



Experiment of Writing in the Film *The Pillow Book*: Analyzing Third World Women's Gender/National Subjectivity

Hui-Ya Lin^{1*}

¹*Department of Applied English, Ming Chuan University, The First American University in Asia
5 De Ming Rd., Gui Shan District, Taoyuan County 333, Taiwan, R.O.C.*

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ABSTRACT

Experiment of Writing in the Film *The Pillow Book*: Analyzing Third World Women's Gender/National Subjectivity," indicates that the subversion of writing, gender, and national subjectivity are closely related because women from the East are usually exploited or their image is distorted and reduced to that of an exotic sexual plaything in Hollywood films. Regarding film narratives, *The Pillow Book* overcomes the limited choice of writing materials. Moreover, women become writers and escape the fate of being passively written on like paper in this film. By choosing to be a pen themselves, women claim the power of active writing. This paper aims to analyze the gender/national subjectivity in the film from Third World Feminism's point of view.

Keywords: The Pillow Book; Third World Women; gender; national identity; power; active writing.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1996, an experimental film *The Pillow Book* [1], based on a book of the same name [2], was introduced into the Western Cinema Market of Taiwan among various Hollywood commercial films. This film differed from other Hollywood films because of its subverting characteristics in multiple aspects. Interestingly, to boost the box office, this film was promoted as an R-rated (i.e., erotic) film in Taiwan, emphasizing female protagonist Vivian Wu's full frontal nudity. The distribution company attempted to attract audience to purchase tickets and watch the film expecting female nudity. However, the film completely went against audience expectations for a pornographic film. Presumably, some audience could have felt cheated or puzzled after watching this film. This disappointment mainly originated from the point of view that we, regardless of gender, are accustomed to when watching Hollywood films. We are used to presentations of female nudity and even derive voyeuristic pleasure from them. In *The Pillow Book*, female nudity is partially presented, whereas, male nudity appears frequently. Moreover, the narration that subverts the active and passive roles of men and women not only subverts traditional narratives but also challenges the audience's viewing habit.

The Pillow Book differs substantially from both Hollywood films and R-rated films in multiple aspects. Therefore, it involves various characteristics that deserve comparison, examination, and in-depth investigation. For example, the relationship between writing and subjectivity can be examined to determine if the concepts of "I write, therefore I am" and "incarnation of the text" apply to this context. It is believed that controlling language is equivalent to possessing power, and in this film mixed use of Chinese, English, and Japanese dialogues shows the meaning of national identity. The film also shows, what attachment or mentality Asian Americans may have about their own languages. In terms of gender, whether the shift from men writing on the female body or women writing on the male body signifies a subversion of subject positions requires further investigation. Moreover, we need to determine whether a woman's control over male body, that frequently appear in the film provides a different experience for the general audience, thus reversing and subverting the typical subject-object positions in theories about voyeurism. The inset screens that frequently appear on the full screen (similar to

the screen image of watching two channels simultaneously on a multifunctional television) also deconstruct the custom of using one single screen image for story-telling in cinema. In addition, the writing materials range from bamboo, animal hide, paper, human body to human skin, which constantly deconstruct the concept of a book to the extent, that the film itself has also been transformed into a book by the director. The film also reveals the book publishers' exploitation of writers and criticizes the overall operation mechanism of the publishing industry. Furthermore, the female and male protagonists' attitudes towards building a romantic relationship varies from examples found in other films; even the presentation of gay men in the film is worthy to discuss further. *The Pillow Book* a rich and complex film that can be discussed from numerous aspects. Therefore, this chapter only focuses on analyzing the relationship between subverting the use of unconventional writing materials, the characters' gender, and construction of national subjectivity.

2. THIRD WORLD FEMINISMS

According to Dr. Su-Lin Yu [3] at National Cheng Kung University, feminists in the Third World have created a space for the development of Third-World feminism. Since the 1980s, Third-World feminists such as Chela Sandoval [4], Trinh T. Minh-ha [5], Spivak [6] and Mohanty [7] have continuously criticized the racial discrimination and class prejudice among women and feminists themselves, providing a standpoint for further development of the feminist theories related to nonwhite women. The diversity and differences in their theories have not only prompted nonwhite women to deconstruct the homogeneous female subject and reject the concept of an overarching feminism, but also enabled them to claim differences and assert diverse female identifications. Currently, women in economically developed Asian countries or regions (e.g., Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) and young women in the United States are facing similar concerns. Occasionally, they even encounter similar challenges and dilemmas. Asian feminists' skepticism regarding a hegemonic feminist discourse is closely related to the disagreement between nonwhite American feminism and the second-wave feminism in several aspects. Despite facing similar dilemmas, young Asian women and nonwhite American women looks upon the history of feminism from different perspectives. Although nonwhite American women understand the history of

