WHEN THE ASIAN GIRL SPEAKS: A Comparative Analysis of Two Young Adult Novels in English Written by Asian Women

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes two contemporary award winning young adult novels in English: *Sing to the Dawn* by Minfong Ho, and *A Step from Heaven* by An Na. *Sing to the Dawn*, published in Singapore, won first prize in the 1975 Council of Interracial Books for Children in New York; while *A Step from Heaven*, published in New York, won the 2002 Michael L. Printz Award.

By using feminist and critical stylistics, this paper aims to answer the following questions: Do Asians retain their "voice" even when they write in English and live in foreign lands? Given this situation, how do they make their voice heard? How do the two women Asian writers represent the voice of their young female protagonists? Is the voice still distinctly Asian in spite of speaking in English and being written by Asian writers who have long lived in America? When the Asian girl speaks, who listens? Literally and figuratively speaking, has the Asian female finally found her voice?

By answering these questions, this paper aims to identify at least some aspects of the Asian "voice" in English and determine the Asian female identity represented in the two young adult novels.

Keywords: Children's literature, critical stylistics, feminist stylistics, young adult literature

The Asian girl speaks. But who listens?

This is one of the questions that this paper would like to answer by exploring, comparing, and contrasting two young adult novels: *Sing to the Dawn* by Minfong Ho (who is Chinese by parentage, was born in Burma, but now lives in New York), and *A Step from Heaven* by An Na (who was born in Korea but now lives in California). *Sing to the Dawn*, which was first published in 1975, won first prize in the Council of Interracial Books for Children in New York; while *A Step from Heaven*, which was published in 2001, won the 2002 Michael L. Printz Award (an annual award in the United States for a book that exemplifies literary excellence in young adult literature).

Using critical and feminist stylistics, together with Gérard Genette's concept of the narrative voice, this paper aims to answer the following questions:

1. Do Asian women writers retain their "voice" even when they write in English and live in a foreign land? Given this situation, how do they make their voice heard ?
2. How do the two women Asian writers represent the voice of their young female protagonists? Is the voice still distinctly Asian, in spite of speaking in English and being written by Asian writers who have long lived in the United States of America?
3. When the Asian girl speaks, who listens?
4. Literally and figuratively speaking, has the Asian female finally found her voice?

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YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: THE TWO NOVELS

Sing to the Dawn and *A Step from Heaven* are both examples of young adult (YA) fiction. YA literature used to be referred to as adolescent literature or juvenile fiction--terms that were dropped for being too derogatory (Pacis, 2006, p. 88). Nowadays, YA fiction is more often described as that which is written for readers with ages roughly ranging from 14 to 18 years. This kind of fiction was born in both Britain and America in the 1970s. It is marked by taboo-breaking realism in the depiction of teenage social experience and

conflict, and by documentary explicitness in the presentation of emotions and sexual development (Hollindale, 1996, p. 315). In the Philippines, however, YA literature published locally often targets readers with ages roughly between 10 and 19 years, a range based on the World Health Organization (WHO) subclassifications of early adolescence (10-14), and of late adolescence (15-19) (Pacis, 2006, p. 88). The protagonists in YA novels usually have ages within the same range; this is true for both *Sing to the Dawn* and *A Step from Heaven*.

Aside from having protagonists that fall between the ages of 10 and 19 years, both novels also depict internal and external conflicts experienced by the young female protagonists. *Sing to the Dawn* focuses on Dawan, a fourteen year old girl living in a village in Thailand. Together with the people in her village, she experiences frustrations, hardships, and injustices. She wants to be given the chance to make a difference in her village, to help her people fight oppression. Thus, Dawan seeks the opportunity to continue her education at a city high school by taking a special examination. But she must compete with her younger brother Kwai, who also takes the test; and by doing so, Dawan faces the disapproval of her father, who is convinced that city life and further schooling are not for a girl. Dawan's determination to overcome these obstacles and to prove to herself, as well as to others, that she is worthy of seeking the prize, is important to her. She seeks the help of several people, among them the head monk of the temple. Alhough she is not able to solicit the help of such people, she is finally able to obtain the permission of her father to go to the city to study. The story ends with Dawan riding a bus to the city, waving goodbye to her brother Kwai, and noticing that the first few petals of the lotus that she takes with her have already begun to unfold.

A Step from Heaven, like *Sing to the Dawn*, focuses on a young female protagonist, Young Ju Park. When the story begins, she is only four years old. From the adults' conversation, she hears the phrase *Mi Gook*—Korean for "America"—and comes to believe that it means "Heaven." Yet, it would turn out to be far from being heaven for her and her family. Young Ju and her parents move to Southern California the next year and find life in "Heaven" utterly difficult, as they face several hardships and challenges both as individuals and as a family. The problems that they had in Korea—her father's excessive drinking and the domestic violence that her mother suffers from—become even worse. The happiness that the family had when Young Ju's younger brother was born, is short-lived. Soon, Young Ju's father

is hurting not just his wife but his children as well. The problem continues until Young Ju finally finds her "voice" and speaks about this problem that no one in her family dares to talk about. Like Dawan in *Sing to the Dawn*, Young Ju also leaves home to seek further schooling; she goes to college in another city after she obtains a scholarship. It is then that she realizes that in spite of the problems they have had, she belongs to a family of dreamers; and that the palms of her mother's hands, rough as sandpaper, are the hands of dreams come true.

