

TRAUMA AND NARRATING IN SYBIL KATHIGASU'S *NO DRAM OF MERCY*

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*Malaysian women's autobiographies is now recognized in academia as important documents to foster the reinstating of neglected or forgotten history in the country's past. This article considers the compelling autobiography of Sybil Kathigasu, who supported the guerrillas in their battle against Japanese Occupation of Malaya during the Second World War, and who was herself later apprehended and tortured by the Kempetei. I argue that beneath a veneer of victory over pain, fear and even madness, the text, when subscribed to close reading, reveals that the representation of a triumphant soul actually belies her struggle at an attempt at re-integrate a traumatized self. For me, the act of narrating is itself a safeguard against defeat. By drawing on the insights of trauma scholars, and interweaving them with autobiography theories, I reread *No Dram of Mercy* as an amazing attempt by a woman at self-healing.*

Keywords: Malaysian women's autobiography, trauma and writing, The Emergency in Malaya, Kempetei, Christianity

Recent interest in Malaysian women's autobiographies is part of a larger excavation and recuperation of neglected, ignored or, indeed, forbidden moments in the country's past. Women's autobiographies, memoirs and other modes of personal narratives not only foreground women's growing political consciousness but reveal an increasing participation of women in public life in the decades between the 30's and the achievement of independence in 1957. Women of varying political leanings, ranging from the socialist to the pro-colonial, participated in the political and socio-economic agitation which marked the years before the Japanese Occupation (the historical backdrop of Sybil Kathigasu's *No Dram of Mercy*) and their roles continued into the decade after the Japanese surrendered and nationalist ferment grew.¹ Personal records of women on the Japanese Occupation, in particular published ones, are rare and thus Kathigasu's narrative is an invaluable testimony. Its relevance today is attested to: "the spirit of resistance against oppression and injustice that Sybil Kathigasu represented is not merely confined to Malaya, but is universal and is found wherever people are free."²

Few would argue that *No Dram of Mercy* records the heroism of a woman who, though suffering extreme physical and mental torture at the hands of the Kempetai, courageously upheld her ideals. Risking all, she and her doctor husband helped wounded members of the MPAJA (Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army) who had taken to the hills to help fight the Japanese. The Japanese invaders, after ousting the British, occupied Malaya and ruled with fear and terror creating a brutalizing atmosphere that intimidated men and women alike. Scholars have usually focused on Sybil Kathigasu's political and religious beliefs, analyzing how these helped to sustain her in the midst of intense suffering. Shirley Lim, for example, see Sybil Karthigasu as "an upholder of Western values such as individual liberty and free speech", whose "unswerving pro-British stance," "sympathetic view of the MPAJA" and Catholic faith (Lim, 1994: 166) provided reinforcing discourses of identity.³ While this conclusion is right, it is still necessary to see how such supportive value systems came under great strain and stress in historical moments of privation and threats to personal and familial safety. To recognize this kind of destabilizing is to see Sybil Kathigasu's autobiography not simply as an unproblematic account of victory over pain, fear and even madness: it is to see not only the victory but the struggle. Yet, to date, no critic has foregrounded her autobiography as a *re-presentation* and thus no one seems to have closely examined her text as a textual attempt at re-integrating a traumatised self. As I see it, her *narrating* is itself an act of heroic survival. Drawing on the insights of trauma scholars like Cathy Caruth, Juliet Mitchell and Dori Laub, among others, and the theories on autobiography from Paul Eakin and James Olney, I reread Sybil Karthigasu's *No Dram of Mercy* as a fascinating attempt at self-healing.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY, TRAUMA AND NARRATING

Just before her trial by the Japanese for treason and her possible execution, Kathigasu tells us of a need to write in order to testify to her experiences. Hence she takes pains to record this moment of decision:

I took out my prayer book with its picture of Saint Anthony, and, kneeling before it, supported by the wall of the cell, said the following prayer. "Great Saint Anthony, please intercede for me with the Infant Jesus to give me the strength and courage to bear bravely what God's Holy Will has ordained for me. Let me face death, if I must, in the spirit of the Holy martyrs. But if I am spared to write a book about what I have undergone, I promise that the proceeds from the sale of the book shall go to building a church in your name, in Ipoh, and if there is any over when the

church is completed, the relief of the poor and suffering, whatever their race or religion."⁴

This conflation of prayer and the desire to write situates Karthigasu's text as structured on the Christian metaphor of martyrdom. This central metaphor of martyrdom helps to contain the horrifying disintegration associated with incarceration (the diminishment of the social self in the removal from a familiar environment) and torture (the assault on body and mind). In the above prayer, the telos of imminent death is associated with ultimate victory. If the Christian Word of Salvation contained in the Bible has sustained her so far, then her own tale may also help in post-trauma recovery and, indeed, in a return to societal connections in her plans to build a church and do further charitable work.

