

**Re-writing Colonial Malaysia/ Re-righting unauthorized histories in  
Bernice Chauly's Memoir *Growing up with Ghosts***

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**Abstract**

*Postmodern theories in literature have engendered significant conceptual reviews at the level of historical representation, which has enhanced revisionist interventions into the canonized narrative of national history and its intrinsic assumptions of unity, linearity, and coherence. They triggered profound epistemological shifts in the patterns of historical writings in national literature. Since the 1970s, the monolithic past narratives underpinned in the foundational historical texts have been increasingly superseded by less static orientations which have overruled orthodox standards and interrogated the hegemonic representational models systematically perpetuated by the nationalist enterprise and dogmatically endorsed by the first generation of national writers. Under the influence of the current representational upheavals in the arena of literature, the blossoming postcolonial life writings have significantly contributed to the process of redefining the narrative of national history beyond the atavistic rhetoric of postcolonial nationalism and its underlying exclusionary paradigms. These emergent life writings gesture towards envisioning subversive counter-hegemonic representations of the past, which aim ultimately at achieving a rupture with the totalizing historical narratives. My paper delves, particularly, into the transgression of generic boundaries and the dissolution of narrative borders characterizing the autobiographical representation of colonial Malaysia in Bernice Chauly's memoir *Growing up with Ghosts**

**Keywords:** Colonial Malaysia, Postmodern Memoir, Counter-histories, Generic transgression, Perspectival shift.

Literary criticism in Malaysia has become increasingly preoccupied with alternative contesting narratives mainly introduced by minority writers and conveyed through family and communal narratives which are illuminating the diversity of national colonial and postcolonial experiences. Malaysian critics have noticed that the quasi total absence of non-Malays' past narratives from the foundational national literary texts is not due to the insignificance of their stories. Rather, it is deeply rooted in the institutionalized process of homogenizing national representations which involves the debarment of competing perspectives. The Malays' ascendancy over other ethnic minority groups was not confined to the political sphere. This privileged ethnic group sought also to maintain its hold on national narratives including historical ones. They realize that the experiences of non –Malay categories generally minorities and particularly female ones during British colonization and Japanese invasion are discursively effaced. Abu Talib Bin Ahmad (2008) maintains that "[t]he official narrative of Malaysia's twentieth-century political history is essentially the history of the victors in the nationalist struggle while the losers have been marginalized or suffered oblivion"(p.45). The mainstream historical narrative in Malaysia undergoes a meticulous selection and filtration process which does not acknowledge the diversity of Malaysian multicultural history. It serves the hegemonic interests of the Malays.

Riddled with evident historical fallacies, vapid ethnocentric myths, flagrant ideological biases, and obvious conceits of hindsight, and consequently replete with representational flaws and injustices, the representation of colonial experience underpinned in the authorized historical narrative has become since the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a constant target of criticism. Second-and third generations Chinese and Indian minority writers whose families and communities' experiences were systematically obscured and almost excised from the authorized past narrative, engaged in a project of literary resistance against discursive hegemony through elaborating counter-historical narratives which daringly interrogate the authority of nationalist historical representation. Driven by the desire to put to the forefront the stories of marginalized communities whose experiences lie outside the domain of official history, they introduce deconstructionist narrative techniques which redefine the borders of past narrative and subvert exclusionary nationalist representational paradigms. These narrative interventions failed to achieve an epistemological rupture with the dominant one. Instead, they convey and even perpetuate the existing power relations. Hence, postcolonial critics realize that an effective resistance against the established oppressive narrative paradigms which allow for empowering minorities should primarily tackle the pivotal issue of the politics of representation.

Dissolving the rigid and carefully defined borders between ethnic histories is one of the main deconstructive representational approaches which are deployed to chuck out the established representational paradigms of nationalist historical narrative. This approach implies confusing and blurring the established boundaries which separate Malays, Chinese, and Indians' past narratives. It aims at redefining marginalized Malaysian ethnic groups "whose cross-racial alliances have been erased or conveniently forgotten in the nation's writing of the master-history as Malay Muslim" (Khoo, 2002, p.85). In this context, the depiction of national minorities' experiences in colonial Malaysia in Bernice Chauly's memoir *Growing up with Ghosts* which suggests new historical insights and interrogates the widely-approved Malay-centred historical narrative offers a pertinent example of minority writers' ability to suggest

productive revisionist interventions in Malaysian historical representations. In fact, the problematized autobiographical narrative of Malaysia's colonial experience introduced in Chauly's memoir potentially subverts the official historiography and dismantles its politics of representation. Her acclaimed memoir has generated, since its publication in 2011, a debate over the relation between national history and new autobiographical narratives in Malaysia.

*Growing up with Ghost* is a problematic text both formally and thematically. It flouts generic classification as it consists of a confusing generic mix of textual sources such as newspaper articles, diaries, scrapbooks, biographies, oral narration, and poetry. It encompasses, as well, visual elements such as photographs from family collections, and public archives, and visualized cartographic texts (maps). This original combination serves to emphasize a kind of textual hybridity that mirrors the provisionality of narrative borders and consequently, the precariousness of ethnic boundaries. Indeed, the generic transgression evidenced in the memoir carries evident critical stances towards the exclusionary impulses of nationalist Malay-dominated historiography, which aims ultimately at dissolving ethnic divisions and opening new spaces of intercultural contacts and dialogues among the different ethnic groups in postcolonial, and more particularly in post-1969 Malaysia. Bernice Chauly's writings are chiefly inscribed in the critique of Malaysian literature elaborated through the prism of anti-colonial nationalism.