The two stories, although written by writers of different nationalities and twenty-six years apart in publication, share many similarities: they focus on the internal and external conflicts of a young female protagonist; she seeks the approval and affection of her father; she must compete with her younger brother; her mother is too submissive to her husband; she has a grandmother with whom she shares a special and close relationship; she seeks to fulfill her dreams by leaving home and seeking further education; she challenges the patriarchal status quo; and she gradually finds her voice and bravely makes a choice.

CRITICAL AND FEMINIST STYLISTICS AND THE NARRATIVE VOICE: APPROACHES TO YOUNG ADULT NOVELS

Sing to the Dawn and *A Step from Heaven* both lend themselves to analysis using critical and feminist stylistics. Critical stylisticians, according to Weber (1996), "reject the mimetic view of language as value-free, transparent medium reflecting reality. They deny the possibility of a neutral representation of reality, and consequently see their own role as being demystificatory: to unmask ideologies, to denaturalize common-sense assumptions and, ultimately, to enable and empower readers" (p. 4). This concern of critical stylisticians with ideology and representation is shared by feminist stylisticians, who are also interested in unmasking (patriarchal) ideologies and denaturalizing (patriarchal) assumptions (Weber, p. 5). Yet, more than unmasking such ideologies, they also intend to critique gender relations to enable "a change to be brought about within relations between men and women" (Mills and Mullany, 2011. p. 65).

The assertions of critical and feminist stylisticians are complemented by Gérard Genette's theory of narratology. Like the critical and feminist stylisticians, Genette asserts that literature cannot imitate reality, "Narrative does not 'represent' a (real or fictive) story, it recounts it – that is, it signifies

it by means of language [...]. There is no place for imitation in narrative [...]" (qtd. in Guillemette, n.p.). Central to this theory is Genette's concept of the narrative voice—which addresses the question, *Who is speaking?* Narrative voice is said to be in conjunction with (1) the time of narration (*When does the telling occur, relative to the story?*); and (2) the narrative perspective (*Through whom are we perceiving?*)—and these three consist the narrative instance. The examination of the narrative instance is meant to help one gain a better understanding of the relations between the narrator and the story given in a narrative (Guillemette, n.p.).

In using critical and feminist stylistics and Genette's concept of the narrative voice, this paper will focus on the language used in the two YA novels—particularly the language used in the dialogues of the young female protagonists with the other characters, or with themselves (internal dialogue). Because this paper aims to identify at least some aspects of the Asian "voice" in English and determine the Asian female identity depicted in the two YA novels, it is but proper to focus on the dialogues in which this voice speaks and is heard. The dialogues, just like the whole novel to which they belong, are a repository of cultural identity. Considering that the novel is YA and targets teenage readers, the repository likewise becomes a way of orienting these young people to their supposed cultural and gendered identity. Thus, by focusing on the language, i.e. the dialogues used in YA fiction, one is able to explore not only the kind of identity and culture represented by writers (who themselves are constructed by the culture of their community), but also how the readers are themselves constructed by the language that they use, i.e. the language that they speak, hear, read, and write. Mills and Mullany (2011), in discussing contemporary issues in language, gender, and feminism, assert that, "by studying language use, one could discover a great deal about the ways in which societies function and the way that individuals and groups construct identities and cultures" (p. 1).

Using both critical and feminist stylistics and Genette's concept of narrative voice in the comparative analysis of the two YA novels can help unmask the ideology that lies hidden or woven into the narrative. By ideology what is meant here is "the system of beliefs by which people explain, account for, and justify their behavior and interpret and assess that of others" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 35). Using critical and feminist stylistics can help explore and unmask not just the ideology behind the narrative in general, but also the gender ideology—the set of beliefs that govern people's participation in the gender order, and by which they explain and justify their

participation (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, p. 35). It is important to unmask this gender ideology because YA literature, just like children's literature in general, can reinforce gender ideology; and this, in turn, may help "teach girls to undervalue themselves and teach boys to believe that they must always strive to be stereotypically masculine" (Stewart et al., 2003, p. 135).

One way of unmasking the gender ideology found in the young adult novels is to analyze the layers of identity represented in the narrative. Hecht et al. (1993) identified four layers of identity: (1) personal identity or an individual's conception of self often called self-concept—this level captures who a person thinks that s/he is; (2) enacted identity or how an identity is expressed in language and communication; (3) relational identity or identities in reference to each other; and (4) communal identity or identities as defined by collectives (Joseph, 2004, pp. 80-81).

THE ASIAN GIRLS SPEAK: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The Narrative Voice

Although *Sing to the Dawn* and *A Step from Heaven* share several similarities as identified earlier, there is one basic difference that they have—point of view. *Sing to the Dawn* is told from the third person, limited omniscient point of view (much of the story is told from the perspective of the protagonist Dawan); while *A Step from Heaven* is told from the first person point of view, with the protagonist herself, Young Ju Park, telling the story through the "I" narrator. Thus, in *Sing to the Dawn*, the narrator is absent from the story she tells; while in *A Step from Heaven*, the narrator is present as the main character of the story she tells. Genette calls the former type of narrative, *heterodiegetic*, and the latter, *homodiegetic*; in addition, since the narrator Young Ju Park is also the heroine of the story, she is also an *autodiegetic* narrator. Genette asserts that every narrative implies a narrator and that all narratives are necessarily *diegesis* (telling) and not *mimesis* (showing), because a narrative does not represent a story but recounts it—it signifies the story by means of language (Guillemette, n.p.). In Sing to the Dawn, it is as if the reader is listening to someone (the heterodiegetic narrator) recount the story of Dawan; while in A Step from Heaven, the reader gets to hear the story directly from the main character, Young Ju (the autodiegetic narrator) herself. How does such a difference in the narrative voice affect the telling of the story and the "reception" of the listeners/readers?

