



Universiteit Utrecht

Reading the Second and Third Feminist Waves

The Unwavering Importance of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, and *Wild Swans* for Contemporary Feminists

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5728509

Thesis

Literature Today

Universiteit Utrecht

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14290 Words (including quotes, excluding Abstract, Content, and Works Cited)

30 July 2020

Abstract

This thesis argues why reading *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, *The Hidden Face of Eve* by Nawal El Saadawi, and *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang is relevant, even urgent, for contemporary feminism. I explore why reading autobiographical works that were published during earlier feminist waves and written by women from marginalised positions is important for the current feminist movement. I first discuss feminist and literary theories and introduce relevant terms and definitions in the “Theoretical Framework,” before continuing with a discussion of the genre of autobiography in relation to feminism in Chapter One. In Chapter Two, I explore *Caged Bird*, *Hidden Face*, and *Wild Swans* with regard to contemporary feminism by discussing the wave narrative and relevant topics discussed in the books. Chapter Three revolves around the personal experiences of Angelou, Saadawi, and Chang and analyses how their experiences differ from those most often represented in mainstream feminism. These chapters all support the belief that these autobiographical narratives are not restricted to being regarded as significant in one specific time period. Moreover, the chapters demonstrate that the experiences of women that write from the periphery are especially important for contemporary feminism’s understanding of “intersectionality,” which raises awareness to the different axes that are involved with the gender discrimination against women on both local and global levels.

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Jolien de Waard, 30th July 2020

Introduction

Despite some people describing our current moment as ‘post-feminist,’ there has been a continuous rise in the production of feminist cultural projects, which demonstrates that many people believe gender equality has not yet been achieved. As Dicker and Piepmeier explain,

Young women today have more options available to them than any other time in history, and because of these options, they feel ... that not only can they accomplish anything they want to but there are no gender-based barriers; sexism, these young women are sure, is a thing of the past. Yet, ... in spite of these beliefs, social structures have not changed as much as feminists might have hoped or expected (3-4).

Although feminist activism takes place in many different academic fields, literature plays a vital role in addressing (contemporary) issues and achieving goals. Felski explains that the second wave feminism of the late 1960s

justifies the analysis of women’s literature as a separate category, not because of automatic and unambiguous differences between the writings of women and men, but because of the recent cultural phenomenon of women’s explicit self-identification as an oppressed group, which is in turn articulated in literary texts in the exploration of gender-specific concerns centred around the problem of female identity (1).

Felski emphasises that the “function of literature is [not] to reflect passively the already constituted needs of a female audience; on the contrary, literature and art can help to create new perceptions and new needs” (182).

This assertion reinforces a widely held sense by various literary scholars that the category of “feminist literature” must continue to be expanded and re-defined, particular to account for a more globalised or international perspective on the movement, because “for recording the spirit and viscera of female life, feminist literature belongs in a world-class

collection. As a main branch of the arts it gathers a range of genres” (Snodgrass ix).

Unfortunately, feminists of the 1970s assumed that

sexism marked women’s lives far more significantly than any other social elements, [and] they assumed that their experience of sexism was universal to all women – meaning all non-trans women – regardless of ethnicity, class, and so on. Recent critiques of radical feminism from the 1970s point out how their convenient negligence of racism and classism in effect privileged themselves as white, middle-class women (Koyama 248).

Literature can offer useful insights into the ways in which ethnicity, class, and other factors can influence the lived experiences of women, because by “immersing themselves in the cultural expressions of women from backgrounds other than their own, individual feminists can understand the particular problems faced by women” (Darraj 201).

This thesis recognises this important aspect of literature written by women and is devoted to discussing the voices of women who were not equally represented in mainstream feminism. My main purpose is to offer a more nuanced and inclusive perspective on the experiences of women by specifically focussing on the texts they have written about their lives. *How* have these women chosen to document their lives, identities and local/global contexts, and *for whom* do they write are two of the questions this thesis attempts to address. I have chosen to focus on three texts in particular: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, *The Hidden Face of Eve* by Nawal El Saadawi, and *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang. These texts exemplify that the experiences of women are not only influenced by their sex/gender, but also by other factors such as race, religion or the political environment. I will argue that these three texts, which were written by women from marginalised groups during the second or third wave of feminism, have relevance to our contemporary discussions of intersectionality and feminism.

To achieve this, I will first devote attention to introducing and discussing relevant feminist and literary theories, concepts, secondary sources, and terms and definitions in the Theoretical Framework. This will be followed by Chapter 1, in which I will argue that placing *Caged Bird*, *Wild Swans*, and *Hidden Face* within a specific autobiographical genre is difficult, as well as further explaining why reading works of life writing is particularly relevant for feminism's manifestations in literature. Then, in Chapter 2, I analyse how and why novels written during earlier feminist waves, and *Caged Bird*, *Wild Swans*, and *Hidden Face* in particular, bear relevance to contemporary (fourth wave) feminism. Chapter 3 provides more insight into the experiences of Angelou, Chang, and Saadawi and the women they write about. This chapter also discusses how their experiences might differ from the experiences that were (and are) most often represented in mainstream feminism.

Theoretical Framework

I Feminism

Since this thesis analyses Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve*, and Chang's *Wild Swans* through a feminist perspective, it is important to establish an overview of the different feminist waves and the changing intentions and goals of the movement. Discussing the differences between the feminist waves is essential in order to understand how and why *Caged Bird*, *Hidden Face*, and *Wild Swans* were important to second and third wave feminists and why they are still relevant for feminists now.

Feminism mainly revolves around the belief that men and women are equal and that the interests and perspectives of women are valid and "of themselves" (Freeman 74). Feminist movements aim to change the structural forces that contribute to society's way of shaping and constraining women, such as patriarchy (Riordan 291). However, although feminists had been around for a long time, their ideas and actions did not materialise into a "mass-based, social movement" before the first feminist wave (Mann & Huffman 58). The first wave started during the late nineteenth century and carried on into the early twentieth century and mainly revolved around opening up opportunities for women, such as suffrage (Rampton 1). The discussions about women's right to vote and participate in politics led to "an examination of the differences between men and women as they were then viewed" (1). However, there was little attention for diversity and the first wave was generally "propelled by middle class, Western, cisgender, white women" (4).

This changed during the second wave, which started in the 1960s and continued well into the 90s, as women of colour and developing countries were being drawn in, and the movement became increasingly radical alongside other social movements, such as the anti-war and civil rights movements (3-4). Feminism became more theoretical and feminists

started to differentiate between sex and gender: sex was classified as biological and gender as a social construct “that varies culture-to-culture and over time” (3-4). Second wave feminists spoke of women as a separate social class and phrases such as “identity politics” and “the personal is political” were used to demonstrate that “race, class, and gender oppression are all related” (4). Hanisch talked about the latter in her famous, eponymous essay: “Personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution” (114). As Koedt, Levine, and Rapone describe, the process of conscious raising was “one in which personal experiences, when shared, are recognised as a result not of an individual idiosyncratic history and behaviour, but of the system of sex-role stereotyping. That is, they are political, not personal, questions” (Qtd. in Hogeland 23). Mann and Huffman argue that, chronologically, “the initial challenges to second wave feminism shared a focus on difference, but resulted in two opposing political camps: one that embraced identity politics as the key to liberation; and a second that saw freedom in resistance to identity” which was best illustrated by “feminists of colour and ethnicity” (58).

During the mid-90’s the third wave started taking form: third wave feminists were seeking to “refigure and enhance” second wave feminism, as they were trying to make it “more diverse and inclusive” (Mann & Huffman 37). The third wave was “informed by post-colonial and post-modern thinking” and many constructs, such as the notions of “universal womanhood,” body, gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity, were destabilised (Rampton 4). Although second wave feminists were progressively aware of the differences among women, third wave feminists had an increased focus on “difference, deconstruction and decentring” and they laid the foundation for contemporary, fourth wave feminism:

To date, four major perspectives have contributed the most to this new discourse of third wave feminism: intersectionality theory as developed by women of colour

and ethnicity; postmodernist and poststructuralist feminist approaches; feminist postcolonial theory, often referred to as global feminism; and the agenda of the new generation of younger feminists (Mann & Huffman 57).

According to Rampton, fourth wave feminists are not simply a reincarnation of “their second wave grandmothers; they bring to the discussion important perspectives taught by third wave feminism” (7). Like the second and third wave, contemporary feminism draws attention to the different axes that are involved with discrimination against women. The belief that gender is the sole basis for identification has been undermined for quite some time and ‘privilege-checking’ has become more important, as it helps to understand differences among women by reflecting on the fact that the straight white-middle classes still dominate mainstream feminism (Munro 24-25).

