

Creating Meaning from Chaos: Cha's *Dictée* and the Recovering of the Lost Voice of Women in the Age of Post-modernism

**Dr Imad Mohammad Khawaldeh¹, Dr Baker Mohammad bani-Khair²,
Dr Nisreen Naji Al-Khawaldeh³, Dr Abdullah Fawaz hamed Al-Badarnah⁴**

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English – The Hashemite University, Jordan

²Associate Professor, Department of English –The Hashemite University, Jordan

³ Associate Professor and Head of the Department of English – The Hashemite University, Jordan

⁴ Assistant Professor, Department of English – The Hashemite University, Jordan

As an experimental work of art, Theresa Hak Cha's *Dictée* (1982) leaves the reader struggling to find a way out of a very perplexing linguistic and visual maze. The experience of reading through this fragmentary and (sometimes) amorphous text and its paratext might frustrate the reader who is looking for a unifying thread around which the thematic "texture" of the whole book is interwoven. The difficulty of reading this book stems from the fact that we are reading a postmodern work of art that counteracts the idea of traditional narrative techniques. Yet, despite the apparent lack of coherence, we believe that the whole book is unified around one pivotal thematic axis that makes the incoherent parts of this experimental work look more integrated, seamless, and sensible. The present study is intended to prove that to the contrary of what many scholars and critics suggest about the plotlessness of *Dictée*, Cha's book does have a unifying theme, a climax, and a resolution after all. To this end, we conduct a close reading of the textual and paratextual examples present throughout *Dictée* and reach the conclusion that despite the apparent non-linear order of the contents of the book, the book is unified as both an anticolonial and a feminine call for enabling the Korean woman to speak. We discuss how Cha's whole book revolves around the power of words and how language can contribute to guaranteeing women a notable place among their communities. Cha's primary intention, we believe, is not merely to revive a forgotten history or resurrect a sense of nationhood. Rather, she uses these literary modes as a means through which she achieves her ultimate gender-related goals – to enable her diasporic female Korean peers to have their own feminine voice and to find for herself a respectful place within the American male-dominated literary canon.



Keywords: Theresa Hak Cha, *Dictée*, Post-modern Fiction, Diasporic Korean Female, Intended Silence, Feminism, Close Reading

INTRODUCTION:

As an experimental work of art, Theresa Hak Cha's *Dictée* leaves the reader struggling to find a way out of a very perplexing linguistic and visual maze. The experience of reading through this fragmentary and (sometimes) amorphous text and its paratext might frustrate the reader who is looking for a unifying thread around which the thematic “texture” of the whole book is interwoven. The difficulty of reading this 1982 book stems from the fact that we are reading a postmodern work of art that counteracts the idea of traditional narrative techniques. Yet, despite the apparent lack of coherence, we believe that the whole book is unified around one pivotal thematic axis that makes the incoherent parts of this experimental work look more integrated, seamless, and sensible.

In this essay, we show how gender permeates throughout Cha's book and allows the reader to achieve a better understanding of the book's central message through which the varied incoherent elements become more cohesive and apprehensible. We believe that this book – both content and form– is primarily a “female's scream”, a call against intended silencing of Cha both as an Asian American woman and as a female writer.

The readers' anxiety, which results from reading *Dictée*, can be attributed to their expectations that what they are about to experience is a traditional historical narrative that is mingled, from time to time, with a paralleling fictional narrative. The reader might presuppose that Cha's book (as an Asian-American text) might be similar to the many texts written by Asian-American (or Asian-Canadian) authors who normally mix autobiography, biography, nationalism, and historiography with fiction in their relatively traditional linear (or non-linear but plot-oriented) narratives¹.

Once the reader finishes the bizarre introductory part of the book called “Disease” and begins reading the first part of the nine constituent sections of *Dictée* titled “Clio-History”, she will feel comfortable and reassured as the narrative begins to relate the biographies of a historical Korean figure, You Guan Soon, and Cha's own mother, Hyung Soon Huo. However, the reader will soon discover that these disconnected narratives are followed by non-normative and fragmented pieces of narrative. Then, the reader is, once again, appalled by the very fears of the indecipherability of Cha's work. How can this disoriented reader recover his/her previous reassuring experience of reading? What might make such disconnected components of the book appear sensible? In her book *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse*, Magali Cornier Michael

¹ The long list of traditional narratives includes several works by Asian-American writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980), Chang Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995), Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957), Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981), Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), and Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* (2014).

states that “Postmodern theories conceive of language as a network of signs whose engines are always in the process of sliding and shifting. Meaning is always being constructed and reconstructed rather than being fixed”. (p. 39) Is it the same case with *Dictée*? Is meaning in this "postmodern" book in a continuous process of shifting and sliding? If so, how is it constructed and reconstructed and for what purpose?

DISCUSSION:

I. Fragmented yet Unified

In her book *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech*, Patti Duncan (2004) contends that Cha's use of space, form, and poetry “suggests narrative rupture and unfixed boundaries” (p. 131). Similarly, Elaine Kim (1994) claims that “Cha disturbs established notions of history, while at the same time disturbing what counts as official nationalist Korean discourse” (p. 16). This seems to be a distinctive feature by which most of postmodern literary works are impressed. According to Magali Michael (1996), the “postmodern problematization of representation leads to a questioning of narrative, the traditional means by which a story is told” (p. 40). She further argues that narrative is widespread in discourses other than fiction, particularly within the domain of history (p. 41). She also maintains that “Postmodern theories and aesthetics do not deny that events occurred in the past but rather question how events are recounted” (p. 41).² This is, we believe, the core thematic concern of *Dictée*, and this is what makes the book so ambiguous for the reader.

