive methods towards forms of resistance and survival, resulting in transformation and transcendence of the self from silenced victims to national heroines.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Asian American women writers may be located in the interstices of at least two cultures. Amy Ling (1990) notes, for instance, that Chinese American women are frequently caught “between worlds” (20). This results in what Cheung (1997) terms as “double consciousness” (2). According to Shirley Lim (1994), colonial and post-colonial women have suffered a “double colonization” by a “foreign race and also by a native patriarchal society”. As a result, they have selves which have been “mutilated by an Other which imposes marginality, inferiority, and absence of being” (14).

In Asian American women’s narratives, their bodies very often become the site of conflict between “duty and desire, ethnic loyalty and Americanization” (9). Shirley Lim (1996) asserts that cultural changes are signified “through and on the body”; bodies are “players” and “culture is the scene in which their continuous, promiscuous, nervous performances unfold” (139). This “promiscuous range of afflictions” (Kang 2002, 71) borne by the bodies of Asian women is illuminated in Bow’s (2001) study. This doubleness has an effect on the perception of Asian American women’s bodies as they serve as “the mediator between opposing cultural dictates” (Bow 2001). Bow concurs that the female body is a “register of international and domestic political struggle” and becomes a “site of national divisions and loyalties” (10).

The key terms that emerge from Cheung’s, Lim’s and Bow’s statements are “double-consciousness” (Cheung), “promiscuous” (Lim), the body as a “site of national divisions and loyalties”, “multiple affiliations” (Bow) and “performances” (Lim 1996, 139). These terms are premised upon plurality,

doubleness and multiplicity, and they stand as opposing concepts to the concept of national belonging and terms of citizenship, which denotes singularity and loyalty to only one nation.

Critics like Laura Kang (2002) have drawn attention to Asian American women's struggles against a racist society with regard to the formation of their identity, which is closely related to their sexuality and how their national loyalty is often perceived through their sexual alliances. In view of the constructions and perception regarding Asian American women's sexuality as sites of inscriptions by various powers at play especially in the process of colonialism and imperialism<sup>1</sup>, there is a need for Asian American women writers to re-inscribe the meanings of their sexuality and identity through various subversive strategies as forms of resistance. Asian American women's literature reveals the negotiations of "multiple affiliations" (11) as Asian American women writers not only have to negotiate between "progress and tradition, modernity and the "Old World," the United States and Asia" (11), but also the perception of their sexuality as a determiner of loyalty.

Occupying two or more spaces and traditions, Asian American women's narratives may demonstrate interesting hybridity and a sense of indirection that reveal their sense of marginality as Asian American women. Due to conflicting definitions regarding their multiple identities, Asian American women writers have found it necessary to employ the trope of performance to negotiate between multiple cultures and identities, including negative and inferior perceptions and issues regarding their sexuality. Hence, they endeavour to re-conceptualize their

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<sup>1</sup> Bow (2001) for instance, demonstrates how in *Farewell to Manzannar*, Asian immigrant writing uses sexuality to articulate the "terms of citizenship and national belonging" (11).

“disloyalty”/“betrayal” as a form of interrogation and resistance to such perceptions. They attempt to re-write patriarchal inscriptions upon their sexual bodies in order to re-negotiate their positions and re-invent themselves as national subjects and not merely sexual objects or victims.

This endeavour to re-conceptualize their “disloyalty” and to re-invent their identity calls for an investigation into the manipulation of memories in Asian American women’s cultural productions. That the acts of writing, reading and producing literary works by ethnic writers are “highly charged political acts” regardless of authorial intention (Nguyen 2000, 151), gives rise to the necessity to challenge the reliability of memories and to investigate these writings as “performative acts”<sup>2</sup> (Kang 2002, 42). The employment of memory as political tools in Hayslip’s and Keller’s narratives demonstrates different positioning of resistance and nationalism.