II Autobiographical writing

Caged Bird, *Wild Swans*, and *Hidden Face* are all books in which the author is depicted as one of the main subjects. This type of writing, one that “takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject,” is unified under the umbrella term “life writing” (Smith & Watson 4). Life writing can be “biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical” (4). The three books this thesis discusses, have often been classified as autobiographies or memoirs, which are both encompassed within the term “life writing” (4). One of the reasons why this thesis pays attention to the categorising of the three books is the fact that placing them in a specific genre of life writing requires a careful and critical approach and should perhaps even be avoided entirely.

Books like *Caged Bird*, *Wild Swans*, and *Hidden Face*, that contain first-hand accounts of lived experiences, are often categorised as autobiographies since they usually revolve around the “development of the self” through an inward focus (Qtd. in Egerton 235). However, the three books also contain elements that are characteristic for memoirs: as,

according to Miller, memoirs capture a “dynamic postmodernism in its movement between the ‘private and the public, subject and object’” (Qtd. in Smith & Watson 4). Rak explains that the memoir has been attached to “popular forms of life writing” and can be used as a “nominal marker to distinguish stories about unacknowledged aspects of people’s lives, sometimes considered scandalous or titillating, and often written by the socially marginal” (Qtd. in Smith & Watson 4). Since memoirs have the tendency “to not be just about an individual” they are an important contemporary autobiographical form (Rak, *Negotiated Memory* 11).

Many academics have now rejected the importance that has historically been placed upon autobiography as a literary genre. According to Smith and Watson, “the term privileges the autonomous individual and the universalising life story as the definitive achievement of life writing” (3). As a result, the genre has been “vigorously challenged in the wake of postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment subject” because the canonisation of the genre supported the assumption that “many other kinds of life writings produced at the same time have lesser value were and not “‘true’ autobiography – the slave narrative, narratives of women’s domestic lives, coming-of-age and travel narratives, among others” (3). Therefore, many postmodernists and postcolonial theorists have agreed that the term autobiography is “inadequate to describe the extensive historical range and the diverse genres and practices of life writing not only in the West but around the globe” (3).

Considering all of the above, this thesis refrains from classifying the books as either memoirs or autobiographies, and simply refers to them as products of life writing, or by using the adjective ‘autobiographical,’ as Smith and Watson also do (4).

III Relevant Sources and Recent Reception

Since *Hidden Face*, *Wild Swans*, and *Caged Bird* were published between 1969 and 1991 and have all been immensely successful ever since, there are many academic sources

available on the books. It is important to establish how these three books have reappeared and how they are received in the contemporary moment. Therefore, besides giving a brief, and limited, overview of sources, the discussion below also aims to show how these books have remained relevant throughout the years and are still frequently discussed by the general public, literary critics, students, and academics.

The publication of *The Hidden Face of Eve* in 1977 marked the beginning of Saadawi's international career, as it was the first of her books to be translated into English (Newson-Horst vii). According to Multi-Douglas, Saadawi became the "most visible woman intellectual in the Arab world" and her books appeared in many different languages, (Qtd. in Moore 17). Since the translation of *Hidden Face*, Saadawi has become the "best-known expositor of Arab Muslim female experience to Western audiences" (17). Her influence on the western world has been substantial, and this year, *TIME* included her on their "100 Women of the Year" list for being one of the most influential women of the past century. Saadawi is deemed an expert on many different topics and is, for example, frequently asked to give her opinion on topics such as Isis and the radicalisation of young girls (Cooke, "Nawal El Saadawi"). Saadawi's critique on circumcision is also still relevant, as female genital mutilation has remained a common practice worldwide, despite being illegal in many countries. A survey in Egypt in 2015 showed that 87 percent of the women between the ages of 15 and 49 were circumcised, although the number was declining amongst younger women ("Egypt Health Issues Survey" 103). Since *Hidden Face* offers insight into the impact of circumcision on the lives of women, Saadawi has also been cited in studies such as the one conducted by Biglu et al., which focuses on the impact of female circumcision on mental health. Some academics have discussed the book with regard to the contemporary aspects of the feminist movement: Al-Wazedi, for example, refers to the book when talking of the ways in which the #MeToo movement affected Muslim women. Other examples include references

to the book in essays discussing Saadawi's overall influence as a feminist writer (Spath), or when focussing specifically on her position as a feminist writer after the Arab revolution of 2011 (Shaw). Critical reflections on the work are also not uncommon, with scholars such as Hasan arguing that *Hidden Face* reinforced the belief that "Islamic identity is ... forced upon Muslim women" (91). Negative approaches are not rare, because the book has been criticised and banned by many different people and countries.

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was the first volume of her series of autobiographical works, and it celebrated its 50th anniversary last year. As Higashida explains, *Caged Bird* was already a bestseller and a canonical work for a long time before it became even more popular after Angelou performed at Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993 (159). While Saadawi can be seen as one of the most visible Arab writers, Angelou can be regarded as "one of the most vital and compelling voices in contemporary American and African-American literature" and "among the most popular and visible contemporary African-American authors" with her work resonating with people of all colours and ethnicities (Bader 4-7). Although some schools banned the book, many have also incorporated it into its curricula. As this thesis and many others show, *Caged Bird* still inspires and fascinates younger generations: in recent years, students, and academics have reflected upon the book, showing its relevance to a contemporary audience from a feminist perspective. Some students focused on the ways in which the women in the book are empowered (Chaima & Asma), while others focused on the experiences of marginalised women (Assefie). Others argue that the "representations of the women of colour in the novel have been problematised" and demonstrate this by using contemporary models and theories on gender (Choudhry & Asif). The issues with racism, oppression, and sexual abuse are also frequently discussed in academic papers, for example in a paper by K. J., who performs a psychoanalysis of the novel. The book has also had influence on the feminist movement in more subtle ways. Like

Saadawi's work, *Caged Bird* has been associated with the #MeToo movement, as the movement's founder Tarana Burke found reading the book as a teenager a life-changing experience (O'Brien).

Like Angelou and Saadawi, Jung Chang has been a prominent name within the public domain ever since she published *Wild Swans* in 1991, which became an international success. The book was translated into thirty languages and sold ten million copies worldwide (Lai 1). According to Thompson, *Wild Swans* is a "very important book both for Chinese history and for oral history" because it "bridges the huge cultural divide between Chinese and Western culture in a way that few books have done" (Qtd. in Lai 1). Tong and Hung touch upon the immense success of the book in the West, and especially the United States, and discuss ways in which books like Chang's can be read. Other academics like Zhu, mention how "Westerners obtain knowledge about socialist China and the Cultural Revolution" from popular texts like *Wild Swans*, as the voices of their writers are seen as authentic and representative of Chinese history (84). As was the case with *Caged Bird*, younger generations have also remained interested in *Wild Swans*. Similar to this thesis, Y. Chen uses a feminist approach to perform a close-reading of the book and discusses aspects such as diaspora by using feminist theory. Some academics have taken a more critical approach, such as to L. Chen, who claims *Wild Swans* can be categorised as

one of those "memoirs of victimhood" which feed the West's perennial fascination of the Orient by offering an unbalanced and uncritical examination of the authors' personal and their nation's traumatic past, which typically ends with finding salvation and happiness in the West (Qtd. in Lai 6).

Hung explores how memoirs like *Wild Swans* have contributed to the creation of "cultural trauma," which can be defined as the "dominant interpretation of a catastrophic event that can be used for various political, social, or religious purposes" (223). He argues that this

“particular trauma has proven to be quite resilient in American thinking about China,” although there is “mounting evidence that interpretations by these memoirs are too narrow and monolithic” (224).

The sources mentioned above are all relevant to what this thesis aims to demonstrate, whether that be by offering a more nuanced or critical approach to the autobiographical texts, or because they show the relevance of the books with regard to different topics that bear importance to contemporary feminism and intersectionality, such as race and post-colonialism.

Chapter 1

Autobiography and Feminism

The genre of autobiography long has been regarded as an important and prestigious literary genre, usually deriving its lustre from the fame or notability of its subject/writer. However, as this thesis's Theoretical Framework illustrates, the genre tended to exclude the narratives of women and other marginalised groups, which caused postmodernists, postcolonial critics, and feminists to challenge the genre and its existing forms. At the time of publication, in the eyes of many Anglophone readers, *Wild Swans*, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* were written from marginalised perspectives. Further, while *Caged Bird* and *Hidden Face* have been continuously referred to as autobiographies, *Wild Swans* is often classified as a memoir, which illustrates a shift in the literary field at the beginning of the 1990s, with feminists increasingly rejecting the genre of autobiography due to its exclusionary nature. Considering this, this chapter aims to demonstrate the ways in which feminist writers have made use of the genre of autobiography during the second wave, partially to make the case that the genre should be more inclusive. By doing so, they perhaps also contributed to memoirs becoming a more popular form of self-writing in the twenty-first century. This chapter first addresses the history of autobiography and the ways in which existing definitions excluded women and marginalised groups from the genre. Then, the chapter focuses on the importance of the genre for the women's movement and the ways in which some feminists challenged the movement itself to become more inclusive, by turning their writing's focus to considering and understanding intersectionality.