Pieces of Korean history are being presented to the reader in *Dictée*. These historical narratives seem to be disrupted and non-linear. The book recounts glimpses of Korea's history during the Japanese colonial era (1905 – 1945) and during the civil war time (1950 – 1953). As postmodern narratives, these historical narratives tend to be “fractured into a mixture of various forms-contents” (Michael, 1996, p. 40). This is also applicable to *Dictée*. In this book, the reader encounters a variety of “fractured” forms and contents. Along with the accounts of revolutionary women, one can also notice some other representations of this history: a photo of a homesick message inscribed into Japanese earth in Hang-gul (the book's frontispiece), the journal entries of a Korean exile (Cha, 2001, pp. 31 - 32), a picture of three crucified Korean martyrs (p. 39), a photograph of a massive women demonstration (p. 122), and the letter written by Korean exiles in Hawaii to President Roosevelt requesting intervention against Japanese colonial rule (pp. 34-36). This postmodern and experimental way of recounting historical events, needs a skillful reader who is equipped with new methods and skills of reading that can be attained with the help of modern technological aiding materials such as web-based translators, electronic encyclopedias, audiovisual recordings, online academic databases, and

² In this regard, Michael (1996) writes:

Traditionally understood as an account of facts and real events, history nevertheless requires narrative to present these facts and events in ordered sequences. Like fiction, history has been relegated to the realm of truth within Western culture. The postmodern challenge to the notion history as truth leans toward a confrontation of both history and historicity – historical actuality or fact... Postmodern theories and aesthetics do not deny that events occurred in the past but rather questions how events are recounted. (p. 41)



social media platforms. However, one might wonder: Cannot the reader comprehend Cha's book without referring to the external materials (including images, diagrams, maps, and handwritings) which exist throughout *Dictée*?

Although *Dictée* appears as a heterogeneous and collaged narrative with a nonlinear structure and it is resistant to the traditional generic forms of autobiography (McDaniel, 2009, p. 69), the reader will still be able to form a homogeneous understanding of the hidden purposes behind writing this experimental book. The book was hailed as a “multigenre text” (Duncan, 2009, p. 135) that comprised a variety of uncaptioned images (including a photograph of author's mother, stills from two films by Carl Dreyer, a well-known image of the murder of Korean fighters by Japanese Soldiers during the first years of the Japanese occupation, and other photos and diagrams) all of which were juxtaposed with documents, letters, Chinese calligraphy, writing in Korean, and French grammar exercises among other “seemingly incongruous textual and [paratextual] forms”(p. 135). Encountering such a multigenre work, the question that is still resounding in our mind is: What is it that could transform this apparent heterogeneity into a more homogeneous product of postmodernism?

In her essay “Ekphrasis and Multimediality: De-stabilizing History and Subjectivity in Theresa Cha's *Dictée*” Cristina Galu (2004) calls for a surface reading of the cinematic and other formalistic elements of the novel (such as photographs, diagrams, maps, oriental calligraphy, and so on) without paying much attention to the depths of the text (p. 3).³ She contends that “from the very beginning the ekphrastic narration in *Dictée* seems to refuse all these narrative characteristics: there is little happening and there is neither climax nor resolution” and that “The temporal link is continuously broken by the interpolation of other small narrations, and the overly detailed descriptions overwhelm the narrative coherence” (p. 15). Throughout the coming pages, we intend to prove that to the contrary of what Cristina and others suggest about the plotlessness of *Dictée*, Cha's book does have a unifying theme, a climax, and a resolution after all. To this end, we argue that a close reading of the textual and paratextual examples present throughout *Dictée* shows that despite the apparent non-linear order of the contents of the book, the book is unified as both an anticolonial and a feminine call for enabling the Korean woman to speak. Cha's primary intention, we believe, is not merely to revive a forgotten history or resurrect a sense of nationhood. Rather, she uses these literary modes as a means through which she achieves her ultimate gender-related goals – to enable her diasporic female Korean peers to have their own feminine voice and to find for herself a respectful place within the American male-dominated mainstream literary canon.

II. Cha, the Narrator and the Author

In her essay “Narrator, author, reader: equivocation in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*”, Sue J. Kim (2008) contends that readers of *Dictée* “nearly unanimously speak of a narrator and/or acting subject and moreover, identify that narrator as Cha”(p. 69). She believes that the text

³ According to Galu (2004), there is still little agreement on the definition and attributes of ekphrasis, as mediums of transfer can take a variety of configurations. There can be ekphrasis implying paintings, sculptures, architecture, film or even music, to name only the broader categories (p. 10).



does not "necessitate the union of its voices into one narrator," (p. 69) and that "the narrator does not have to be identified with Cha for the text to be effective" (164). For Kim, *Dictée* should be read as an "equivocal text, in which the author and narrator are neither wholly distinct nor wholly identified" (p. 165). She divides the readership of *Dictée* into two main categories (of which she prefers the first over the second): The members of the first group draw on the conventions of the avant-garde or postmodern art" (p. 165). She further argues that "as demonstrated by her education, exhibitions, employment, and earlier edited anthology of psychoanalytic film criticism, *Apparatus: Cinematographic Apparatus*, Cha was very much a part of the postmodern art movement of the 1970s--most of which did not explicitly deal with issues of race in the United States" (p. 166). For this authorial audience, the text, claims Su Kim, requires familiarity with avant-garde aesthetic practices.

The second group includes Korean-American critics such as Elaine Kim (1994), Shu-me Shih (1997), Hyun-Yi Kang (1994), and Lisa Lowe who tend to identify the narrator with the author herself. They, specifically, focus on the Asian/Korean American, feminist context of the book. Critics of this group have argued that "to discuss the text without that specific context is to stifle its ideological critique" (Kim, 2008, p. 166). Elaine Kim seems to justify this way of reading noting that because Cha's book has a specific history and context, "something that Cha repeatedly calls attention to as she inscribes the narratives missing from the chronicles," (1994, p. 22) to discuss this book without ever referring to its author as a Korean American writer is "to depoliticize the text and thereby obliterate or at least drastically reduce its oppositional potential and its empowering possibilities" (p. 22).

