

Anchee Min's *Red Azalea*: Memoir as an Enterprise to Self-discovery

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Abstract Alexander Pope's epigraph, "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; the proper study of mankind is man." captures the essence of what this paper sets to examine: Anchee Min's recollections of her past through her memoir and how it reflects a fragmented self. *Red Azalea*, her memoir, poignantly delineates her confused and conflicted self. This genre is apt, as it provides the opportunity to reach the past and analyze past experiences. Min's exploration of herself through her memoir is the first step to facilitate an understanding of self in order to reconstitute her self through her creative writing. By her self-narrative, Min engages in the role of an artist who allows the dynamics between her imagination and the power of language to be an agent of discourse for her past female self. This affable world of creative endeavor provides the space for writers to explore, rediscover and reconstitute the notion of self.

Keywords Anchee Min; memoir; self-discovery; *Red Azalea*

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Memoir: A Textual Depiction of the “Fractured” Self

The form of the memoir is typically employed in texts dealing with the search for a self because it bestows primacy to an individual’s subjectivity and experience. The memoir is a literary form rooted in the private dimension of living, but poised ambivalently between private and public statements generated from one’s memory. It is a platform where personal, historical, ideological and cultural issues are absorbed, articulated and reflected within the framework of the memoir. Generally, a memoir is a form of “biography, the writing of a life,” and thus, it is included as a “branch of history” (Gass 178). William H. Gass tells us that a biography “requires quite a lot of labor, and therefore, when such a work is undertaken, one would expect the subject to be of some significance to history as a whole.” (178). In his book *Finding A Form*, Gass explains that:

A memoir is usually the recollection of another place or personality and its primary focus is outward bound: [...] Even when the main attention of the memoir is focused inward, the scope to the memory tends to be limited [...] and not wide enough to take in a life. (188-9)

This insight sets memoir apart from autobiography, with the latter chronicling one’s life and being “wide enough to take in a life.” Gass also observes that all diaries, journals, notebooks, chronicles, memoirs, travelogues and testimonies are different. The point where they concur is in their character: each one of these is “autobiographical” and “predicated on privacy” (186-8).¹ These instances are variable under the genre of self-life-writing. Of all, autobiography is considered the

1 Gass makes a summary of the differences between a diary, journal and notebook. According to him, a diary demands day-to-day entries, whereas a journal’s “sweep is broader, more circumspect and meditative. Facts diminish in importance and are replaced by emotions, musing, thought.” As for a notebook, it is no longer chronological. In fact, we learn that entries do not even require any dates (187-188).

most chronological and complete in describing an autobiographer's life experiences. The popularity of the autobiography has gained vast recognition and is considered the most sophisticated and well-researched of all the types of self-life-writing. However, Beth Lynne Brunk, a scholar of women's autobiography, informs us that the word "autobiography" was only coined in England in the beginning of the nineteenth century to take the place of the earlier term "memoir" (23). As such, if autobiography is recognized as a "fertile site" to draw out "women's inventive rhetorical strategies," certainly rhetoric via memoir is just as important (Brunk 19). Another critic, Leslie Schenk, in his article, "Memoirs: From Scribblings into High Art" defuses the "claptrap" that ascribes memoirists with "too little imagination to write fiction and too bad a memory to write the truth" (1). He goes on to say that "memoirs written qua memoirs" are a significant form and works of great art by citing great works done in the form of the memoir.¹ To Schenk's deepest regret, these "celebrities' memoirs are not admitted into the pantheon of belles lettres" because for him, they deserve it (5). A memoir, the "art of reminiscences" as Schenk has called it, is a reflexive act of writing which can also be seen as a mirroring of the self.

In *Virginia Woolf: Moments of Being* (1985), Jeanne Schulkind's introduction draws on Woolf's memoirs to inform us that although memoirs may appear incoherent and "a random heaping together of fragments of a life," in reality, they contribute to a pattern of an emerging self:

Yet the fragments do arrange themselves into a meaningful order; a pattern emerges which expresses Virginia Woolf's view of the self generally, and herself in particular, in ways that a conventional autobiography could not have done She believed the individual identity to be always in flux, every moment changing its shape in response to the forces surrounding it: forces which were invisible emerge, others sink silently below the surface, and the past, on which the identity of the present moment rests, is never static, never

1 Schenk's observation of how a number of the pioneering novels were written in the form of memoir is worthy to be mentioned. He gives a list of texts in the first-person reminiscences: *Robinson Crusoe*, *David Copperfield*, *Moby Dick*, *Jane Eyre*, *Henry Esmond*, *Tristram Shandy*. He also includes a list of recent works in this genre: Ford Madox Ford's *Good Soldier*, Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, Simone de Beauvoir's *Memoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, Saul Bellow's *More Die of Heartbreak*, William Boyd's *New Confessions*, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Le Mur* and *Les Mots*, and Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*. Schenk also brings to our attention several outstanding memoirs: Elie Wiesel's *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, Jean-Francois Revel's *Le voleur dans la maison vide*, and not forgetting Irish-American Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1-6).

fixed like a fly in amber, but as subject to alteration as the consciousness that recalls it. (12)

The excerpt above clarifies how the form of the memoir, albeit comprising mere “fragments” of a life, uses these fragments which “arrange themselves into meaningful order” and contribute to a “pattern” of the self (12). The self is described as “always in flux, every moment changing its shape in response to the forces surrounding it”; this can be captured succinctly in a memoir, which then highlights an emerging pattern of this self (12). The memoir, which captures life experiences, is also likened to “a bowl that one fills and fills and fills” (“A Sketch of the Past” 64). Each new experience adds to the existing ones and also “displaces them ever so slightly and alters their previous meaning by forcing them into new combinations” (13-14). It is also important for us to bear in mind that the memoir is a compilation of one’s memories, “the means by which the individual builds up patterns of personal significance to which to anchor his or her life and secure it against the ‘lash of the random unheeding flail’ ” (21). This highlights the importance of the memoir in delineating a person’s self, and hence, from here, is the relation of this to Min’s portrayal of self in her memoir. The form of self-life-writing provides the opportunity to reach the past, analyze past experiences, and perhaps re-define oneself by experiencing them again while living in the present. It is a space of freedom and potentiality for validation and even re-definition of self. In essence, it is a space of self-creation, the dynamics of self-in-becoming. The attempt to write the self, or regard the self as narrative, is deeply bound up with the concerns of, in Min’s case, a fractured self and the need to re-define the self.