Juliet Mitchell defines trauma in this manner: "A trauma, whether physical or psychical, must create a breach in a protective covering of such severity that it cannot be coped with by the usual mechanisms by which we deal with pain or loss."⁵ The word "breach" captures not only physical wounding; it more vividly implies the breach to the self's construction of meaning when painful, unassimilated life experiences impinge on consciousness. Thus some attempt must be made at telling, at narrating trauma so that coherence of some kind may be achieved with lesser or greater success as per case. Autobiographies and other modes of personal narratives (diaries, letters, etc.) are often used as vehicles for narrating trauma. Yet traumatic moments are often moments of speechlessness, of incoherence and, most of all, of unassimilated, uncomprehended sensations – vivid but unabsorbed.⁶ Precisely because of this unassimilation, the struggle to tell becomes paradoxically even more of an imperative amongst traumatized persons. In this analysis of *No Dram of Mercy*, I see Sybil Kathigasu as someone who uses her narrative to "contain" the disintegrating self, the self breached by physical and emotional assaults.

Following Eakin, I read autobiographies as paradoxically lodged between documentary "truth" and psychological "truth" and therefore the narrative qualities of omniscience, dramatization, point-of-view and other elements of writing also operate. As Eakin puts it, "autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation and, further, that the self that is at the center of all autobiographies is necessarily a fictive structure."⁷ However, he makes very clear that it is not his intention "to expel truth from the house of autobiography and install fiction in its stead."⁸ Thus, the autobiography as genre will still appeal to readers as "more" than fiction because in reading autobiographies we subscribe to what is "a kind of existential imperative, a will to believe that is, finally, impervious to theory's deconstruction of reference as illusion. The assumption of truth-value is experientially essential; it is what makes autobiographies matter to autobiographers and their readers."⁹

Autobiographies therefore continue to retain popular interest because they negotiate between the play of imagination and the constraints of referentiality.

What is equally interesting is Eakin's comment on the "specular reciprocity" or mirroring between the author of an autobiography and the reader. This is a process in which "the author as reader" (which is another way of saying that the autobiographer is aware of how her narrative affects the reader), "is matched by the reader as author, for the reader's involvement in authorial consciousness, which seems intrinsic to the functioning of the autobiographical text, is ultimately self-referential; readers, perhaps especially critics, are potential autobiographers themselves."¹⁰ Entering as best I can into Kathigasu's effort in sense-construction, I hope to arrive at a better understanding of her life at a time of extreme testing.

In his study of a post-Holocaust child victim, Dori Laub discusses a boy who prays while holding the photo of his mother. Laub concludes that prayer, then, helps the boy to articulate his unspeakable, private trauma, which, in the process, turns it into a "creative act of establishing and maintaining an internal witness who substitutes for the lack of witnessing in real life."¹¹ Laub's reference, more precisely, is to the traumatic moments of abuse by perpetrators on Holocaust victims that remain un-witnessed because only victim and perpetrator are privy to them. Moreover, even the victim cannot "witness" such a moment because language has been reduced to the proto-language of cries and screams. Healing often comes with the ability to accept the inchoate sounds of such a proto-language and the confusion which memories of trauma conjure. In the last portion of my analysis, I turn to Kathigasu's record of her experiences of imprisonment and torture by the Japanese military police, the Kempetei, in order to understand how she deals with the paradoxical needs to recount and the reluctance to tell.

