

Why I write

Han junghyun

Hello, I am a female novelist from Korea. Why do I write? This is a very difficult question. It is a personal question for me, but a very public question for a writer.

I think I should start with this story: In 2016, a woman was murdered in a public restroom in Seoul. The reason she was murdered was because she was a woman. Seoul is a very safe city, but it can be a threatening place for women. Whenever I go to a public restroom, I feel nervous and reluctant to use it. I worry that there might be hidden cameras.

I am a novelist and I also study Korean culture, especially women, female workers, sex workers, and sexual minorities. Contemporary Korean culture is influenced by Japan and the United States. When I say that I write novels about women from those two countries, most people think of novels about sexual slavery in the Japanese and American military. This is an especially important part, but I do not want to criticize a specific country. I also want to tell stories about the lives of women and queers who are absent and erased from history.

Since the declaration that “the most personal is the most political,” feminism is not simply supporting women. I think the positions of queers and women in Korea are similar. The same goes for other marginalized people. For example, my novel *Juliana Tokyo* is a story of solidarity between Hanju, a female researcher who lost her native language due to dating violence, and Yukino, a Japanese individual who identifies as gay who was abused by her gay lover. This novel talks about the deep-rooted hatred toward minorities in Japan and Korea. You can strongly say that the Japanese government should apologize immediately. But I didn't stop there. I wanted to tell the stories of marginalized people in Korea and Japan. (However, when this novel was selected as a recommended book by the National Library of Korea, some people called me a traitor.) This novel won the Today's Author Award in 2019, and there was lambasted with criticism saying, “It's shameful to like queers,” and “Feminists should die.” There were also such malicious comments when “*Our Wish is a Science Boy*”, which deals with the history of Korean science fiction novels through the stories of Anna Seo, a nurse in colonial Joseon, and transgender novelist Yoon Kyung-ah, and “*Kyoko and Kyoji*”, which deals with the stories of women and queers whose lives were destroyed by the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement. I received malicious comments in online bookstore reviews every time I published a new book. In Korea, the words women, queers, and solidarity are always targets of attack. There is hatred that began during the Japanese colonial period and

the Korean War. Since the details are very academic, I will write more about this in my research and novels.

The same goes for my personal life. In fact, I like people, but I no longer go to gatherings. Why is that? When I was a master's student, a male writer grabbed my wrist and asked for my number. The male writer was a powerful figure in the literary world, but I protested strongly at the time. Ironically, my behavior became a hot topic among the women at my school. I was angry because I could not hit him. But I realized that women are in a situation where it is difficult to protect even such basic rights as safety and their bodies. Anyway, if I hadn't protested so strongly back then, most people would have said that I was causing trouble because I liked male novelists.

Let's go back to the research story. It was the same when I first started this research. I decided to start this research right away after seeing photos of female workers protesting in the 1980s. But I immediately ran into difficulties. Not a single photo remained. Many female workers died or were injured in poor working conditions, but no one cared. Instead, everyone talked only about the men who were the heroes of democracy. I know that this hatred was influenced by student movements in Japan and the United States. But before we criticize them, Korea itself should take care of them first.

A reader emailed me a while ago. She said that she thought of my novel whenever she wanted to live as a human being, not a woman. She said she was happy that she could believe in even a small change. She told me not to give up and to keep writing novels. Yes, I write novels in the hope that I can witness even a small change. I write novels in the hope that the word feminist will no longer be a target of attack. I write novels in the hope that many social and historical situations will improve so that feminism will no longer have a need and so, that my novels will no longer be read in Korea.

Why I Write

Yuten Sawaishi (Japan)

Why do I write? This is a very personal question, and if you mean why writers write, it's a social question. But I don't want to make the "subject" too big. Writers are not special people. They are just individuals who have experience of writing. So I think the most honest answer to this question is to talk about my own personal experience.

I wrote a novel named "The Letters of Letters". In this novel, fragments of letters fall from the sky and just keep piling up. They fall and pile up, staining the landscape black, covering the roads, destroying the infrastructure, and destroying houses. All the people can do is to get rid of the letters from their houses. This makes them nervous and their behavior becomes strange.