Min’s travails make her life story vivid and engaging. It is interesting to note how she incriminates herself as the “guilty agent” through her narration. As observed by Wenying Xu in her article, “Agency via Guilt in Anchee Min’s *Red Azalea*,”

Red Azalea is an exception to the exclusive focus on victimization common in most of the writings by Mainland Chinese immigrants dealing with the Cultural Revolution. Rather than portraying herself only as victim, she incriminates herself (even if only mildly) and thus proclaims that she did exercise agency: she did something for which she holds herself responsible and guilty. She is using her personal narrative as a way of engaging in a project of empowering herself as a responsible agent in her new world by reconstituting her identity in just the way that is so highly prized in the liberal Western community,

acknowledging personal responsibility and guilt. (4)

This same sense of guilt is also noted in Jung Chang's autobiography, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1991), as she contemplates the notion of "individual responsibility."

In bringing out and nourishing the worst in people ... Mao had created a moral wasteland and a land of hatred. But how much individual responsibility ordinary people would share, I could not decide. (495-6)

Both Chang and Min discarded the "moral superiority" tone through their respective autobiography and memoir, unlike many other Chinese writers who exonerated themselves of personal complicity from being a part of the GPCR. As Xu contends:

As someone who lived through ten years of the political turmoil and personal agony of China "Cultural Revolution," I find these autobiographies unsatisfactory because of their high moral tone, which exonerates them from any responsibility for the horrors. [...]. Many of them strive to portray their own moral superiority to those Chinese who betrayed, persecuted, or brutalized others for their own political security or advancement. [...]. Almost all of these writers are silent about any personal complicity in the horrors of these events. (2)

Chang and Min, on the contrary, believe that no one was a mere victim and thus, no individual could fully disclaim responsibility. Min's self-representation as a "guilty agent" provides a new horizon of possibilities for her as an agent of discourse. According to Xu,

[t]hey (some mainland Chinese immigrants' writers) are adopting a vocabulary that allows them to understand and speak of their involvement in the Cultural Revolution and making use of a reading public who can redeem their "inhumanity" with the liberal realization [...]. (14)

Xu concludes that Min's memoir works in a dialectical way: firstly, to incriminate herself rather than to portray herself as a victim. In doing so, it serves another purpose, that of an agency to voice her need for self-discovery. Farmanfarmanian concurs with Xu's view on Min's boldness in incriminating herself: "she [Min]

defiantly takes on the responsibility for who she is, refusing to put the blame on the Cultural Revolution, party bosses or any of the other scapegoats she sees her countrymen turning to explain away what she calls the corruption of their souls” (1). Here, the dialectical relationship of Min’s search is brought to light: on one hand, her search for who she was in China; on the other, the redelineating of her incoherent self. This is made possible through her choice of form, the memoir, which provides her the distance and space to analyze herself. The memoir, in short, serves as an agent of discourse about her past female self. Min’s choice of a memoir instead of an autobiography is foregrounded in the fact that the former is a more effective form to explicate the idea of her many fragments and fractures. Admittedly, an autobiography has more continuity and unity. It traces an individual’s life chronologically and closely, whereas a memoir is more selective and its form is abrupt and choppy. However, it is these distinctive qualities which poignantly capture, delineate and replicate the fractured self. Thus, a memoir opens up more space for a contemplation of and search for the self instead of just delineating the past in linear fashion and with the coherence than an autobiography may suggest.

As Gass points out, a memoir’s “primary focus is outward bound,” therefore, it is invaluable to measure how a self is subjected to the forces of the political upheavals of the time (188). The best means to analyze a particular period, the GPCR for instance, is really through the exploration of the prevalent themes of memoirs crafted after 1976, such as those by Gao Yuan, *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution*, Rae Yang, *Spider Eaters: A Memoir*, Zhang Xianliang, *Half of Man Is Woman*, and Anchee Min, *Red Azalea* (Brownell and Wasserstrom 252). Indeed, Min’s idea of writing a memoir functions as a springboard for her to voice her concerns and needs under the Communist regime which left no room for negotiation and led Min to feel deprived of a normal childhood or personal choices. Her memoir, hence, is essentially an enterprise in self-discovery. Through the narration of her life story, Min bears witness to the experiences of her past “fragmented” self, inevitably the darkest moments of her life. In doing so, she creates a space to attain a certain personal integration for a nascent self.