1.1 History of Autobiography

The first use of the term "autobiography" can be credited to William Taylor of Norwich, who first used it in 1797 in a piece he wrote for the *Monthly Review* (Smith &

Watson 1-2). According to Folkenflik, before that, the term “memoirs” had always been used for the broad category that could be defined as “self-life writing,” but then the term “autobiography” started to appear “in the late eighteenth century in several forms, in isolated instances in the seventies, eighties and nineties in both England and Germany with no sign that one use influenced another” (qtd. in Smith & Watson 2). As Smith and Watson further explain, the genre gained prominence ever since it became “the term for a particular generic practice that emerged in the Enlightenment, as the figure of the “Enlightened individual” was informed by notions of “self-interest, self-consciousness, and self-knowledge” (2). With the invention of the printing press, affordable printed books had become easily accessible and, as a result, many people had access to these autobiographies (2). However, due to the existing definitions of what an autobiography entailed, only a select group of people, often those who held most power, were actually able to write and publish books about their own life experiences.

Women, people of colour, and those writing from a non-Western perspective often had limited access to the Anglo-American literary field, and therefore, to the genre of autobiography. Theoretically speaking, it is impossible to define autobiography and provide a model for the genre without privileging “one over the other,” so no “centre” or “margin,” as well as provide a definition that “acknowledges the diversity of culture, that resists privileging the centre and travelling the edges” (Benstock 5). As Benstock argues, a definition “must display self-sameness in order to be recognisable; definitions can acknowledge difference, but only difference outside its own mode” (5).

However, it is important to note here that due to these existing definitions, the genre of autobiography was almost exclusively accessible for people with power. As Foucault demonstrates, power and the authority to produce knowledge are inexplicably linked to each other: “The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge

constantly induces effects of power. ... It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (52). Ultimately, this demonstrates that those who held power dominated genres such as autobiography, and, as a result, were the ones to narrate history.

Although Benstock’s argument shows that defining a genre almost automatically conveys an element of exclusion, it is problematic if definitions systematically exclude the narratives of certain groups of people. This is for example addressed by Smith and Watson, who explain that those who followed the German tradition of *Geistesgeschichte*, “the spirit of historical moment,” excluded many groups and minorities when defining what constituted as works of autobiography:

Unmentioned are the non-public figures such as women, slaves, and other colonised peoples, whose assertion of human status and exercise of rights as social subjects were systematically restricted and often brutally repressed and whose acts of self-narrating either silenced, repressed or ignored (196).

Similar ideas were voiced by philosopher Georges Gusdorf, who observed that the tradition of autobiography was defined in a way that denied

women, ethnic minorities, those who are not Christian or heterosexual, those who do not live within northern American and western European culture, those who do not employ traditional narratives of action, adventure, and tests of manhood as the driving force of their autobiographical plots (Benstock 5).

It is perhaps most important to note that people like Gusdorf did not deny that these people wrote about their life experiences, he simply denied that what they wrote could be called “autobiography” (5). Smith and Watson also emphasise that although access to the genre of autobiography was constrained for specific groups, “people, from diverse cultural locations, produced, wrote, and told their stories to confessors, amanuenses, and editors before the

twentieth century” (196). Because the definition of what constituted as autobiography was in many cases exclusionary, these texts, which were sometimes “quite popular and influential in their own times” did not acquire the status of “representative autobiographies” (196). Since the texts written by these people were not regarded as “formative” of the civilisation, they were not “celebrated as the appropriate subject of study” (196). As Smith and Watson explain, many people, such as German philosopher Georg Misch, found the “‘representative’ nature of autobiography” to be of great importance (196). According to Jardine, the labelling of what is, or what is not, representative is part of the cultural project of “naming, controlling, remembering, understanding” (qtd. in Smith & Watson 196). This, in turn, “sustains the patriarchal, and imperial, power to produce ‘knowledge’ about the world and to authorise certain subjects to produce knowledge” (196).

1.2 Feminism and Autobiography

Since women and other marginalised groups were not considered important, their contributions to the genre of autobiography, as well as the field of literature as a whole and many other fields of study, were not considered valuable. Besides not receiving recognition for their work, they were not honoured with prestige or authority in a way that most men usually were. According to Bourdieu, the allocation of such honour or prestige can be defined as “symbolic capital” (262), with capital referring to “attributes, possessions, or qualities of a person or a position exchangeable for goods, services, or esteem” (DiMaggio 1463). Despite the fact that women and marginalised groups wrote autobiographies, the genre became, as Marcus explains, a way of writing that historically marked, and was marked by, the often masculine “privilege or self-possession” (qtd. in Cosslett et al. 2). As Cosslett et al. explain, the traditional construction of the “ideal autobiographer as a unified, transcendent subject, representative of the age, has favoured privileged white male writers who can fit into this role

more easily than the marginalised and the dispossessed” (2). As a result, female self-writings have been excluded from both “the critical and literary canons” (Stanton vii). The fact that autobiography favoured male voices is not surprising, since men have typically had “greatest access to and control over language,” while simultaneously arguing “that women cannot enter into that language without much authority or success” (Brownley & Kimmich xiii). This demonstrates that language not only “describes or communicates but also orders and organises the world into groups with varying degrees of power” (xiii).

Thus, it is important to remember that women’s access to print is “both recent and hard won,” as Murray argues (qtd. in Eagleton 131). Consequently, female “autobiographies, memoirs, letters and diaries” represent cases of “maddening neglect that have motivated feminist scholarship since 1970” (Stanton vii). This specific body of “writing about the self” has remained largely invisible and has been “systematically ignored in the studies on autobiography that have proliferated” since the 70s (vii). Like postmodernists and postcolonial critics, feminists felt determined to make the genre of autobiography more accessible and inclusive. As a result, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminist literary critics started to challenge the male bias in autobiography, so “that the genre broadened to include diverse forms of women’s self-writing” (Wang 3). Their criticism of the genre of autobiography coincided with an increased interest in the ways in which autobiographical writing could become an important vehicle for the feminist movement. As Skeggs explains, feminists first became interested in autobiography during the second wave, with the attempt to connect the “‘personal’ with the ‘political’ and the concomitant emphasis on “women’s experiences as vital resource in the creation of women’s knowledge” (qtd. in Cosslett et al. 2). This shift within the feminist movement brought the genre of autobiography to the attention of second wave feminists, as they could use autobiography to support this motto.

Furthermore, as Cosslett et al. discuss, as awareness “shifted from women’s experience as a given, to the complex construction of gendered subjectivities, the field of autobiography has become a central preoccupation and testing-ground for feminism” (2). The emphasis on understanding that knowledge is situated within “social relations and historical discourses” is derived from “a feminist questioning of universalist assumptions, and a realisation that knowledge is not ‘objective’, but has often been produced from a privileged white male-centred perspective that has pretended to universality and objectivity” (2). Cosslett et al. also emphasise the importance of understanding the relationship between “personal narratives and the public stories available within popular culture” (3). Patriarchal cultures have often categorised women as “objects,” and women’s autobiography gave them “an opportunity to express themselves as ‘subjects’ with their own selfhood” (5-6). The feminist interference with the genre of autobiography proved successful. Since 1970 or so, the feminist movement, together with postcolonialism and other politically correct theories, “distorted the understanding and even the practice of autobiography” (Brosman 99). They did so by denying the

general validity of the autobiographical tradition by pointing out that it is exclusively the domain of those who can write, and that they were until recent decades mostly male and, with exceptions, moneyed or intellectually prominent – that is, members of the hated elite (99).

Although the movement initially posed “a challenge to the genre of autobiography” feminism’s engagement with the genre has, in turn, “contributed to a critical re-evaluation of its own long-standing concerns including subjectivity, knowledge and power, differences, and collective identity (Cosslett et al. 2). Furthermore, as Gilmore argues, feminist critics have undertaken “a critical project of revering and remembering the erased cultural productions and lives of women” (125). After feminists started to become involved with changing the

genre to fit their contemporary desires in terms of inclusivity, the genre first opened for writings by women from the middle classes, and later also to women of colour (Wang 3).

As the Theoretical Framework discusses, we could say that second wave feminism was characterised in part by an increasing attention to intersectionality, and feminist activists started to bring to their discourse the ways in which factors such as race and class were involved with inequality between the sexes. Cosslett et al. explain that

the importance of further categories of difference such as race, class, sexual orientation, nationality and age – sometimes as a consequence of challenges to their own resumption of universality – has complicated and enriched understandings of autobiographical writing and practices (3).