Since the rise of anti-colonial nationalism and the concomitant elaboration of monolithic national narratives in the colonized Southeast Asian multiethnic countries in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the bulk of the emergent historical representations embedded in the referential national life writings have dogmatically and vehemently upheld the dominant nationalist narrative. The blossoming generation of committed nationalist writers in this geographical area wholeheartedly engaged in legitimizing and consolidating the totalizing grand narrative underlying the hegemonic nationalist ideology. Their unified historical, ethnic, and geographical representations which are evidenced in their autobiographies or memoirs replicated the unifying impulse of anti-colonial nationalism and reified its irredentist tendencies. Their portrayals of the native nation tend towards conveying a prescriptive ideologically-driven representation rather than expressing a personal descriptive one since they were deeply rooted in the nationalist literary project and constantly monitored by the ruling nationalist institution.

The emergent past narratives introduced in contemporary postcolonial life-writings, particularly autobiographies and memoirs which are articulated by Malaysian ethnic minority writers and which largely espouse postmodern representational approaches of historical writings have become an active site of contestation and negotiation whereby repressed counter-histories have been evidenced and celebrated. National ethnic minority writers like Bernice Chauly who bore the brunt of a systematic exclusion before decolonization and in its aftermath, have sought, since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, to rethink the institutionalized mechanisms of historical representation in traditional nationalist life-writings and to challenge its intrinsic hegemonic tendencies by having recourse to a wide range of deconstructionist strategies such as shifting historical perspectives, disrupting narrative coherence, blurring generic boundaries, and de-centering the authorial voice.. Their fragmented, multivocal, and multi-dimensional narratives reflect their muddled perception of the colonial past, and convey

their proclivity towards elaborating a literary project of resistance against the conventional oversimplified, reductionist, and ideologically loaded historical representations.

Through the revisionist task of straddling generic borders and blending multiple textual and non-textual references in her narrative of the Malaysian colonial and postcolonial past, the author of *Growing up with Ghost* seeks to dismantle the discursively entrenched divisions existing between the Muslim-Malay dominant historical narrative and ethnic minorities' alternative ones. Chauly's reliance on blurring narrative borders aims, eventually, at emulating the ambitious project of eroding ethnic barriers and consolidating post-ethnic activists' efforts of demystifying the precariousness of the established ethnic hierarchy in Malaysia. Writing on the borderline of genres, spaces, and times mirrors eventually a fervent desire for navigating across ethnic spaces. By letting non-Malay minorities' experience speak for itself rather than coercing insights from it that must speak on its behalf, Chauly contributes to the re-valorization of multi-perspectival contingent historical representations which are highlighted as antitheses to the prevailing nationalist ethnocentric ones. While the memoir covers multiple phases of national history and revisits its essentialized representations, this research paper deals particularly with the deconstruction of colonial Malaysia's narrative.

While Bernice Chauly was not the first to tackle Malaysian history in her memoir since Shirley Lim and Hillary Tham have explored this issue in their memoirs, the postmodern approach deployed in her narrative complicated the history of colonial Malaysia, which spurs historians and critics to rethink the very concept of history embedded in privileged nationalist representations. By having recourse to a plethora of deconstructionist representational strategies, Chauly's transcends the strict narrative borders in the monolithic representations delineating traditional memoirs by nationalist writers and interrogates its timeless validity. Her counter-hegemonic intervention does not only consist in illuminating the overshadowed experiences and proposing alternative narratives but, further, in emphasizing the contingency of any historical representation.

In *Growing up with Ghosts*, Chauly embarks on a journey across space and time to retrace her mixed lineage and to reconnect with her communal history by re-exploring her family's obscured past. The decision to journey across familial and communal histories is not driven by mere feelings of nostalgia. It is rather propelled by her determination to counter repressive practices which are institutionally perpetrated by the ruling Malay elite, and her willingness to celebrate alternative biographies of Malaysia by re-exploring and re-inscribing them in the national historical narrative. Her evocation of her family's diverse and significant experiences and the concomitant process of re-writing the Malaysian past are rooted in the larger process of expanding the horizon of historical focus beyond self-imposed temporal, ethnic, and geographical frames as well as beyond conventional narrative perspectives and its particular focus. This revisionist task implies an act of resistance against the unquestionably accepted monolithic exclusionary narratives and its pertaining normalized representational paradigms.

Driven by the desire to topple down the set of historical dogmas, Chauly resolves to democratize the task of historical writing by varying perspectives and evoking a wide range of voices. Far from focusing on a coherent and comprehensive depiction of colonial Malaysia,

Chauly confusingly straddles narrative borders and disrupts, hence, the generic unity and the narrative coherence of her autobiographical text. This approach enables her to shift away from the rigid standards of univocality defining historical representation in traditional memoirs. By embracing the postmodern approaches, Chauly engages in the process of redefining the rigid borders of Malaysian colonial history and expanding its narrative beyond the narrow ideological frames of the authorized history and the cluster of oppressive dichotomies, essentializing presumptions, unfounded claims, and clichés enmeshed within its narrative. Her narrative challenges the official historiography without being reducible to the plain recuperative task or without being informed by the simple oppositional gestures and their pertaining facile dichotomies. Chauly's memoir is clearly inscribed in the revisionist project targeted against the homogenizing narrative tendencies.