Like a particular *zeitgeist*, the outburst of autobiographical materials in post-Mao women’s writing is characteristic of the predominant concern of the era or generation. Therefore, this genre of self-life-writing cannot simply be an autobiographical validation of their experiences and selfhood, but “a political strategy to deconstruct and renegotiate the structural relation between the personal and the public, as well as its underlying gender system” (Lai 26). Min’s memoir, like Yu Luojin’s *Dongtian de tonghua* (*Winter’s Tale*), attests to the conventional

dismissal of women's writings for their supposed inability to transcend personal experiences and concern. As noted by Xu Jianyi and Zhang Qing, many contemporary critics have argued that post-Mao women's writing merited little significance in their literary value and quality because of the narrowness in subject matter and shallowness of social reflections and representations. Ming-yan Lai in "Telling Love: The Feminist Import of a Woman's Negotiation of the Personal and the Public in Socialist China" refutes such reductionistic criticism:

Implicit in this kind of criticism is a reductive interpretation of women's focus on the personal as straightforward "autobiographical" transcription of actual experiences. Given the conventional understanding of autobiography as writing of and about the self, and the hegemonic association of feminine self with the 'private' and domestic realm of love, marriage, and family, such an interpretation simply furthers the predisposition to read women's writings as concerning nothing but the personal. (26)

Min's articulation of the personal serves three aims. First, to open up a space for self-expression; next, as an agent of discourse; and finally, to "craft" a self as against the atrophied self. In *Red Azalea*, Min neatly structures her narratives into three parts. Part One delineates her childhood to her adolescent years; Part Two brings us to the worst years of her life – toiling on a leech-infested farm; and finally, Part Three lightens up with the opportunity of becoming a lead actress. In each part, Min emphasizes strongly the sense of herself as provisional and indistinct. This comes across as a rather puzzling issue, yet central and important to Min.

This paper delves into the structure of the memoir to examine how each part brings across this issue. At the beginning of her memoir, Min clearly depicts a self that is dictated by the Party: her whole life is circumscribed by Mao's indoctrination and Madame Mao's operas. She memorized Mao's Little Red Book with great determination, sang Madame Mao's operas, and later served as a Little Red Guard. The memoir opens with a self-proclamation of her staunch pledge of loyalty to her country. This underlines her naïveté and ignorance of the devastating repercussions of her blind devotion and faith in Mao's teachings:

I was raised on the teachings of Mao and on the operas of Madam Mao, Comrade Jiang Ching. I became a leader of the Little Red Guards in elementary school. This was during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution

when red was my color. (*Red Azalea* 3)¹

The two key persons who had immense influence in her life were Mao Zedong and his fourth wife, Jiang Ching (Jiang Qing).² Min relates her life story from elementary school where she was a good and obedient communist. She was selected as leader of the Little Red Guards because of her good grades. Oaths of fealty to Mao's doctrine were espoused in her declaration, "red is my color" (3). As Ross Terrill informs us, the color red is "a cultural appellation for Mao" (20). Min is representative of her generation. Her pledge is representative of the same commitment shown by her contemporaries. The description of her parents' occupation also shows the adults' compliance to Mao's call for loyalty. Her father works as "an instructor of industrial technique drawing at Shanghai Textile Institute" (3) despite his true love for astronomy. Her mother teaches at a "Shanghai Middle School" (3). Her parents, Min reflects, did not like their jobs, but they behaved correctly for their children's sake. From the opening of the memoir, the idea of the stripping of one's self is immediately impressed upon us. The notion of a fragmented self is explored right from the beginning and is sustained throughout the memoir. Her self-introduction, "I was an adult since the age of five" (4) conveys the idea of a robbed childhood. As the narratives unfold, Min owns up to a realization of an effaced self as she says, "I don't belong to myself" (140). These utterances appear on separate occasions, a hundred and thirty-six pages apart, but they are pertinent remarks which reveal the psychological make-up behind her words. Her obedience, in this light, was the only means to survive the demands of the revolutionary task force. Every single action, thought and word hinges on Mao's collectivistic ideal.

On another occasion, Min tells us of the careful choice of naming children. It seems that her neighbors had totally given in to the country's call for complete and unwavering loyalty. They called their children, "Guard of Red, Big Leap, Long March, Red Star, Liberation, Revolution, New China, Road of Russia, Resist U.S., Patriotic Forerunner, Matchless Red Soldier, etc." (4). Min is not oblivious to the absurdity of these names; in fact, she seems to be in agreement with her parents that it is necessary to have more original ideas. However, it is noted that they were

1 Anchee Min, *Red Azalea* (New York: Berkley Books, 1994). All quotes from Min's memoir will be taken from this edition hereon.

2 The different spelling of the name "Jiang Ching" is a deliberate choice of the author. Perhaps, in this way, it is easier to distinguish Jiang Ching as a character in her memoir and fictional works from that of the historical figure. The latter's name is spelt "Jiang Qing."

“considered eccentric” for differing from the norm set by the Party (4). The sense of creativity and liberty of mind is discouraged and denied. Every individual is expected to place his loyalty with the community or country before his personal desires. Many times, we see Min, as a representation of her generation, honoring her country before her parents. In fact, Min secretly criticizes her parents’ counter-revolutionary behavior. In a later interview, Min confessed that if she had known that her mother was a Christian, she would have reported her as a counter-revolutionary to the Communist Party.¹ Her position as the head of the Little Red Guards, her obsession with singing heroic operas and painstaking effort to memorize Mao’s Little Red Book, demonstrate her total submission to the Party.

At the tender age of eleven, she is coerced into denouncing her favorite teacher, Autumn Leaves. This episode is given substantial attention and marks the end of Part One in Min’s memoir before she continues with her new life in Red Fire Farm. It is an incident that is etched in her memory as she is convinced of Autumn Leaves’ innocence. The overwhelming “guilt” she feels is of paramount importance because it serves as an agent of discourse for the writer to speak of her involvement in betraying and persecuting others for her own advancement or political security. At the same time, owning up to such inhumanities allows the writer to redeem him/herself and start afresh with a new sense of integrity. This is vital for Chinese immigrants “to gain empowerment in their new lives in the West” through “their reconstruction of their subject positions in the old country” (Xu 13). This particular event in Min’s young life is crucial to show that when one’s personal convictions collide with the Communist ideologies; the nationalist agenda will surely take precedence. Min’s tone is emotional, peppered with guilt and remorse as she recalls the incident from a vantage point years later. In effect, her guilt underlines the fact that Autumn Leaves was innocent and unjustly treated:

Autumn Leaves was [...] an energetic teacher who never seemed to be tired of teaching. [...] Once she completely lost her voice while trying to explain geometric progression to me. When she finally made me understand she laughed silently like a mute with her arms dancing in the air. [...] One day when it was raining hard after class, she gave students her raincoat, rain shoes and her umbrella as they went home. She herself went home wet. The next day she had a fever, but she came to class and struggled on, despite her fever. By the time she finished her lecture, she had lost her voice again. (30-2)

¹ This confession is drawn from one of her interviews, available on the internet website: <http://www.ivillage.com/books/intervu/fict/articles/0,,192468_87327,00.html>.