When discussing the genre of autobiography with regard to second, as well as third, wave feminism, it is absolutely essential to consider intersectionality as both a motivation and consequence of such writing; the importance of the genre for the feminist movement was not solely based upon gender. As McKay demonstrates, the genre of autobiography has also been an important literary tradition for Black people in North America as a marginalised group:

From their earliest writings in the West, autobiography was sufficiently central to African Americans that they made it the genre of preference in the development of black literary culture. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, displaced Africans found it critical in gaining the language they needed to enter white debates on the humanity of Africans, and to challenge western European discourses on freedom and race. They believed that in mastering the literacy and the language of their enslavers they could prove to their oppressors and to sympathetic white readers that people with black skins were as intelligent as other groups (96).

With regard to other Anglophone writing, as Kehinde explains, many postcolonial writers “domesticated” English into their works, to “overturn the assumptions of cultural and racial

inferiority imposed by the colonisers and foolishly accepted by the colonised” (76). However, although this argument pertains to both postcolonial authors and Black people in the United States, it is important to note here that their experiences are inherently different. Although Black people might also use the English language to achieve the same goal, they do not ‘domesticate’ it into their writing because they are born into an American identity and the English language, which is unlike the degree of “foreignness” postcolonial subjects might experience. Nevertheless, for both subjects writing in English makes them more likely to become a player in the international field of literature. According to Sapiro, even today, authors writing in central languages such as English are more likely to gain international recognition than authors writing in “peripheral” languages (92). As McKay further explains, by using the

white oppressor’s language and black cultural tropes (like masking), they transformed the racially inferior, abstract African self of the master’s text into the ultimately triumphant black experiential self. These selves, inhabitants of the slave and spiritual self-stories, were the legacy of twentieth-century autobiographers as different as W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and Maya Angelou (97).

However, in order to make use of the language of the oppressor in such a way, people need access to education. For a Black woman raised under circumstances like Angelou’s, it was not unusual to be deprived of proper education as a result of racism. In America, public schools became segregated by race after 1896, which resulted in Black schools receiving “considerably less governmental support” than white schools (Kalmijn & Kraaykamp 22). Saadawi’s career as an author was also greatly influenced by what she experienced while she was working as a doctor, something she would not have been able to do if she had not received proper education.

Considering factors additional to gender is also important in the case of Jung Chang, who would perhaps not have been able to leave China if she had not been chosen to become a student of English. As Wang explains, “Chinese women’s literary works have often been read autobiographically with brilliance and sophistication. The autobiographical perspective is located in almost all genres, including their short stories, novels/novellas, essays, poetry, and drama” (3). According to Kong, *Wild Swans* is one of the most well-known memoirs “written in English by Chinese women who were born in mainland China and ‘escaped’ to the West after the Chinese Revolution” (239). These examples show that there are many factors, besides gender, that can greatly influence the lives of women and the chances they have of becoming successful writers. Because intersectionality allows feminism to pay closer attention to ways in which women struggle with inequality individually, studying works of life writing is especially relevant to the feminist movement.

Although the genre of autobiography was historically associated with a high level of prestige and (masculine) intellect, “the tradition was never as coherent as it could be made to appear, its canonical texts formally unstable and decidedly multivoiced, and its variety as much a critique, parody, or mimicry of the Western self as evidence of it” (Gilmore 2). While autobiography became less popular, the “writing and publishing of memoir has undergone a significant shift since 1990s” (Rak, *Boom!* 9). Historically, memoir has most often referred to life writing that “takes a segment of a life, not its entirety, and focusing on interconnected experiences” but is now used interchangeably in “contemporary parlance” (Smith & Watson 274). Currently, the genre is often used to categorise autobiographical texts that are characterised by “density of language and self-reflexivity about the writing process, yoking the author’s standing as a professional writer with the work’s status as an aesthetic object” (4). According to Rak, critics have often treated the genre as “a poor relative of autobiography discourse, a secondary form of life writing” (“Are Memoirs Autobiography?” 306). However,

the genre has now gained “currency in popular and scholarly arenas”: “Predating the term *autobiography*, *memoir* is now the word used by publishing houses to describe various practices and genres of self life writing” (Smith & Watson 3). Gilmore even argues that “memoir has become *the* genre in the skittish period around the turn of the millennium” (1). This would, for example, explain why *Wild Swans*, published at the beginning of the 90s, is most often referred to as a memoir, rather than an autobiography.

1.3 Conclusion

Considering all of the above, although critics and many feminists have agreed to reject the genre of autobiography as a valuable form of self-life writing, the genre has been of importance to the feminist movement. With the rise of the motto “the personal is political” during the second wave, feminists became interested in increasing the representation of women’s individual narratives within the public and academic domain. The growing importance of the genre of autobiography went alongside their critiques on the ways in which the genre had historically excluded the perspectives of women and marginalised groups. In order to argue for the importance of reading *Wild Swans*, *Hidden Face*, and *Caged Bird* from a contemporary feminist perspective, it is essential to understand the role of the feminist movement within the genre of autobiography.

Chapter 2

The Relevance of *Caged Bird*, *Hidden Face*, and *Wild Swans* to Contemporary (Fourth Wave)

Feminism

This chapter discusses the ways in which *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, and *Wild Swans* offer relevant contributions to contemporary, fourth wave feminist discussion, despite being published during the second and third waves of feminism. As a foundation for this discussion, in the first chapter I have discussed the periodisation of feminism. Although this thesis makes references to the “wave narrative” and recognises its value, it is also important to approach it with a critical attitude, especially when discussing works of literature. This is especially relevant since I aim to demonstrate that *Wild Swans*, *Caged Bird*, and *Hidden Face* possess a sense of timelessness because of their topics and the way in which they are written.

2.1 The Wave Narrative

The use of separate waves allows for a comprehensive overview of the history of the feminist movement and its development in terms of goals and achievements. As Laughlin et al. explain, the periodisation of feminism and the wave’s “chronology” is widely accepted and reappears across the web in a “dizzying array of information about feminism, from scholarly journals and reference sources to Women’s Studies Web sites and third-wave feminist blogs” (77). However, Laughlin et al. also argue that it is important to consider the consequences for the future of feminism “in adhering to a metaphor that entrenches the notion that feminist politics only occurs in dramatic waves of revolutionary activism” (77). Others have rejected the wave narrative as well, and critics such as Gillis and Munford have argued that clinging to the wave narrative “paralyses feminism” and sets up “false dichotomies between generations of feminists” (qtd. in Evans & Chamberlain 396). Evans and Chamberlain emphasise that the

“*intersection* between the waves is an important site for rigorous and healthy debate” and that the task of a new wave is “not simply to herald the end of the previous wave, nor to assume the mantle of leadership” (398, emphasis mine). They also claim that the use of the wave narrative illustrates “the power of discourse to shape our understanding of the world,” and thus, “it is of strategic and intellectual value for feminist writers and activists to critically engage with the narrative, to ensure that it does not continue to be solely used as a means by which to reinforce feminist in-fighting and crude, inaccurate caricatures” (406).

Discussing periodisation and feminism is important when arguing for the relevance of *Wild Swans*, *Hidden Face*, and *Caged Bird* for the fourth wave, because I want to argue that these books should not be rigidly linked only to the historical context of when they were written. In other words, these books cannot be read as simply products (and symptomatic) of the periods in which they were produced. Although they were initially discussed and analysed by contemporary feminists through second or third wave perspectives, they can also offer useful insights to present-day feminism. The importance and influence of these books increases if feminists refrain from discussing the movement as fragmented into different historical moments, but rather pay attention to its continuity. As Evans and Chamberlain stress, “continuity is important not only as a way of acknowledging a feminist legacy but as a way of shaping on-going and future feminist debates and campaigns” (406). They also argue that “the continuity of the feminist movement is surely one of its greatest strengths” (406).

Further, it is important to bear in mind that reading experiences are greatly influenced by individual perspectives. This is in line with the reader-response theory, which centres the act of reading around the reader (Davis 71). As Rosenblatt, a pioneer in reader-response theory, explains, many books allow for more than one interpretation and readers bring “previous knowledge, beliefs and attitudes to the reading process” (qtd. in Kibui 18). She argues that, since reading is a “transaction” between the author and the reader, “each reading

experience is different” (qtd. in Kibui 18). Although second and third wave readers will have had certain reading experiences of *Wild Swans*, *Hidden Face*, or *Caged Bird*, contemporary feminists might also offer new interpretations as a result of their own specifically-situated perspectives. Scholars like Frankenberg or Sleeter argue that our “perspectives are strongly rooted in our lived experiences and unexamined beliefs” (qtd. in Singer & Smith 19).