NARRATING COHERENCE BEFORE IMPRISONMENT BY THE KEMPETEI: CHALLENGES TO THE NARRATIVE OF A SELF IN CONTROL

If trauma is seen as a breach in a broader sense than mere physical torture, then the first portion of *No Dram of Mercy*, before Sybil Kathigasu's imprisonment, can already be seen as traumatic as she faces a world turned upside down by the Japanese take-over of Malaya. Relocating from Ipoh to Papan, separating the family with her husband, her older daughter and mother in Ipoh and herself and the younger daughter, Dawn, remaining in Papan, would have been hard on everyone. Also, Kathigasu's status as a respected midwife, an educated middle class Eurasian, may hold no weight in the eyes of the new authorities. Above all, the socio-political values of the British administration, which bolstered her

identity, are now substituted by the brutalizing policing rules of the Japanese. In her study of trauma, Mitchell speaks of the need of "the holding environment" in the individual's sense of self: "Someone or something gives one a place in that world... Do we feel secure in familiar places and insecure in strange ones not only because we are attached to known objects, but because we feel the known environment sees us where the unknown one does not?"¹² Mitchell's focus is more complex than what I have selected for use with Kathigasu's narrative effort because Mitchell analyzes the pathology of autism and trauma. My rather modest focus is on how Kathigasu, in her re-membering of trauma, is capable of using various ways of telling to return herself to control as she attempts – sometimes successfully, sometimes less so – to narrate a "holding environment."

The reader must notice the Daniel Defoesque quality in the first portion of the autobiography when Kathigasu takes pains to give details of daily activities, delineating practical solutions to the physical needs of everyday living. Parts of the first eleven chapters read like a manual of resourceful communal self help in times of privation. Measures are carefully carried out for the safety of both family and close friends under the clear instructions of the resourceful, authoritative Sybil: "On hearing the news of the Japanese attack on Singapore I gave orders that one car should be available with its driver day and night to take my mother and the two daughters to the garage without delay" (p. 12). Food is stored and then the relocation to Papan planned. She carefully details how she prepares for the Doctor's comfort when he is discharged from the hospital where he had been treated for a shrapnel wound, the result of Japanese bombs. With the ingenuity of a Crusoe, the tireless Sybil ensures the physical survival of her family and friends across racial lines. Even more riveting is her account of how she transforms a house in Papan into a secret hospital for injured MPAJA guerillas who were fighting the Japanese. Cleverly using the Japanese injunction that "everyone should plant and grow food whenever possible" (p. 47), Sybil starts a garden, planting various vegetables and, more significantly, constructing a bamboo fence six feet high, ostensibly to keep out the neighbours' goats and chickens. In fact, the fence "served to screen from the main road the approach to the back of the house" (p. 48). It thus hides from the authorities the back entrance that injured guerillas could use. Kathigasu details how one of the small rooms beyond the kitchen is converted into an operating theatre. No "chance visitor penetrated beyond the living room" (p. 54). Such vivid details of a busy, strategic self may help make the terrible memories of a self diminished by torture and reduced to sub-human status, bearable.

Another way in which Kathigasu, as remembering narrator, affirms the continuity of identity is by repeated reference to the fact that her community continues to recognize her in spite of the vastly changed political milieu. She recounts her roles both as a mid-wife in her own right and as able assistant to her husband, Dr.

A Kathigasau, recording how the community continues to see her as a person of authority and, more importantly, of healing, in a time when many are ill or injured. Countering the recurrent images of beheading and torture at the hands of the Japanese are vignettes of herself as a midwife bringing new life into a society shrouded in a miasma of death. Of one delivery done with Japanese planes roaring overhead in the sky, she writes, "the danger passed; all went well, in the end, with mother and child" (p. 26). As she puts it in one of her many authorial summary-statements: "The truth is that we had won the confidence of the townsfolk, in a way, as a result of the very circumstances" (p. 47). If communication facilitates reciprocal recognition between self and community, then Kathigasau's knowledge of languages other than her own helps her to traverse communal barriers: "I spoke fluent Cantonese and was able to understand and make myself understood in several other Chinese dialects" (p. 47).¹³ In addition, she records that even the Japanese authorities recognize her position as mid-wife and Eurasian: "Like all Eurasians, I wore a red-and-white armband with my name and registration number on it," and adds that this armband "served as a sort of passport." On her rounds to deliver medical care, this mark of identity proved invaluable, "I had only to show my armband when stopped by a police post on the road and to say that I was on my way to a confinement for me to be waved on without delay" (p. 47). Kathigasau also becomes a member of the "Peace Committee" of Papan, established by the Japanese in every town to represent the people in their dealings with Japanese authorities. One of the responsibilities of these committees involves the public duty of entertaining visiting Japanese officials. We can only surmise how trying this may have been for Kathigasau even though no such scene is recorded.