The Gendered Identity

> *It* was her <u>own</u> song, one which she had made up herself, but so <u>gradually</u> and <u>unconsciously</u> that it had always seemed to her that she was born knowing *it* (Ho, p. 9).

This is how the heterodiegetic narrator describes Dawan, the young female protagonist in Sing to the Dawn. This particular passage highlights two things: Dawan and her song. At the level of lexical choices, such highlighting is achieved through the repetition of pronouns—the first set (her, she, herself) of which refers to Dawan, and the second set (it) of which refers to her song. The other lexical choices—the use of the modifiers own, gradually, unconsciously—further emphasize Dawan's "ownership" of the song. Thus, Dawan has her own song, a song that she has made up herself, a song that she sings with her own voice. Through this song she speaks—she is able to show others that she is able and capable.

Yet, Dawan does not seem to realize this herself. Because in the same chapter, her younger brother Kwai, who is in the same grade level in school as Dawan, tells her, "Don't always be so afraid of speaking out in class, Sister." They have both taken the special examination that could mean getting a scholarship to study in the city. Their conversation takes this turn:

> "Stop talking as if I had already won that scholarship!" Kwai interrupted. "There are plenty of other students in our village who might get it, you know."
>
> "Like who?" Dawan challenged.
>
> Kwai fell silent, as if he was mentally considering every member of his class who might win. Finally he blurted, "How about you, Sister? You could win."
>
> "Me?" Dawan flushed. "But I'm a girl." (Ho, pp. 13-14)

From this dialogue the reader can surmise that although Dawan did take the special examination, she did not really think that she would win the scholarship simply because she is a girl. Dawan's lack of confidence in her ability to pass the test is reflected in the structure of her utterances. Compared to the utterances of Kwai, which are longer and consist mostly of simple and complex sentences, Dawan's utterances consist of a simple phrase (*Like who?*) and a simple word (*Me?*). In effect, Dawan is enacting

her gendered identity—she is expressing and communicating her self-concept; that is, being a girl, she cannot possibly win the scholarship because girls are not supposed to have further education, because girls are expected to be simply housewives and mothers in the future. And one can surmise that Kwai had to remind Dawan earlier in the dialogue not to be afraid of speaking out in class precisely because she likewise knows that a girl like her is not expected to speak out her mind; and that if ever she does, nobody listens. Yet, Dawan gradually finds her voice. In the second chapter of the novel she does try to speak out in class:

> Hesitantly, Dawan raised her hand. To her surprise, she was acknowledged immediately. She stood up, one of the few times that she had ever done so in class. Acutely aware of her own voice, she asked her teacher, "But sir, why does the landlord own the land? What makes him the landlord? What makes him own all the land instead of us?" (Ho, p.17).

The words and phrases that the heterodiegetic narrator used to describe Dawan in this passage—hesitantly, to her surprise, acutely aware of her own voice—show that Dawan lacks self-confidence. Note that these modifiers are foregrounded in this particular passage—all of them are positioned at the beginning of the sentence as if the narrator would like to have the readers see Dawan the way her classmates and teacher are seeing her at the moment: she is slow to proceed (i.e., hesitant) and seems to find the experience of speaking before the class "painful" (based on the associative meaning of acutely). Speaking out, therefore, is a "struggle" for her because she is not used to doing it; and she is "acutely aware of her own voice" because she seldom speaks aloud in class and when she does, she does not expect her classmates and much less her male teacher, to listen to her. This is the reason why she was surprised when the male teacher immediately acknowledged her when she raised her hand to ask some questions. She must have been "trained" by her family and her community to simply listen, not to speak out. She has not really been encouraged to ask questions and to speak her mind. Thus, through Dawan's personal and enacted identities, the reader is able to get a glimpse of her relational and communal identities as well—she sees herself as a "nobody" in relation to the males in the community; and the community seems to collectively believe that males are "obviously" superior to females and are therefore "naturally" entitled to privileges such as that of further education. Such is the "training" that the community provides Dawan and other young females like her.

Such "training" is also seen in *A Step from Heaven*. When the story begins Young Ju, the young female protagonist, is only four years old. In different instances in the first few chapters, the supposed autodiegetic narrator Young Ju has been told the following:

> Young Ju, no more questions. (Na, p. 22)
>
> Young Ju, that is a stupid question, Apa says. (Na, p. 25)
>
> Young Ju, Apa says. I do not want to hear any more nonsense from you. (Na, p. 26)

A very young child like Young Ju is naturally curious. Yet, she is discouraged from asking questions. If she is able to ask a question, it is dismissed as being stupid. It is important to note that the first dialogue was from Young Ju's Uhmma or her mother, while that last two were from her Apa or father. Both parents—people with whom Young Ju has lived in the early years of her life—are not encouraging her to speak out and ask questions.