In fact, we are more inclined to favor the second group's way of reading as we believe that when writers write, they do so with certain intentions or agendas in their minds, and such intentions or agendas, regardless of the aesthetic aspects of their works; relate to the authors' milieus and even their own beliefs or ideology which can be reflected upon their characters and narrators. Feminists, for instance, speak of the power of a patriarchal ideology, and how "it operates to conceal, mask and distort gender relations in our society" (Storey, 2018, pp. 3-4). We analyze Cha's work bearing in mind the notion that texts (television fiction, pop songs, novels, feature films, etc.) always present a particular image of the world and disseminate stories of their own. As famous German playwright Bertolt Brecht puts it: "Good or bad, a play always includes an image of the world ... There is no play and no theatrical performance which does not in some way affect the dispositions and conceptions of the audience. Art is never without consequences" (pp.150–151). Brecht's argument can be generalized to apply to all types of texts. One might accordingly assume that all texts are eventually political. In this sense, authors write their books to be understood not to be equivocally inapprehensible.

Although there is always a certain message lurking underneath the lines of any book, writers might make their texts challenging and provocative before their ideas are finally grasped with the great efforts readers make while reading. We think that Cha, the young woman writer wrote *Dictée* to be representative of her overall work within the avant-gardic postmodern milieu and

what led her to wrap her message with this postmodern gown can be attributed to several factors as we shall demonstrate in the present paper.

Although several critics from Sue Kim's second group have suggested that Cha's text contains different political and social messages related to colonialism, racism, feminism, nationalism, and historicism; we believe that the feminist message is the most prevailing one. The treatment of themes— such as Korean Nationalism, occupation and colonialism, and history – is not an end by itself; rather it is a means by which Cha questions the status of both national Korean women and Korean-American women.

III. The Non-Textual Elements of *Dictée* and the Feminine Message

Commenting on the role played by the varied material aspects of the book, Alison Fraser (2019) maintains that “Cha interrogates the role materiality plays in shaping identity, memory, and the past and future, by using mundane cultural artifacts and (re)production techniques, especially photocopying (or xerography), to create documents that subvert or expand their original function” (p. 31). To be more specific, we think that the function of presenting the varied paratextual or material elements in Cha's book is to reshape or reclaim the once subjugated feminine Asian-American identity and subvert the androcentric xenophobic mainstream American image of the Asian-American female.

Let us now do a more thorough examination of the textual and non-textual elements of Cha's work to see how the feminine element is the ultimate end of this experimental project. We shall begin with the non-textual clues and then continue with the many textual illustrative examples. To begin with the photos and sketches that portray women or men in this book, the reader notices that among the ten photos and drawings there are nine that portray women. This gives the reader who begins by skimming through the book the impression that this is a book about women.

The first photo (in the studied edition) appears, of course, on the front cover. It portrays Hyung Soon Huo, Cha's mother whose biography is told in the "Calliope/ Epic Poetry" section. The photo of Cha's mother seems to reappear on page 45 and likely on page 59. The first photo that appears inside the book (Cha, 2001, p. 24) depicts a famous Korean woman – one of the leaders of the March 1st Movement against the Japanese occupation, Yu Guan Soon whose heroic story is related in the "Clio /History" section.

On page 93, the reader can see a picture of St. Therese of Lisieux. And for those readers who do not recognize the identity of this woman, we believe that it is quite possible for them to interpret this photo according to the context that accompanies it. The reader might suggest that this photo depicts a woman in in the garden of her house as she walks with the aid of a pair of crutches. The reader might tell that this photo suggests spousal abuse which is referred to in this section. At the end of this section, we come across a photo of another woman – a still from Carl Dreyer's 1928 film, *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (the passion of Jeanne of- Arc (Kim, 2008, p. 170) who is referred to in the context of Yu Guan Soon's story. And since this still photo is

uncaptioned (like in the case of all other photos), we would suggest that the reader should relate this photo to its preceding context and notice how this picture shows a woman's empty hopeless face. Actually, the reader might suggest whatever interpretation she finds appropriate for the context of what she reads. Yet, it appears to us that all interpretations will end talking about a woman and how she appears physically and emotionally.

As for the section titled "Elitere/ Lyric Poetry", one can notice how this section begins with a photo (Cha, 2001, p. 122) that depicts the 1919 Korean Independence Movement demonstration where over two hundred female students who were protesting for democracy were brutally mutilated (Cheng, 1998, p. 121). It is quite understandable that the reader who is not aware of Korean historical events might not recognize the history related to this photo. Yet she can easily tell that in this photo, there is a large gathering of angry Asian women who are yelling and participating in a demonstration for a certain cause. We can label this gathering as feminine because we see just women in this photo. In another section, "Thalia/Comedy", a sketch of a Greek woman (probably Thalia herself holding a comedy mask) appears on page 138. The book concludes with a photo depicting a group of Asian school girls (probably Cha and her classmates). In fact, a quick look on the whole book (prior to the process of reading) might lead the reader (any reader) to conclude that this book treats women-related issues- especially Asian women.

This feminine thread is also apparent in some other non-textual examples. This appears from the very beginning in the book's frontispiece. Here, in the photo copy (which seems to be a result of several copies of copies), we come across some Korean statements which appear in a graffiti that is generally assumed to have been written by a "Korean laborer in Japan during the period of occupation" (Spahr, 1996, p.10). With the aid of a Korean native speaker or a Korean dictionary, we will find that the words of the graffiti translate as the following: "I miss you *mother*. I am hungry. I want to go home". These emotionally fraught words tell us much about the amount of oppression inflicted upon Korean men by their Japanese occupiers. In these horrible moments of distress, these humiliated and forced workers seek refuge in their mother figures or in the larger feminine image of their country, Korea. Cha's imaginative depiction of her country as woman's body is so impressive too.