The narrative of the colonial experience in Chauly's memoir historically crosses the boundaries of space and time, and weaves together multiple threads. First, it covers two historical phases. The first one is the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Malaysia during British colonial rule. It is conveyed through the author's voice along with 3 ancestral voices. These voices are those of her paternal grandparents Karam Kaur and Jaswant Singh as well as her maternal grandmother Ho Siew Ngan. The second phase is the late 1930's and early 1940's and more specifically during the Japanese occupation. Its narrative is conveyed through three voices which are those of the author and her two maternal grandparents and her maternal grandmother's sister Loh Siew Yoke. Second, the narrative is written from different Malayan cities which are Ipoh, Georgetown, Buntong, Taiping, Kuala Lumpur, and Kuala Kangsar, and Singapore, and the Chinese city of Fatshan. Each of these alternating voices narrates from its standpoint personal, familial, and communal stories of the colonial epoch.

In *Growing up with Ghosts*, Chauly shatters the reader's expectation and urges him to rethink the inherited definition of a memoir. Lost in a labyrinth of places, voices, and lives, he is invited to piece together the shards of family stories and the scraps of facts to reconstruct a coherent unified narrative. Yet, this task is crippled by the missing information which creates gaps and do not allow the narrative to unfurl coherently. In her book about the crisis of representation in postmodern life writings, Susanna Egan (1999) observes that "[c]ontemporary autobiographers [...] who seem to stake no claim for unified or coherent identity, seek no illusions of coherence from the reflections available to them. Their texts display fragmentation, incoherence, even dissolution"(pp.11-12). Like coeval postmodern autobiographical texts, Chauly's memoir does not claim authoritative first-person narration. The multivocal structure of the text transgresses narrative and generic borders. It involves the reader in a complex process of query and in an exhaustive pursuit of shifting historical perspectives and provisional meanings. This unconventional narrative structure that de-centers the authorial voice and disrupts its narrative unity triggers the reader to question the supremacy of the narrator's perspective and allows the author to undo the oppressive hierarchy of voices enmeshed in nationalist historical representation and its underlying presumptions.

National autobiographical narratives in postcolonial Malaysian literature offered a pertinent example of the obvious nationalists' penchant for unifying literary representations. These



narratives were deeply committed in the founding national stories of post-independence Malaysia and strikingly influenced by the dominant nationalist ideology. Along with cartography and ethnography, historiography in postcolonial Malaysia was perceived as one of the principal domains whereby nationalist discursive interventions in the national narrative are undertaken, and one of the fundamental premises upon which the supremacy of nationalist assumptions is grounded and sustained. Therefore, the representation of Malaysian history was an issue of paramount concern for engaged anti-colonial Malaysian writers like Bernice Chauly. The narrative of the colonial experience particularly represented the main avenue of anti-colonial literary praxis.

As a member of a disadvantaged non-Malay minority group in Malaysia, Chauly writes against the official history books and documents in Malaysia. Her re-exploration of colonial Malaysia which results in elaborating alternative contentious narrative is not driven by the desire to overcome a nostalgic feeling, but rather to unravel the domineering paradigms underpinning any representation and highlighting the fissures which are endemic in the process of writing national history. She seeks to give voice to the silenced national minorities, to disclose, to use Azade Syehan (2001) words, “an unauthorized biography of the nation “,to unbury repressed stories, and to throw lights on its obscured facts (p.96). In her memoir, Chauly exhibits no interest in the politically-correct representation of colonial Malaysia which reduces it to the experience of the Malays and their “big sacrifices and brave resistance”. She flouts not only the ideological and political constraints of an authorized historical representation, but even further shatters its totalizing assumptions, demolishes its putative cohesiveness, and defies, eventually, its unquestioned authority. She re-explores partly the mainstream narrative of colonial Malaysia (formerly known as Malaya) whose representation in nationalist historiography is riddled with silences and replete with obscurities and inconsistencies. Her critical attitude towards the conventional representations of Malaysians’ colonial experience stems from her awareness of the flagrant injustices and the obvious fallacies lurking in such representations. Her propensity towards re-writing the colonial history of her native nation via alternative lenses is fuelled by her desire to recover lost experiences and to legitimize un-official yet significant stories of ethnic minorities’ ordeal during the colonial period.

The process of re-writing Malaysian colonial history in Chauly’s memoir implies further a process of re-righting alternative standpoints. Indeed, her critical re-exploration of Malay-centered past narrative falls within a national project of de-silencing sidelined minority voices and re-valorizing the repressed and underrated Malaysian communal stories. Since its publication, Chauly’s memoir, has earned critical attention as it appeared in a context marked by the blossoming of a revisionist project which aims at foregrounding the irreducible diversity of Malaysian histories through performing creative cultural practices. The thrust of this revisionist project is to celebrate a multicultural Malaysia on the ground. The latter which remains, because of Malay’s hegemony, a dead letter can only be put into effect through the concerted efforts of unburying and gathering repressed past narratives and giving the oppressed and intimidated national minorities back their right to sound off their testimonies about colonial Malaysia and to re-tell their own cherished stories.

The process of exploring and representing colonial history in earlier national narratives was inextricable from the national project of political decolonization. In his book *The Other Malaysia: Writings on Malaysia's Subaltern History* Farish Ahmad Noor emphasizes the organic relation between political hegemony and historical narrative in the mainstream literature of post-independence Malaysia. He asserts that "[h]istory and politics are, and have always been two of the most contested discursive terrains for the simple reason that to control the writing of history means having the power to determine the past, present, and future of any nation" (Noor, 2002 p.vii). As a corollary, the autobiographical narrative of colonial Malaysia and its intrinsic representational approaches were inevitably informed by the pre-defined ideological constraints in the elemental historical narratives which are rooted in the official nationalist historiography and underpinned in its essentialist tenets. The stark representational injustices which institutionalized and perpetuated oppression against non-Malay minorities galvanized minority writers into a project of literary resistance.