The "training" not to speak out, perhaps not even to dream of being heard, is not something that is always explicit. Part of the reason the "training" is effective is that it can also be very subtle—a girl simply has to observe the adult models in her environment, particularly her mother, to know how the family and the community expect her to behave. For instance, when Dawan informed her father that she had won the scholarship and that she could study in the city, the actions of the adults in the family (with the exception of the grandmother) spoke loud and clear:

> Dawan looked timidly at her father and this time their eyes met and interlocked. There was a long pause, then he spat out, "You took your brother's chance away from him!" He flung down the hammer he had been holding, and stalked away to the rice fields.
>
> The grandmother, mother, and daughter, all watched him stride away; the silence between them was broken only by the wet plop of the tiny frog jumping back into its puddle. Dawan kept quiet, for she was afraid of angering her other elders. For a while no one stirred, then the grandmother putting a palm flat on each knee, slowly straightened up from her tree stump, and walked with slow careful steps over to Dawan.

> "Child," she said, touching her granddaughter's hand lightly, "I'm proud of you."
>
> "You should not encourage her so!" Dawan's mother called from the veranda. "You know her father won't let her go. She'll be even more disappointed if you praise her now. At least spare her that."
>
> Dawan felt her heart sinking, not from fear of her mother's anger, but at this suppressed bitterness. Why did her mother sometimes talk as if hope was a disease, Dawan wondered. How was it that she could be so loving and full of laughter one moment, and then so biting and sour the next. And sometimes, like now, even both at once? (Ho, pp. 29-30).

This particular passage from the story speaks volumes of how women are expected to behave in a family. The lexical choices associated with Dawan and the other two women in the family (looked timidly, watched, silence between them, kept quiet, afraid of angering her other elders, walked with slow careful steps, felt her heart sinking), in contrast to those associated with her father (spat out, flung down the hammer, stalked away), show the contrast in the positions of men and women in the family. Even if there were three women against just one man in the family, all three women simply kept quiet. No one dared to oppose the man in the family. What made matters worse was, instead of the parents being happy for their daughter who won the scholarship, they accused her of taking her brother's chance away from him, thereby implying that it is only the son, the male child, that should be so privileged.

Once again, the words and phrases used by the heterodiegetic narrator to describe Dawan represent her personal identity—timidly, kept quiet, afraid of angering her elders, felt her heart sinking. The associative meanings of these lexical choices (e.g., lack of courage and self-confidence, full of apprehension) highlight the psychological "pain" that Dawan has to go through, simply because she is beginning to assert her right to a good education and her right to be heard in the family. The same words and phrases that the narrator used to describe Dawn in this passage could have described her mother. As Dawan wonders why "her mother sometimes talks as if to hope was a disease," and how she could be both "loving" and "so biting and sour" both at once, the irony of the situation becomes clear—her mother has always been timid and fearful of her husband; and she perhaps thinks that

in order to spare her daughter from the same oppressive situations, she has to "train" her to behave submissively early on in her life. Dawan's mother apparently believes that it is better not to allow her daughter to hope at all, if only to spare her from the disappointment later on, disappointments which perhaps she has had more than enough of her share even before she got married to Dawan's father.

Now, why is the maternal grandmother giving Dawan hope? Why is the old woman not supporting her son-in-law? Later in the same passage she tells Dawan's mother, "I do what I think right." Is she not a product of a patriarchal family? Why does she believe that it is right to praise Dawan for her achievement and to encourage her to pursue her dreams? Why does she make Dawan's mother realize that what the latter is doing to her daughter is wrong?

Perhaps the grandmother has witnessed how oppressive a patriarchal setup has been and thinks that it is about time that girls like her granddaughter Dawan be given the same opportunities as the males in the family. Perhaps she wants to give the next generation the opportunities that her generation and that of Dawan's mother have not had.

Young Ju, in *A Step from Heaven* has had a similar experience. Her "training" to be a "good daughter" also includes observing the women in her family. Like Dawan, Young Ju has a submissive mother and a very supportive paternal grandmother, her Halmoni. In the second chapter of the novel, the reader gets a glimpse of the relational and gendered identities of the different members of Young Ju's family:

> Apa is not happy.
>
> Uhmma is not happy.
>
> Halmoni, who is old and has a sleepy blanket face, says that a long time ago Apa was young like me and she could boss him around. But not anymore.
>
> Now, Halmoni can only shake her head when Apa comes home late stinking like the insides of the bottles that get left on the street. Her lips pinch tight, then she hides with Uhmma and me. Because when Apa is too quiet with the squinty eye, it is better to hide until he falls asleep or else there will be breaking everywhere. Halmoni always says, That Apa of

> yours needs a good spanking. If only your Harabugi had not passed away. (Na, p. 8)

This passage is narrated from the point of view of the four-year-old Young Ju, supposedly by an autodiegetic narrator. Young Ju observes how everyone in the family is not happy, and it is implied that the main reason for this is that her Apa is not happy. Thus, it is shown how the male figure in the family can greatly affect the happiness of the other members of the family who happen to be all females. Three generations of females are no match for this one male (a situation similar to Dawan's family)—Young Ju's father—who comes home drunk. Not even the grandmother, who should have the power over her son by virtue of her age and relationship to him, could do anything to discipline him and bring him to his senses. Halmoni wishes that her husband were alive to do this for her (again, it is expected and believed that only another male can have power over this problem male in the family). In the meantime, the three females hide and pretend to be asleep because they do not want to anger the drunkard, lest he starts breaking things in the house and hurting his wife again. Later in the same chapter this is precisely what happens. Young Ju's mother gets tired of pretending to be asleep and confronts her husband. Young Ju and her paternal grandmother helplessly listen to what is happening and do nothing even if "the breaking is too hard." Young Ju has not found her voice yet.

