Gender Stories & Cruel Hope: Gateways to Sexuality and Resistance in Asian Women's Writing

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In an increasingly polarised global landscape, the reductive binary of East vs. West still underpins cultural and political discourse (Lau & Mendes, 2012). Despite the growing diversification of gender stories, the narratives by and about Asian women are often framed through orientalist lenses or exemplify what Alexander, Jeffrey et al., (2004) identify as cultural trauma, and the psychological consequences of such trauma are well-documented, including depression, language disorders, sleep disturbances, and PTSD (Hinton & Good, 2016; Wang et al., 2023). Arguably, many trauma survivors manage to resume their lives, yet their vulnerability, particularly among women, reveals how control and systemic injustice are universally embedded. This aligns with Neil Smelser's (2004) assertion that crisis is not an exception but a process rooted in everyday events where structural violence is normalised and only fully exposed in moments of rupture in ordinary life through stories.

Recent scholarship has increasingly highlighted how gender narratives in Asian literature challenge patriarchal power structures (Suleri, 2005), often through tropes of silence, loss, and trauma (Caruth, 1996; Tal, 1996), as well as hope in political or utopian terms (Berlant, 2011; Muñoz, 2019). However, the intersection between these narratives and representations of female sexuality remains under-examined, particularly where sexuality is shaped by religious, national, or colonial constraints. In societies where women's bodies are sites of both honour and control, regulated by religion, nationalism, and colonial residue, Asian women writers turn to fiction, memoir, and poetry to challenge hegemonic narratives and recover lost or silenced subjectivities. These "gender stories" navigate the contradictions between imposed roles and inner lives, between systemic violence and affective endurance. Sexuality within these texts is rarely overt or liberatory in the Western sense; it tends to appear more as an ambivalent force, often entangled in shame, silence, ritual, and rupture. Yet, new meanings of hope are created through the various tensions.

In innumerable texts presented by Asian women, hope does not appear as a naive or redemptive force, but a more complicated, ambivalent form of survival. As these narratives seldom embrace a linear recovery, they seek to create provisional, fragile forms of hope within structures that have undervalued female pain and voice in a historically heterogeneous society. Additionally, a significant gap exists when it comes to the recognition that Asian women's narratives travel across a productive doubleness in the dual sense that they embody pain and embrace the prospect of a glorious future by not losing hope.

Berlant (2011) refers to hope as a "cruel optimism" that is life-sustaining, but through its sustenance, it continues to shape relations of subjectivity and constraint. Berlant's theoretical intervention further recasts the discourse of optimism as incoherent desire, not as dysfunction but as one form of psychological endurance. This incoherence serves a protective purpose by promoting

survival. In the unevenness of experience, the individual is left to pursue impossible happiness and illusion, along with fantasies that protect them from chronic existential helplessness.

Finally, this special issue reveals and poses a unique direction and contribution for literary studies, gender studies and contemporary Asian women's writing as a site of both resistance and cruel hope, particularly in non-Western contexts.

I invite abstracts of 150-200 words, accompanied by a bio note of no more than 100 words. Contributions may focus, but are not limited to, the following themes:

- Decolonial feminist readings.
- Ambivalent or suppressed sexualities within fiction, memoir, or poetry.
- Queer and trans perspectives within Asian women's narratives.
- The role of ritual, silence, and bodily autonomy.
- Religious, national, or cultural limits on gendered desire.
- Affective labour and intergenerational trauma.
- Comparative approaches between Asian sub-regions.
- Translations and diaspora accounts.

Submission Guidelines

- **Deadline for abstract submission**: 1st December, 2025
- **Notification of acceptance**: 25th of January, 2026
- **Full paper submission deadline**: 25 April, 2026
- **Publication date**: Second half of 2026

Kindly send your submissions to Muhammad Sohail Ahmad [sohailu8@gmail.com]

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