In spite of the picture of a functional self in the first eleven chapters, the reader cannot help but see that beneath this self, which is painted as decisive, controlled, and operating ably in a world described as relatively tolerable, tensions exist. Thus, while noting Kathigasau's record of having outwitted the Japanese, I am propelled into reading more closely the account of her life before imprisonment by the Kempetei so as to highlight unnoted instances of doubt and uncertainty when narrative composure slips. One may then foreground a less public self and note indications of a self shaken by new challenges. Clearly, another story of a self – conspiratorial, secretive, and inhabiting an underground world of unspeakable activities – emerges from beneath that of the public persona. The Doctor's wife and the citizen of the occupying Japanese state is also someone who pledges to help the enemies of the Japanese: the guerillas hiding in the hills and jungles near Papan. The world Sybil inhabits and which she paints as one of communal help, is also an environment filled with spies and informants who can betray one to the Japanese. The Japanese "relied for their information about what was passing among the people on a widespread system of informers" (p. 39). She feels that she can trust no one and will not speak openly even to the Brothers of

the St Michael's Institution: "So obsessed was I by the prevalent fears and suspicion that even with the Brothers I could not relax completely" (p. 42). Moru, one of the go-betweens for the guerillas and Kathigasu, is never allowed into her full confidence. This is not only to protect herself and the guerillas but Moru himself since "the Japanese were masters in the art of forcing men to tell what they knew," and thus "if a man knew nothing he could give nothing away" (p. 65). Instances when the authoritative voice of the omniscient narrator, who knows what others feel, gives way to uncertainty occurs when, for example, Kathigasu recounts her fear with regard to involving her family in the forbidden activity of helping the guerrillas. While adult members of the household are instructed to keep visitors away from the back of the house, which, in a sense, conscripts them into "sentry" duty, the children are more difficult to manage.¹⁵ For example, in one episode, Kathigasu has to send a five-year old Dawn to a guerilla go-between with a secret message because of the desperate urgency of the moment. The tension of this incident is dramatized using narrative techniques of scene-painting and dialogue. Here, authoritative narrative summaries give way to a poetics of fear, indicating a memory ridden with the angst of a dreadful discovery. The terror that was not fully assimilated then has now been "dramatized" in order to objectify for the autobiographer, albeit ambiguously, that moment. In another episode, Kathigasu recounts how, "one evening when I entered the back room to attend to the patients awaiting me, I found to my horror Dawn already there, seated on the knee of a guerilla and playing with his revolver and ammunition which he had considerably emptied from the chamber" (p. 55). The dialogue that follows is interesting:

"Dawn," I said, "do you love me?"

"Of course I do, Mummy," and she put her arms round my neck and kissed me.

"All those men who come here are soldiers who are sick and need medicine. They are fighting to save us from the Japs. If the Japs see them they will be shot. So they have to come at night. Nobody must know they are here. If somebody sees them come here, he might tell the Japs and these soldiers will be shot. Then Mummy will be killed too."

"If they kill you, I will die too."

"If you love me, you must promise never to say a word about what you have seen here. These men are fighting for us. Whatever happens, we must never let them be killed" (p. 57).

The remembering consciousness prefers to use a tone of resolving terror by making the guerillas "protectors." In the conflation of love for Mummy and care for the guerillas' welfare, Kathigasu paints the guerillas as if they too are "family." In so doing, Kathigasu normalizes a moment which must have been

terrifying to both mother and child. In fact, in other parts of the autobiography, she tells us how the guerillas habitually addressed her as "Mother" (p. 80).

Clearly, one of the most important elements influencing the unwavering conviction of right choices in this autobiography is Kathigasu's steadfast belief in the heroic struggle of the guerillas. She sees them as unquestionable allies of the British, who, together with the Allied forces, would oust the Japanese and return her world to one of justice and order. And yet this unshaken conviction must leave the reader with questions. Before the uneasy alliance between the MPAJA and the British, the Malayan Communist Party, from which the MPAJA sprung, had run foul of the British administration's economic policies. Surely, the educated Kathigasu must have read in newspapers about the trouble which socialist (perhaps even outright Communist) elements had created in the labor force, which resulted in labor unrest and subsequent deportations. According to a Malaysian historian, "The problems of unemployment, wage deductions and repatriation provided fertile ground for left wing political propaganda."¹⁵ Thus, when World War II broke out in September 1939, "labour conditions were again conducive to Communist agitation."¹⁶ In fact, even prior to this, industrial unrest was quite widespread: "Between September 1936 and March 1937, colonial administrators and employers were faced with a spate of labour unrest that affected the manufacturing industries, the building labourers, the estate tappers and mining labourers."¹⁷ And yet Sybil Kathigasu curiously chooses to elide this aspect in her recall of events.