As if to assuage her own guilt and pain, she tells us that it was actually the school's new Party Secretary, a man addressed as "Secretary Chain," who not only pressured her to denounce and implicate Autumn Leaves as an American spy, but told Min exactly what to say:

He said, Tell the masses how you were mentally poisoned. I said that I did not quite understand the words "mentally poisoned." Secretary Chain said, You are not mature enough to understand that yet. He then asked me to give an opinion on what kind of person I thought Autumn Leaves was. I told him the truth. Secretary Chain laughed loudly at me. [...]. He stopped laughing and said, You shouldn't be discouraged by your immaturity. He made me feel disappointed in myself. Let me help you, he suggested. (33)

Min's confusion is obvious and apparent. She tells us how her "world turned upside down. [She] felt deeply hurt and used" (35) but succumbed to his persuasion when he twisted the facts and said that Autumn Leaves' goal was to make Min and others betray Communism. The episode on Autumn Leaves ends on this forlorn note. Having excelled at school, and having pleased her teachers by following Mao's teaching absolutely, Min is next instructed to go to the countryside to labor on a farm for women:

When I was seventeen, life changed to a different world. The school's vice principal had a talk with me after his talks with many others ... He told me that I belonged to one category. The category of becoming a peasant The policy from Beijing was a holy instruction. It was universally accepted. It was incumbent upon me to obey. [...]. He said a true Communist would love to take challenges. She would take it with dignity. *I was* seventeen. *I was* inspired. *I was* eager to devote myself. *I was* looking forward to hardship. (43, emphasis mine)

Min is assigned to a rural outskirts farm, known as Red Fire Farm, located near the shore area of the East China Sea. When days turn into months and months into almost two years, Min's earlier enthusiasm dwindles. Even the depiction of the farm recedes into that of a barren, infertile and unproductive place. It is a poignant metaphorical allusion of Min's own life there. Her description of the "cotton" harvest demonstrates this:

The cotton plants would bend to the side; they live in the shadow of the reeds. Their flowers were pitiful. They looked like pinkish-faced widows. The fruit - the cotton bolls they finally bore - were stiff nuts, thin, crooked, and chewed by insects, hiding in the hearts of the plants. It was cotton of the lowest quality. Not even qualified to be rated. (73-74)

It is a farm that “produced nothing but weeds and reeds”; she describes it as a “complete darkness” and a “hell” (100). The farm’s depiction teems with descriptions of sterility and is a poignant metaphorical allusion of Min’s own life there.

Chairman Mao made it incumbent for the youths to serve for their countryside as peasants. This took place from 1967—’76 and over seven and a half million city youths were involved. As Min informs us, every family must have a peasant worker, otherwise, they would be suspected of being, and ridiculed as counter-revolutionaries. Those who turned their backs on this policy sealed their own fates:

[m]other reported that none of these people met a good end. They were shamed in the neighborhood. Their families were bothered every day until the appointed youth moved to the countryside. (177)

Also, on surface level, the decree was meant to provide gender equality. Feminists however, would argue that Mao’s injunction on collectivism and egalitarian values were nothing more than a substitution of Confucius’ patriarchy with Socialist patriarchy. As Lydia H. Liu argues:

[t]he category of women, like that of class, has long been exploited by the hegemonic discourse of the state of China, one that posits the equality between men and women by depriving the latter of *their* difference (and not the other way around). In the emancipatory discourse of the state, which always subsumes women under the nationalist agenda, women’s liberation means little more than equal opportunity to participate in public labor. (35, emphasis author’s)

Indeed, gender equality in socialist China only meant equal opportunity to labor. In fact, in this socialist state, male and female were regarded as having equal opportunity and equal rights. When Min was asked by the Supervisor how she felt

at being a female in society, Min was only able to regurgitate Mao's propagandist notion of gender equality between male and female.

[...] Chairman had taught us everything about equal rights. Equal rights between men and women, equal rights among human beings. (272)

Equal opportunity to labor is not the only gender exploitation which occurred. The women were also deprived of their femininity and made sexless. In terms of appearance, the females were subjected to many "rules" of behavior (56). Min, fascinated by Little Green's boldness in enhancing her physical appearance, admitted that most women did not dare to decorate themselves as this was rather an act of "bourgeois allure" (57). Hence, she

[...] scorned [her] own desire to display [her] youth. A nasty desire, [she] told herself a hundred times. (57)

This was another form of self-abnegation couched as "political correctness." As Liu's penetrating observation reveals,

[d]uring the Cultural Revolution, political correctness consisted largely in women wearing the same dark colors as men, keeping their hair short, and using no makeup. I am not suggesting that women ought to be feminine. But the fact that the state did not require men to wear colorful clothes, grow long hair, or use makeup, which would have produced an equally iconoclastic effect, indicates that it was woman's symbolic difference that had been specifically targeted and suppressed on top of all other forms of political repression. (35)