The manipulation of memories in Hayslip’s autobiographies and Keller’s novel<sup>3</sup> has thus far escaped the attention of literary critics. The complexities and contradictions regarding the production of memories, as related to the performative are pivotal issues which reveal strategies used by the authors and/or narrators to revise their identities. That their writings are performative acts call into question the necessity to examine the notions regarding “authenticity” and “truths” associated with productions of memory such as autobiographies. As such, some issues with regard to Asian American women’s autobiographies will be discussed in Chapter 4.

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of the performative as applied in this study will be further discussed in Chapter 4 of this study.

<sup>3</sup> Though a novel, *Comfort Woman* was produced from the memories of former comfort women.

In the meantime, it is suffice to mention in this section that a “completed” autobiography is often incomplete as it can be reconfigured and re-scripted and mediated through certain personal, cultural and political agenda. An autobiography can function as a screen to filter out difficult memories. It has the capacity to obliterate “real” happenings. There is therefore, a need to recognize the spaces between the “real” and fictive, between creative imaginations and political intentions. These spaces offer interesting issues and themes to this study. Due to the inability of the autobiographical mode in representing traumatic memories, it is pertinent to examine both the role of autobiographies and novels in attempting to articulate the memories of the trauma of war.

A novel, as an extended piece of *fictional* prose, needs to be further interrogated, especially one such as *Comfort Woman*, which is based on memories of *real* people who remember past events. Fiction is “tantalizingly hard to define” (Hawthorn 1997, 3); fictions are not true, yet they are not lies either, they tell what is not real but what they tell is not totally unreal either. Hawthorn opines that fiction is “not a wholly stable category” (4). While it may be agreed that a novel depicts imaginary characters and situations, some novels, such as Keller’s *Comfort Woman* may depict real characters and situations. The opposing terms ‘fictional’ and ‘real’ seem irreconcilable.

Keller’s novel has been investigated as “resisting memory” as a “form of confrontation and critique” (Sato 2005, 25) and as transnational feminist solidarity” (Schultermandl 2007), represented by Akiko’s and Beccah’s alternate narratives. Hayslip’s autobiographies embody memories and provide evidence of what is perceived as “real” happenings. On the other hand, they have been

examined as a performance of the role of an emblematic victim to gain a voice and an audience (Nguyen 2002). It is imperative that claims of authenticity under the guise of “realist strategies” (Hesford and Kozol 2001, 2) are reexamined. The way Hayslip and Keller mediate and repackage the memories are interesting political sites that call for further investigation. However, the extended performative dimension as associated with the acts of impersonation as expounded by Chen (2005) has yet to be applied to the analysis of the texts. Akiko’s performance as a shaman has been explored by Patricia Chu (2004) and Chen (2005) but it has not been investigated comparatively with Hayslip’s performance<sup>4</sup>. The tools advocated by Chen’s study are useful in revealing that literary texts by Asian American women, regardless of genre, do embody cultural, national and transnational issues and concerns relating to sexuality, national identity, memory and history.

Keller’s and Hayslip’s narratives have been studied separately<sup>5</sup> despite striking parallels. This study will blur the boundaries between a novel and an autobiography and demonstrate close association between the works of these two authors, especially in the employment of subversive strategies to re-script women’s sexuality and identity. The selection of Hayslip’s autobiographies and Keller’s novel represents my attempt to dislodge the different genres from fixed boundaries and to draw a parallel between Keller’s novel and Hayslip’s autobiographies based on their shared common ground. In narrating historical experiences, both genres have displayed personal perspectives and intimacy of emotions which would otherwise be buried or silenced by official accounts. Their

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of performance will be expounded in Chapter 4.

<sup>5</sup> These studies will be named and applied in later parts of the study.

narratives of different genre, written by Asian American women of different ethnicity and background, of different generation of immigrants, based on different wars, have relied on subversive use of silences and acts of resistance which includes “acts of impersonation”<sup>6</sup> to counter racist and sexist construction of their identity and to re-define their sexuality and transform their identity.