Considering the above, books that bear relevance to feminist discussion at the time of their publication, can also do so at later points in time, although perhaps in different ways, because new readers can offer new insights and interpretations. To put it simply: *Wild Swans*, *Hidden Face*, and *Caged Bird* have proven to be vital to contemporary feminist discourse around literature; they do not belong to one specific point in time, and their relevance and popularity certainly outstretches their own waves.

2.2 Relevant Themes

One of the reasons why *Wild Swans*, *Caged Bird*, and *Hidden Face* have remained popular is because of the relevance of the topics included in their narratives. Although Chapter Three provides an in-depth analysis of the particular experiences of the authors detailed in their writing, this chapter first discusses more broadly why several of the themes in these books are relevant to contemporary feminism.

For example, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* narrates Angelou’s life in the 1930s and 40s and her descriptions of her daily life clearly show the presence of racial prejudice against Black people in America. Although many years have passed since both slavery and segregation were abolished, there are still large social, cultural, and economic differences between Black and white communities as a result of racism. For example, as has been widely documented in recent media, particularly through the activism of “Black Lives Matter,” even today, Black people are more likely to become victims of police brutality in America (Chaney

& Robertson 482). Therefore, Angelou's depiction of racial prejudice against Black people in the United States is still relevant. Similarly, in *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Saadawi's chapter on female genital mutilation still applies to contemporary, global feminist discussions about the oppression of women in Egypt. Despite the fact that the English translation of the book was published almost 45 years ago, there are still young female children who suffer the same fate as the women in *Hidden Face*, as the results of the "Egypt Health Issues Survey," discussed in the Theoretical Framework, showed. Deforming women's bodies to ensure they adhere to cultural standards of beauty and purity, to make them desirable to men, has not entirely changed since the second wave.

Several themes within *Wild Swans* are relevant to current debates and concerns of fourth wave feminists as well, such as the development of a global feminism through student migration and increased educational opportunities for young Chinese women. In her book, Chang describes how she was probably one of the first students from her region who was allowed to study abroad (654). Since then, the number of Chinese students, from many different regions, who have travelled abroad for their studies has increased considerably. However, as Xiang and Shen explain, social stratification is "always gendered and this applies also to international student migration" (517). Amongst other things, one of the reasons why education abroad is important is that "women need extra education credentials in order to compensate for sex discrimination," which actually has been *increasing* in recent decades in the job market (517). Further, education is inextricably linked to many other aspects of society, such as social status and economic position, but also the marriage market (517).

Bearing the above in mind, although these books were written in different contexts, there are still parallels between the experiences of Angelou, Saadawi, and Chang, as well as those of contemporary feminists. As Hirsch and Smith argue, "feminist studies and memory studies both presuppose that the present is defined by a past that is constructed and contested"

(12). The past is not only studied for “its own sake; rather, we do so to meet the needs of the present” (12). Moreover,

What we know about the past, and thus our understanding of the present, is shaped by the voices that speak to us out of history; relative degrees of power and powerlessness, privilege and disenfranchisement, determine the spaces where witnesses and testimony may be heard or ignored (12).

Considering this, the topics discussed in the three books are relevant to the feminist cause whether or not they still directly influence the lives of women. Smith and Watson explain that

the politics of remembering – what is recollected and what is obscured – is central to the cultural production of knowledge about the past, and thus to the terms of an individual’s self-knowledge. Autobiographical narratives, as we will see, signal and invite reading in terms of larger cultural issues and may also be productively read against the ideological grain (25).

By remembering – and actively discussing – the lives depicted in *Wild Swans*, *Caged Bird*, and *Hidden Face*, feminists might be able to analyse how the future of feminism could be shaped and what might be done to make the movement more inclusive. Although it is important to pay attention to the narratives of contemporary women and other marginalised voices as well, we must keep in mind that individual accounts from earlier generations can offer important contributions to the present state and future of feminism. Hirsch and Smith explain that, since the 1970s “feminist scholarship has been driven by the desire to redefine culture from the perspective of women through the retrieval and inclusion of women’s works, stories, and artefacts” (3). During this period, there was “an explosion of literary and cultural production by women in numerous languages and cultures that in itself has shaped much of the cultural memory of the late twentieth century” (3). They further argue that feminism has “defamiliarized and thus re-envisioned traditional modes of knowing the past. Theorising

cultural memory through the lens of feminism does not merely foreground the dynamics of gender and power” (11).

In addition to the evident topics and themes raised by *Hidden Face*, *Caged Bird*, and *Wild Swans* it is also important to consider that these books are worthy of attention from fourth wave feminists because of *how* they are written. The fact that these autobiographical works enjoy such immense and long-lasting popularity shows that they appeal to large audiences, and several theorists have argued that an important defining feature of fourth wave feminism is “moving from the academy and back into the realm of public discourse” (Rampton 6).

It almost goes without saying that writing style is one of the factors that contribute to a book’s success (Ashok et al. 1753), and significantly, critics have celebrated Angelou, Saadawi, and Chang not only for the content of their books, but also for their individual, innovative strategies for composing compelling life narratives.

Caged Bird, for example, has been praised for its “rich, humorous, intense, engaging” narrative style (Lupton 68). Lupton explains that Angelou does not refrain from using frightening or confrontational language, and that dialogue is a “stylistic feature throughout Angelou’s entire autobiographical series” (68). Other critics, such as O’Neale emphasise that Angelou avoids using “stereotypical black vocabulary,” but that instead her “style reflects the rich language of her literary models,” such as Poe, Dunbar, and Dostoyevsky (qtd. in Lupton 69). However, reports from “newspapers and Internet sources suggest that not all readers appreciate the ‘effectiveness’ of Angelou’s language” (69). This effectiveness refers to her precise, direct, and honest writing, and this so-called “fear of Angelou’s truth-telling has been spreading as white parents discover her power and confront the anger in *Caged Bird*” (69). For example, as Gross explains, one mother argued Angelou’s storytelling was too “sexually explicit, racially divisive, and too graphic about lesbianism” (qtd. in Lupton 69). The passage

below, in which young Maya describes her rape, is an example of Angelou's "sexually explicit" language:

Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape of an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot (84).

Lupton explains that parents also objected to the fact that Angelou's writing stands out from other autobiographical works because of its "element of candor, of openness, as though she were telling the truth and nothing else – 'as if' because Angelou the autobiographer sometimes changes the truth for artistic reasons" (69-70). However, investigating whether or not Angelou tells the "absolute truth" in passages such as the one above does not matter. What does matter from is Angelou's gift of "convincing readers of the narrator's desire to be accurate, that her rape becomes a believable account of a young black girl's horrifying experience". As Lupton emphasises, her use of "profanity and sexual references are a necessary part of this experience" (70).

In Chang's case, Thurston argues that *Wild Swans* provides an extraordinary narrative because of Chang's "impeccable focus on detail and the unwavering integrity with which the story is told. She stares truth in the face and tells her tale without judgment or moralizing, self-pity or hate. She understands her characters, good, bad and mixed, from the inside" (1207). Kong explains the book is also written in a "clear, concise style and structured in a very logical manner" and that many colleges and schools have "adopted the book as a text in courses on modern China" (240), because it appears to authoritatively and authentically provide an account of a modern Chinese life. *Wild Swans* is "over five hundred pages long and ranges from the Republican revolution to the 1970s, including a virtually day-by-day description of crucial episodes, notably the Cultural Revolution" (240). Kong emphasises that

it is important to consider the book's "immense popularity outside the academy" (240) which could perhaps be explained by aspects such as the "readable style, the era's intrinsic interest, or perhaps her gender" (249). According to Kong, each chapter in the book "deals with a well-contained, dramatic episode in the life of the author's family, through novelistic techniques such as dialogue and the construction of plausible characters with whom we can identify" (240). Considering the appeal of its writing style is essential to our understanding of why millions of people were drawn to the book. Most of these readers would otherwise not have come in contact with China, which means that Chang's narrative might have influenced their "judgements of its recent history" (Kong 240).

Unlike Angelou's and Chang's books, Saadawi's work was translated into, rather than originally written in, English. As Amireh explains, the English edition has been heavily edited and the translation does not always accurately represent Saadawi's writing style (223-227). Amireh also argues that Saadawi's writings differ from "the more academic writings of radical feminists such as Fatima Mernissi and Khalida Said" (231). However, compared to Angelou and Chang, *Hidden Face* reads most as a straightforward non-fiction book, because Saadawi less frequently employs fictional techniques into her writing. While reading *Wild Swans* and *Caged Bird* readers might have to consciously remind themselves that they are still reading an autobiographical text, and not a solely fictional narrative. For example, Angelou and Chang both pay attention to describing surroundings, people, or their own feelings and thoughts into great detail. Although *Hidden Face* contains passages that narrate Saadawi's own experiences or those of other women, she more heavily relies on explicitly expressing her opinion and beliefs on certain matters. For example, Saadawi uses her afterword to very clearly state what she has maintained within her book by giving a brief overview of the points she had made (427-430).