Against the backdrop of the systematic obliteration of Malaysian national memory, the literary class of minority groups has waged, since the late 1960's a campaign against the institutionalized ethnicization of national history and the systematic obliteration of national memory over decades of colonial then Malay cultural ascendancy, which culminated in the bloody inter-ethnic riots of May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1969, and resulted in the frenzied rage of Malays against the disenchanting Indian and Chinese ethnic groups. The oppressed minorities started fidgeting and demonstrating, particularly at universities, against cultural discrimination under the leadership of their enlightened class including writers such as Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Wong Phui Nam, and Ee Tiang Hong. The fact that ethnic minorities' literary elite in Malaysia resolved to revolt and to mobilize by revisiting the official national history and writing their histories can be taken as an indication that the foundational narrative of nationalist historiography has failed to take them into account.

Farish Noor highlights the flagrant flaws and inconsistencies which flatten and obsolete the Malaysian historical narrative. Through exploring the guiding suppositions and the underlying premises of the authorized historical texts, Noor (2002) emphasizes the need "to focus on the reactivation of the memory of the past and to bring to light aspects of Malaysia's marginalized and subaltern histories and narratives that had been buried for so long" (p.v). The revisionist project which Noor persistently reclaims aims to recover "forgotten episodes of [Malaysians] collective past and present" and to cast lights on darkened pages of Malaysian political history which are inaccessible through classical approaches of historical inquiry (Noor, 2002, p.vi). This project ultimately aims to refresh national memory and to sensitize the younger generations to the manifold possibilities and contingencies that shaped the past but remained little explored, and hence almost ignored. In an interview with Daphne, in the wake of the memoir's publication, Chauly asserts that:

[she] wanted to include [forefathers]' voices, their stories. The aim was to have a tapestry of voices, to use existing words that were left behind, and to piece together something indicative of real people, to celebrate oral history in ways that may challenge the notion of the conventional memoir. ( Lee, November 2011)

Like many other coeval literary writings, Chauly's narrative is an attempt to offer a sustained critique of Malaysian historiography. It is an effort to redefine the borders of the traditional autobiographical narrative, but also the borders of colonial Malaysia's narrative, to multiply its stories beyond the narrow scope of Malay anti-colonial resistance, and to deconstruct some of the more settled and essentialist understandings upon which the exclusionary paradigms inherent in the nationalist narratives are premised.

Rather than referring to official historical documents and rather than being bound with its established narrative norms, Chauly relies on alternative sources. Enticed by the lure of the private familial and communal realm and its significant representational potential which was overlooked by nationalist historians, Chauly delves into the contesting past narrative underlying moving family stories. The latter is illustrated throughout the text and conveyed through multiple voices. Since the opening chapters of the memoir, the reader notices that the narrative of colonial Malaysia does not unfold straightforwardly. Instead, it is fragmented and confusingly articulated through a complex network of textual and non-textual references and through interwoven voices that provide multiple perspectives. The narrating voice loses its presence and its control of the flow of the narrative. It seems to retreat to give the way to other narratives which are conveyed through diverse texts. These latter are juxtaposed to complement each other.

In her memoir, Chauly clearly seeks to concretize her strong wish to circumvent worn-out representational conventions and to eschew generic classifications in traditional memoirs. The first chapter entitled "Origins" consists of a series of intermittently intersecting shards of grandparents' autobiographies. The latter are overwhelming the narrative of colonial Malaysia. The domination of the grandparents' voices de-centers the author's one and even relegates it to the margin. Funny childhood anecdotes, charming love stories, magical communal tales, and other enticing accounts are directly transmitted by those who experienced it so as to offer a vivid portrayal of Malaysian minorities' daily lives during the colonial rule (Chauly, 2011, p.21-25). The immediacy of narratives appears to take us directly to the epoch and to the scenes being described. The author's voice is almost eclipsed from the narrative then re-inserted in the following chapter. The duality of presence /absence in the narrative undermines the traditional definition of the author as the omniscient, all-embracing and all-knowing voice, and as the unique source of historical knowledge.

The multiple textual references which are lumped together and the diverse past narratives which are juxtaposed and intertwined throughout the first chapters of the text allow the reader to experience the past not as a single coherent monological narrative but as a combination of intersecting and even conflicting multi-perspectival narratives none of which is central. The narrative of the past is made up through the interweaving of a multiplicity of intersecting perspectives. The colonial past is written through the interaction of the author's voice with 5 other ones. Chauly (2011) writes: "I speak from five voices and I speak from my own. These are our stories" (p.18). By illustrating more than one voice, Chauly offers valuable insights and significant personal reflections. The autobiographical portrayal of national minorities' lives unfurls into a discontinuous narrative made up of fragments of autobiographies and biographies. The narrative is structured and orchestrated by the autobiographer but not dominated by his voice which results in a hybrid multi-generic text. The generic transgression



is strikingly evidenced in chapter “Origins” which conflates biographical and autobiographical elements.