One of the elements in Hayslip’s autobiographies and Keller’s novel is trauma, which is a common element found in Asian American women’s narrative. According to Caruth (1996), trauma addresses a “reality or truth that is not otherwise available” and which “cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very action and our language” (4). Because of its violent, destructive nature, trauma cannot be “known” or accepted at the time of its occurrence and therefore involves a “certain paradox” that has clear implications for the experience-oriented genre of autobiography. The direct experience or seeing of a violent event may occur as an “absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (91-2). This inability to know trauma or the belatedness in knowing it gives rise to the next interesting element in Asian American women’s narrative, which is silence.

Silence is a key element found in narratives of these marginalized and traumatized “hyphenated identities”. As a result of the peculiarity of Asian American women’s political positionings, their narratives demonstrate silences, masking and concealment as subversive strategies of alternative discourses peculiar to women’s writing. The multiple meanings of silences resonated through their acts of impersonation offer ways of relooking at Asian American women’s

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<sup>6</sup> This concept will be discussed in Chapter 4 of this study.

stories. Hayslip's and Keller's contestation and re-construction of the meaning of women's sexuality in relation to identity, nation and nationalism are mediated by articulations and silences, masking and exposure. Feminist critics (Cheung, Trinh, Duncan) suggest that silence both articulates and conceals various issues particularly related to Asian women. Rather than seeing silences as passive and silencing as oppressive, Cheung (1993) identifies silences in Asian American women's writings as tools of empowerment. Duncan (2004) suggests that silences can act as an alternative discourse to official history. Trinh (1990) says that silence can be seen as the assertion of the will to say and "unsay". There have been studies done with regard to Asian American women's silences in their attempts at re-writing the dominant discourse: Cheung (1992) and (1993), Yamamoto (1999), Chu (2000), Kang (2002) Duncan (2004) on the earliest Asian immigrants to the United States which comprised mostly Chinese and Japanese. Besides Cheung (1993 and 1997), critics, including Stan Yogi (1997), Traise Yamamoto and Patti Duncan (2004) have interpreted silences in strategic ways<sup>7</sup>. This study builds upon their significant contributions in addressing and complicating the notions regarding Asian American women's articulations and silences.

Silences and acts of impersonation have not been analysed as closely related in these works. Although Chen (2005) has expounded on how acts of impersonation are constitutive of identity, she has however, not emphasized acts of impersonation as a form of silence that constitute resistance through transformation and transcendence. Cheung's concept of silences, though closely

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of silence will be discussed in Chapter 4.

linked with acts of impersonation has not been employed to analyse and compare the workings of memory in a novel and an autobiography.

This study traces the origin of “acts of impersonation” from silences and suggests that impersonation as a form of “articulate silence” is an empowering tool to articulate the multiplicity of Asian women’s allegiances and to revise their roles from that of passive victims to national heroines. The association of acts of impersonation with silences in women’s writings has so far not been highlighted. I intend to delineate the discursive power of negotiating between silence and articulation, memory and forgetting to investigate the trope of impersonation as a means of transformation, i.e. the re-invention of self- identity which makes the selected texts complicated texts that provide exciting avenues for investigation and analysis. Through their acts of impersonation as a form of silence, Asian American women writers may articulate and conceal their identity at the same time. Their acts of impersonation enable them to revise and re-inscribe new meanings onto their identities and subjectivity in order to achieve a status which transcends their victimization.

It is hoped that this study will be able to illuminate, apply and merge silence and acts of impersonation to investigate memories and the notions of the “real” in works such as Keller’s novel and Hayslip’s autobiographies which are significant examples of narratives<sup>8</sup> of sexual violence committed against women in times of war. A study of the strategies of silences they employ to re-write their sexuality in these narratives is valuable in tracing not only the resistance and survival but the transformation of the ‘victims’. Keller and Hayslip employ

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<sup>8</sup> The term ‘narratives’ as used in this study, refers to the stories told in both works, “truth” or fiction, which encompasses both the genre of autobiography and novel.