Aside from not yet being able to find their voice in the beginning of the story, both Dawan and Young Ju problematize their mothers. Dawan wonders why her mother sometimes talks as if to hope is a disease (Ho, p. 30); while Young Ju in one chapter says, "I hate when Uhmma makes too much sense. I try to get her to think big." (Na, p. 77). Both girls know that something is not right about their mothers' behavior; yet, the young females do not speak about their observation; it remains a part of their internal dialogue, something that the narrator in each narrative seems to emphasize. The young Asian female protagonists have yet to find their voice, even if what they have to say concerns "just an older female."

It took some time, but the young Asian female protagonists did find their voice. In *Sing to the Dawn,* the heterodiegetic narrator highlights Dawan's gradual finding of her voice:

> "Mother, I am going now," Dawan said, her voice small but determined. (Ho, p. 32)

> "I want to see for myself," she said. And her voice was soft, but firm. (Ho, p. 46)

In terms of narration, the heterodiegetic narrator makes use of what Genette classifies as reported speech, which means that the narrator distances herself from the story she tells. Yet, the same narrator seems to emphasize that in these dialogues, Dawan's voice need not even be loud—it is "small" and "soft"—but what is remarkable and far more important is that the voice is both "determined" and "firm." This is the first step—the courage to speak, no matter how small or soft her voice is. Later, this voice becomes a little louder, not in terms of volume, but in terms of what it has to say; it becomes braver, more assertive, more powerful:

> "It's hard to change things, even the smallest thing, without changing the overall pattern that these things are a part of. I keep thinking that there must be a whole order to this, a system with rules and laws mapped out in it. And I want to study how the system works and moves, and then I think I could help to find a better one." (Ho, p. 46).

> "I'm every bit as good as you are!" (Ho, p. 51).

> "It's not that people are born smarter or dumber than one another. It's the way different chances have been given or denied people that make them so different after a while." (Ho, p. 63).

> "All right, Grandmother, I'll be strong, and brave." (Ho, p. 102).

> "Father, if you keep thinking that I'll never be capable of doing anything worthwhile, then of course I really won't." (Ho, p. 106)

> "There's a wide, wide world out there, Father, and so many things I want to learn and see and do. If you can share in your son's dreams why can't you share in mine too? Don't keep me caged now, let me have my chance to fly out too!" (Ho, p. 106).

In these dialogues, Dawan progresses from simply having her internal dialogues to speaking to sympathetic people like her grandmother, her teacher, and her newfound friend, the girl Bao; to people who oppose and discourage her like her mother, her younger brother, and the head monk; to the male figure who "oppressed" her—her own father. Finally, near the end of the story, she finds her voice—it is loud and clear and powerful. It fights for what is rightfully hers; and it demands its freedom to be heard. For instance when Dawan said, "I want to study how the system works," her not using a modal shows how she has gained some kind of confidence and how she has begun to assert herself. The exclamatory sentence, "I'm every bit as good as you are!" shows how her voice has literally become louder. When she claims that, "It's the way different chances have been given or denied people that make them so different after a while," Dawan shows that she has begun to question the "training" she has had in her family and her community. When she promised her grandmother that she will be strong and brave, and when she boldly tells her father to share her own dreams and allow her to fly out, the reader hears her assertive and confident voice loud and clear. Thus, these dialogues also show that as Dawan finds her voice, she is also empowered. Power then, as Mills and Mullany (2011) assert, "is something that is fluid and needs to be enacted within interaction; it is not simply something that one person 'possesses' in relation to another"—power is "enacted and contested in every interaction" (p. 57). As Dawan enacts her newfound identity and contests her father's views as to who between his two children has the right to further education, she is able not only to claim her right to that education, she is also able to "grab" power from her father and use it to her advantage.

Things were a little different for Young Ju in *A Step from Heaven*. She also had to fight the "oppression" as when her younger brother was born and her Apa tells the family that his son could be president:

> I can be president, Apa, I call out.
>
> Apa's eyes are back home. Pointing at me. He laughs. You are a girl, Young Ju (Na, p. 38).

Young Ju refuses to be put down. She knows she can be great although she is not the son in the family:

> I listen to Uhmma and think, I cannot be the great son, but I can do important things. Then I will be the famous Park in the family. Maybe even better than the first son (Na, p. 45).

And she continues to question her Apa's way of thinking about boys and girls:

> I don't understand why Apa thinks boys and girls cannot be treated the same. Why they are so different (Na, p. 55).