As Amireh explains, like Saadawi's other works, *Hidden Face* is written in "an accessible language that is neither literary nor technical" (231). Moreover, her simple diction, crisp sentences, and short paragraphs give her books a journalistic flavour and appeal to a wide reading public. Her nonfiction mixes genres, juxtaposing critical analysis, scientific discourse, polemic, case histories, personal anecdotes, and autobiography. She addresses readers with the confidence of a physician, the passion of an activist, the credibility of an eyewitness, and the pathos of an injured women (231).

The mixing of genres is a characteristic of life writing: unlike purely academic texts, that often rely mostly on a presentation of facts or opinions, autobiographical texts combine different modes of writing, and share "features with the novel, biography, and history" (Smith & Watson 18). Therefore, unlike what some people think, autobiographical narratives should not be read as "historical documents, sources of evidence for the analysis of historical movements, events, or persons" (13). In other words, autobiographical texts do not present an objective truth, and readers should pay attention to the other dimensions of the text. As Smith and Watson explain, although it can be read as "a history of the writing/speaking subject ... life narrative cannot be reduced or understood only as historical record" (13). Their complexity "requires reading practices that engage the narrative tropes, sociocultural contexts, rhetorical aims, and narrative shifts within the historical or chronological trajectory of the text" (13).

Considering the above, *Wild Swans*, *Hidden Face*, and *Caged Bird* are not restricted to readings within a specific context, framework or time period. As Rosenblatt explains, people read in two ways, depending on "the nature of the text as well as the reader's purpose" (qtd. in Kibui 18). People can either read to gather information, also referred to as "efferent reading," or for pleasure or enjoyment, which is called "aesthetic reading" (qtd. in Kibui 18). Readers

do not only read *Wild Swans*, *Hidden Face*, and *Caged Bird* because they are interested in finding out more about the writers. These books would perhaps never have been as popular if the writing had not been compelling or interesting to readers with little or no knowledge of the different particular problems discussed in the books.

2.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter is dedicated to analysing how books like *Wild Swans*, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* can bear relevance to contemporary fourth wave feminism. Discussing the reasons why critics have intervened or added important caveats to the commonly-held periodisation of feminism illustrates why these books cannot only be placed within one specific feminist wave. Moreover, the topics that are discussed in these books bear relevance to future generations of feminists, not only because some issues second and third wave feminists faced have still not been resolved, but because *Caged Bird*, *Wild Swans*, and *Hidden Face*, through their accessible yet innovative written styles, have placed these issues as a matter of interest to the wider public domain. This emphasis on bringing feminist concerns into mainstream discourse has proven to be a central concern of fourth wave feminism.

Chapter 3

Mainstream Feminism and Marginalised Voices:

Lived Experiences in *Wild Swans*, *Caged Bird*, and *Hidden Face of Eve*

The inclusion of marginalised voices has remained an important issue for feminists since the second wave and an emphasis on intersectional understandings of identity is one of the main characteristics of contemporary feminism. According to Zimmerman, intersectionality considers “class, race, age, ability, sexuality, and gender as intersecting loci of discriminations and privileges,” and the concept has become the “overriding principle among today’s feminists” (54). Since the second wave, mainstream feminism has been criticised for favouring the voices of straight, middle class, white women, while largely ignoring women who speak from more marginalized positions. Fundamental second wave feminist concepts, such as “woman,” “oppression,” and “patriarchy” are now perceived as “problematically universalising and essentialising” (55), because they fail to account for diversity. As Spelman explains, people claimed these concepts “ignored or downplayed differences among women” (qtd. in Mann & Huffman 59). Taking this into account, contemporary feminism does not only focus on inequality and differences between men and women, but it also acknowledges that individual differences among women influence their experiences with sexism. McFadden explains that by asserting “the existence of a singular women’s experience,” feminists ignore the “diversity of women’s lives by denying the possibility that women of various races, classes, nationalities, and sexualities have divergent experiences and thus different world views” (12). Further, feminists such as Nancy Hartstock have universalised womanhood “by asserting that there are common experiences that are shared identically by all women,” such as motherhood (11). In doing so, they fail to recognise that “because of a history of racist exclusion of non-white women within feminism, the experiences of women that have been documented in feminist theory and practice are mainly those of white middle-class women”

(12). In other words, there has been a “Western tendency to homogenise and universalise women and their experiences” (Mishra 129). As Kimberlé Crenshaw, largely credited for coining the term “intersectionality,” explains, “a sense of shared experiences among women is necessary for political visibility and social change;” however, “in order to adequately consider the issue, one must take into account intragroup differences such as class and race” (qtd. in Zimmerman 57).

Drawing attention to the problems and experiences of marginalised women allows for a better understanding of ways in which feminism can move forward. According to Munro, the “realisation that women are not a homogenous group has brought with it a set of new terminologies that attempt to ensure that those who hold a given identity are not spoken for, or carelessly pigeonholed” (25). Contemporary feminists continue to emphasise that the narratives of those who write and speak from marginal positions should not be appropriated. ‘Privilege-checking’ is one of the tactics feminists use to bring attention to the “axes of difference” that influence the experiences of women that reflects that “mainstream feminism remains dominated by the straight middle-classes” (24-25). The concept is “about reminding someone that they cannot and should not speak for others” (24). However, as Munro explains, ‘privilege-checking’ has also received criticism: “As Sadie Smith has noted [in an op-ed] in the *New Statesman*, however, ‘check your privilege’ is often abused as a phrase – used as a means of deflection rather than with any hope of understanding or rapprochement” (25). Considering such criticisms is important, even when arguing for the useful contributions ‘privilege-checking’ has made to feminist discussions. As the wave narrative demonstrates, feminism is constantly evolving, and as has been discussed in Chapter Two, future waves might regard certain aspects of our contemporary feminist discourse as problematic or inadequate. By reflecting on contemporary feminist terminology from a nuanced and more objective perspective, feminists might be better able to gain insight in the ways in which the

movement might improve, and which terminology might be altered, added, or removed from our discourse.

Part of the significance, as well as favourable reception, of books such as *Wild Swans*, *Hidden Face*, and *Caged Bird* is that they can offer varying and diverse insights into the perspectives and experiences of women positioned on the margins of mainstream feminism. Marginality in these books is, for example, due to race, geographical locations, religion, or political situations. Reading these narratives can demonstrate how the feminist movement might improve their support of women whose experiences are different than those of the women most often represented in mainstream feminism, as well as consider how to expand our understanding of “intersectionality” on a global level.

While I do not wish to dismiss the progress previous waves of the feminist movement have made towards becoming more inclusive, I want to reiterate here that it is essential for feminists to continue paying attention to the narratives of women who were traditionally excluded from feminist discourse. If I may speak from a personal perspective, for me the value of reading these books, and writing this thesis, comes from the belief that feminists in the West should educate themselves on the issues of women who have remained largely invisible. As I argued in the Theoretical Framework by quoting Foucault, there is a correlation between power and the production of knowledge, which remains essential to our understanding of inequality between the sexes even today. Moreover, I also believe it illustrates that women in the West should refrain from speaking for others, and instead should support women from marginal groups in their fight for equality, for example by raising awareness for their problems.

3.1 *The Hidden Face of Eve*

With *Hidden Face*, Saadawi raised awareness for the axes that are involved in the oppression of Arab women, as it offered a perspective that was not present in feminist

discourse when it was published in 1977. As Cooke argues, Arab women have been historically invisible, but their “education and mobility [allowed] them to see and project themselves as public intellectuals” and they gained visibility at “local, national, and international levels” (*Women Claim Islam* vi). Thus, scholars/critics such as Spath, Cooke, and Moore have pointed out that Saadawi was able to shed light upon issues that had remained largely invisible to Western feminists before:

El Saadawi uses her experience and knowledge as a physician along with her experiences as a woman when she writes. She combines personal accounts, studies and information from scholarly journals, and stories from patients, exposing incidents and actions such as rape and incest that may have been assumed to be rare and unusual but in fact, are only hidden, spoken of to no one by either the child or the brother, uncle, relative, neighbour, or teacher that committed the crime. Put together, all of these factors give El Saadawi's writing a unique perspective (Spath 20).