“strategies of reticence” in the form of “acts of impersonation” which may constitute assimilation or resistance or both. Seeking to re-inscribe new meanings onto women’s sexual bodies and identities, their narratives reveal significant findings on the intersecting and entangled relations between gender and nation, sexual bodies and nationalism.

Their silences can signal what I would call “the politics of writing”, which involves the intentions and necessity to manipulate traumatic events, or the inability to grasp the trauma which they know, yet remain unknowable. Silence can occur through the ways memories in cultural productions are manipulated. The concept of silences in Asian American women literature explored by feminist critics has also not included the analysis of the manipulation of memories and co-writers. This study serves as a point of departure that analyses strategic silences, masking and impersonation as women’s poetics and the employment of memories as a basis of narration in an autobiographical work and a novel to portray the re-definition of the meanings of Asian/American women’s sexuality and its interaction with race, stereotypes, and nationalism. The attempts of the female protagonists to counter their erasure and their transcendence from victims to national heroines worthy of honour in historical discourse in Hayslip’s and Keller’s works have yet to be studied. The revisionist nature as a result of the performative and acts of impersonation of both Hayslip’s autobiographies and Keller’s novels has yet to be investigated.

It is significant to explore the differences in representation of a first generation Vietnamese American woman who experienced the assault upon her during the Vietnam War and the imaginations of a second generation Korean

American woman. Their texts are documented ways that show historical concealment and compromises on one hand and revelations on the other. Hayslip may have chosen to erase/eclipse some gaps of American occupation and her trespassed sexuality but Keller struggles to imagine and to fill the gaps. Though of different locations and nationality and time period, both writers point to interesting slants of revealing and concealing and a study of their works reveals strategies that are in many ways, complimentary. The “truth”/fake dichotomy is investigated against the themes and intentions of the authors/narrators. Both are studied as narratives and their distinctiveness will be discussed as they occur in the analysis.

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

This present study has three main objectives which are interwoven and derived from the strategy known as “acts of impersonation”. The three objectives are related to the concepts of silence, memories and “truth” respectively and find their basis in the “acts of impersonation”.

Applying the ideas of Derrida, Cheung (1993), Duncan (2004) and Tina Chen (2005) to analyse the autobiographies of Hayslip and a novel by Keller, this study shall firstly, demonstrate the employment of the acts of impersonation as a strategy of silence enacted for political agendas related to the relationship between women, colonialism and nationalism. This study shall demonstrate how Asian American women writers attempt to re-write the constructions of their sexuality and identity and employ the “weapons of the weak” (James Scott’s term) which are often double-edged in their attempts re-capture the past events in

order to resist perceptions of passivity and victimization. I investigate how Hayslip and Keller articulate and contest the tensions between nation, gender and allegiances in the context of conflicted positionings in order to challenge and mediate inscriptions upon their sexuality and national identity. In the process of looking at the subversive strategies of Hayslip and Keller to contest and re-write women's identity, this study examines the tensions between speech and silences, masking and erasure as poetics of exile and displacement to detail the ways sexuality, sexual experiences and victimization and silences are redefined and reworked. The articulations and the silences inserted within their narratives are examined for their implicit intentions, functions and meanings and their complex relationships with the marginalized Asian American woman. It poses challenges to the dominant powers of language in suppressing the stories of Asian American women. Such an examination opens up various possible meanings of silences in Asian American women's narratives in the context of feminist and postcolonial writings and theories.

Secondly, acts of impersonation are applied in order to investigate the ways the acts of remembering are politically loaded with intentions. The act of selecting certain memories: what is remembered, what is forgotten/obscured and why depends largely on the "politics of remembering" (Smith and Watson 2001, 18). The role of memory in both genres is examined as it is employed to construct both the autobiography and the novel in order to demonstrate the impossibility of memories remaining personal. Hayslip and Keller frequently have to remember, re-imagine and reinvent the "reality" of what took place and in the process, creating the instability of "truth". Investigating the acts of impersonation adopted

by Asian American women writers reveals the manipulation of memories in cultural productions.