In the section which begins with a map of the partitioned Korean peninsula "Melpomene/Tragedy", Cha figuratively draws an image of her country as a violated female: "Violation of her by giving name to the betrayal, all names, interchangeable names, to remedy, to justify the violation. Of *her*. Own. Unbegotten name... No enduring time. Self-devouring. Devouring itself. Perishing all the while. Insect that eats its own mate (p.88). This violation (the partition of Korea) leads the violated female, as we see through Cha's depiction, to go through a process of metamorphosis like when a "black widow" kills and eats its own mate.

IV. The Text of *Dictée* and the Recovery of Women's Suppressed Voice

Moving from some formalistic (non-textual) examples, we should begin now with a close reading of a number of the many textual examples which illustrate Cha's treatment of the feminine cause throughout *Dictée*. After dedicating her book to her mother and father, Cha chooses as an epigraph for *Dictée* an invocation by the ancient Greek poetess Sappho that reads: "May I write words more naked than flesh, stronger than bone, more resilient than sinew, sensitive than nerve" (Cha, 2001, n.p.). It is so important to know that Cha had chosen as a source for her epigraph a very famous Greek poetess – who was included in the list of the nine lyric poets and who "[f]or about two thousand five hundred years [...] has held her place as not only the supreme poet of her sex but the chief lyrist of all lyrists" (Carman, 1910, p. IX). With the inclusion of Sappho's invocation at the beginning of her fragmented book, Cha stresses that a female writer's work could live forever even though it consists of fragments (not complete linear passages). By including Sappho's invocation, Cha also emphasizes the importance of words (written and / spoken) in finding a place for women within male-dominated literary domains. As Sappho was a distinguished female literary figure among her famous male Greek peers, Cha desires a similar distinguished artistic and literary status among her contemporary American writers. Actually, Cha's whole book revolves around the power of words and how language can contribute to guaranteeing women a notable place among their communities.

Interestingly, to stress such importance of words for women, Cha chooses to divide her book into nine parts whose titles include the names of the nine famous muses: Clio, muse of history; Calliope muse of epic poetry; Urania, muse of astronomy; Melpomene, muse of tragedy; Erato, muse of love poetry; Euterpe, muse of lyric poetry; Thalia, muse of comedy; Terpsichore, muse of choral dance; and Polymnia, muse of sacred poetry. Here, again, Cha wants to project the feminine aspect of literary creativity through invoking these muses who are classical goddess or female inspiring deities.

The novel begins with a French dictated passage accompanied by its English translation. We are not interested, here, in examining the authenticity of this translation, but we want to pay attention to the fact that the person who is being referred to in this introductory paragraph is a girl who seems to be an outsider (probably an immigrant) who "had come from afar" (p. 1). As mentioned earlier, we tend to identify this girl with the author herself. Here, as a female stranger, Cha comes from Korea fully aware of the challenges waiting for her in the United States. Above all of the expected challenges, English – the language spoken by native American speakers, becomes the most problematic concern for the immigrant girl. It is in the next pages that Cha elaborates on her linguistic crisis. She chooses the word "Disease" as a title for the introductory section which describes her suffering as a female immigrant. Here, she so painfully tries to mimic the way native speakers utter their words. It seems that Cha borrows this term from her actual experience as a cinematography student in France during the 1970s (Kim, 2005, p. 143). According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, a disease (French, feminine of diseur, *monologist*) is a woman who is a skilled and

usually professional storyteller, poet, or other spoken-word performer. A disease can, also, be understood as a figure that embodies the forms of fortune/teller (*Disease de bonne aventure*), shaman (*Mundang*), and re'citante or narrator (*Sprechstimme*) (Michael, 2009, p. 158). Thus, Cha stresses from the very beginning of her book the necessity of letting woman speak her thoughts out. For her, it "murmurs inside. It murmurs. Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say... the pain not to say (Cha, 2001, p. 3).

Through her alter ego character, Cha addresses the main problem that haunts her as a diasporic Korean-American woman writer, i.e., the loss of voice which is occupied by either Korean male writers or American main stream writers: "she allows others. In place of her. Admits others to make full. Make swarm. All barren cavities to make swollen. The others each occupying her" (p. 3). She, so defiantly asks them to give her voice back to her: "Give her. Her. The relay. Voice ... Hand it. Deliver it" (p. 4). In fact, Cha's call to retrieve the female's voice from her patriarchal oppressor seems to be her obsessing question in the disease section: "Traduire en francais [To translate into French]: 1. I want you to *speak*. / 2. I wanted him to *speak*. / 3. I shall want you to *speak*. / 4. Are you afraid he will *speak*? / 5. Were you afraid they would *speak*? / 6. It will be better for him to *speak* to us. / 7. Was it necessary for you to *write*? / 8. Wait till I *write*" (p. 8).

Dominika Ferens (2019) comments on the female's trauma in *Dictée* and claims that this trauma "is not solely a personal issue, the effect of an external blow too painful to fully understand, and therefore relived over and over again as an affective disorder. Instead, [the book] links individual suffering with the political and the social" (p. 34). While we agree with Ferens' supposition about associating the individual and socio-political suffering, we believe that the female's individual trauma as a writer is of greater importance than any other considerations in Cha's book. Cha's socio-political suffering as a female writer is reflected in the long agony of her alter ego character. After the long suffering of the mimicking female, she manages to gain some agency by possessing her own uttering: "Uttering Hers now. Hers [Cha's]bare. The utter. Here, she assumes the other aspect of her rule as a disease. And since Cha becomes able to speak her own words, it is now her duty to write and speak for her fellow women. She, then, celebrates her work as a feminist call against intended attempts to silence her both as an Asian-American female and as a woman writer. Here, she assumes the other aspect of her role as a disease. She becomes the one who narrates the past (*récitant* or *Sprechstimme*) and the fortuneteller or the shaman who takes upon her shoulder the responsibility of writing for the sake of Korean-American women's future.