feminism as involving three consecutive waves of transformation from the nineteenth century to the present, few Asian women see it as a linear development. The submission of Asian women has a long history and is deeply rooted in the course of economic, political, and cultural development. In the past decades, Asian historians, sociologists, and feminists have rediscovered various figures and incidents that used to be missing in the history of women. They found that colonization and nationalism have contributed to a fragmented and discontinuous history of Asian women. In other words, the development of feminism presents a fragmented and nonlinear history rather than a linear and gradual progress. Sometimes we may fail to recognize the importance of discontinuity over continuity in the history of feminist movements in Asia. Therefore, if young Asian women hope to accept a feminist identity, they must identify with their historical heritage first and then make contributions to their own cultural development.

The relationship between Western and Asian women has undergone changes in the early twenty-first century. Young Asian women face a false framework of binary choices if they view Asian women through a perspective of East–West opposition. In fact, Asian and Western women are not homogeneous within themselves. The framework of binary opposition not only fails to acknowledge the differences existing in the discourse of Asian feminism, but also neglects the diverse interactions between Asia and the West. In addition, a binary opposition between the West and Asia would discourage young feminists who desire to engage in transnational collaboration. Therefore, we must regard Asian and Western feminism as mutually dependent and reciprocal rather than place them in a binary opposition.

In recent years, Asian feminist scholars have increasingly sought examples from the Third World they live in, to determine the uniqueness of their own ethnic groups, environment, and culture. Moreover, they have been resisting the gaze from the First World in order to reclaim their power of discourse and interpretation and to voice for their people and culture. This monograph consists of four articles that individually analyze literature, films, and indigenous folk legends from a Third-World feminist perspective, comparing different contexts and viewpoints in the First World and the Third World. The present study focuses on

the exchanges between feminisms from the First World and the Third World, will facilitate mutual understanding between women from the two worlds and eventually resolve the binary opposition and misunderstanding that originate from parochialism.

3. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The Pillow Book is a film directed by Peter Greenaway [1]. His works are widely known for their experimental characteristics. For example, Greenaway has created numerous outstanding films such as *The Draughtsman's Contract*, *Prospero's Books*, and *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*. Greenaway extended and even amplified his usual experimental style in *The Pillow Book*, subverting multiple aspects regarding the use of conventional writing materials. In addition to the subversion of writing, this film's treatment of subjectivity related to gender and national identity is worth further exploration. The cast of the film is nationally and ethnically diverse. Among the leading actors and actresses of the film, the protagonist Vivian Wu is Chinese American, the male protagonist Ewan McGregor is American, Ken Ogata is Japanese, and Judy Ongg is Taiwanese Japanese. Moreover, the film was selected and screened under the Un Certain Regard section in the 1996 Cannes Festival, indicating its recognition by the film community.

In this film, subversion of writing is closely related to gender and national subjectivity because women from the East are usually exploited or their image is distorted and reduced to that of an exotic sexual plaything in Hollywood films. In this regard, film narratives have multiple commonalities with literature. Feminist theories have indicated a prevalent condition; that in literature and the arts (including painting and music), men symbolize an actively writing "pen," whereas women are usually passively written on like paper. Accordingly, the creation of literary and artistic works is frequently likened to using a pen to write on and penetrate a piece of paper, an action similar to producing a child after sexual intercourse. The numerous discourses arising from this metaphor are what feminists strive to subvert and overturn. Similarly, according to Asian American literary theory, Asian Americans (including men) in the United States face an embarrassing and uneasy position of being feminized and silenced. When they intend to speak for themselves, they encounter various similar difficulties and dilemmas that women

face. However, *The Pillow Book* presents an unconventional story. The female protagonist in the film is a woman from the East (of both Chinese and Japanese descent) who, during the process of pursuing her subjectivity, overcomes the limited choice of writing materials, avoids the destiny of being passively written on like paper, and chooses to be a pen to claim and exercise the power of active writing.