As this thesis's other chapters already demonstrate, Saadawi's discussion of female genital mutilation provides a unique and shocking perspective on the matter. In *Hidden Face*, Saadawi actively opposes the “political, ideological use of religion” (Cooke, *Women Claim Islam* 76). One passage *Hidden Face* reads:

If religion comes from God, how can it order man to cut off an organ created by Him as long as that organ is not diseased or deformed? God does not create the organs of the body haphazardly without a plan. It is not possible that He should have created the clitoris in woman's body only in order that it be cut off at an early stage in life. This is a contradiction into which neither true religion nor the Creator could possibly fall. If God has created the clitoris as a sexually sensitive organ, whose sole function seems to be the procurement of sexual pleasure for women, it follows that He also considers such pleasure for women as an integral part of mental health. The psychic and mental

health of women cannot be complete if they do not experience sexual pleasure (Saadawi 86-87).

Other examples of similar issues include the concept of ‘honour’ killing. Saadawi’s description of the practice is regarded as “particularly powerful and vitriolic, and yet rates of such killings remain astronomically high in some Arab countries – In Jordan they account for 23-30 per cent of all homicides” (Husni xiii). Violence against women seems present in almost all societies, but the practice of honour killing “reveals the double standards of a male-dominated society in which it is acceptable to kill a girl who sullies her family’s reputation” (xiii).

Although the narratives of Arab and Muslim women had gained increasing visibility around the time of publication of *Hidden Face*, mainstream Western feminism still regarded them in a way that did not accurately depict actual conditions. For example, the notion of ‘Muslim women’

ignores the heterogeneity of women in Islamic societies and constructs them into a universal category shaped by one particular characteristic, a common religion, Islam. The imagined Muslim woman is so unique that she cannot share anything – demands, rights, politics, ideals – with Western women. Differences are turned into a universal and unbridgeable divide. This universalisation of difference produces two separate types of human beings, and two women’s movements (Mojab).

According to Spath, in the West, “Saadawi’s work is taken in a context that is saturated by stereotypes of Arab culture; El Saadawi is not always in control of her own voice” (19).

Although there are significant differences between the West and the Arab countries discussed in Saadawi’s work,

Muslim women have often been portrayed as disempowered, oppressed and belittled by Muslim men, subservient to their husbands with no equal rights, utterly neglected

by parents and mistreated as daughters-in-laws, and most notably always kept under the veil of ignorance and at home (Hasan 90).

As Amireh shows, Saadawi was aware of the possible reception of her work in, for example, North America, and she deliberately rephrased, omitted, and added certain parts of the English edition of *Hidden Face*, so that reader-responses would more accurately match her intentions (223-224). However, during the process of translation other alterations were made to the book's content and form, which likewise influenced its reception and representation in the West: "absent are passages that assert Arab women to be ahead of American and European women in demanding equality for their sex, that celebrate the progress of Arab women have made, and that exhort them to see wars of liberation as empowering to them" (224). One of the missing passages reads: "It is important that Arab women should not feel inferior to Western women, or think that the Arabic tradition and culture are more oppressive of women than Western culture" (qtd. in Amireh 224-225).

Considering the above, although the experiences and narratives of Arab women were traditionally less represented in mainstream feminism, there are also factors at play that enforce this belief. To this regard, it is also important to bear in mind that Saadawi herself also contributed to the existing stereotypes in the West about Arab women. For example, Golley explains that "The practice of female circumcision is alien to many Arab people, especially in Syria, yet Saadawi writes about it as if it were the norm in all Arab regions" (179). However, Golley also emphasises that Saadawi has "opened the way for many women to follow her path and continue the struggle" (179). Adopting a more neutral position when discussing the relevance of *Hidden Face* with regard to improving intersectionality in the feminist movement is important. Saadawi deserves recognition for her contributions to the position and visibility of Arab women in mainstream feminism, but feminists should bear in mind that existing representations are not always entirely accurate.

3.2 *Wild Swans*

Like *Hidden Face*, *Wild Swans* is also a narrative from outside the Western world and it provides insight into the lived experiences of women during the communist regime in China and demonstrates how such a political regime might relate to feminism and inequality between the sexes. In the pre-communist era,

Chinese women suffered the most from the male dominated culture, prejudicial legal system, inhuman ethical code, and patriarchal social structure, which reinforced men's political power, physical power, and psychological power over Chinese women. For more than 2,000 years, the double chains—footbinding and inhuman ethical codes—confined Chinese women to the domestic sphere (Zhou 67).

In *Wild Swans*, Chang's grandmother represents this older generation of women: her feet were bound from the age of two and her marriage was arranged without her knowledge (5-10).

Initially, it seemed communism could aid the elimination of such gender inequality. As Zhou explains, under the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, Chinese men and women enjoyed "the same rights in every sense and had equal personal dignity" (69). According to Chang there was a "new Communist moral code which, in radical departure from the past, enjoined that men and women should be equal" (144). This "new stage of women's liberation" emerged with the Communist Revolution of 1949, but unfortunately "many of the gains were largely theoretical and contradictory" (Zhou 69). The Communist Party of China (CPC) "put into practice the freedom of marriage in order to get maximum support from the Chinese people, including Chinese women" (69). In reality, the CPC regarded "human rights, feminism, and women's rights ... as Western capitalist concepts and spiritual pollutions" (70). Moreover, *Wild Swans* demonstrates that equality between men and women sometimes implied that they were treated exactly the same and that differences between the sexes, such

as biological ones, were largely ignored. For example, women working in the coal mines had to do exactly the same physical labour as men:

Women, like men, had to crawl down the pit on all fours to drag the coal baskets out.

... Mme Mao had been insisting on women doing the same kind of work as men, and one of the slogans of the day was Mao's saying 'Women can hold up half the sky.'

But women knew that they were given the privilege of this equality they were in for hard physical labour (477).

The suffering Chang's mother endures during her pregnancies also illustrates how the CPC negatively affected the lives of women: while preparing to leave for an expedition, Chang's mother finds out she is pregnant. However,

It had been left vague what a pregnant woman should do, and she was torn about whether to go or not. She wanted to go, and the mood at the time was very much one of self-sacrifice; it was considered shameful to complain about anything. But she was frightened by the memory of her miscarriage only five months before, and by the thought of having another one in the midst of the wilderness, where there were no doctors or transportation. ... Still, she decided to go (149).

Not only does this fragment illustrate that the CPC did not offer proper health care to women, it also illustrates that living conditions were bad for both men and women. Zhou argues that the liberation of women in China remains a difficult topic, because it was "meaningless for women and men to have equal rights, when both men and women were abused by the Chinese political system" (71). According to Chang, the "general educational level of the country had always been very low" and the vast majority of the then 600 million Chinese citizens "never enjoyed anything like a decent standard of living" (254).

Further, Chang argues, since China had "always had a dictatorship that operated by keeping the public ignorant and thus obedient" many citizens did not have access to education

(254). Someone with “any education at all was referred to as an ‘intellectual’” (254).

Intellectuals were shunned, and even “reading a book without a Marxist cover would bring down a rain of criticism about being a bourgeois intellectual” (200). The majority of Chinese women did not have access to education, which had vast implications for their involvement with the liberation of women through feminist activism. As Munro explains, “many women tend to encounter feminism at university” and women who do not “go on to further education face a barrier when attempting to engage with those academic debates that drive feminism”

(25). If the majority of Chinese women could not engage in feminist debates, it is perhaps not surprising their narratives were less represented in mainstream feminism. Therefore, reading *Wild Swans* offers insight into the functioning of China and the problems women encountered in their daily lives during the communist regime, when the country was closed off to the rest of the world.

3.3 *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Although *Caged Bird* discusses several aspects of Angelou’s childhood, Black selfhood and racism serve as central themes and the book depicts what it is like to grow up as a Black woman in a society where racial segregation was still present. Issues with race and racism are introduced to readers in the beginning of the book when Angelou’s younger self, referred to here as ‘Maya,’ wishes to be white, with her “real hair, which was long and blond” and “light-blue eyes” (4). Maya explains why she is able to wake from her “black ugly dream”:

Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil (5).