The reader notices that the narrative of the past is conveyed through an alternation between the great grandmother’s life narrative and the author’s one (19). By including her voice in her great grandmother’s life narrative and vice versa, Chauly seeks to confuse temporal barriers and to cross-generational borders. She does not seek to produce cohesive life narratives. She rather seeks to retrace her ethnic roots, to re-explore her bloodlines, and to reconnect both culturally and emotionally with a lost mysterious, and intriguing past. She writes: “I had to go back to the beginning. I had to find bloodlines. I had to find secrets and stories, and then begin to tell them” (Chauly, 2011, p.20). In this sense, narrating her family’s life does not consist in an account of an experience but an experience itself. By choosing to communicate and to interact with her ancestors, she wants to highlight the dialogic nature of any past narrative. This approach contests and relativizes representational authority, and gives wider rooms to Malaysia’s margins for speaking out and celebrating their own mixed and inter-racial histories.

The generic fluidity and hybridity which marks postmodern autobiographies and memoirs “challenge[s]” according to Linda Hutcheon (1988) “the borders we accept as existing between literature and extra-literary narrative discourses which surround it: history, biography, autobiography”(p.224). In her memoir, Chauly transgresses generic boundaries and transforms her life narrative into a hybrid text that confusingly incorporates all genres. Each genre complements and/or contradicts the other and never tells the whole story of her family and childhood. The reader who expects a straightforward narrative of Chauly’s life realizes, ultimately, that the generic unity of the memoir is not fulfilled since the author moves constantly from one text to another. These generic slippages obfuscate the categorization of the memoir. In other words, the generic referentiality of *Growing up with Ghosts* remains unstable because the text runs from one generic ground to another. The narrative of colonial Malaysia particularly moves fluidly from poetry to prose and from literature to journalism (Chauly, 2011, p.41). By and large, the text resists generic labeling. It keeps floating, evading boundaries and restrictions in canonical autobiographical writings.

In her portrayal of colonial Malaysia, Chauly draws upon a cluster of texts which are conveyed by a myriad of textual forms. The latter are juxtaposed almost randomly. Some of these texts are visual like photos and maps while some others are written like poems. Even the written texts illustrated in the memoir are divided into two categories. Some are factual such as newspaper articles and some others are non-factual like private letters. The narrative of Malaysian minorities’ daily experiences during the British colonial rule and the Japanese occupation is constructed through the jigsaw puzzle pieces of texts. Besides, the boundaries between these textual forms are obviously blurred. She inserts an old handwritten letter sent by her grandfather Bapuji in which he offers a portrayal of her great grandmother (Chauly, 2011, pp.19-20). Juxtaposing letters and prose allows again for achieving an inter-generational conversation which enables the author, ultimately to grasp deeper meanings of the past that lie beyond her own consciousness. In this sense, Chauly transforms the autobiographical narrative of colonial Malaysia into a borderless and generically hybrid text.

Through revisiting her great grandmother's life, Chauly re-explores an obscured and a little-known past experience; that of the Punjabi during the earlier epoch of colonial rule. The historical significance of this epoch prompts her to embark on a historical inquiry in which grandparents' biographies are substantial material. Furthermore, to fathom the historical background of the Punjabis and the complexities of their experience, Chauly (2001) refers, in addition to inherited family narratives, to literary extra-historical texts such as the fables illustrated in the *Indian Serpent Lore Or The Nagas In Hindu Legend And Art* by Vogel, J. Ph which contain mythical tales about her Punjabis ancestors. (p.20). The insertion of mythical elements in her narrative imbues it with an extra-literary fantastic dimension, unsettles its putative coherence and continuity, and expands, consequently, its narrative horizons. It opens up the process to insert unforeseen narrative possibilities, and hence new and competing meanings.

The generic hybridity of the autobiographical text and its multivocal, multidimensional and multi-perspectival nature dynamize its narrative and potentially reinvigorate it by allowing the writer and the reader to transcend the narrow ideological frames and the strict standards of unity and closure, and to reconfigure new possibilities. Chauly seeks to extend the literary frame beyond the closure of ideology and towards the infinity of textual possibilities and hence the endlessness of interpretations. In an essay entitled "Gender and Life Stories", Annie Vilkkko et al.(2003) posit that:

[t]he new model of autobiographical truth [...] is characterized by disconnected, scattered and fragmentary textual conventions of performance. Thus the late-modern autobiographer is zigzagging between old and new registers to narrate a life, searching for possibilities to recite it in another way, that guarantees the openness of the text. (pp. 61-62)

The representation of Malaysian history including the colonial one in Chauly's memoir is so complex that it resists attempts to essentialize it due to the diversity of perspectives and the consequent contingency of the narrative and its fissured structure.

When exploring the colonial experience, Chauly evokes voices of people issuing from marginalized categories which are the Chinese Malaysians and the Indian Malaysians minorities, as well as Women. This approach is subsumed under the author's project of recuperating the lost multicultural history of Malaysia which was systematically seized by nationalist historians. The latter discursively imposed an ethno-centered and male-centered representation of the past and discarded, subsequently; alternative ones. Farish Noor (2002) observes that:

[a] close reading of Malaysian official historiography will show that the Malaysian historical subject remains male, Malay/Bumiputera, middle-class and Muslim. But surely this is just one aspect of Malaysian identity that is far more complex and cries out to be problematized and interrogated further. (p.vi).

By shifting perspectives in her autobiographical depiction of the colonial experience, Chauly engages in a political project of redefining Malaysia beyond the reductionist and discriminatory nationalist paradigms and galvanizing critical acumen by eroding certainties imbricated in the canonized narrative within the well-established historical discourse.