James Petras in his article, "The Chinese Cultural Revolution in Historical Perspective" discusses the infiltration of Maoist doctrine into every sphere of life where the "collectivist rule failed to acknowledge a distinction between public and private spheres of life." (453) Owing to Mao's perpetuation of the need for self-denial which most Scar Literature aptly portrayed, *Red Azalea* also pinpoints Min's

longing for a need to recover this fractured female self.¹ Her obsession with the role of the main character in the biographical film of Jiang Qing in “Red Azalea” dramatizes her need to be someone else, someone more empowered and stronger. She desires to be Red Azalea. This is to say that the attraction of playing Red Azalea lies in the appealing figure of Jiang Qing, one of the most powerful women in China. The film, entitled “Red Azalea,” was meant to celebrate Jiang Qing as the liberated daughter and the figure of a strong female Party leader. It was part of Jiang Qing’s cultural apparatus to portray herself as an ideal working-class girl. The choice of the “shrubs of the genus *Rhododendron* and members of the heath family,” the azalea, lies in the plant’s attributes. It requires acidic soil and is found chiefly in hills and mountains, mainly in North America and Asia (“The Encyclopedia Americana” 888). The azalea’s distinctive quality lies in its being a hardy plant. Perhaps Jiang Qing’s choice in depicting it as an enduring shrub in harsh regions is to depict her own perseverance through life’s difficulties. The choice of the color red correlates with the notion of passion. Min’s secret affair with the Supervisor at “Peace Park” throws light on this:

I see the hills of youth covered with blood-colored azaleas. The azaleas keep blooming, invading the mountains and the planet. The earth is bitten and it groans, wailing nonsensically in pleasure-drive. (291)

Undeniably, the idea is that Red Azalea is an embodiment of communist passion. Metaphorically, Jiang Qing ascribes to herself this image of a faithful comrade, serving the Party full-heartedly. The Supervisor is adamant that Min play Red Azalea, despite her failed attempt during the audition. He gives her another chance to replace Chearing Spear. He, in fact, personally guides and encourages Min to portray the soul of Red Azalea.

[from] this moment on, I want you to forget your family name. You are Red Azalea now, said the Supervisor. Let me hear your name, please. I shivered and pronounced it loudly: I am Red Azalea. He nodded with satisfaction. (309)

1 “Scar Literature” (Scar Literature hereafter), on the other hand, is a generic term used in writings of post-Mao China. This mode of literature refers to fictional texts produced in the specific period of the immediate aftermath of the GPCR, from 1977 to around 1981. It is still one of the major preoccupations in the works of writers from mainland China, as well as those who have emigrated.

To cast herself in the role of an empowered woman is alluring and enticing, a breath of fresh air to her mundane, sterile and suffocating life: “I am the embodiment of Red Azalea. I am my role” (326). From Part Three onwards, Min yearns to break out of the miserable hardship and detention on the farm. Her leaving Red Fire Farm is symbolic of her severing herself from her old identity. Henceforth, she fixes her mind on getting the lead role as Red Azalea. As Red Azalea, she is brought to the world of imagination, dream and fantasy in which herself may become fluid and capable of change. The final part of the memoir develops Min’s desire to reconstitute and refashion herself. Her obsession with the role of Red Azalea demonstrates this intense yearning of possessing imaginative space to become autonomous. As things would have it, her hopes collapse with the death of Mao Zedong on September 9, 1976.

The discussion so far has dealt with the importance of the memoir in delineating Min’s effaced self under the “masculinist” nationalist agenda. By structuring her memoir in three parts, Min neatly and aptly shows the unity, thought and sensibility of her predicaments. Each unique experience underlies her responses to the repressive regime. Self-realization, thus, is prerequisite to the next step of self-validation and reconfiguration of self.

The Truncated Self as A Result of the Restrictive Gender Norms

In Imperial China, the seclusion of women from public life was considered proper. In the Republican era (1912-1948), however, these previously admired women became symbols of backwardness, pity and targets of modernization efforts (Brownell and Wasserstrom 25-28). Hence, when the Communist revolution succeeded and the PRC was instituted (1949), leaders advocated women’s liberation through annihilating all orthodox or feudal practices. Mao Zedong, as noted in Kristeva’s “On Chinese Women,” had written passionately in his youth about the injustices of patriarchy governed by Confucius’ kinship structures. According to Mao, these structures were considered symptomatic of all that was wrong with the old order. On a broader scope, an even more crucial explanation was that China was impelled to reconstruct its official gender rhetoric because Western imperialists said that “the subjugation of women in China came to symbolize the subjugation of China in the world of nations.”¹ Both situations led the CCP to promote the strengthening of women’s position by enforcing their participation in labor in the public sphere. Mao’s trajectory of gender identities heightened during the GPCR, a

1 Lisa Rofel, “Liberation Nostalgia and a Yearning for Modernity.” *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State*, eds. Christina Gilmartin et. al. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994) 236.

period which has been characterized by “gender erasure” or “socialist androgyny,” when both men and women wore short hair and donned “Mao suits” (Brownell and Wasserstrom 252; Finnance 3-36). With that, the government also utilized women’s so-called “equality” as “the sign of China’s qualifications for entrance into advanced nationhood in a western-dominated neocolonialist world order” (Rofel 244). Mao pronounced the end of class oppression and propagated equality through his slogan: “The times have changed; men and women are the same.” With this proposition, the image of “Iron Girls—strong, robust, muscular women who boldly performed physically demanding jobs traditionally done by men” was valorized, celebrated and disseminated through various media (Honig 255). Women dramatically deviated from their perceived traditional femininity and resorted to wearing army-like attire and wearing broad leather belts. They also wielded weapons and displayed a capacity for verbal expletives and even physical assault. These acts were regarded as efforts to extirpate the old stereotypes of feminine behavior. They indicated what Honig describes as a radical aberration from the feudal past (255-68). But this slogan could not really justify the claim of gender neutrality; instead, it required women to behave like men. This trenchant insight is irrefutable because “[a]lthough men and women were declared equal, the CCP defined equality by erasing women’s difference from men, and thus women were expected both to look and to behave as men did at that time” (Somerson 104).