The main character of this novel is an old woman called Mrs. "S". The novel is written in the form of letters from Mrs. S. She lives with her retired husband and sends letters to a young woman called Fumie. In Fumie's area, the fragments of letters have not yet fallen, and Mrs. S. informs her of the damage caused by the falling fragments. These fragments contain the shapes of letters from all languages. And most of them are incomplete, nothing more than fragments that make no sense. These immature words torture the lives of the couple and the people around them, both physically and mentally. In the midst of this, Mrs. S. picks up the beautiful fragments and uses tweezers to glue them together into letters (which reach Fumie).

I wrote this novel in 2012. There were two incidents that triggered it. The first was the rise of, or praise for, social networking discourse, symbolized by the Arab Spring. While it has had a major impact and helped to transform society, I will never forget the fact that many people have fallen victim to slander and defamation on social networking sites. The second trigger was the big earthquake that struck Japan in 2011. It may be easier to say 3.11 in English-speaking countries. A major earthquake struck eastern Japan, and many people lost their lives in the tsunami. (Fortunately I was living far away from the disaster area.) In addition, the nuclear power plant in Fukushima collapsed, and some of its functions were destroyed. Immediately after the earthquake, as the serious situation was revealed one after another, we Japanese stared at the TV monitor every day and every minute and struggled with the invisible fear of the collapse of the nuclear power plant. On social networking sites, there was an abundance of statements that were difficult to verify. Since radiation is invisible, we had no choice but to describe its horror and danger in words.

The characters in "Letters of letters" are metaphors for these things. However, what I was seeking was not to trace reality. That is not the job of a novelist instead what I wanted to write about was how, amidst confusion, people can continue to protect their human dignity as human beings. Mrs. S is able to maintain her sanity until the end by using words and writing letters.

I wrote my debut novel, "The Village of Flamingos", in March 2011. The reason for this is that the deadline for submissions for the Newcomer's Award was March 31st 2011. I started work on

the novel at the beginning of the year, and even though February had ended, I had only completed half of it. I put all my hopes into it in March and threw myself into the work. Then 3/11 happened. I remember facing the manuscript every day with anxiety, wondering why I was writing now, and whether the publisher would still be around in the future if I managed to meet the deadline. After the big earthquake, there were aftershocks, and all kinds of negative effects from the collapse of the nuclear power plant to the disappearance of Tokyo, or the shortage of paper due to the reduction in electricity. The only thing that kept me sane in the midst of all this was the time I spent working on my story. Writing my own story in the midst of chaos. I believe that this is something that anyone can do, and that it is one of the fundamental purposes of writing. At the same time, I also included another message in the “Letters of letters” (not just in this work).

Fumie's son is innocently playing with the fallen-letters that have were sent to him. I have talked about what “letters” mean to me, but I have no idea whether they mean the same thing to someone else, especially to the next generation. In fact, it is important that the next generation has a different answer.

Why I Write

Sabyn Javeri

We are all made of stories. Some are written for us, some we write ourselves. Some we tell others, and some we tell ourselves. But it's the stories we don't want anyone to know that intrigue me the most. These are the stories that often get writers into trouble. Yet, we stubbornly continue to write. Why? What drives us, excites us, motivates us? What is it about the power of storytelling that compels us to write?

In his famous essay 'Why I Write', George Orwell divides the reasons into four parts: the desire for recognition, aesthetic enthusiasm, a historical impulse to record the world as it is, and, most importantly, the political purpose of pushing the world in a certain direction. For Joan Didion, the reasons are simpler: "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear."

The Urdu short-story writer Saadat Hasan Manto, called writing a compulsion. Not to feed into the tortured alcoholic writer trope but Manto like Hemingway, thought of writing as an addiction. He writes in his essay, *also* titled, Why I Write, "I'm addicted to writing, just as I am to drinking. When I don't write, it feels like I'm unclothed, like I haven't had a bath. Like I haven't had my first drink."

For me, the reasons I write are deeply rooted in the reasons that often stop me from writing.

Sometimes it's the self-imposed guilt of neglecting my family or demands of my day job, other times its self-censorship or the imposter syndrome screaming, 'who are *you* to write this?' The fear of rejection can be paralyzing. The fear of success and drawing attention to myself even more daunting.

With so many reasons not to write, you may be wondering why I'm sitting at a panel about why I write. I'm here because for every reason that holds me back, there are more that urge me on.