Yet, although Young Ju has yet to find the courage to speak out loud about and against the different kind of treatment that a son and a daughter get from their father, it is not the worst of Young Ju's problem. Unlike Dawan in *Sing to the Dawn*, Young Ju's problem was not just a matter of finding her voice and fighting for what is rightfully hers. It was more a matter of protecting herself, her mother, and her younger brother from her violent father. The domestic violence which Young Ju witnessed when she was just a child in preschool in Korea, continues even after she and her parents have moved to California. Young Ju's inability to find her voice is also her inability to stop her father from physically abusing not only her mother, but also Young Ju's younger brother Joon, and Young Ju herself. In the chapter titled "My Best Is Always Not Enough," Young Ju witnesses another violent episode between her parents:

> Where were you? Uhmma asks.
>
> That is not your concern, Apa slurs.
>
> You have an early-morning gardening job tomorrow and you get drunk the night before. What kind of responsible man are you?
>
> I told you, woman, Apa growls low. That is not your concern.
>
> I hear Apa cursing loudly as he steps into the living room. I take a few steps back, turn, and flee quietly to my room. Safely behind my door, my heart finally slows.
>
> The crashing is loud and strong. I plug my ears but can still hear Apa's loud yelling. Who do you think you are? Questioning me. Slap.
>
> Stop it, I say to myself. Go out there and stop it. But I do nothing. Say nothing. Only listen to the walls like a shameful mouse (Na, pp. 95-96).

Young Ju, just as what she and her Halmoni did when she was four years old in Korea, helplessly listened in her room. The phrases she used in describing herself—flee quietly to my room, I plug my ears, like a shameful mouse—show how helpless she felt and how she has not found her voice yet. She did nothing to stop the violence committed against her mother. Later in the same chapter, her Uhmma begs her, "Do not speak of this to anyone." Thus, the violence continues because the victim herself, Young Ju's mother, refuses to find her voice and prevents her own daughter from finding hers. The violence continues until Young Ju herself becomes a victim of it:

> Before I can stop my tongue, I question Apa as though I'm in school with Amanda. I ask, Why do you need the car?
>
> The skin around Uhmma's eyes wrinkles in concern, her lips gather together in a knot. The slight shake of her head warns me to stop. But it is too late.
>
> Apa grips his beer. His eyes narrow and a smooth, tight voice snakes out. It is always why with you. Stand up, Apa orders.
>
> I slowly push back my chair and stand in my place by the table.
>
> Come here, Apa says.
>
> I take small, careful steps, avoiding any glances at Uhmma or Joon. I stop when I see Apa's gold-toe socks.
>
> You, Apa shouts and hits the side of my head with his knuckles, will never question me (Na, p. 109).

This chapter ends with Apa telling Young Ju not to get up until "you know how to be a Korean girl again." By "a Korean girl" her father means someone who is submissive to her father, never questioning her father. Young Ju, however, does "get up," because later in the novel she had this dialogue with her Uhmma:

> What do you want, Young Ju? Uhmma says harshly.
>
> I open my mouth to speak, but the words are lost. I sit on the floor and begin to cry.
>
> Uhmma does not move. She holds herself stiffly, waiting for me to stop.

> Young Ju, go get ready for church, Uhmma says finally. Go now.
>
> I fiddle with the end of my shirt, trying to gather the courage to ask a question. I wipe my tears with my sleeve but remain sitting.
>
> Uhmma stands and moves to the small mirror on top of her dresser. She picks up her lipstick as though to finish putting on her makeup.
>
> Why does Apa do it? I finally whisper and look to Uhmma for answer.
>
> Uhmma stares into the mirror, lipstick tight in her hand. Young Ju, go now, Uhmma says.
>
> But I will not leave this time. Will not pretend. The sight of the dark bruises, some as big as an iron across her back, lingers on the inside of my eyelids, each blink heavy with the weight of it all.
>
> Why does Apa do it? I ask again, louder. . . .
>
> As Uhmma straightens the clutter of makeup on her dresser, she says, Your life can be different, Young Ju. Study and be strong. In America, women have choices.
>
> I stand up. Stare straight at Uhmma. You have choices, Uhmma. (Na, pp. 127-129)

In this dialogue with her mother, Young Ju finally finds the voice and the courage to ask her Uhmma why her father physically abuses them. Just like Dawan, Young Ju has to first suffer the psychological "pain" of asserting herself and finding her voice. Her lexical choices as the autodiegetic narrator, highlight both the pain—I sit on the floor and begin to cry, I fiddle with the end of my shirt--and the gradual emergence of her courageous voice—I wipe my tears with my sleeve, But I will not leave this time, Will not pretend, I stand up. Stare straight at Uhmma.

Young Ju refuses to continue to pretend that there is nothing wrong happening in her family. The problem has to be discussed, although her mother does not want to do so. Just as Young Ju tells her Uhmma that even

a Korean wife like her has a choice, she in effect is also asserting that she has that right to choose. And choose she did, because in the chapter titled "Disclosure," she finally chooses to put an end to the violence committed against her and her mother. Her father finds out that she has disobeyed his order not to see her American friend Amanda anymore and he beats her:

> The rain blows on my face, shoulders, and head forces my body to the ground. My hands slide into the shag carpet. I pretend I am drowning, letting the sea take me under. I close my eyes and the world cannot touch me.
>
> You are going to kill her! Uhmma shouts.
>
> Get away from me, woman, Apa growls. This is all your fault. Look at what kind of daughter you have raised, always lying and sneaking around. She is just like you. Apa kicks me in the stomach. I barely feel the blow. I am already floating away.
>
> Yah, Uhmma screams. You worthless dog! You are no better than a common hoodlum. Why do you think our children hide from you all the time?
>
> Liar, Apa roars (Na, pp. 137-138).