Honig in “Maoist Mappings of Gender: Reassessing the Red Guards,” remarks that the “gender-neutral style that was emulated by teenage girl Red Guards who cut their hair short (or more daringly, shaved their heads), donned army clothes, and marched barefoot through city streets” represented a period when femininity was deliberately effaced (255). Female militancy instead was valorized and popularized through “Red Detachment of Women” and the historical figure of Jiang Qing.¹ Mao’s fourth wife, who rose to political prominence during GPCR, always appeared in military attire and represented the paragon of the “Iron Girl” image. She, in short, symbolized the rejection of femininity as part of shackling Chinese

1 *Red Detachment of Women* is one of the eight famed model operas. The film made its debut in the early 1960s and was premiered as an opera four years later. The plot of the story is based on historical events. It takes place on Hainandao and centers on the heroic efforts of a young slave girl, Wu Qinghua, to resist a wicked and evil landlord. She manages to escape and eventually joins the CCP’s Women’s Detachment, a group of heroic female guerrillas that wreaks havoc on the local landlords. The story ends with Wu’s vow to live by Mao’s motto, “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun” (Wilke 426-29).

tradition.¹ Despite this rejection prescribed by the official discourse, Honig informs, “gender identity and gender relationships were being continually contested and reformulated” (256). Her essay explores the significance of female ferocity and the role of violence in re-mapping male and female identities in the GPCR. As she observes,

[...] personal accounts and memoirs of the Cultural Revolution reveal that its violence was in fact deeply gendered, sexualized, and enmeshed in contested notions of masculinity and femininity. This does not mean that violence was *about* gender, but rather that its practice and representations had clearly gendered dimensions. (256, emphasis author’s)

To Honig, the most prominent theme in memoirs crafted in the aftermath of the GPCR actually serves as a consideration of women’s violent behavior. There are two ways of looking at female ferocity during GPCR: firstly, female compulsion to militancy, a dramatic turn from their “normal” behaviors, which was an effort to compete with their male counterparts; and in doing so, they upheld Mao’s equality of the sexes. Another explanation for female violence was “attributed to the particularly severe forms of “sexual repression” to which young girls had been subjected. Whether sexual repression referred to control of women’s sexuality per se, or to a more general social control for female behavior, remains unclear” (261-262).

Both perspectives mark a radical departure from women’s conventional deportment. The official ideology also imposed the desexualization of women’s femininity through advocating plainness and sexless dress codes.² Such social restraints virtually denied women any way of realizing their femininity and achieving natural sexual fulfillment. Such restrictive gender norms reshaped society during the GPCR. Min, in her memoir, captures this remarkably. Through her descriptions of the repressed female sexuality, Min delineates a truncated female self and thus, interrogates sex-identity politics within the framework of the memoir.

1 For a more detailed account of Jiang Qing’s dress code, see Yen Chia-chi and Kao Kao, *The Ten-Year history of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Taipei: Institute of Current Chinese Studies, 1988) 460-62.170).

2 For further reading on the semiotic of dress, refer to Antonia Finnance’s “What Should Chinese Women Wear? A National Problem.” Through the charting of the changes in Chinese women’s dress over the past century, we can delineate the shifting position of the figure of the Chinese woman within nationalist discourse. See Antonia Finnance and Anne McLaren, eds., *Dress, sex and text in Chinese culture* (Australia: Monash Asia Institute, 1999) 3-35.

Underscoring Min's exploration of her fractured self is the reconfiguration of female gender identity. Gender constitutes a major trope for the construction for the self. The phenomenon of the "masculinization" of women is reflective of a truncated self, and indirectly spurs the practices that subvert official discourse that sublimated all desires into desire to serve and obey the Party.

Wendy Somerson's article, "Under the mosquito net: Space and sexuality in *Red Azalea*" is insightful to convey that Min's exploration of her own sexuality in her memoir is, in fact, a subversive reaction towards the state "degendering" of women in Communist China. Min explicates the account of restricted sexuality through four main occurrences: Little Green's narcissistic inclinations, her own sexual awakening, her furtive lesbian encounter, and finally, her sexual liaison with the androgynous Supervisor. The sequel of her complicated sexual relationships is what Somerson regards as a subversive tool, couched in the phrase, "desire as resistance" (108). "Sexuality today is," according to Jeffrey Weeks, "perhaps to an unprecedented degree, a contested zone. It is more than a source of intense pleasure or acute anxiety; it has become a moral and political battlefield" (4). This is because, as Weeks further stresses, sexual meanings are not "neutral, objective phenomena, but art the bearers of important relations of power" (177). The polymorphous dimension of sexuality, concurrently, invites us to reevaluate and reinterpret the significance of Min's portrayal of her repressed sexuality. The suppression of her sexuality stands as a "metonymy" of her fragmented self. To begin with, Min insists on the preeminence of women's bodies in her narrative as a means of renegotiating her subject-position to enable her to articulate her predicament. The inscription of "body narrative," in the eyes of feminists, would be an attempt to recover and reinstate her truncated self as demonstrated through the following four main events.