My journey as a writer has been shaped by the powerful words of other women writers of color. Arundhati Roy once said, "There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard." This resonates deeply with me. Hailing from a country governed by successive dictatorial regimes, where freedom of expression was curtailed and censorship rampant, I witnessed how women's rights were brutally compromised by laws like the Hudood Ordinance. The state inserted itself into women's lives, dictating everything from honor killing pardons to control over their

bodies. Brave writers like Fehmida Riaz spoke up but were forced into self-exile. Presses were shut down. Libraries burned down.

In fact, it feels ironic that we're having this conversation in a library, a space I had limited access to as a child. My tiny school did not have a library, and only the privileged had access to private libraries or the elite bookshops where English-language books were sold. Growing up without books made me keenly aware of how knowledge is a form of privilege. For many women of my generation, writing became the means of reclaiming that knowledge. I remember squeezing into corners of bookstores, speed-reading books I couldn't afford to buy and then recounting the plot to friends. Probably my earliest training as a storyteller!

As I grew older, the reasons to write became all the more pressing. I found myself in a foreign country and writing became a way to make sense of the displacement. In 'Bad Feminist' Roxanne Gay writes, "I write to understand as much as to be understood." During my first few years abroad, I often encountered Western narratives that painted Muslim women as oppressed and voiceless. But I knew that wasn't the whole truth. As Chimamanda Adichie said in 'The Danger of a Single Story' - "The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." Yes, I grew up under dictatorship, witnessed gender violence, and saw cases like Zainab Bibi, a blind woman jailed for adultery after reporting rape because she couldn't produce four male witnesses to support her testimony. But I also saw women like my mother and aunts, who marched against these laws. Women like Asma Jahangir, who fought for legal reforms, and poets like Fehmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed, whose feminist writing itself was an act of political resistance.

These stories need to be told.

I started writing about those liminal spaces between silence and speaking out. It wasn't easy. I am not a natural writer, nor a brave one. Often, I had to remind myself that I come from a line of courageous-women writers like Malala Yousafzai, who started advocating for girls' education under Taliban rule as a young girl through her blog on BBC Urdu website. Or Ismat Chughtai, whose bold story 'The Quilt' about queerness and female sexuality caused such a stir in 1942 that the British Raj had her tried for obscenity. Or further back, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, who in 1905 wrote 'Sultana's Dream', possibly the first feminist science fiction story in English, about a world where men were kept indoors and veiled, due to which all wars ended and the world achieved global peace.

When I wrote my first novel, I tried to tell a story inspired by Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan's first female prime minister. Like Samira Makhmalbaf's 'At Five in the Afternoon', which portrays a young Afghan woman whose only hope against the Taliban is the election of a female prime minister in a neighboring country, I felt Benazir's rise and assassination were crucial to telling a different story of Muslim women. Through subsequent anthologies, I continued to challenge reductive narratives of oppressed Muslim women, telling more nuanced stories that reflected the full spectrum of their resilience and agency. But when my book 'Hijabistan' came out, exploring the metaphorical veil between Muslim women and society, I received a lot of criticism for it. An elderly colleague advised, "Why don't you write about something safe like other Pakistani writers do? Like Terrorism."

And so, for some time, I stopped writing. But if writing was hard, not writing was harder.

Eventually, "I wrote myself back together" (Gay). Today, I write not because I want to—but because I must. I think of my mother who used to write poems in secret and publish them under my uncle's name because she feared for her reputation. I think of the many women whose stories became lullabies or folk songs because they could not write them down. I think of women who throw their creativity and imagination into cooking or embroidery because those were permissible expressions of a woman's art. Finally, I think of those for whom literacy is not a right but a privilege. And then all self-doubts disappear.

I write because it is an honor, a responsibility, a necessary act of survival.

*"Waqt likhata hai aur main likhti hoon
Kya hoon main aur meri marzi kya hai?"*

Time dictates and I write
Who am I to
True but what choice do I have *but* to write?

-Perveen Shakir

Why I Write

Nada Alturki

Some write because it's difficult and they like the challenge. There's a sort of magic in puzzling words together. But answering this question may be more difficult than anything I've written. Upon reflection, it has become evident that it is not a question of why I write, but why I *should*.

I remember traveling with my family when I was young. People would ask where we're from. "Saudi Arabia," we'd say. "You mean South Arabia?" they replied. We'd settle on "Arabia" for our future trips. A general location. Palatable.