Young Ju's father turns to her mother and beats her instead. At first, Young Ju simply presses her hands on her ears and closes her eyes. She tries to pray:

> Stop, I whisper, rocking back and forth. Please, God, make it stop. Please. God, make it stop. God. God? (Na, p. 138).

But the violence continues and Young Ju decides to call 911. Yet, when her call is answered, she falters and asks herself if the police really can help. The cries of her Uhmma continue to be heard:

> The sound of breaking and Uhmma's deep wail haunt the room. I pound my fist into my thigh and bite my lower lip. But I am not a child anymore. I do not have time to wait for God. There is only me. Stop it. Stop it. This is enough.
>
> I pick up the phone and raise it to my ear. "Please," I whisper and take a gulp of air. "Send help."

> "Tell me what is going on, miss."
>
> "My father is killing my mother" (Na, p. 139).

Finally, Young Ju finds the courage and the voice to speak the ugly truth about her family. But Young Ju's problems are not yet over. Her father is jailed but only for a night because her mother refuses to press charges. The next morning, when they go to the police station to pick up her father, he instead goes with another Asian woman. Uhmma tells Young Ju, "This is all your fault" (Na, 140). Then for months, her Uhmma does not speak to her. Until one day her Uhmma comes home early from work and tells her that her Apa has decided to return to Korea and that their Gomo asks if they would like to go back with him.

> Please try to understand, Young Ju. These last few months have been difficult. I did not have the right words for you until today. I said things that are not true. I blamed you for my mistake. Uhmma shakes her head. I blamed you for trying to save me.
>
> I want to reach out to Uhmma. Rest my head on her shoulder. But I stand in my place, arms crossed over my chest.
>
> Uhmma says, Now it is my turn to do the right thing for you. For us. I told Gomo that we could take care of ourselves. My strong children and I will be fine without Apa (Na, p. 143).

The chapter ends with Uhmma telling Young Ju, "You are my strong girl." Thus, in finding her voice to speak the ugly truth, Young Ju also finds courage to put an end to a nightmare and finds not only her strength but also that of her mother.

THE ASIAN GIRLS SPEAK: WHO LISTENS?

Sing to the Dawn and *A Step from Heaven* show that Asian women writers like Minfong Ho (who is Chinese American) and An Na (who is Korean American) retain their Asian voices even when they write in English and live in a foreign land. Their voices as writers are heard as the young female protagonists in their YA novels speak and as these young girls retain their Asian identity—their being Thai, their being Korean—in the way they experience their internal and external conflicts, in the way they try to

overcome the challenges that come their way, and in the way they live the experiences unique to their respective families and communities.

But there is a catch here. Because both YA novels are told from the point of view of the young female protagonists, they seem to address only female readers. Although the writers seem to have employed two different kinds of point of view (third person limited omniscient and first person "I" narrator), and although *Sing to the Dawn* makes use of the heterodiegetic narrator who is not part of the narrative, while *A Step from Heaven* makes use of the autodiegetic narrator who is also the protagonist in the story, both YA novels have actually adopted the same focalization. Focalization, based on Genette's theory of narratology, is the point of view adopted by the narrator; it is the narrative perspective. Thus, the narrative voice is different from the narrative perspective; the one who perceives is not necessarily the one who tells the story, and vice versa (Guillemette, n.p.). In the case of the two YA novels, both adopted what Genette calls internal focalization, in which the narrator knows as much as the focal character, who filters the information provided to the reader and who cannot report the thoughts of other characters. Such is expected of *A Step from Heaven* because it has an autodiegetic narrator; but such is also the case with *Sing to the Dawn*, although it has a heterodiegetic narrator. At some points of the narration of both stories, there seems to be even an overlap between the heterodiegetic and the autodiegetic narrators. This is particularly true of *A Step from Heaven* ,which supposedly is told from Young Ju's point of view but often reads like it is a much older narrator, a much older Young Ju, recalling the story and not simply telling it as it happens (as signified by the use of present tense verbs). Both YA novels, therefore, have narrators who have chosen to recount the events as perceived by the young Asian female protagonists. By doing so, the narrators are able to help the reader "witness" the gradual development of the young Asian female protagonists' voice, as they first manifest it in their internal dialogues; then as they tentatively use it in expressing their opinions to other sympathetic characters; and finally as they determinedly and firmly assert their rights not only to be heard but also to be given the chance to prove themselves, this time to their "oppressors."

By depicting the young female protagonists as individuals who have gradually overcome their lack of self-confidence and timidity, and as persons who have found the courage to express themselves and claim what is rightfully theirs, the female writers who are of Asian parentage seem to encourage female

Asian readers to do the same. One problem with these YA novels taking a very strong feminine (if not feminist) standpoint is that they may attract young female readers, but turn off young male readers. This might be so because studies like that of Bleakley, Westerberg, and Hopkins show that boys rate stories much less interesting when the main character is female (in Stewart, et al., 2003, p. 138). For these YA novels to balance things out, the girls should not only be encouraged to find their voice; the boys should also be made aware of the importance of girls having equal opportunity to express and prove themselves.