It is in "Disease" that we come across a new feminine deconstructive rendering of the ancient Greek long-established way of invoking the muse. According to Kung Jong Lee, Cha's "Disease" is a feminine subversion of the works of the famous ancient Greek poet Hesiod. In fact, the first test through which we can make sure that Cha has accomplished her transformation from the "mimicking disease" into the "orator disease" is her invocation of the muse. Here, we find a new feminine parody of the well-established ancient Greek traditions of

invoking the muse. Cha undertakes her task of representing the voice of women by changing the wording of the invocation made by Hesiod, the famous Greek poet. Kung Jang Lee argues that Cha's first utterance turns out to be a “subversive repetition of Hesiod's invocation of the Muses” (p. 82). Hesiod invokes the Muses at the end of his poem: “Tell me, O Muses who dwell on Olympus, and observe proper order / for each thing as it first came into being” (Hesiod, 1983, pp.114-115). According to Shelley Wong (1994), in Cha's disease, we find a repetition of Hesiod's invocation with a telling difference: “O Muse, tell me the story / Of all these things, O Goddess, daughter of Zeus / Beginning wherever you wish, tell even us” (Cha, 2001, pp. 113-114). Cha changes Hesiod's appeal to the muse from “observe proper order” to “Beginning wherever you wish”. Here, the disease “interferes with a historical practice which privileges origins and the idea of orderly patriarchal succession” (Wong, 1994, p. 113). And when Cha adds “tell even us” to Hesiod's invocation, she wants the muse to include even women (writers and audience) who were previously excluded from the process of telling. The disease's request to “tell even us” in the gender-specific section, “Disease,” is both an indirect critique of women's exclusion from the *Theogony* [Hesiod's epic poem about the origin and descent of the gods] and an ironically subversive declaration that she will tell “the story” which is fundamentally different from Hesiod's. Her “story / Of all these things,” wherever she begins, will turn out to be the story of women who have struggled to reclaim their own voices and identities denied by the patriarchy and androcentrism of their cultures (Lee, 2006, p. 83).

The Disease is, also, subversive of the patriarchal system of Catholicism. The disease criticizes the exclusion of female communicants from “the 'Man-God' continuum celebrated and perpetuated in the fundamentally male-identified Catholic rite” (Lee, 2006, p. 83). This appears in the disease's confession and recitation of catechism for female utterance on pages 13-19 in Cha's book.

Interestingly, not only does *Dictée* subvert Hesiod's invocation of the muse, but it also counteracts his *Catalogue of Women* as a whole work. Lee also discusses in her essay how *Dictée* serves as a subversive reading of the Hesiodic *Catalogue* which was composed as a celebrated song on the union of immortal gods and mortal women. While on the one one hand the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* is a song on mortal women who mate with gods and bear demigods and heroes and includes in its celebration famous female figures such as Alkmene, Atalante, Demodike, Europe, Io, Kallisto, Koronis, Kyrene, Mestra, Niobe, Pyrrha, Semele, Tyro, and other ancient women; Cha's *Dictée*, on the other hand, is a modern catalogue of women (Lee, 2006, p. 81). This twentieth century text is an interesting amalgamation of female characters. It is a fascinating gallery of the portraits of women that includes a diverse range of women from different ages: a disease (whom we see as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha), St. Therese of Lisieux, Yu Guan Soon, Queen Min, , Hyung Soon Huo (Cha's mother), Jeanne d'Arc, Persephone, Gertrud, Sibyl, Demeter, Laura Claxton's sister, Princess Pari, the unnamed woman who appears in "Melpomene Tragedy," the anonymous heroine of the cinematic narrative in “Erato Love Poetry”, the nameless woman in “Thalia Comedy,” and the unidentified girl in the epilogue.

According to Kun Jong Lee, the women of Hesiod's work are remembered and celebrated because they are "bearers of divine seed and mothers of heroic sons and demigods" (p. 79) and they, accordingly, "became secondary figures who helped consolidate patriarchy and, in the last analysis, no more than the instruments of reproduction for the preservation of prestigious stemmata in the classical period of Greece" (p. 80). To the contrary of the image of Hesiod's female figures, Cha's women range from mythical Greek goddesses to a Korean shamanistic matriarch and from actual historical figures to fictional ones. Most of these female figures are either unmarried or incapable of fulfilling their female potential as imposed upon them by patriarchy. Even those few married women in the book are remembered not as the mothers of sons but of daughters- victims of the patriarchal system.

In this sense, Cha's *Dictée* serves as a feminist counter-discursive text that revokes the androcentric hegemony of Western literature since the ancient Greeks up to the Europeans and Americans of the twentieth century. Counting on the vast scope of its representation, Cha's subversive work becomes a clear rejection of the traditional roles imposed by patriarchal writers throughout the world as the women of the book "ultimately transcend the limitations of their lives by asserting their voices and/or through female bonding" (Lee, 2006, p. 80).