This revelation will lead us to the third objective, that is to demonstrate the ways the notions of the “real”, “truth” and “authenticity”, which are associated with productions of memory, should be subjected to active contestation. Notions of authenticity are often not dependable and there is a need to interrogate the “real” as a fixed essence. The act of writing, particularly through the workings of memory, is often slippery as the writer may be torn between “exhibitionism and secrecy, between self-display and self-concealment” (Fox-Genovese 1988, 71). This calls for a mode of reading autobiographies (and novels) not as “simply benign remembrances of things past” but as “self-conscious narratives that construct and assert subjecthood and agency” (Yamamoto 1999, 104) and as a collective political tool to affect thinking and behaviour. The discordant voices in Hayslip’s autobiographies may project a vast spectrum of possible inaccuracies and inauthenticity. Yet, accuracy and authenticity are never guaranteed in the first place, which makes it necessary to explore the instability of memory. The expectation that creative writers represent the authentic and the real is challenged for authentic voices ought to be tempered with investigation into the sites of subversive resistance and “impersonation”. Exploring the methods employed by Asian American women writers to reconstruct their sexuality against the commonly-held belief of the ‘truth’ of dominant discourse requires a critical interrogation of the strategic subversive acts in their narratives which speak of resistance and interrogation of the hegemonic power and dominant discourse. The impossibility of memory to be authentic is highlighted and the notions of the

“real” are problematized, posing questions about how far Hayslip’s autobiographies and Keller’s novel are shaped by “realities”.

The three objectives mentioned above will see their culmination in the transformation and transcendence of the identity of women in Asian American literature from victims to national heroines. Asian and other “third world women” are often portrayed as victims where sexuality is concerned (Mohanty, 1991). There is a need “to listen to the voices of colonized women from deep within their oppressions” (Lim 1993, 249) and the nuances regarding the complicated interactions of nation, gender and sexuality and the representations of women’s sexuality to a nation, especially in relation to a nation’s subjugated position to a superior conqueror are contained in Asian American women’s narratives. In examining the ways traumatic repression is evoked through subversive strategies, this study shall demonstrate the ways Hayslip and Keller represent and negotiate contradictions and complexities between gender, identity and nation and shift their female protagonists from their social and political ambiguous positions as objects to conspicuous national subjects, transforming them from silenced victims to national heroines.

This study will further establish the findings that both autobiographical writings and novels are very much subjected to strategic acts of impersonation. It is clear that the three objectives listed above are closely interwoven and can be united under the key concepts in this study, which are silences, acts of impersonation and performance. These concepts will be discussed further in Chapter 4 of this study.

#### **1.4 Scope and Limitations**

This study focuses on the intersecting issues of race, gender, sexuality, identity, colonialism and nationalism and the way Asian American women's bodies/sexuality have been inscribed culturally and politically. It investigates the methods employed by two Asian American women writers to re-position women characters as national figures by re-inscribing meanings onto their sexuality and identity. As the focus is not on autobiographies per se, theories of autobiography shall be applied where there is relevance.

While this study draws some aspects from trauma and memory studies, it does not base its foundation on the said studies whereby the subjects' psyche and attempts at recreating the traumatic events are emphasized. The main focus of this present study is not the transformation of events but the methods the writers employ to transform their heroines from victims to national heroines.