In his long memoir on those uncertain decades in Malayan history, the Malayan Communist Party leader, Chin Peng, notes that before the "arrival of Japan's 25th Army under the command of Lt. General Tomoyuki Yamashita, the colonials had proscribed us, hounded us and either jailed or banished to China every suspected communist ethnic Chinese they could lay their hands on."¹⁸ The mutual suspicion between the British and the Communists persisted as Chin Peng frankly reveals, "I was never under any illusions about bonding with Britain against the invaders from the land of the rising sun. My allied status was never anything more than a transient arrangement. I knew my imperial masters would ultimately be my enemy again. The British were using us because they had no choice. I thought we could use them too. For both sides it was a deal with the devil."¹⁹ For Chin Peng and his comrades, the future would mean an inevitable parting of ways when the common enemy is defeated and anti-colonial sentiments return. In stark contrast, Sybil Kathigasu's time-line sees a return to British colonial rule. In the autobiography, she repeatedly refers, with confidence, to the day "when the British return" (p. 19). Nationalist ferment and agitation for independence from the British would be hard for someone of Kathigasu's pro-British leanings to acknowledge. Thus, one of the self's "sheltering conceptions" (to borrow a Conradian phrase for identity supports) rests on the chronology of a return to

British administration. Hence, we are not surprised at the details repeatedly given of how she acquired and hid a wireless – something forbidden by the Japanese. Like a leitmotif, functioning to reinforce Kathigasu's sanity, the wireless quenches her thirst for knowledge of what is happening outside the brutalizing world created by the occupiers. It reassures this isolated Papan inhabitant that the world of law and order she admires is not lost: this world is still there, and is confirmed by the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation).

The hope for a British return is in alignment with the main psychological, and indeed spiritual, ballast to Kathigasu's identity: her Catholic faith. Catholicism guides her to a life of sacrifice and justice, aspects which she interprets as central also to British colonial values. Many readers and scholars see her text as structured alongside Christian martyr narratives, and many have alluded to her deep faith. I agree with this perspective, but it seems to me that her moments of praying are not merely records of strength. True, they reveal strong faith and tremendous trust in God, but these moments of conversations with God also reveal a more introspective self, one that suffers the dialectical pulls of courage and fear. I want to focus on one such moment to warrant this perspective:

One night in the middle of January, tired out with worry and without hope for the future, I fell into an exhausted sleep. It was during the early hours of the morning that I awoke, feeling a gentle tap on my feet. As I opened my eyes I was dazzled by a vision of the Sacred Heart before me. Overwhelmed by a feeling of awe and love, I arose and knelt by my bed, murmuring:

"My Lord, and my God."

And his voice said to me:

"My child, you must be ready to pay the supreme sacrifice, for the glory that is to come."

"My Lord, I cannot..." I whispered.

"You can, and will, for I the Lord command it. I will be with you and will give you strength."

A great fear came over me as I answered: "I will pay the supreme sacrifice, my Lord. I promise this in Thy name." (p. 30–31)

The Sacred Heart recurs like another leitmotif in moments of intense suffering and privation to remind Kathigasu of a world beyond the physical, and the reality of a Body, infinitely more meaningful than her own battered one, since it is that of the crucified Christ. As she puts it: "I hung a picture of the Sacred Heart on the plank wall of our shabby dispensary. This I found to be an aid to prayer, and a reminder of a world beyond the tangible, material one which, so often, in this room, pressed upon us" (p. 31). Thus, in the portion of the autobiography which

records Kathigasu's life before imprisonment and torture, she already records instances of fear and of a return to strength. Studies of her autobiography rarely give attention to these inner conflicts or point out the narrative devices used to record them. The passage quoted above is immediately followed by Kathigasu's mother appearing to ask with whom she is speaking, which indirectly implies a self who is otherwise shaken by fear, has now found new strength in a return to love for both God and family.