During the reign of the CCP, the Party executed unwarranted social restrictions: one of them was the stringent prohibition against any contact with the opposite sex. Any male and female relationship had to be endorsed by the Party. This was an "obligatory procedure," lest the couple be viewed as treacherous.¹ Little Green's episode best demonstrates the Party's harsh social restrictions. Somerson sees her

1 We can gather this "obligatory procedure" from Chang's autobiography, where her parents had to apply for permission to date each other (with a view to marriage): After hearing each other's frank accounts of their past lives, my father said he was going to write to the Jinzhou City Party Committee asking for permission to "talk about love" (*tan-lian-ai*) with my mother, with a view to marriage. This was the obligatory procedure. My mother supposed it was a bit like asking permission from the head of the family, and in fact that is exactly what it was: the Communist Party was the new patriarch (170).

as a representative of “a different form of resistance to official doctrine” (107). Little Green’s life is a bold display of “contempt for the rules”:

[s]he was daring. Dared to decorate her beauty. She tied her braids with colorful strings while the rest of us tide our braids with brown rubber bands. Her femininity mocked us. [...]. She was the Venus of the farm’s evening. (56-58)

However, she was denied her desire to display her femininity and to indulge in her unquenched sexual appetite. Any expressions of love were strictly forbidden and punishable, even if they happened between heterosexual lovers. This is most poignantly illustrated when Little Green was caught with her lover. Their relationship was considered treacherous and an act of violation of the Party’s trust:

Little Green screamed. It broke the night. She was in her favorite shirt—the one embroidered with pink plum flowers. The lights shone on her naked buttocks. [...]. The man with Little Green was skinny, wore glasses, and looked very bookish. He pulled up his pants and tried to run. He was caught immediately by the group led by Deputy Commander Lu, who pulled out her rifle and held it to the bookish man’s head. (65)

After a public trial, the incident was concluded with the execution of the man who was labeled a “rapist” (66). Little Green, unable to withstand such inhumanity, gradually slipped into insanity and later committed suicide by drowning herself. Her pathetic state is a reminder of the harsh and uncompromising iron-fisted rules of the Party. Somerson comments that “Little Green’s severe punishment and subsequent death exemplify the threat her resistance and expression of desire posed to official discourse” (107).

The idea of a truncated self is also apparent in the individual’s alienation and suffocation within the repressive system. The other two prominent characters, Yan and Lu, epitomize Maoist zealots. Through these characters, Min reveals the deep-seated sense of an individual’s alienation within this repressive regime. She constantly finds herself in conflict with jealous antagonists. On Red Fire Farm, where she was scouted for the role of Red Azalea, her dream and only means of an escape from the hellish farm was almost disrupted by an envious Lu. When she was auditioning, Chearing Spear, one of the other four contenders, also schemed her way into securing the role. At one juncture, Min lamented, “Chearing Spear often

reminded [her] of Lu. It seemed that [she] could never escape from Lus. There were Lus all over China” (248). The repressive ideology imposed was not only disruptive to human relationships; it brought the worst out of people. To survive, one had to be ruthless and scheming.

At the turn of Min's eighteenth year, she underwent a phase of sexual awakening: “[a] nameless anxiety had invaded me. It felt like a sweating summer afternoon. [...] It was the ripeness of the body. It began to spoil. The body screamed inside trying to break the bondage. I was restless. [...]. The body and the restlessness worked hand in glove. They were screaming in me, breaking me in two (69-70). She began to examine her own body, out of curiosity: “I used a small mirror to examine my body, to examine the details of its private parts. I listened to my body carefully. I heard its trouble, its disturbance. It had been trying to capture something, a foreign touch, to soothe its anxiety, but in vain” (70). This experience underscored her sexual awakening, which hitherto, had been stunted by the Party's stringent sanctions of a sexless society. Min did not personalize her desire; in fact, the shift from what she termed “my body” to “[t]he body” which “demanded to break away from its ruler, the mind” is Min's way of saying that this unquenched sexual urge was a common situation shared by many other women on the farm. Somerson astutely notes that,

[t]he mind as the privileged term in the mind/body split becomes emblematic of official discourse which utilizes this opposition to suppress bodies that might resist or disrupt its doctrine. While women's bodies are supposed to function only as workers to advance China's position, Min links her individual body to the social body and asserts that women's bodies have desires that cannot be contained through recourse to official ideology. (108)

The proposition of “desire as resistance” is brought to the fore once again when Min's admiration of Yan turns into sexual desire (Somerson 108). On one hand, Min's desire to be Yan is partially due to the rhetoric of the masculinized “Iron Girl” figure. Yan, who is the secretary and commander of the Red Fire Farm, is famous for her “iron shoulders,” and “her blisters were the size of thumbs” from her laborious work (60). Yan, in Min's eyes, exemplifies the image of a good proletarian as propagated by the Party. Yan becomes Min's heroine. Determined to emulate her, Min begins to “imitate Yan's way of walking, talking and dressing” (62).

This relationship begins in the context of a narrative of desire as they both negotiate their feelings by assuming the different gendered roles (Somerson 108).

At various moments, Min and Yan reverse gender roles back and forth, both wishing the other were a man. Yan confides, “[t]oo bad you are not a man” when they share the same bed (121). Eventually, they transgress these previously prescribed roles, turning the heterosexual narrative into a homoerotic space. Their erotic encounter reinterprets the original heterosexual narrative, as Min admits, “I did not know what role I was playing anymore: her imagined man [Leopard] or myself” (142, addition mine). The blurring of gendered roles is again a prominent issue of the truncated self, as these women are de-familiarized with their own sexuality. Somerson explains:

[a]lthough official discourse during the Cultural Revolution suppressed the private sphere and sexuality, through its promotion of strong roles for women in attempts to posit China as a strong country that could compete with the “West,” it inadvertently created a space of desire between women; social production is clearly linked to the production of desire. Whereas the state discourse claimed to “degender” women, it masculinized them on the official level; however, when actual women occupy these masculinized positions, they change what it means to be both a man and a woman. [...], when women take on the male role of the narrative, they simultaneously revise the romance narrative itself and reconfigure symbolic positions of desire. Women can thus articulate desire from the traditionally active male sexual position for either other women or men; desire need not be restricted to active/passive, but it can encompass two strong active beings, and thus sexual desire itself is redefined. (109)

