

The Rhetoric of Trauma and Healing: A Study of Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*

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Abstract

This paper deals with the issue of comfort women and their next generations as presented in Nora Okja Keller's novel *Comfort Woman*. Taking into consideration the theoretical explorations of Cathy Caruth, Gabriele Schwab and Jenny Edkins, this paper would try to throw light upon the problematic of trauma and trans-generational trauma experienced by the survivor and her daughter respectively. This paper would also try to delineate how Keller very efficiently puts forward the rhetoric of their healing. Besides this, my paper would also try to analyse why the unearthing and reading of such narratives is relevant even today and how Keller, herself a Korean-American author, through her work, poses a challenge to the dominant and patriarchal Korean culture that tried to eliminate the brutal history of the comfort women. This paper would therefore explore into an Asian history of abuse on women that has largely been ignored in the narratives of the Second World War.

Key words: Comfort woman, trauma, healing, patriarchy, abuse, history, challenge.

The objective of this paper is to bring into light the plight of the Korean Comfort women as described in Nora Okja Keller's novel *Comfort Woman*.¹ The issues of trauma and healing have been dealt with in this paper as experienced by the comfort woman Akiko and her daughter Rebeccah. This paper would also highlight how there have been gaps and silences in the history and how the voices of these women have been largely neglected. Since their traumatic histories have remained unrecorded through these years, this paper explores how Keller's fictionalized narrative has helped recover their lived experiences embedded in the past besides giving a voice to women like Akiko who needed representation and

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agency.

Women who were coerced into sexual slavery by the Japanese armed forces in occupied territories before and during the Second World War were euphemistically called Comfort Women. The term 'comfort women' is translated from the Japanese term *ianfu*, meaning prostitute. These women were taken away from their homes with assurance of work and were sometimes also bought from their families. Once in the comfort stations, they were dehumanized in a number of ways. They were raped, bullied, beaten and sometimes killed. Nora Okja Keller, a Korean-American author, attended a human rights symposium in the year 1993 in the United States of America and was deeply moved by the experiences of Keum Ja Hwang, a former comfort woman. This meeting, Keller later describes, resulted in the publication of her book *Comfort Woman: A Novel* in the year 1997. Keller's presentation of Akiko and her silence about the abomination she faced is similar to thousands of silenced comfort women in Korea who could not stand up against the brutalities and speak about it until the recent 90s. The patriarchal mores in Korea have always considered it an indignity for these women to come forward and narrate their tales of excruciating agony. Gilbert throws light upon the same in one of her articles,

It is interesting to note that the government of Korea itself has always seemed reluctant to press the Japanese government to acknowledge these violations of human rights and to apologize for what they had sanctioned. According to Schaffer and Smith, this reluctance stems from Korea's past of national shame at having been "emasculated" by its occupation and colonization by Japan and by its women having been forced to serve the Japanese military as sex slaves.²

The truth was properly revealed much later and had a tremendous impact all over the globe and especially over The United States of America where the symposium took place. Recently the San Francisco Comfort Women Memorial was installed in San Francisco in 2017. This is the first sculpture placed in a major U.S. city to memorialize the comfort women.

In her novel, Keller deals with the dynamics of the psychological complexities of a comfort woman, Akiko. She does not only give a comprehensive depiction of the experiences of Akiko in the comfort stations and the physical as well as mental distress that she undergoes but

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also the repercussions of this prolonged cruelty. This is where Nora Okja Keller deviates from the other war narratives of the Second World War. These women, who merely served as means to satisfy the sexual needs of Japanese soldiers, find no proper representation in the literatures and histories of the war-time. Patriarchal Korean culture, as mentioned earlier, refused to recognize these women as survivors of war brutalities on a large scale.

The survivors' plights did not end in 1945 with Japan's defeat. Many kept their experiences secret out of shame, or were pressured into silence by their communities and families back home, who often blamed the young women for what had been done to them. This is part of why it has taken so long for these stories to be told, and why it is important, now, seven decades later, for the world, including but not only the Japanese government, to acknowledge what happened. That is a form of justice as well.³

Keller's narrative therefore is one of those very few works of fiction by a Korean-American author who tries to bring into focus this issue and presents it on the international platform. With the passage of time and the death of most of the surviving comfort women, it is imperative to discuss this dimension of history besides recording their traumas and survival mechanisms.