IMPRISONMENT AND TORTURE BY THE KEMPETEI

The chapters on her imprisonment and torture invite the reader into a nightmare world where the self is reduced to sub-human, even non-human, status. Kathigasu recounts how she was kept in a foul-smelling cell with the top half of its door permanently shut so that prisoners "had to stoop and enter the cells like dogs" (p. 127). Men and women are put in the same cell with only a single latrine bucket. Prisoners are not allowed change of clothes, so their garments rotted on their bodies and stank of sweat and blood. What must have been especially hard for Kathigasu, who had counted on the recognition of and respect by others, is the loss of these. She tells us: "The figures we cut when we went for interrogation provoked mocking laughter and ridicule, but we were past feeling shame" (p. 128).

Subjectivity is often lodged in time sequence when the self performs its daily duties; this time-consciousness was what helped Kathigasu in the busy days before imprisonment. Now however, in the Kempetei's domain, she fears losing track of time. Prisoners either waited for the regular interrogations or are left in a terrifying limbo of days when nothing happened. To lose track of time is, in a sense, to lose oneself because we are deprived the ability to "locate" ourselves meaningfully. We are dislodged from the chronology in which subjectivity finds its story. Kathigasu struggles to defy this in order retain cognizance of self in duration. Significantly, she uses the feast days of her Catholic faith, and the moments spent in prayer to help her reckon the passing of time: "Our prayers became a regular feature of life in Cell Three; every morning, noon and night, we knelt together" (p. 135). Related to her persistence in prayer is her ability to rise above overwhelming terror through sheer display of Christian faith. When speaking of the horrifying conditions of the cell, she finds consolation in the belief that all God's creatures are created for a purpose, and that her situation is part of that purpose she must fulfill: "At night centipedes and scorpions came out from crevices in the walls and from under the planks of my bed. I scarcely ever saw them, but shrank back and shouted in horror when I felt them crawling over me. Then I realized that they would do me no harm, but on the contrary were my

allies, for they fed on the bugs which tormented me, and so kept down their numbers" (p. 173).

For Kathigasu, community has always been important; in the cells, her care for the sick and injured as best she could before the toll of torture on her body left her in need of care herself takes on an added dimension that insinuates a coping mechanism as well. Another way of maintaining sanity is to obtain information about the outside world to counter the nightmarish one in prison. Her strategy is to source out sympathetic others like Suppan, the night-soil disposer, whose association with human waste makes him anathema to the Japanese guards, and which makes him unlikely to be searched by them. As such, Suppan becomes Kathigasu's main conduit to her husband who is imprisoned in another cell, and to the outside world. Such a strategy enables Kathigasu, whose self has been dislodged from a familiar world, to regain, however slight, a sense of being back in that world again.

Kathigasu's remembrance and narration of the trauma of torture is compelling because she does not elide the horror she encounters, but she balances it against a vivid depiction of a defiant, fearless self who is not a victim but a worthy adversary of the Japanese perpetrator. She will not allow the frightening memories of cruel torture to detail her narrative tone from its steady portrayal of a woman whose body may be battered, but whose mind remain alert, rational and focused, and whose spirit remains unabated by fear. In this respect, her rendering of trauma differs markedly from numerous Holocaust victims', which often cannot marshal linguistic resources to articulate the embodied memories of an extremely abused self because the mental faculties have also been injured as well. Employing various narrative strategies, Kathigasu reveals her heroic battle with the Kempetei interrogators who try to break her. One of the most significant of these devices is the use of dialogue in dramatic scenes. Kathigasu details many such episodes because they give her room to reinforce the point of her ability to think clearly even in the face of terror. In this way she invites both her remembering and narrating self, as well as the reader, to witness how she outwitted the Japanese in their attempt to dehumanize her. An example is during her interrogation by Yoshimura, who she describes as her "chief inquisitor," and how he tried to trap her into making "a damning admission" (p. 117):

"What is your name?"

"Sybil Kathigasu."

"How can that be? Kathigasu is the Doctor's name. You have no right to use it.

He is innocent of the crimes you have committed and you are trying to shield yourself and put the blame on him by using his name."

"I am his wife and must use his name."

"That is nonsense. Tell us your own name and leave the Doctor's alone."

"My name is Sybil Kathigasu."

"What were you called before you were married?"

"Sybil Daly."

"Then that is your name. Why didn't you tell the truth at once?"

Were you the Doctor's mistress or are you really married?"

"I have my marriage certificate" (p. 118).