This study does not intend to homogenize the women's sufferings with a "homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group (Mohanty, 2003, 22). The various significant political and socioeconomic issues that are conveyed (and silenced) in the narratives of Hayslip and Keller shall be investigated only as they relate to issues focused on in this study. Vietnamese and Korean American ethnic group have distinctive sociopolitical, cultural and historical backgrounds. The experiences of Vietnamese women are rooted in specific historicities such as the Vietnam War. The Korean comfort women issue has its distinctive historical background in the colonial, postcolonial and postwar conditions of Korea. The study of the selected Asian American women writers of certain ethnicity is not representational of all Asian American women writers of the same ethnicity or

Asian American women writers as a whole. Each work is studied for its individual, unique context.

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

As Asian American literature explores and mirrors the historical devastation of wars on women's lives, this study pays close attention to the historical, social and political contexts out of which this literature has emerged. The traumatic voices and silences in the narratives of a Vietnamese American and a Korean American women writer are analysed in order to understand the United States' historical involvement in Asia and investigate how these texts deal with issues related to war, sexual trauma and immigration and displacement.

Hayslip and Keller offer us literary representations of these historical events and demonstrate the wounds of women caught in these events who had their sexuality assaulted, used and commodified. Hayslip employs subversive strategies to transform her identity from victim to ambassador of both countries at war, acquiring the position of standing in-between the gap. Keller transforms her protagonist from victim to champion of all comfort women. Both women put themselves in positions of agents to restore their nation's pride, transforming themselves from objects to active agents.

The notions of the "real" and how far life-writings and novels are shaped by "realities" need to be re-investigated and problematized. The exploration and comparison of similar themes and techniques and the selective process of memories, articulations and silences between two different genres problematizes the assumption of authenticity and truth associated with life writing and suggests

that life-writing may be as fictitious, if not more, when compared to a novel. According to Fields, the “faultless reconstruction of memory” is impossible, being constantly interfered by an “individual’s wishes, a group’s suggestions, a moment’s connotations, an environment’s clues, an emotion’s demands, a self’s evolution, a mind manufacture of order” (Fields 1994, 150). Sturken (1997) says that there is no ‘original’ memory to be retrieved; it has already been rewritten and transformed and “the elimination of certain elements” in memory always occurs (8). Literary revisions of historical memories are essentially political acts which can be loaded with intentions to turn past issues into political and social concerns. The study of the employment of impersonation and the performative dimension of two different genres can contribute useful suggestions to future studies of autobiographies and other fictive genres.

Leslie Bow (2004) laments that “more attention is devoted to furthering the concept that we *can* “shuttle between identities” than how we go about it or what it means to make that attempt”, and “discussions about how the subject negotiates between often contradictory positionings become elided” (122). The surge in publication of narratives by Asian American women<sup>9</sup> has seen numerous critical works that analyse the methods they employ to address and resist the persistent and numerous misconceptions regarding their identity and sexuality. This present study displays attempts by Asian American women to redefine and reconstruct their sexuality and its thwarted images. As Asian women’s bodies/sexuality have been encoded and inscripted culturally and politically with

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<sup>9</sup> According to Cheung (1997, 1), there was a time when teachers and scholars lamented of having to teach and write about the same works mostly by Chinese American and Japanese Americans, but today the difficulty lies in “representing and selecting among writers of diverse national origins”.

various meanings, Asian American women writers have sought to decode and re-inscribe new meanings and re-invent themselves. This gives rise to the question of how representations, stereotypical images and intersections of nation, gender, identity and nationalism affect the ways these women position and perform their identities.

The narratives selected for this study are able to provide insights into the inseparable unity of nation and gender, showing that the female body is a “register of international and domestic political struggle, as a site of national divisions and loyalties” (Bow 2001, 10). The study of these narratives regarding Asian American women’s struggles with perceptions and abuse of their sexuality reinforces that ‘sexuality’ delineates a site that is not only physical and psychological but also social and political. It shall further explicate the ways Asian/American women’s sexuality is closely linked to the relations between what is perceived as the Other in relation to both white and non-white, male supremacy and the methods Asian American women writers use to problematize this established equation.