I've always written. After discovering The Jonas Brothers at 9 years old, my sister and two of our friends formed an all-girls band in which I was the dedicated songwriter. I journaled about the loneliness of adolescence and the cruelty of other girls making fun of my curls and my "Americanized" accent. I looked forward to my high-school English class, where we were asked to write essays about Shakespeare and John Steinbeck, but I never saw a career in it. There weren't any strong programs in Saudi at the time so I settled on Interior Design, thinking it would be fun to decorate houses for a living only to find out it involved so much math—which is definitely not my forte. I also liked arguing about various things, so I switched over to Law. I was miserable.

Two years later, I finally got the opportunity to travel abroad for my studies. Journalism, Maybe? I was advised against it by many, telling me the profession was tiresome and "dead anyway." But my stubbornness prevailed. When I landed in Boston, placed my luggage at the Piano Row Dorm at Emerson College, I had no doubt I was meant to be there. From my very first class, we were pushed out onto the street and asked to find a story. Any story, and bring it back. I felt an adrenaline rush, a world of possibilities, and an enticing word puzzle waiting for me to piece together.

When I returned back to Saudi Arabia in 2021, it was a different world. "Is this really my Saudi?" Women were driving, music festivals were thriving, and there was so much more to do than just spend our free time at restaurants or desert excursions.

There was so much the world wasn't seeing. So much that even I couldn't see while I was abroad. The true gem of Saudi Arabia, its heart, is its rich culture and history. Through journalism, the soft power of the arts, I was able to make people *see*. During my residency at Mist Art Institute, I created an autobiographical piece of journalism about the building the residency was held in. Prince Faisal bin Fahd Fine Arts Hall,

I've come to find, was one of the first to welcome women to showcase their work alongside men. I'm currently a staff reporter at Arab News, which is Saudi's first English-language daily founded in 1975, and currently the leading English daily in the Middle East. I co-manage our environment page, Green and Blue, and continue to write about the booming art scene, profiling incredible artists like Manal Aldowayan, whose influential community and participatory works are showcased at the Venice Biennale this year at the Saudi Pavillion; Mawadah Muhtasib, the Saudi woman behind the first reversed Arabic calligraphy typeface; and also some more glamorous work like covering the Cannes Film Festival and interviewing Hollywood legends like Will Smith and Michael Bay—in my own country. By writing about our cultural metamorphosis, I could finally make people see.

I don't think writing, for me, was ever a choice. I write because I have to. All my trials and tribulations lead to home. I do love what I do. I've been able to highlight so many voices, but I suppose, never my own publicly.

One thing that stuck with me when I was in the US, back in Boston, and even now, is how often I'm told that my first name means nothing. A statement I've grown tired of, not because it's offensive to share what something means in your own language, but because of its ignorance to ask firstly: what it means in mine. Four letters that are so small, they mean nothing and possibly everything. I write because I want the world to know our names. I will offer you now that my name in Arabic actually means 'morning dew.' I no longer want to be told that my name means nothing in Spanish, or Portuguese, or languages that are more commonly spoken/known across the globe. My history is not nothing.

Like my country, which just celebrated its 94th national day 5 days ago (عاشت السعودية), I'm told I'm so young. But this is exactly why I write. It was reported last year that 63% of Saudis were under 30 years old and the youth recognize how important it is to preserve the heritage and legacy passed down by our elders. We're the ones who will live to tell our story. And also tell our own, as we go through this fascinating period of cultural change; more importantly, to document it.

This is why, during my time at this International Writing Program's Fall Residency, I'm working on my first poetry book; pieces that explore my journey with navigating identity, tracing my heritage, my conflict with my own language, and my place in this ever-changing time and space. Never to settle on the generic, palatable, "Arabia" again.

I leave you with this poem that I wrote 3 years ago now, during the Misk residency, which may help encapsulate my answer to this complicated question:

The Promise

You spoke to me in my sleep
years ago, you dared to dream
Held your brush, eternity between your fingers
There is work to be done

I felt your pain between the words
written by the victors of circumstance
There was no space for you on their arc
Hold on to the night, for
the moon is not above, but within me

I mutter: I am sorry
She was not ready for you

The beauty you held is covered in ashes
of those next in line, their sons now able to sing
because you had once screamed
upon deaf ears

I imagine that my grandfather had tread your land
held your sorrows in his hands and
entrusted me to tell the world
with just a glance
It is not just a name, but a past

Your last words to me:
Make us eternal.

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International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm)
Iowa City Public Library

Han Junghyun (Korea), Yuten Sawaishi (Japan), Sabyn Javeri, Nada Alturki (Saudi Arabia)