Kathigasu refuses to succumb to Yoshimura's attempt to trick her into thinking that her husband, who has been interrogated separately, has denied her status. In her remembrance of this tense moment, Sybil Kathigasu even records how her calmness motivated her to be sarcastic, and in the process, reverses the situation by interrogating the interrogator:

"Excuse me, Officer, I will ask you a question. Are you a married man?"

He seemed temporarily taken aback by the fact that I was questioning him, but he replied. "Certainly, I am."

"Why did you marry your wife?"

He grinned complacently. "I like woman, so I marry wife."

"Just so. I like man, so I marry husband" (p. 119).

In fact, the reader is constantly assured that Kathigasu did not betray anyone: "But I held out against Kunichika and his henchmen and told them nothing" (p. 108). Because Kunichika had failed, the allegedly more cunning Yoshimura replaced him in the interrogation process, but is himself foiled as well. Even Yoshimura, as the autobiography intimates, comes to admire, albeit grudgingly, Kathigasu's courage. It is a portrait of unusual bravery, and even of heroism.

Although Kathigasu does refer to the rape of women as an example of violence exercised by the occupying Japanese, there is no depiction of herself suffering this fate. Of course, it is highly plausible that Kathigasu did not, indeed, experienced such a circumstance. But if she did, then her silence is telling. It may partly be due to discretion, since the autobiography was written and published at a time when women were more reticent about public confession of such a violation. But for me, there is another reason – one that is perhaps unconscious – for this. Kathigasu may fear being stigmatized as a soiled woman, but that the aim of her autobiography is meant to reflect a dignified individual, whose mental

faculties remains undiminished and her self-respect unshaken in the midst of inhuman and cruel treatment, may also contribute to this explicit elision. In the end, whether or not she was raped is not the issue; for me, it is the silence surrounding this (because neither does Kathigasu tells us outright that she was not raped) that leaves this painful question unanswered.

Tellingly however, and as if to dispel the reader of suspicion that she may have been sexually violated, Kathigasu includes the following vignette about her interrogation by Kunichika, the head of TOKO (Tokyo Kogatsu, the lead manufacturer of optical instruments for the Japanese army), who alternates between hard and soft approaches. Here, she describes how, when she denies even knowing the guerillas, "a rain of blows descended on my head and shoulders." In the next instant, his manner changes and he invites her, with a hint of seduction, to have a cigarette; but what Kathigasu does in response is revealing:

He got up from his chair, walked round the table, and stood beside me, a smile on his face. "My dear sister," he began, stroking my arm as he spoke.
"Take your hands off me," I said, jerking his arm away. "I am here as your prisoner, not for your pleasure."
This reply brought a torrent of slaps upon my face, with an outburst of filthy language. I was then taken back to my cell (p. 99–100).

Clearly, the narrating voice wants to foreground that her defiance was enough to put the perpetrator off his intentions, and by logical extension, how any attempt at rape by the Japanese is successfully stymied.

Other than the silence surrounding rape, Kathigasu is unabashed in recounting actual moments of torture, but this is often executed in a rather casual manner. This is not, for me, a belittling of these moments, but for possibly two reasons: because her memory refuses to return to such scenes, and because Kathigasu reluctance to dwell on the Kempetei badge of pride, namely, its ability to reduce humans to cowering victims and (un)willing traitors of even their own next-of-kin. Although she records the tortures endured, she refuses to dramatize them. She refers to her own body as a mass of bruised flesh and mentions, in passing, of resorting to agonized cries, the language of a wounded creature (p. 112). Via listing and summary, and avoiding long descriptions, she exercises control over her narrative (and her memory) with regard to her torture and the methods used, which in turn, robs them of their fear factor and undermines their power. One clear examples reads as follows: the torturers "would run needles into my fingertips below the nail, while my hands was held firmly, flat on the table; they heated iron bars on a charcoal brazier and applied them to my legs and back; they ran a

stick between the second and third fingers of both my hands, squeezing my fingers together and holding them firmly in the air while two men hung from the ends of the cane, making a see-saw of my hands and tearing the flesh between my fingers" (p. 108).