The film begins with a scene in which Motosuke, the father of the female protagonist Nagiko Kiyohara, writes her name on her face as he does for every birthday celebration of hers during her childhood. When writing the name, he says, "When God creates man, He draws his eyes, lips, and sexual organ, and then signs his name," to complete the human-making process. These words, when presented along with images, clearly indicate that the father plays the role of the God, names his daughter, and thus gives life to her. Concurrently, human skin transforms from mere skin into paper, a writing tool. Humans are named through their skin, and the naming assigns meanings to their lives. Moreover, the eyes, lips, and sexual organ are crucial human faculties for expressing emotions and obtaining sexual pleasure, implying a parallelism between creation and sensual pleasure in this film. Since she was a child, Nagiko has loved this method of birthday celebration and seemed to derive pleasure and her meaning of existence through it. In addition to her father, Nagiko's mother and aunt have substantial influence on her. The former likes Chinese songs, and the latter loves Japanese literature, particularly Japanese female writer Sei Shōnagon's *The Pillow Book*, which was written more than one thousand years ago. Nagiko's aunt details how Sei Shōnagon described the surroundings and combined her observations of pleasurable experiences between lovers to develop her own philosophy. Moreover, Nagiko's aunt encourages her to keep a diary as Sei Shōnagon did. The arguments and thoughts in the book considerably affect Nagiko. According to the book, creation is the same as love, and the writing brush is a tool of happiness that combines the pleasures derived from creation and sex. Nagiko grows up in the combined yet contrasting attitudes of being passively named and actively writing books.

As a writer, Nagiko's father had to plead a publisher Yaji-san to publish his books in order to make a living. The publisher is gay, and therefore Nagiko's father would get his books published

only by complying with the publisher's sexual demands. This incident is witnessed by the ingenuous Nagiko accidentally when she goes to pick up her father, leaving a profound impression on her that breeds her future intention to avenge her father. Later, Nagiko grows up and marries while continuing to keep a diary. However, her husband, who prefers sports and archery to thinking, fails to understand Nagiko's love for literature. He is annoyed by and refuses to accept Nagiko's request for repeating her father's way of birthday celebration. After he reads Nagiko's diary without her permission, he is deeply upset by her mixed use of Japanese and non-Japanese words in the diary. Therefore, he burns Nagiko's books because he cannot stand their house being overwhelmed with books. Nagiko becomes furious with her husband and leaves him. This incident reveals that Nagiko's wish to establish subjectivity through creation and recognition could not be fulfilled by her husband, and neither could she obtain paternal love from him. Consequently, she is forced to leave under a situation that is painful yet beautiful. Nagiko's interprets her marriage profoundly as, "I became a wife. I am married. I acquired a husband. My marriage is a tragedy." These words reveal a change from a passive to an active position and foreshadow a transformation occurring to the female protagonist.

To flee from her husband and escape her parents' search efforts, Nagiko leaves Japan for Kowloon, devotes herself to learning Chinese (i.e., Cantonese in the film), and finds a typing job, thinking that she is following her father's footsteps. However, typing is essentially different from creative writing. On her twenty-fourth birthday, Nagiko attempts yet fails to type and print words on her for her birthday celebration, indicating her failure in imitating her father. Later, she becomes a model, using her body to interpret clothes (i.e., artworks). In other words, she also transforms fabrics into materials for creative writing. From then on, she liberates herself sexually and asks every man interested in her to write on her, as if she would obtain utmost pleasure, including that derived from the combination of creation and sex, from this activity. Afterwards, she becomes a designer and studies English studiously, cherishing the hope of relocating to California. However, she eventually returns to Japan and finds a job in Matsuo where Sei Shōnagon used to work. By then, Nagiko's and Sei Shōnagon's trajectories of life seem to have merged into one.

From then on, Nagiko continuously changes her sexual partner, finding men of different backgrounds to write and create on her. Meanwhile, she hires a maid of her age to accompany her through everything. In Nagiko's mind, an ordinary lover who can write calligraphy is superior to one that cannot. In other words, calligraphy is more crucial than flirting skills for her. She turns to a calligrapher, designer, mathematician, deliveryman, and poet, constantly seeking men who can take her back to her childhood memories and times. Nagiko's maid usually stays with her during these moments without feeling any embarrassment. During this period, Nagiko continues to rely on men to prove herself, passively hoping others would define her rather than having to actively define herself. Later, she meets the multilingual Jerome, who requests her to write on himself and print the words on pillow cases. However, she is also dissatisfied with Jerome's writing, dismisses it as graffiti, and intends to chase him out. Surprisingly, Jerome requests Nagiko to write on him but is rejected. However, his suggestion affects her. When Nagiko arrives home, she looks into a mirror and begins to write on herself, deriving pleasure from doing this. She finally proclaims, "I want to be a pen rather than just a piece of paper." By doing so, Nagiko pronounces her transformation from a passive role into an active one.