Maya's desire to be white illustrates her awareness of the implications of her Black skin on her status in society. By referring to being Black as a fairy-tale-like curse she further symbolises the negative connotations attached to having Black skin. In an interview, Angelou explains she did not write *Caged Bird* to simply produce a narrative on her own experiences: I wasn't so much thinking about my own life or identity. I was thinking about a particular time in which I lived and the influences of that time on a number of people" (qtd. in Tate 153). Angelou emphasises that other Black individuals had similar experiences, since their lives were influenced by the same social system with its integrated racism. As Corrêa explains, throughout *Caged Bird*, Angelou "portrays a world dominated by humiliations, oppression and losses, ably demonstrating how African-Americans were forced to grow up and live where possibilities were severely limited by society's inequity" (79). *Caged Bird* is filled with examples that demonstrate the social inequity Black people faced as a result of these structural issues. Maya's school, for example, distinguishes itself from the school for white children "by having neither lawn, nor hedges, nor tennis court, nor climbing ivy" (183). Instead, the school has two buildings which are "set on a dirt hill with no fence to limit either its boundaries or those of bordering farms" (183). Moreover, when Maya urgently needs to see a dentist because she has two rotten teeth, her grandmother resorts to bringing her to a white dentist, because "there was no Negro dentist in Stamps, nor doctor either, for that matter" (199). However, the white dentist refuses to treat Maya and tells her grandmother: "Annie, everybody has a policy. In this world you have to have a policy. Now, my policy is I don't treat coloured people" (202). When Maya's grandmother reminds him that he owes her a favour, he exclaims: "I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (203). Maya's grandmother forces him to pay her the interest she says he owes her and takes her to a Black dentist outside of town (206-207). Although Maya's grandmother preserves some of her pride by reclaiming her money, the fragment clearly depicts the humiliating and unethical

treatment of Black people and the shame and anger they must have felt at being treated so unfairly.

As Corrêa explains, the issue of gender is especially relevant to *Caged Bird*, because the book “presents the way in which black women are violated by oppressive forces, including their own black community” (79). Feminism and The Civil Rights Movement worked “as watersheds especially for the African-American female writer as such movements were a site for the emergence of a counter discourse” (77). According to Corrêa,

During the 1960s and 1970s the Civil Rights Movement was at its peak while the Feminist Movement blossomed. This convergence raised demands for books about black experience, and, in particular, fostered a resurgence of autobiographies written by black women. These works took up questions of inequality and the double oppression suffered by these women: the oppression of race and gender. The discourse articulated within the Civil Rights Movement was based on race, focusing on structural issues such as segregation in housing, jobs, and education” (77).

As Assefie explains, the “experiences of marginalised women in America have been less studied since African-American literature, unlike in the present times, was not taken as an integral part of American literature” (iv). According to McKay, “in spite of the racial and class oppression black women share with white women, they see themselves differently from black men and white women” because the system still “privileges whiteness and maleness” (97). As a result, “the black female self stands at once alongside and apart from white women and black men, joined to the struggles of each but separated from both” (97). Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall argue that although “Black male and white female narratives of discrimination were understood to be fully inclusive and universal, Black female narratives were rendered partial, unrecognisable, something apart from standard claims of race discrimination” (790-

791). For Angelou, preserving the image of Black people in her work was incredibly important, but she emphasises the problems Black women face due to their gender:

Image making is very important for every human being. It is especially important for black American women in that we are, by being black, a minority in the United states, and by being female, the less powerful of the genders. So we have two areas we must address. If we look out of our eyes at the immediate world around us, we see whites and males in dominant roles. We need to see our mothers, aunts, our sisters, and grandmothers (qtd. in Tate 149).

In line with Braxton's argument, the above shows that Angelou "speaks very consciously about her role as an image maker, especially as young black postmodernists seek responsible mentors after whom they may model useful and responsible lives" (15). *Caged Bird* does not only contribute to the representation of Black women in literature, it also consciously devotes attention to the image-making of the Black community as a whole. As explained before, the hardship Angelou conveys in her book is certainly something many Black people in America, but also worldwide, are able to identify with. *Caged Bird* inspires readers and conveys to them a message of hope, as Angelou is able to heal herself, which she explained in an interview with Braxton was because she always knew she was loved by somebody (11). However, according to Braxton, *Caged Bird* is also aimed at those who are not able to recognise themselves in these experiences:

Angelou inscribes her resistance to racism, sexism, and poverty within the language, the imagery, the very meaning of her text: her truth-telling vision confronts stereotypes old and new, revising perspective and discomfiting the reader seeking safety in the conventional platitudes of the status quo. Simultaneously, *Caged Bird's* profoundly moral stance challenges its audience to confront the contradictions of life and to create positive change, beginning with one's self and then one's community. As

such, the task that Angelou set out for herself as a writer must be acknowledged as one of exceeding complexity: she seeks to inspire and to direct (5).

Considering this, although *Caged Bird* has been enjoyed by people who have read the book for the purpose of entertainment, it certainly argues that there is a necessity for change, and to this regard encourages its audience to take from it a note of urgency. Although this might inspire Black and white people alike, it might encourage the latter to reflect on their privilege. This can, for example, apply to the fact that when white women experience gender discrimination, the colour of their skin is not a determining factor. As demonstrated above, *Caged Bird* demonstrates that this is certainly the case for a lot of Black women.

3.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter aimed to demonstrate that the experiences and narratives of the women in *Hidden Face*, *Wild Swans*, and *Caged Bird* were (traditionally) not represented properly in mainstream feminism. Understanding the nature and effects of the experiences of women who write from marginalised positions, like Saadawi, Chang, and Angelou, allows for more educated and nuanced discussions. The three narratives provide insight into the different axes that can be involved with the oppression and liberation of women and are therefore relevant to feminists that value intersectionality.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was both to understand better and to argue for why reading *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, and *Wild Swans* is relevant for a contemporary feminist audience. Even though these books were written during earlier feminist waves, their importance outstretches these specific time periods. Angelou, Saadawi, and Chang all represent groups of women that were traditionally not represented adequately in mainstream Western feminist discourse, and their narratives have proven to make valuable contributions to altering this discourse, and, therefore, to our understanding of women's lives through the lenses of intersectionality.

Since this thesis revolves around a feminist analysis of *Caged Bird*, *Hidden Face*, and *Wild Swans* it was important to establish a clear understanding of why it is problematic to simply categorise these books as autobiographies. The increasing importance of autobiography for second wave feminists and their attention to the political value of personal problems went alongside an increased discontent with the genre's history of excluding the narratives of women and marginalised groups. Instead, the genre mostly favoured the voices of white men, who held most power and prestige and whose narratives were deemed most representative of society. First wave feminism was criticised for favouring the voices of white, straight women from the middle-classes. The rejection of "autobiography" as a valuable genre for feminism is in line with the movement's increased efforts to become more inclusive for which other forms of life writing might be better suited. Since *Wild Swans*, *Caged Bird* and *Hidden Face* present narratives that were traditionally excluded from mainstream feminism, addressing the exclusionary aspects of the genre of autobiography is important.

This thesis also demonstrates that *Caged Bird*, *Hidden Face*, and *Wild Swans* are not simply products of the second and third waves of feminism. While recognising the value of

the wave narrative, I simultaneously argue that works of literature and their significance should not be restricted to specific periods of time. These books are not solely tied to the specific context of the feminist waves and have value for later generations of feminists as well. The narratives are still accessible for today's readers, and most of the topics are still relevant in a contemporary setting. Recognising the enduring influence and immense popularity of books such as *Wild Swans*, *Caged Bird*, and *Hidden Face* is important for the future of feminism. They prove that the questions and challenges posed by these authors to their readers about how society defines and treats women have still not been resolved.

Due to the efforts of the second and third wave feminists, intersectionality and the inclusion of marginalised voices became increasingly important to the feminist movement and have remained so for the contemporary "fourth wave". In the third chapter I provided a slightly more in-depth discussion of the experiences of Saadawi, Angelou, and Chang to illustrate that their experiences as women are not solely influenced by their gender and might differ from perspectives most often shared in mainstream feminism. The purpose of this discussion was to demonstrate that by not only representing the voices of straight, white women from the middle classes, feminists could gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of women worldwide. The focus on intersectionality aligns with the belief that there is no such thing as a singular universal female experience, which feminists in the West have been accused of maintaining. *Caged Bird*, *Wild Swans*, and *Hidden Face* do not solely focus on the lives of the authors, but also shed light upon the lives of women around them. I believe that by paying attention to the representation of these voices, feminism could more adequately address and resolve the problems faced by women who remain on the margins of mainstream feminism.

I recognise that this thesis has only been able to discuss the three books very briefly due to its limited length. Since intersectionality is an important aspect of contemporary

feminism, I wanted to focus on books with very different political, social, cultural, and religious contexts, to offer an inclusive analysis on the representation of marginalised voices. However, I do believe that future research could perhaps analyse these novels individually or discuss them in relation to other works from female authors with similar backgrounds. Moreover, the relevance of feminist books for other generations might also be discussed in relation to other literary genres.

I also acknowledge that I belong to the group that has traditionally been most represented in feminism and that I have the privilege of educating myself on the experiences of writers such as Angelou, Saadawi, and Chang rather than living through them myself. I strongly believe that feminists of current generations should continue to actively amplify the voices of women who remain at the margins and to try and understand their experiences. The main purpose of my thesis was to argue that *Wild Swans*, *Hidden Face*, and *Caged Bird* are relevant in this regard, and I hope future feminists will continue to educate themselves with these books. I believe the feminist movement would greatly benefit from them doing so.

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