This study will contribute to the continuing protests that sexuality of Others (as they are perceived), are not solely matters of personal choice, but are intrinsically political. It extends far beyond what Kate Millet (1977) terms as inequality of power or dominance of men over women in patriarchy when this is applied to Asian American women. This study may either answer or further problematize the following questions: How have Asian/American women’s sexuality and consequently, their identity been conjured and (mis) interpreted? How have they sought to reconstruct/redefine it? How have their memories and

narration been subjected to “politics of remembering” (Smith and Watson 2001, 16), silenced and obscured? Most importantly, how have they performed their transformation and transcendence over their victimization?

## **1.6 Methodology**

This study is based on the ways two different narrators in two different texts re-negotiate their identity and rewrite their sexuality, one seemingly through assimilation and the other through open resistance. The themes of sexuality/sexual commodification do not exist in isolation from other themes but are closely entwined with issues of memory and articulation and silence and oppressive shame on the other spectrum. A key element found in trauma narratives is the tension and conflict, silences and articulation between forgetting and remembering. The tropes of silence and forgetting, articulation and remembering and reconciliation are found in both narratives and shall be explored in my analysis of Hayslip’s and Keller’s narratives. The acts of impersonation and its application to the texts of Hayslip and Keller will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Literary works such as Keller’s *Comfort Woman* have a role to play not only in drawing attention to injustices committed against Korean women during World War II, but to reveal Western colonization and its effects on the lives of the victimized women. Similarly, Hayslip’s autobiographies shed light on the Vietnam War and the interaction between nation, nationalism and women. These not only serve to provide accounts of the interrelation between nation, nationalism and women, but they reveal revisionist strategies of Asian American women writers to re-write and reconstruct women’s identity and subjectivity as related to the nation.

The differences between Hayslip and Keller are not undermined in this study. Their texts are selected despite and because of their vast differences. Hayslip and Keller, who belong to different generations of Asian immigrants to America, dramatize the traumatic assaults on women's sexuality in different wars and different Asian countries. Their works inevitably reveal the tendency of Asian American women writers to adopt various subversive strategies to represent the faceless and voiceless Asian women victimized in times of war. Despite their differences, they have capitalized on silences and the instability of memory to rewrite and transform the identity of their female protagonists from victims to national heroines.

## **1.7 Definition of Some Key Terms**

### **1.7.1 Silenced Victims**

The idea of victimization and silence seem synonymous. However, the concept of silence as related to contemporary feminist theories with regard to women's poetics is fraught with various controversies. These controversies are discussed in Cheung's (1993) study and subsequently in Yamamoto's (1999) and Duncan's (2004). Kang (2002) says that [t]he repeated rallying cries of "breaking silence", "coming to voice", and "making visible" presuppose some absences, repression and marginalization as the ontological rational and political motivation for particular articulations of self and community" (20).

Cheung advocates that we see silence not only as a theme that speaks of the hindrances to female expressions, but as a strategy of writing and urges us to pay close attention to silences in narratives of Asian American women which

have been misconstrued as passivity. Yamamoto employs the trope of masking (as a form of silence) to investigate Japanese American women's writing that articulate the complex relationships between language and the body, gender, identity and nationalism. What is significant in the concept of silences as employed by these feminist critics is that silences result in open-endedness and multiplicity.

The term "silenced victims" as used in this present study speaks of the normally misunderstood notion of silence as meaning weak and passive and associated with being a victim. It does not mean powerlessness and voicelessness but rather shows that silences can be a form of strategic empowerment of the protagonists in the selected texts who are re-inventing their identity from that of perceived victims to that of national heroines.

#### 1.7.2 National Heroines

The meaning of "national heroines" as employed in this study is not conceptualized in a vacuum, but is always in relation to and/or opposed to the concept of women's sexuality as subjected to the idea of nationhood which relegate women as objects of national belonging. Hayslip and Keller deconstruct masculinist nationalism and reclaim nationalist issues as women's issues. Their narratives function as feminist correction and revision to the meanings of women's sexuality and identity as closely related to a nation.