The redefinition of sexual desire is an attempt to define identity. Weeks points out that through the preeminence of the subject of sex in contemporary political and moral discourse,

[...] we are expected to express our subjectivity, our sense of intimate self, our ‘identity’. Through its grids of definition, we are subjected to the operations of power, fixed in a world which tries to form us, but which we could re-form. [...]. Sexuality could be a potentiality for choice, change and diversity. (5)

The symbolic position of “desire as resistance” is further stretched when Min becomes involved in another relationship. This time it is with a feminized man of position and power, the Supervisor. When she first sees him, she describes him

as “femininely handsome” and later wonders, “[w]as he a woman or a man? He seemed to be both. He was grotesquely beautiful” (260). The Supervisor’s gender “ambiguity,” Somerson remarks, “dislodges gender and sexuality from their traditional ontological configurations” (111). Min, in doing so, shows that even men experienced the sense of the truncated self under the nationalist agenda.

Min’s entanglement with Yan is the most fully elaborated episode on relationship in *Red Azalea*. She traces how the friendship gradually evolves into a lesbian relationship, with several passages describing highly sensual and erotic encounters between the two. They are both emotionally and sexually starved young women, deprived of any possibility of fulfilling their personal desires. This passionate affair is conducted secretly under the “mosquito net” and under constant threat of being discovered which would have led to possible severe execution. From the compulsive need to emulate, she gradually channels her admiration to “[worshipping]” Yan: “I must have a heroine to worship, to follow, to act as a mirror” (76). This desire to “have a heroine to worship” is an expression of Min’s sense of an inadequate self. She needs an exemplary figure “to act as mirror” in order to be a reflection of what she aspires to become. Only then is she able to recover from the sense of self-deficiency and affirm her self-worth.

A “mirror” is a symbol commonly used to express self-affirmation as seen in fairy tales. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, the Wicked Witch is overtly concerned about the mirror’s answer to, “Who is the fairest one of all?” Similarly, Min, like the Queen/Wicked Witch, needs the “mirror” to affirm herself. At an even deeper level, Lacan identifies the mirror stage as pivotal to identity. It is a basic differentiation between two orders within signifying practices: the signifier and signified. The mirror stage provides a person with a “spatial location or position” to locate only “an unstable identity” as the mirror-double of the self is a mere reflection (Grosz 45-6). Therefore, Min’s curiosity with the mirror is actually a desire of seeing herself through a mirror’s reflection. This mirroring act is important to her as she seeks to understand her growing sexuality. In Min’s case, her sexual energy breaks loose from the confines of the regime through her sexual gratification with Yan. Earlier on, as she examines her own body, she thinks about men. This is an expression of the need for human intimacy in reaction against the repressed sexuality of the official discourse. Her lesbian encounter is an outlet, a means to reach out for human contact and a means of fulfilling her sexual needs. The outlawing of sexual desires was an official decree but, Min demonstrates that women have physical desires that cannot be contained through the recourse of the official ideology. Min, in going against the grain, disrupts the official decree.

Indeed, she confirms Somerson's proposition that "desire is resistance." From the feminists' perspective, lesbianism, which is concerned with sexuality, becomes the focal point where women's lives are reconstructed (Martin 83). Sexuality constitutes the ground of identity. Elizabeth Wilson explains, "'sexuality' was about identity and gender, about masculine and feminine, about desire, fantasy, and the whole construction of the self" (360). Some see lesbianism as a vital point of resistance, as "validating a denied sexuality"; others, as a "relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affection are directed towards one another. It becomes a synonym for sisterhood, solidarity and affection and as such a basic aspect of feminism" (Weeks 201-202). The common ground of lesbianism is about identity and sexuality because it offers the space for interrogation, defies the fixity of identity and essentially defines a life (Cooper 2; Martin 79 and Wilson 360; Weeks 201-209). Min, in her lesbian discourse, reclaims her sexuality by revoking the mainstream ideology imposed by the regime. This may be construed as her first step to recover her need for self-affirmation and reshape her stunted female identity.

Conclusion

Suffice to say that the hodge-podge of memories allows Anchee Min to explore her past in the Socialist realism of the fifties and sixties very effectively. From the discussion above, her memoir succinctly delineates an attenuated self. It is not just a personal spectacle of the past, but it proffers her the opportunity to reclaim her female self. When the past and present coalesce, both are enriched and this helps in the shaping of a self. Her memoir, therefore, is a textual validation of subjectivity, a critical reflection on the relation between subject constitution, representation of experiences, and knowledge production. Wang Gan, a male critic, affirms the autobiographical bent in Chinese women's writing of the 1990s. He thinks that "women's self-dissecting exposure of their personal lives constitutes their most valuable contribution to literature, supposedly because such acts promote an emancipation of individuality (*gexing jiefang*) that China sorely needs" (Lai 44). Min, in her memoir, does not only delineate a paralyzed self-sublimated under the Maoist regime. Through the power of language and the power of imagination, Min "reclaims agency for women by disrupting official discourse and revealing the potential effects of 'degendering'" (Somerson 112). Min's memoir, *Red Azalea*, poignantly delineates her confused and conflicted self. The genre is apt, as it provides the opportunity to reach the past and analyze past experiences. Through this, she engages in the process of making the self-public, of defining and creating the self by experiencing her past again while living in the present. Writing, hence,

serves the purpose of validating past experiences and is thus also an agent of discourse for her past female self. It is an enterprise locked in self-discovery which oils the process of becoming.

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