Afterwards, Nagiko starts her own writing; however, she is rejected by a publisher when seeking publication. This publisher turns out to be the gay publisher who tortured her father. Therefore, one of Nagiko's female friends suggests that she could seduce men who are both willing and suitable to be a writing medium. After investigating, Jerome was found to be one of the publisher's lovers. By then, the number of languages Jerome was proficient has increased from four to six. Therefore, Nagiko seduces Jerome, allows herself to be written on by him, and makes him volunteer to be a writing medium for Nagiko to present her works on. Concurrently, Jerome complies with Nagiko's request of writing his name on his face like her father did for her, rendering her to become one with Jerome both mentally and physically. By then, Nagiko has fulfilled Sei Shōnagon's words, "Physical and literary joys are the two most trustworthy things in life," in Jerome. Thereafter, Nagiko becomes a pen and Jerome a piece of paper; a woman writes on a man's body, subverting the convention of men writing on female bodies.

Jerome volunteers to be the paper and bears her messages with his own body. After the maid shaves Jerome, Nagiko starts to write *The First Book of Thirteen*, planning to write a total of thirteen books. The publisher is extremely satisfied with her work when Nagiko sends Jerome to him. However, the publisher cannot distinguish whether he loves the body or the literary work on it. Perhaps it is the combination of the two that created the exceptional work. Later, when the publisher invites Jerome to a hotel, Jerome accepts and leaves Nagiko behind. Nagiko searches for Jerome everywhere and tastes the bitterness of being deserted. Depressed and furious, Nagiko turns to another man. This time, she finds two blonde men to write the second and third volumes, *The Book of Innocence* and *The Book of Idiot*, and publishes them with another publishing house. Subsequently, when the fourth volume *The Book of Impotence/Old Age* and the fifth volume *The Book of Exhibitionist* had been published, Jerome realizes that he had overestimated himself. He had thought of himself (i.e., man) as indispensable to Nagiko; however, he now faces the risk of being replaced. These men were completely naked when they presented Nagiko's works. The male body is presented by the video camera without any reservation, creating tremendous shock to audiences who have long been visually accustomed to the male gaze. This presentation also highlights that male body is just a material for a woman to write on in this context, lacking any decisive power, while underscoring the power competition between the publisher and the writer. A Japanese man Hoki who admired Nagiko also offered himself as paper; however, he was turned down because his skin texture was not "suitable" for writing on. In this plot, the convention of women passively waiting to be controlled by men is defied; instead, Nagiko as a woman is active in challenging the male publisher who has the upper hand in social status and access to resources. This arrangement reveals that a woman does not have to depend on a man and let him decide her fate. Instead, women can select and replace men at any time, making them materials for creation and writing in women's lives. In this context, the inspiration and dominance of female writers rather than men is the core of literary works.

Jerome cannot accept being replaced. He goes to Nagiko's home to seek her forgiveness but is not let in. In desperation, Jerome seeks help from Hoki, who gives him medicine and suggests that Jerome take the medicine and fake death to

win Nagiko back, as Romeo does to Juliet. However, the faked suicide is too successful; Jerome dies naked in bed, hands folded with a book on his private parts. The sorrowful Nagiko uses Jerome's body to write *The Book of the Lover*. After holding a funeral for Jerome and burning paper-made funerary ritual objects, Nagiko decides to burn everything and returns to Japan. This is the second fire of her life. During this period, the publisher loots the tomb, removes the skin from Jerome's body, and licks the skin book. Due to these actions, Nagiko's animosity toward the publisher is furthered and she becomes determined to get the skin back. By now, the film has heightened into a battle of wits between the writer and the publisher, as well as a battle between rivals in love. What is different is that the avenger is a woman.

Afterwards, Nagiko successively wrote *The Book of the Seducer*, *The Book of Youth*, *The Book of Secrets*, *The Book of Silence*, *The Book of the Betrayed*, and *The Book of False Starts*, continuously attracting the publisher's attention and luring him step by step toward death. During this period, Nagiko is pregnant and has the maid draw on her swollen belly. By the time *The Book of the Dead* is being written, Nagiko sends a man to kill the publisher in revenge for his insult to her husband and lover. The publisher is wrapped in human hide when executed by having his throat cut. Nagiko finally retrieves the book written on human skin. When she completes her works, her struggle against the existent power structure is complete as well. Toward the end, on her 28th birthday, which is also the one thousandth year after the birth of Sei Shōnagon, Nagiko holds her child and writes the characters of "Nagiko" on the child's forehead. This practice indicates that Nagiko has inherited her father's position to name her child as God created men and women. The background music of this scene is "Rose, Rose, I Love You." This scene symbolizes that Nagiko integrates the characteristics of both her father and mother and passes down her will to the next generation. Interestingly, men and sons are no longer those who pass down traditions; they have been replaced by women in the film.