### 1.7.3 Nation

According to Bhabha (1990), a “nation” refers to a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging” (45). The elements that constitute a nation are never fixed and should be open to debate. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1998), it is the “myth” of nationhood, which is “masked” by ideology that perpetuates nationalism. There are specific “identifiers” employed to erect concepts of homogeneity in a particular society (150). These signifiers of homogeneity do not represent the diversity and instability of what a nation is and create boundaries and borders which are both physical and mental. The “imagined political community” that Anderson (1991) talks about pave the way for how the nation is referred to in this study. The meaning of “nation” is not only fluid but subjective, constantly imagined and re-defined by the selected authors.

### 1.7.4 Sexuality

The terms “sexuality” and “women’s bodies” as used in this study are closely associated with the stereotypical patriarchal transcription upon Asian women in relation to not only the masculine but colonization. Sexuality and sexual practice, “rather than being ‘natural’, are cultural constructs” (Palmer 1989, 47). Irigaray (1991) notes that “female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters”. Women have been defined as the Other (the negativity to be transcended), an imperfect man (a man without a penis) an object of exchange among men. These “phallogocentric concepts” view women sexually as “lack” and “absent” due to the absence of external sexual organ of recognized value and result in “cultural subordination of women’s bodies

and their sexuality to the needs and fantasies of men”. Cheung (1997) says that the “hyperfeminization of Asian women in popular American culture” is as demeaning as the emasculation of Asian American men and is in need of refutation (11).

The terms “sexuality” and “women’s bodies” are used interchangeably in this study. Sexuality of Asian American women is a site of active controversy and contestation. Two crucial areas of emphasis for Asian American feminists are “the damage inflicted upon Asian American women by orientalist representations of Asian women, and the stereotyping of Asian women and femininity” (Grice 2002, 24). Duncan (2004) asserts that sexuality for the Asian American woman must be contextualized against “a history of denigrating stereotypes about Asian women’s deviant sexuality, erotic sensibilities and exotic sexual practices”. Globally, Asian women are seen to be linked to the sex industry because of stereotypes and through “imperialist and capitalist expansion into Asian nations” (174). Pornography is often racialized, and “Asian women are most often portrayed as victims of abuse and torture” (174).

#### 1.7.5 Identity

This study concurs with Trinh’s argument against identity as fixed and stable in favour of “hybrid realities” and “hyphenated identities” (Trinh 2000, 1213). According to Trinh, identity is dependent on the relationship between the self and other and the enactment of power relations. It is a notion that relies on the concept of an “essential, authentic core” “that requires the elimination of all that is considered foreign or not true to the self” (1210). The understanding of identity

pre-supposes that there is a clear dividing line between what is authentic and what is not and the further one moves away from the core, the less likely is one able to be one's real, genuine, original, authentic self as opposed to that which is "superfluous, fake, corrupted, or Westernized" (1210).

However, according to Stuart Hall, identity is "a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (1994, 392). The concept of identity as adopted in this study is one that is fluid and highly unstable, always in a state of flux and always being created and re-created through various subversive means.

#### 1.7.6 Acts of Impersonation

Acts of impersonation refer to specific acts of assuming "a public identity that does not necessarily belong to "someone else" but that has been assigned to and subsequently adopted by the performer in question in order to articulate an identity comprehensible to the public" (Chen 2005, xviii). It is a "performative strategy" (Chen, xvi) which establishes the notion that there is no fixed "truth". It is not a false act but an act wherein roles are performed, blurring boundaries between the "real" and the "fake", authentic" and "inauthentic". It interrogates the possibilities of being one or the other and its subject eludes definition. In this study, I relate this concept to Derrida's deconstructive method of reading in which there is no "truth" which is absolute but that any transcendental reading of a text can be countered by another reading which de-constructs the original claims. This concept will be discussed at length in Chapter 4.