As we stated earlier, while Cha's *Dictée* appears as a collage of seemingly disconnected fragments, its core issue (or unifying subject matter) is the articulation of Korean-American woman's dire need to speak for herself and get rid of her typical role as a suppressed subaltern (in the Spivakian sense). The many examples scattered throughout the book show Cha's recurring attempts to resurrect the Korean female's lost voice through breaking the silence barrier which surrounded her life for a long time. We can see this in the "Disease" section discussed earlier. Here, we notice the pain accompanying a female's attempt to practice uttering words: "The wait from pain to say. To not say" (p. 4). When the disease is ultimately granted her right to speak and write, and uttering becomes "Hers now", she speaks out although her words fall upon deaf ears. She still can speak and bear the suffering inflected upon her by the pain which results from her capability of speaking: "She call ... no response ... the other end must hear. The other end must see. The other end must feel... if name only be seen heard spoken" (p. 15). She so defiantly faces the patriarchal limitations forced upon her. "Into Their tongue" is nothing other than her "counterscript.... To scribe to make hear the words, to make sound the words, the words, the words made flesh" (pp. 17-18). The disease here represents Cha who declares her intention from the very beginning (in the epigraph) to "write words more naked than flesh".

The crisis of speaking woman's voice continues to exist in the historical narratives of two women, the Korean national activist You Guan Soon and Cha's mother. At the beginning of the Soon's story, we come across two Chinese words handwritten in bold: 女 (woman) and 男 (man) (Cha, 2001, p. 26). This section is a feminist subversion of both, the official patriarchal Korean historical narratives and the Japanese patriarchal colonial system. To begin a narrative about a female heroic figure with the word "woman" (p. 26) preceding the word "man" (p. 27),



this indicates that the written word is meant to be given to women who must break the shackles imposed upon them by patriarchy and gain the upper hand over their oppressors. If we know that Korea was colonized by the Chinese before the Japanese colonization, we might, also, interpret the presence of those words in this order written in Chinese (and not in Korean) as an indication that the colonial presence in Korea had a greater impact upon the psyches and bodies of women than it had on men's.

The supremacy of women over men is clearly articulated in the “Clio/ History” section where Cha tells the story of Yu Guan Soon, the sixteen-year-old leader of the “March 1st” resistance movement against the Japanese occupation. By relating the story of a revolutionary young woman Cha intends to question the Korean official narrative which privileges men over women and tries to belittle women's achievements by simply ignoring them or mentioning them by passing. The young woman is presented, here, as a national martyr who died for the sake of her own word. She chooses to speak up her mind and uplift the injustices which the Japanese occupiers had inflicted upon her own people. To borrow from Maxine Hong Kingston's terminology, the young Korean “woman warrior” “makes complete her duration. As others have made complete theirs: rendered incessant, obsessive myth, rendered immortal their acts...” (Cha, 2001, p. 28). Maybe this is what led Helena Grice (2000) to argue that although the novel undoubtedly employs postmodern narrative strategies, Cha's “primary project [is] creating a Korean (American) national identity which is gendered” (p. 44).

By alluding to Jeanne d'Arc – the national heroine of France and the famous Catholic saint, Cha seems to draw some sort of parallelism between Oriental and Occidental heroic women. Cha's message behind her fictionalized historical heroine's calling of the name of the fifteenth-century French heroine “three times”(p. 28) could be interpreted as her wish to say that if Western women had been able to sacrifice their lives for the sake of speaking their minds and revolting against the tyrannical systems, and they ultimately gained their freedom as emancipated female speakers; similarly, Eastern women did sacrifice their lives and the day will come when the voice of Korean women (native or diasporic) is freed.

Cha's concentration on the capability of the Korean women as opposed to the impotence of Korean men is also indicated by her reference to queen Min (p. 30) in the context of the 1919 demonstrations. Cha intentionally interferes in changing certain events in the Korean History so to fit her feminist attitudes. In this regard, she mentions that in the aftermath of “the assassination of the ruling Queen Min and her family...Guan Soon forms a resistant group with fellow students and actively begins her revolutionary work.” (p. 30) However, in reality, Queen Min was “murdered and burned to ashes by Japanese assassins in 1895 [and] the nationwide March First demonstrations broke out in 1919” (Lee, 2006, p. 85). Historically, it was the Japanese poisoning of King Kojong on 21 January 1919 that “brought about the mass demonstrations for independence on 1 March 1919” (p. 85). Then, one might ask, why does Cha mix histories and give this unreliable version of Korean history? Before answering this question, we should remember Magali Michael's assertion that “Postmodern theories and

aesthetics do not deny that events occurred in the past but rather questions how events are recounted” (1996, p.41). A possible answer to this anxiety could be that Cha, as a feminist writer of postmodern fiction, wants to problematize the patriarchal Korean official version of history by rewriting a new version of history in which the deeds of Korean women are aggrandized and projected as a consistent and continuous chain of females' achievements. In short, she wants to guarantee for those intentionally absenced and muted women a place in Korean history that is higher than that allotted to them by their male-dominated communities. In comparison with the vital activism of Cha's women in this section, a further emphasis on Korean men's impotence is also indicated here. This appears in the full text of a letter addressed to President Roosevelt written by Syngman Rhee, president of the Korean provisional government in exile (Cha, 2001, pp.34-36). We believe that by citing the full text of the Korean exiled men's petition to a President of a foreign country, Cha tends to show the agency of Korean women “as active freedom fighters” over the men who seek to gain their freedom from the Japanese colonial presence by substituting it with another form of colonization.

The struggle of the Korean woman continues to be the theme of the “Calliope/ The Epic Poetry” section. This part of the book is, as Lee describes it, a “family saga of victims of Japanese colonialism and American neo-colonialism.” (p. 88). Here, one might notice how Cha's mother demonstrates bravery by speaking Korean despite the fact it is forbidden: “You *speak* the tongue the mandatory language like the others... you are bilingual. You are Tri-lingual. The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue... To *speak* makes you sad... They take from you your tongue” (pp. 45-46). “And you wait. You keep *silent*... you *write*. You write you *speak* voices hidden masked you plant words ... By sky and by water the words are given birth ... from one mouth to another, from one reading to another ...the seed of message. Correspondence” (p. 48). The story of the exiled mother is another version of the everlasting gender conflict that Cha's book is after. Here, with the death of the distressed mother – who “come[s] back to [her] one mother to [her] one father” (p. 53) who are apparently the same father and mother Yu Guan Soon has, “born of one mother and one father” (p. 25) – the hegemonic paternal system wins one round of this ongoing gender battle. Maybe, for this reason Cha includes two single words (written once again in Chinese calligraphy) in the two following pages: the word 父 (father) followed by the word 母 (mother) (pp. 54-55).