CONCLUSION

I was introduced to *No Dram of Mercy* during my undergraduate days by my sister, a Catholic, who found the autobiography riveting. I confess to putting it down after the first few chapters because I thought it rather straightforward, and even a little dull and flat. Like some readers of autobiography, I simply concluded that autobiographies were nothing like fiction in terms of narrative, because facts and referentiality were imperatives in an autobiography. As a result, I failed to appreciate the process of fictionalizing in the composition of such a text, a process which is "a central constituent of the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life."²⁰ Unsurprisingly then, as a young undergraduate unfamiliar with the "poetics of autobiography,"²¹ I found Kathigasu's story simple, boring, and too neat a tale of victory over adversities. I even though the autobiographer was also a little pompous. Rereading Sybil Kathigasu's autobiography many years later, and once more in preparation for this essay, together with helpful insights from various trauma and autobiography scholars, I now see this autobiography with new eyes. I now appreciate that it could not have been easy for Kathigasu to articulate painful experiences and to allow them resurfacing without being overwhelmed all over again. To speak, and yet not let the process of speaking devivify the self, is indeed a daunting negotiation to undertake and a challenge to the autobiographer's shaping skill. In relating trauma, *No Dram of Mercy* must deploy certain narrative strategies, key of which are an omniscient narrator, dramatizations, and listings, in order to help the autobiographer achieve her aim. *No Dram of Mercy* is thus not only a fascinating attempt at narrating the unspeakable, but a testimony of the power of narration as performance that can engender healing and hope.²²

NOTES

1. Among the women's autobiographies reissued are Janet Lim, *Sold for Silver* (Singapore: Monsoon Books, 2004), Khatijah Sidek, *Memoir Khatijah Sidek: Kesateria Bangsa* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1995); Shamsiah Fakeh, *The Memoir of Shamsiah Fakeh: From AWAS to 10th Regiment* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2004).
2. Cheah Boon Kheng, "Preface," in *Alias Chin Peng: My Side of History*, ed. Chin Peng, (Singapore: Media Masters Pte. Ltd, 2006), 4.

3. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Writing Southeast/Asia in English* (London: Skoob, 1994), 166. Lim also concludes that Sybil Kathigasu's autobiography runs against the grain of Malaysian nationalist sentiment because she was unashamedly pro-British and she supported the MPAJA, who were later seen as plain Communist terrorists – a view held to this day.
4. Sybil Kathigasu, *No Dram of Mercy* (Kuala Lumpur: Prometheus Enterprise, 2006), 162. All references are to this edition and inset quotes will subsequently be used.
5. Juliet Mitchell, "Trauma, Recognition and the Place of Language," *Diacritics* 28, no. 4 (1998): 121.
6. See Cathy Caruth, "Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 3–12.
7. Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-invention* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 3.
8. *Ibid.*, 4.
9. Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 30.
10. *Ibid.*, 36.
11. Dori Laub, "Truth and Testimony: The process and the Struggle," in *Trauma: Exploration in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 7.
12. Mitchell, "Trauma, Recognition and the Place of Language," 123.
13. I get the sense that Kathigasu is free of racial and ethnocentric bias, a condition that seems to infect many incumbent politicians in present-day Malaysia. As such, she may be unapologetically pro-British, but she is never condescending to the "natives." Instead, she is concerned about, and caring towards her Malay drivers and their families, and members of other racial groups in a pre-independence Malaysia.
14. *The Star*, 10 March 2007, national edition, <http://thestar.com.my/news/story/2007/3/10/nation/> (accessed 11 July 2010). In a report in the local news press, Sybil Kathigasu's older daughter, Olga (who was 86 at the time she was interviewed), frankly admits that she was never close to her mother and adds: "People used to tell me that I must be proud that my mother was given the George Medal for her bravery. But I would say not because I didn't want her to do silly things (like helping the hill people). I wanted her to be alive to share my joy and sadness."
15. Leong Yee Fong, *Labour and Trade Unionism in Colonial Malaya: A Study of the Socio-economic and Political Bases of the Malayan Labour Movement, 1950 – 57* (Penang: Universiti Sains Malaysia Press, 1999), 48.
16. *Ibid.*, 83.
17. *Ibid.*, 73.
18. Chin Peng, *My Side of the Story* (Singapore: Media Masters Pte. Ltd, 2003), 10.
19. *Ibid.*, 11.
20. Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 5.
21. *Ibid.*, 3.
22. Sybil Kathigasu died shortly after the Japanese surrendered and after receiving the George Medal. A number of operations failed to stop the spread of septicemia from her fractured jaw. Her burial in Ipoh saw large crowds of mourners. She leaves behind a record of a woman who bravely walked a less-travelled and dangerous path in order to keep the promises she made.

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