The multiplicity of voices and perspectives disrupts the continuity of historical narrative and dispels long-standing homogenizing assumptions. “To challenge the impulse to totalize is” according to Linda Hutcheon (1989) “to contest the entire notion of continuity in history” (p.66). Bernice Chauly utilizes, in *Growing up with Ghosts*, deconstructive narrative techniques to highlight the textual nature of the past. She undermines referential representational paradigms by incorporating a range of destabilizing strategies, including the representation of history as a narrative construct whose meanings are endlessly devised and interpreted via the constant interaction of multiple conflicting texts and through contradictory irreconcilable discourses. All serve to complicate any access to her family’s history and to emphasize the intricate process involved in her identifications with Malaysian history.

Unlike conformist ones, these contentious narratives of the past do not seek to sanctify a coherent historical knowledge that is exclusively modelled and conveyed through an omniscient all-embracing authorial voice and progressively fashioned through a seamless, unified, teleological narrative. Conversely, these narratives constantly remind the reader, through deconstructive techniques of fragmentation and discontinuity, of the inevitable constructedness of any historical knowledge and its endless openness. Otherwise, by adopting this problematic narrative structure which dispels the notion of historical closure and questions its oppressiveness, they emphasize the fact that any historical representation is inescapably undercut by the diversity of representations, the provisionality of narrative interpretations, and the contingency of historical knowledge.

In this context, Tracie Guzzio (2011) posits that “[i]n postmodern autobiography, authors often take on double or multiple voices or selves to challenge dominant hegemonic ideologies” (p.31). The inclusion of multiple voices which continuously coalesce to articulate national history serves to highlight the manifold possibilities of narrative. The provisionality of historical representation demonstrates its purely narrative quality and dismantles the very bases upon which the hegemony of nationalist historical texts is grounded. These generically hybrid and borderless texts have become a productive site of interventionist practices whereby totalizing nationalist narratives are overruled and alternative post-nationalist ones are elaborated. The subversive potential of its inherent representations prompts Malaysian minority writers to embrace them and to promote their ideas instead of the cluster of orthodox nationalist representational assumptions

In *Growing up with Ghosts* Bernice Chauly persistently reminds the reader that history is not just one opinion. She affirms her disinterest in methodological constraints of unity and coherence. She confesses that she rather prefers a complicated history that lies beyond historical documents and its spiritless factual narratives. She prefers to celebrate a history where an event is seen through multiple lenses and emotions. This tendency stems from her unflinching belief that history is not about a dead thing but it is about something which is always alive. Chauly suggests that “[h]istory needs to be told from many perspectives. [She] didn’t want to be the sole voice. [She] needed to be honest to [her] ancestors, to use their own words, and to re-tell their stories” (Lee, 2011). In this sense, Chauly breaks with traditional standards and approaches of historical writing in nationalist literature and demolishes its inherent system of representation. Chauly shares with Farish Noor (2002) the conviction that

“[i]t is only through such a deconstructive approach to history and politics that some of [Malaysians]’ settled understandings of identity and difference can be dislocated and questioned further” (p.viii). The problematized historical representation of colonial Malaysia in her memoir largely helps to disclose “the underlying power structures and violent hierarchies that have kept communities and classes apart, and which have sustained the status quo for so long”, and hence, conveys the author’s subversive aspirations. (Noor, 2002, p.viii). By exploring the alternative inter-racial histories of colonial Malaysia the author seeks to address “the awkward silences and blind spots” in official historiography (Noor, 2002, p vi). The latter, in her view, confiscated national memory by ruling out other narrative possibilities. In a prescient speech addressed as part of Worlds festival of Literature in which she tackles the burning issue of multiculturalism in Malaysia and its cultural challenges, and she stresses the disruptive outcomes of the systematic obliteration of ethnic memory which spurs her to write against hegemonic and exclusionary representations, Chauly says in a sorrowful accent:

[w]e do not celebrate our history. We do not celebrate our diversity. We are a nation that suffers from historical amnesia. We have chosen to forget[...]. There are so many parts of our history, so many parts of our narrative which haven’t really been explored[...]. Our stories matter, they are of Malaysia, they are Malaysian. Writing becomes an act of will, of defiance, of memory, an act of faith[...].I had to write myself in my country and into the world[...] Since that memoir was written, my stories are driven by the desire to tell stories that haven’t been really told. (National Centre for Writing, 2014, 03:00-03:37)

While the narrative in *Growing up with Ghosts* largely conveys Chauly’s preoccupations, her autobiographical revisitation of the past is neither merely confined to the task of introducing untold family stories, nor even limited in the aim of giving voice to silenced oppressed minorities. It horizons, further, towards highlighting the endemic discontinuities and intricacies intrinsic to the writing of national history which result from the gaps rooted in any historical representation and its inescapable narrative dimension. She asserts that “[she] did not want to write it in a straightforward narrative style – meaning one singular narrative throughout, [hers]– as [she] felt that this would be too conventional and did not best serve the stories [she] wanted to tell. [She] wanted to redefine memoir writing” (Lee, November 2011). Chauly is essentially concerned with filling the voids in the official history of colonial Malaysia by illustrating fragments of untold stories and unpublished testimonies.

The author is never concerned with reproducing the grand narratives and reiterating their inherent representational models. She seeks rather to foreground the inevitable complexities associated with any autobiographical narrative of the nation. According to Ansgar Nünning (2005) postmodern texts “cross traditional genres boundaries and shift the emphasis from the mere writing, or re-writing of a historical individual’s life to the epistemological and methodological problems involved in any attempt at life-writing itself”(p.199). The approach of narrating the colonial history of Malaysia through a plethora of perspectives allows the author to tell not only a single story, but multiple ones conveyed through the voices of their owners in a way that reflects the diversity of national experiences. By endorsing this postmodern approach of representation, she throws lights on overshadowed family stories and highlights their underappreciated historical significance.