Cha's decision to resurrect the past of her mother through “documents, proof, evidence photograph, signature [through] particle bits of sound and noise gathered pick up lint, dust... speech morsels. Broken chips of stone not hollow not empty” (p. 56); is a feminist questioning of the American interrogating system which contributed in deepening her mother's and her diasporic bitter experiences as female immigrants and new citizens.

It is in the next section (the mother's story “Urania/ Astronomy”) that the reader begins to read more of Cha's exposition of silence which she is fighting through her writing. She wants to deconstruct and ultimately eliminate this silence from her dictionary. But it seems that Cha desires to tell us more about how silence operates in the lives of women before she shows how



women's strong will breaks it towards the end of the book. The reader of this section reads a poem that is written in French with its translation on the opposite page. This poem which consists of a variety of impressionistic fragments details the importance of memory, sound, and speech. The poem stresses the unity of speech organs (which are demonstrated in four detailed diagrams) and the difficulty of producing sounds and, consequently, proper linguistic communication. This reminds us with the sort of pain that the disease suffers from when she decides to speak. Interestingly, it is not just the process of speaking that is rendered silent here; writing, the other important means of recovering women's voices, is also being described as silent: "Phrases silent / Paragraphs silent / Pages and pages a little nearer / to movement / line / after line / void to the left to the right. / Void the words. Void the silence" (p. 73).

In fact, Cha's book is full of blank pages. Maybe these are Cha's representations of women's enforced silence which she constantly struggles to break. The notion of silence versus speaking might be implied once again in the juxtaposition of the text between verso and recto leaves in the following section "Erato/Love poetry". Through the section's cinematic snapshots, the crisis of the silenced woman is being reiterated and takes the form of spousal abuse. The woman, who appears as a loving wife, is portrayed as being owned by her violent and unfaithful husband: "You find her for the first time as he enters the room calling her. You only hear him taunting and humiliating her. She kneels beside him, putting on his clothes for him. She takes her place. It is given" (p. 102). In her devotion to her husband and her household, the faithful and patient wife is being linked, by Cha, to St. Therese of Lisieux, the other French female saint mentioned in this book. St. Therese's picture in which she appears depending on a pair of crutches to help her in walking might suggest how severe spousal abuse could be.

Silence, thus becomes the prevailing element in this part of the book too. The moment when the unnamed woman tries to form words with the movements of her mouth but with no avail is very touching for utter silence is the only result. Here, we see the figure of the mimicking disease being repeated to stress the unity of silenced women under all forms of patriarchal oppression: "Mouth moving. Incessant. Precise. Forms the words heard. Moves from the mouth to the ear. With the hand placed across on the other's lips moving, forming the words. She forms the words with her mouth as the other utter across from her" (pp. 97-99).

The section ends with a still from the 1928 film, *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. The actor's face in this still seems so empty and shows a traumatized hopeless female. Yet, it is with this photo, that the passivity of Cha's women reaches an end, and their silence begins to fall apart. We regard this photo as the climax of Cha's book after which the gender conflict seems to be resolved with the moment women decide to break their silence.

The seventh part of the book "Elitere/Lyric Poetry" begins with a photo of a large gathering of Korean women who appear while yelling (p. 122). Here begin the attempts of Korean women to collectively speak up and shatter their silences which lasted for a long time. According to



Anne Anlin Cheng (1998), we learn that in this photo more than 200 female students were protesting for democracy and freedom. Their protest was part of the larger 1919 Korean Independence Movement demonstration (p. 121). On the opposite page, Cha's call for the fortuneteller disease to break silence is frankly articulated: "Let her break open the spell cast upon time upon time again and again. With her voice penetrate earth's floor, the walls of Tartarus to circle and scratch the bowl's surface. Let the sound enter from without, the bowl's hollow its sleep. Untill." (Cha, 2001, p. 123) The poems of this section "*Aller/Retour* (Go back/Return)" are also frank calls to unveil (through writing) what was once muffled. The female addressee is directed to gradually unearth all of her suppressed memories:

Resurrect it all over again. Bit by bit. / Reconstructing step by step ... resurrect as much as/ possible, possibly could hold/ possibly ever hold/ a segment of it/ segment by segment / segmented / sequence, narrative, variation ... salivate the words/ give light. Fuel. Enflame. / Dimly, dimly at first / then increase just a little more/ volume then a little more ... Say, say so. / And it would be the word. Induce to speak to take/ to take it ... (Cha, 2001, pp. 129-130)

Interestingly, as this section began with an appeal to the disease to break the silence, it also ends with an appeal to the disease to resurrect the dead words and the dead tongue which were buried in time's memory because of *disuse*. Notice how Cha plays with the words "disease" and "disuse". Here, Cha strikes some kind of parallelism between the "disease" and a famous Greek goddess, Demeter, "The one who is mother who waits [for the return of her daughter Persephone whom Hades took to his underworld] nine days and nine nights be found. Restore memory. Let the one who is disease, one who is daughter [Persephone or Cha herself] restore spring with her each appearance from beneath the earth" (p. 133) Interestingly, according to Greek mythology, the mother goddess restored the earth's spring after she had been reunited with her daughter. This restored spring symbolizes the resurrected voice of women of our time and which is retrieved in Cha's written words: "The ink spills thickest before it runs dry before it stops writing at all" (p. 133). It is through Cha's constantly flowing pen which keeps on writing until it is dry (i.e., she is dead), that women's voice is resurrected.