Borrowing the terminology that Althusser used (as discussed in Mills, 2011, p. 244) both YA novels seem to interpellate the female reader, to call upon her to take the subject position (i.e. that of the young female protagonist); and likewise take the "obvious" and "dominant reading" of the text; that is, to take the "advise" of the writers to have the courage to find her voice, to finally speak out unceasingly, to persevere in her efforts to be heard and to be recognized as an individual capable of doing meaningful and worthwhile things regardless of her sex (biological) and her gender (sociological), because sooner or later somebody will listen. However, this concept of interpellation is not that simple, because as Durant (in Mills, p. 244) has pointed out, a reader can adopt either the position of the supposed speaker or the role of the supposed addressee, or s/he can be positioned as an overhearer of the interaction. Thus, the two women Asian writers' voices may be heard, but not necessarily listened to, particularly because both YA novels also seem to suggest that to "succeed" in being heard is not only to create conflict within the family, but also to bear the loneliness of being away from one's family, of being "isolated" from everything one holds dear. This is the reason both young female protagonists were called upon to be brave. Dawan's grandmother tells her, "You have a long life ahead of you yet, child, and this is just the first step. If you're this timid now how on earth are you going to face all the struggle still before you? Gather yourself together, and face the world out there with clear bold eyes" (Ho, p. 116); while Young Ju's mother gives her an old picture of their family, with her Apa holding Young Ju on his shoulders and her Uhmma standing by his side, with waves and a long stretch of beach in the background, and tells her, "Take it to college so you can remember how to be brave" (Na, p. 149).

Both young female protagonists do learn to be brave and they do find their voice and they do find the courage to speak. But who listens?

The much older female generation listens. The grandmothers of Dawan and Young Ju do not only listen to what the girls have to say, but also to what they could not and did not say. This is the reason these old, loving and supportive women are able to encourage their granddaughters, even if the latter are not able to express their doubts and fears verbally. Portraying the grandmothers as good listeners and advisers is also perhaps the writers' way of showing how the female persona keeps the family intact, provides some kind of balance (especially in a very patriarchal family), and wisely encourages change when such a change is needed.

The young female generation listens. Both Dawan and Young Ju have their young female friends—Bao for Dawan and Amanda for Young Ju—who listen to them, believe in them, share their dreams and aspirations, encourage them, and are likewise encouraged by them. This is particularly true of Bao who told Dawan:

> "We girls have always had to stand aside and let our brothers do all the challenging things. And when we become wives, we'll have to stand aside for our husbands. And when we're mothers, we'll stand aside for our children." She jabbed Dawan with her finger. "You've earned your chance for flying to a bigger world, to pursue your own ideals. Don't yield to your brother now. You have to pursue forward and struggle if you want to be free, and equal to your brother" (Ho, p. 78).

The older females (the mothers) listen. The respective mothers of Dawan and Young Ju may be submissive as wives, but they have also done their part to give their daughters the chance that they did not have. Dawan's mother accompanied her to her cousin Noi to ask the latter to argue for Dawan in front of Dawan's father, so that this man of the family would allow Dawan to go to the city to study. Young Ju's mother, on the other hand, decided not to follow her husband to Korea, but to stay with her children in California; she tells Young Ju, "Now it is my turn to do the right thing for you. For us. I told Gomo that we could take care of ourselves. My strong children and I will be fine without Apa" (Na, p. 143).

The younger male generation listens. One encouraging thing that happens to the young female protagonists is that their young brothers who were apparently their "competitors" have become their friends and allies as well. Making the younger brothers open to the idea of their elder sisters' taking

the lead in the family and proving themselves able and capable, may be the writers' way of interpellating the young male readers as well, calling upon them to assume the subject position and to see the importance of boys and girls having equal opportunity to develop themselves holistically.

The older male generation listens. Because the young female protagonists persevered and tried to overcome their timidity and their fear, they are finally able to make their voices heard by the supposed important person in the family (as far as the fight for the female's rights is concerned). When Dawan argued with her father and asserted her right to go to the city for further education, her father finally relented:

> "So," he finally said, "so you want me to open your cage door, Dawan, and you think you'll soar off and do great things for us all, for the village, and the country, even the world?"
>
> "I can try, Father," Dawan breathed, her heart pounding. "I can try."
>
> The lean peasant stood up, flexing his knees carefully to uncramp his leg muscles. His two children scrambled up too, never taking their eyes off him.
>
> Standing in a tight triangle, they exchanged glances silently. The tall peasant looked down at Dawan solemnly. "Then try, my daughter," he said. And he smiled, a bit reluctantly, down at her (Ho, p. 106).

Things were not as explicit for Young Ju. But at the end of the story, her mother reminded her that once, when Young Ju was younger, her father had asked her to be brave. This is like saying that when her father went back to Korea and left them in California, he was in effect acquiescing that Young Ju was capable of taking care not only of herself but of her family as well.

So, literally and figuratively speaking, has the Asian female finally found her voice?

Yes, the two YA novels tell us that the Asian female has finally found her voice. Yet, the fight is not yet over. As both novels end with the female

protagonists leaving their homes to pursue their dreams, the reader is made to realize that the real fight has just begun. What is important is that the Asian female has already found the courage to overcome her timidity and her fear of speaking out, of expressing herself and asserting her rights.

The Asian girl speaks. Her ability and determination to do so will do not only her own family some good but the whole of humanity as well. Because if people are to make the world a better place to live in, both halves of humanity, female and male, have to be heard; they have to maximize their potentials, and be allowed to do their share of improving not only their lives but also those of others.

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