Chauly re-explores, in the second chapter of her memoir, a bitter experience lived by her parents and grandparents which dates back to the early 1940s' which is the Japanese occupation of her homeland in the wake of World War II. While this historical event which constituted a gloomy page in the history of Malaysia was thoroughly tackled by nationalist historians due to its profound implications on the nation's psyche and its far-reaching political consequences, Chauly's re-exploration of this event was particularly significant. The importance of the Japanese occupation's narrative in her memoir lies in the obvious perspectival shift it comes to offer. Unlike the mainstream narratives underpinning the foundational historical texts which conventionally embrace Malays accounts and assumptions, and exclusively focus on the direct effects of the invasion on the Malays' liberation movement and their national project, Chauly's narrative carries deconstructionist traces as it puts to the forefront non-Malays accounts about the brutality of the Japanese invasion and uncover its disruptive psychological impact on national minorities..

The diverse standpoints suggested in the narrative challenge conventional representational models by casting light on the very narrative that nationalist historians seek to obscure. In fact, through the multiple voices evoked in the first chapters, Chauly suggests diverse standpoints of the same event. The horrifying scenes of daily bombings and the shocking accounts of flagrant Human Rights violations are exhaustively conveyed through the lenses of the victims in their poignant testimonies. These latter offer an interesting historical document as they point out the heavy legacy of Japanese occupation by exposing diverse stories of oppression ranging from daily harassment and systematic intimidation, to atrocious crimes of emotional and physical abuse, such as rape, torture, and mass murders, and by depicting horrendous crimes of ethnic cleansing perpetrated against helpless Chinese and Punjabis by the savage and bloodthirsty Japanese invaders. These heart-rending stories are conveyed by her maternal and paternal grandparents who went through the dreadful ordeal of war and colonization generally and who witnessed the horrors of the barbarian Japanese occupation particularly.

The testimonies about the Japanese occupation of her grandparents' homeland offer significant accounts which are not included in the official historical documents and important historical facts that cannot be accessible through conventional methods of historical inquiry. In her diaries of war illustrated in the memoir, Chauly's paternal grandmother Karam Kaur depicts the overwhelming feeling of fear that tormented her and disconcerted her peaceful Punjabi community. Chauly (2011) writes:

We hear on the radio that the Japanese dropped bombs on Penang. We ran into the hills this morning to hide [...] We are very scared. *They say that the Japanese come on bicycles and on foot with sharp guns that can stab and shoot. I am very afraid.* [emphasis added]. My husband is in Penang. I do not know if he is dead or alive. It's night now and I cannot sleep[...] ! (p.33)

The vivid depiction of the war's paralyzing atmosphere of panic and uncertainty enables the reader to get closer to this major historical event as it had been experienced by the Punjabis as well as by other non-Malay minorities and to redefine the borders of past narrative beyond



ethno-centered perspectives and concerns. The poetic-like tone of the speaker adds to the testimony an emotional dimension that makes it deeper and more sincere. The reader is struck by the freshness and persuasiveness of her impressions about the event. In a frightening depiction of the Chinese predicament in the wake of the Japanese occupation conveyed through the lenses of her grandmother in a breathless tone, Chauly (2011) writes:

We have a dug hole. With our bare hands. The Japanese are raping women and children. Yesterday, they cut off the heads of a few men who were caught stealing food. Then they stuck the heads on sticks near the market so that everyone could see. I saw four heads. Their eyes had been gouged out and there were crows pecking at the sockets. I felt like vomiting but my stomach churned from pain [...] We will have to stay here for a while. Days, weeks, months? I don't know. There is nothing to eat at all. I tried to eat some tree bark yesterday. It tasted horrible. I was so sick. I threw up. But there was nothing inside me, just bright yellow bile. (36)

Chauly illustrates, in the same context, a similar distressing experience lived by her grandmother's sister Loh Siew Yoke and her family whereby she depicts the bitter plight of the Chinese who were constantly terrorized, ruthlessly exterminated, and systematically starved to death by the Japanese invaders. In a moving testimony illustrated in Chauly's memoir, Loh Siew Yoke chronicles that:

[They] lived on sweet potatoes for almost two years. There was nothing else to eat during the war. Then one day, they came. The Japanese came [...] Then they dragged Ah Ma by her hair out the door[...] [They] were crying, hugging each other, not knowing what to do[...] Ah Ma had been kidnapped by the Japanese. [She] cried and cried. [They] could not sleep that night. (Chauly, 2011, p.38)

Chauly inserts the shocking testimony of her mother's aunt with the tiniest details in order to underscore the traumatic effects of Japanese oppressive practices against Malaysian minorities, and hence to disclose an unknown version of the Japanese occupation which interrogates and stultifies the prevailing nationalist one. While the latter purports that non-Malay minorities, notably the Chinese, had secretly and vicariously sympathized with the Japanese invaders against their alleged national enemy, Chauly's narrative stresses the mutually hostile relation between the Japanese army and non-Malays national minorities which refutes Malays' claims.