Women's silence, in this sense, becomes the most abominable fact to which Cha writes her entire book as a fierce reaction. Thus silence has never been and will never be a positive sign or a "means of resistance" as Patti Duncan writes in her chapter about *Dictée* which appears in her valuable book *Tell the Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech*. Here, she declares that "while silencing has been a negative and oppressive force for Asian American women, Cha argues that speech, too, is complicated by relations of power and nonequivalence. Though silence risks dismissal and erasure, Cha suggest that it also operates as a form of language and a means of resistance" (p. 170). We disagree with Michael's supposition for it is clear for us, as we have just noticed, that what is at stake in Cha's book is her repulsion of women's forced silence whose negative effects we have felt throughout *Dictée* and which she is eager to break in order to let women come to voice.

The "Talia/ Comedy" section resumes the hopeful tone of voicing women's unsaid words. It begins with a sketch of Greek woman (probably Talia herself) holding a comedy mask (p. 138). The woman of the first narrative "decides to take the call" (p. 139) but her words are rehearsed and her voice is feeble and choked from *disuse*. Yet, it luckily grows louder because she can't contain her voice any more. She restlessly searches for words to equal her feelings. She feels that she can find immortality through continual writing. In "memory" the crazed woman is like a child. She touches the pen in her pocket, indicating that she finds comfort in writing. The "Talia" section contains two letters to Mrs. Laura Claxson, a woman about whom we do not know much. The subject matter of these letters seems to be inconsistent with the thematic thread of the book or the section. Yet, when we read in one of the letters: "You write often to her [Mrs. Claxton's nearly crazed sister] as your litters[sic] cheer her up..." (p. 146), it is through the act of writing that women find themselves comforted. The section ends stressing the importance of resurrecting forgotten past through uttering: "Simulated pasts resurrected in memoriam. She hears herself uttering again and uttering to re-vive. The forgotten. To survive the forgotten ... from stone. Layers.... She returns to word. She returns to word its silence." (pp. 150-51).

In fact, the retrieved sound or voice which was once muted continues to become the theme of the "Terpsichore/ Coral Dance" section too. Here, Cha asks women to "Give up the sound" and "replace it with voice" (p. 158). She further compares the human voice and its power to the hard stone: "From stone, a single stone. Column. Carved on one stone, the labor of figures. The labor of tongues. Inscribed to stone. The labor of voices" (p. 162). Cha's final message addressed to women in this section is to: "render voices to meet the weight of stone with weight of voices" (p. 162).

As Cha began the nine sections of her book with an historical account of a Korean national heroine, she ends them with an account of a Korean folkloric female figure, Princess Pari who is regarded as the ancestress of Korean Shamanism. She appears here to help a young girl by giving her a remedy for her ill mother.⁴ But why does Cha conclude her book with this folkloric figure? A possible answer to this is that Cha wishes to draw our attentions to the fact that it is a female (an abandoned one) who reshapes the history of her country. Although she was an

⁴ Stone-Richards Michael (1996) mentions in his commentary on *Dictée* that:

In the classical tale of Princess Pari, she is abandoned by her parents (Pari may be translated as Abandoned One), the King and Queen, because she is not a boy. When, however, the King and Queen fall ill, only the Abandoned One, Pari, will undertake the risk, that is, the journey, to find the medicinal water that alone can save them. She journeys to the underworld and after many trials—over nine years in all she returns only to find her parents dead, but is able to revive them with the waters. Hereafter, Pari becomes the goddess and guide of the Underworld. It is this story, of Abandonment, made materially equivalent to the story of Demeter and Persephone, that is, an allegory of Separation, that structures the closing of *Dictée*. (p. 190).



insignificant woman whose voice remained suppressed for no reason other than her gender as an undesired female, it was this neglected female who proved to be more courageous than the men of her country and who became an immortal legendary figure by undertaking the task of journeying to the underworld. Therefore, Cha chooses to finish her book by stressing the agency of women over men through alluding to a famous folkloric female figure just as she began her book with an account of a famous historical female figure.

CONCLUSION:

It was in Cha's work that we saw the epic of the androcentric Western world of warriors inverted into that of Oriental women warriors. We saw how *Dictée*, as a postmodern epic, had deconstructed the Western Male-oriented tradition of epic writing. Cha's narrative (through including fictional and historical female heroic figures such as Guan Soon, Queen Min, Jeanne d'Arc, St. Therese of Lisieux, Hyung Soon Huo Cha, Sibyl, Demeter, Persephone, and Princess Pari) subverts the masculine Greek genealogy, the Catholic patriarchal system, the Korean masculine nationalism, the Japanese patriarchal colonial history, and the American mainstream publishing system which neglected Korean women and Korean-American women, and Asian-American "women" writers. Thus, Cha's book comes as an attempt to prove – for those who excluded Asian-American (and specifically Korean-American) female writings – that a Korean-American woman writer can project her original Korean heritage using the same artistic techniques used by the most sophisticated mainstream postmodern writers of her time. By so doing, Cha draws her reader's attention towards her diasporic status as a Korean-American woman writer. We think that Theresa Hak Kyung Cha was successful in reserving for herself a respectable place among both Korean and American writers as a distinguished amalgamation of both, and this has led, consequently, to asserting her identity as a Korean-American.

In conclusion, it is apparent that a close reading of *Dictée* could help us find what might serve as a unifying thread – that is, the feminine call for the suppressing patriarchal, colonial, and mainstream representatives to give voice back to women after a long time of forced silence. We hope that by this examination of Cha's work, the ambiguity of her non-traditional narrative would now be resolved, and what seemed fragmented and disconnected is more coherent and seamless.

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