4. CONCLUSION

After textually analyzing the film, we can conclude that by subverting conventions in the choice of writing materials and reversing the (writing) subject–(written) object positions between men and women, the director Greenaway proposes numerous questions while

attempting to experiment in the film and offer several answers to these questions. Moreover, his arrangement of images prevents the audience from easily and completely identifying with the camera's gaze and the characters [8,9,10,11], creating an intriguing viewing experience. This alienation strategy [12,13] is particularly meaningful for subverting the established gender images. In addition, Greenaway strives to diversify his treatment of language [14,15] and music in the film, presenting the beauty of different languages without placing English at a dominant position.

Through the writing materials that range from bamboo, animal hide, paper to human skin, Greenaway continuously explores and deconstructs the concept of book, encouraging us to consider whether films and the television are too forms of books. Moreover, the film-making mechanism and institution shares commonalities with the publishing mechanism represented by the publisher in the film. Accordingly, the director's filming of the film also symbolizes his rebellion against the entire film-making mechanism.

Greenaway's reversal of subject–object positions between men and women, including the change from men writing on the female body to women writing on the male body in the film, manifests female subjectivity (i.e., women can define themselves). In addition, the film neither presents the male body in a form of phallus worship nor involves any voyeuristic pleasure of peeping at female body. The plot of women avenging themselves not only reveals that the dominance of men over women can be shifted, but also challenges Laura Mulvey's [16] visual theories. The inset screens in the film create alienation effects that constantly interrupt and force the audience to think. Consequently, the audience cannot identify with gender roles (i.e., women feeling masochistic pleasure or men having control over others) as they usually do during film viewing. This experience critically challenges and impacts the established gender roles.

Greenaway's treatment of language and music in the film is richly diverse. Nagiko does not identify specifically with any specific nationality because she learns a language mainly for practical reasons. For example, Nagiko learns Cantonese when she goes to Kowloon; she studies English when she desires to relocate to California. Although her lover Jerome is a British, he is proficient in six languages. Nagiko asks Jerome

to write characters from different languages on her. They have sex with French songs playing in the background. Nagiko's mother loves Chinese songs (Shanghainese to be specific). Each of Nagiko's other lovers, including a designer, mathematician, and calligrapher, has his own language or set of signs. Everything is art in Nagiko's eyes as long as it is original. For her, art transcends language and the division of disciplines. She adheres to Sei Shōnagon's belief that physical and literary joys, as they are universal to humankind, are the two most trustworthy things in life. Therefore, national subjectivity is not emphasized in the film because every language and culture deserves respect.

The romantic relationships and Nagiko's marriage presented in the film imply the director's belief that, marriages between two persons that are mentally and physically incompatible, should be abandoned. Moreover, he could be encouraging women to prioritize creation and physical pleasure, seek a partner who is physically and mentally compatible while not excluding the possibility of promiscuity. This attitude challenges the stereotype that women [17] must be faithful to marriage, sacrifice themselves, and remain chaste. While liberally depicting how heterosexual people freely select a partner and engage in an open sexual relationship, this film also implies a lesbian relationship [18] between Nagiko and her maid, or one reflected in Nagiko's adoration and admiration of her aunt and Sei Shōnagon. This implication also approves female friendship and the passing down of traditions by women. Contrastingly gay men are presented in a different way. Although gay characters are clearly presented in the film, they do not have affection for each other. Instead, their relationships are built upon coercion and presented in a negative manner. Presumably, the director's rendition of the film mainly focuses on heterosexual relationships, disapproves gay relationships, and avoids referring to lesbian relationships. Nevertheless, we cannot determine whether the director intends to reflect social reality or voice his personal opinions. We can only observe that this film is less experimental in exploring homosexuality than in discussing other topics.

In conclusion, this film has made breakthroughs in various aspects. In my opinion, its construction of female subjectivity through writing is more meaningful than its other achievements.

Particularly, the film's challenging the viewing position proposed by Mulvey [16] sheds new light on how films can overturn gender roles (either in the film's characters or audience). Nevertheless, this discussion is still limited to the biologically gender-based division of work without taking homosexuals into consideration, at least temporarily. This underexplored topic can be further developed and discussed in the future.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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