In one of her confessions, her grandmother's sister expresses in a hysterical tone her utmost contempt for the Japanese because of their terrible mischievous misdeeds unscrupulously perpetrated against her helpless community. Chauly (2011) mentions, in her memoir, that grandmothers' sister says: "[i] hear screams all the time. Women are being raped, then beheaded. Their children are forced to watch. They are barbarians. Heartless. Animals. I hate the Japanese. I curse them from the depths of my soul (p.36)". Her hysterical tone which is evidenced in the series of offensive words and derogatory adjectives attributed to the Japanese reflects her tremendous fury against the savage invaders but also tells the reader much about the long-term profound consequences of a collective trauma after painful national, communal, and individual experiences. While the mainstream version of colonial Malaysia sought to

exclusively emphasize the psychological impact of the Japanese occupation on the Malays, national minorities' seek to illuminate the overshadowed experiences of non-Malays and to enrich the national historical narrative with untold stories of oppression against vulnerable people. These competing testimonies which are conveyed through the eyes of the victims serve to refresh national memory and to reconnect the Malaysian nation who "suffer[s] from historical amnesia" with significant accounts of her colonial history (National Centre for Writing, 2014, 03:00-03:08). They offer, moreover, new insights into the lingering effects of post-traumatic stress.

The author's proclivity towards relying on family stories as a principal material in re-assessing and re-writing the history of political repression in colonial Malaysia emanates from her unflinching conviction that the counter-narrative underlying these stories not only provides alternative standpoints and perspectives, but further potentially undermines the authority of the canonized historical texts within official historiography, and dismantles the intricate power systems enmeshed in their representations. Chauhy disrupts the monolithic national stories about colonial Malaysia including Western grand narratives of colonization. She demonstrates, through re-exploring these challenging narratives about the history of colonial oppression in her native country, that any assumption of objectivity and scientificity anchored to colonial and nationalist historiography is inescapably illusive since "claims for historical knowledge must always be fatally circumscribed by the character and prejudices of its narrator"(Schama, 1991, p.322). In a speech addressed as part of the Worlds Literature Festival, Chauhy says:

I chose to write my father, mother, my illiterate grandmother, grandfathers ... ordinary Malaysians who are part of the landscape and history to write about ordinary Malaysians who lived survived wars ordinary. Ordinary Malaysian who pass in a landscape and history. In my memoir *Growing up with Ghosts*, I explored bloodlines, history, forbidden love .I trace memories, stories, curses I remember my ancestors I them speak. I gave them voices. Writing became an act of will, of defiance, of memory, an act of faith...I had to write myself in my country and into the world. (National Centre for Writing, 2014, 03:48-04:32)

By reconnecting with her grandparents and her family's past and by coming to terms with their own stories through recuperating their own voices and perspectives, Chauhy illuminates and celebrates narratives about brave popular sacrifices and devoted anti-colonial activism of Malaysian people which override Western derogatory description of colonized natives but also thwarts the purportedly authoritative nationalist historiography which systematically glosses over the diversity and richness of non-Malay experiences and erases them from the elemental narrative of official historical documents. Dane Johnson (1996) observes that:

[t]he blurring of history, story, and genealogy is another form of resistance to the official stories embedded in each of these narratives. Colonized groups often find that getting their story straight and protecting their heritage against attempts to erase it takes the form of genealogy of family history, which then stands in opposition to the official story. (pp.150-151)

This painstaking yet enlightening task enables Chauly to develop deeper insights into the meticulous process of selection and filtration whereby the official past narratives evolve. Chauly concludes that this task of selection and filtration is primordial to maintain and perpetuate the unquestionable authority and the timeless validity of the authorized past narrative. She realizes, as well, that the sustainability of these discursive hegemonic practices is inextricably linked to dictators' obsessive greed for power. As a corollary, she writes essentially against the Malay historians who mostly dismiss and obscure all unpleasant stories which may discredit the very regime they wholeheartedly defend. In her Ph.D. dissertation, Erin Haddad-Null stresses the subversive interventions of family narratives in re-writing history. She maintains that: "[t]he family histories offer a means for representing access to counter-histories. Those historical experiences often occluded or excised from official accounts of history. These counter-histories typically emerge from a need to understand the way particular forms of nationalism suppress or elide certain experiences" (Haddad-Null, 2013, p.24)". Chauly seeks to re-authorize buried family stories because they offer a significant site of contestation whereby the hegemonic politics of historical representations are demystified.

In response to official historiography, Chauly suggests a contentious depiction of colonial Malaysia. Her representation of a turbulent epoch carries obvious subversive traces as it gestures towards disentangling national history from the strict ideological frames and expanding its narrative beyond the narrow official to the rich un-official realm so that new truths can be told and new horizons can be envisioned. Thus, the narrative possibilities offered by the nexus of family stories erode totalizing representations endemic in its narratives, gain new insights into the colonial experience, add a representational value to national historical narrative, and hence, allow for achieving a deeper apprehension of the multiple aspects of political oppression and its roots in colonial and postcolonial Malaysia which is crucial to the task of facing state-building challenges in a multicultural nation.

*Growing up with Ghosts* should not be read as an attempt to subvert a dominant nationalist historical narrative and replace it with another totalizing one, but, to use Farish Noor's (2002) words "to render [...] moments of hermeneutic closure and epistemic arrest impossible" (p.viii). Chauly seeks, in her autobiographical representation of colonial Malaysia, to desilence the voice of the Malaysian subaltern which has been locked within the distorted discourse of colonial and nationalist historiography, and to celebrate repressed elements of colonial past "that would complicate such attempts to construct a flat and static historical narrative premised upon such simple essentialist notions of identity and difference" (Noor, 2002, p. vi). Yet, her attempts at giving Malaysian minorities back their voices generate a representational quandary which is how one does exhaustively explore these sidelined voices and honestly conveys their attitudes and interpretations of their past experiences without oppressing them.

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