Comfort Woman is a novel narrated from two different perspectives. The perspective of the mother, Akiko (the name given by the Japanese soldiers and used throughout the text), a former comfort woman whose actual name is Soon Hyo and that of the daughter Rebecca Bradley, born to her after her marriage with the American missionary Richard Bradley. The novel delineates an intimate love- hate relationship between the mother and the daughter, where the daughter although affectionate towards the mother, feels a sense of detachment and alienation from her. For Rebecca her mother is always the 'cultural other' whose conduct and methods are in complete contrast to her own Americanized self. Akiko, on the other hand, is a victim of bouts of depression and convulsions as a consequence of the atrocious treatment that was meted out to her at the comfort station by the Japanese soldiers. Even after her escape from the prison and the end of the war, Akiko could hear soldiers laughing at her and others like her, mocking

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their vulnerability. She detests her husband's touch and thinks of him as one of the many men who just wanted to 'mount her.' Akiko is a survivor from the concentration camps and suffers from severe post traumatic stress disorder. Akiko's traumatic memories come in flashbacks and nightmares. Elaborating how trauma constitutes a double wound, Cathy Caruth states:

[...] the wound of the mind- the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world- is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event ... so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilable nature . . . returns to haunt the survivor later on.⁴

She communicates with spirits and almost spends her entire day talking to and appeasing these spirits who she had always felt were following her. She escapes pain through her trances, and ultimately, through her death. According to some Korean theorists, Akiko tries to seek her emancipation in the esoteric world away from the glare of humans who had always been the cause of her suffering and exploitation. She earns her livelihood by becoming a *shaman* (a person who communicates with spirits and practices divination or healing). Akiko's inability to communicate her trauma leaves her benumbed and isolated throughout her life. 'Torture and rape, the two most prominent forms of social murder, eradicate psychic time because time cannot heal the victim's suffering in the same way time heals other wounds.'⁵ The only solace she receives is through her connection with the supernatural world. She believes in the supernatural and tries to relieve herself of her pain through her communication with the spirits. Keller has also portrayed the complex dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship where the daughter unable to share the mother's ethnic consciousness, is unusually distant and cold towards her.

The young Rebecca reads *A Catcher in the Rye* and steals money for school trips, while pining for a mother, who would sign report cards and make breakfast for her. Rebecca's childhood is marred by poverty, lack of care and bully at school. She loses her father at five and at ten she realizes that she was the one who had to take care of her mother and not the other way round. The spirits, the haunting and the grief continue to envelop and engulf their lives. Rebecca says, 'And I remember nights that seemed to last for days, when my mother dropped into a darkness of her own, so deep

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that I did not think she would ever come back to me.’⁶ Rebeccah herself was subjected to sexual abuse as a child but could never actually share the same with her mother. The irreconcilability of her mixed race and her mother’s Korean roots posed a difficulty and lack of understanding between them. Being Akiko’s daughter, Rebeccah was affected by memories that were not hers at all. Although Rebeccah does not come to know of her mother’s haunting past in the initial years of her growing up, she is not spared the after effects of the same. She inherits her mother’s overwhelmingly traumatic memories. Rebeccah’s mother’s experiences preceded her birth but they were nevertheless transmitted to her so deeply so as to constitute memories in her own right. The condition of children of traumatized parents being affected directly or indirectly by their parents’ post-traumatic symptoms has been described as trans-generational trauma or *secondary traumatisation* (in reference to the subsequent generations).⁷ Rebeccah grows up to be an unstable individual unable to form long lasting bonds or relationships. When Rebeccah finally reads her mother’s letters and comes to terms with a past hitherto unknown to her, she feels a connection with Akiko. By sharing her trauma with her daughter, even after death, Akiko endeavours to mythologise the same. In her three strategies of cultural coping from a traumatic experience, Kali Tal talks about the processes of *Mythologisation*, *Medicalisation* and *Disappearance*.⁸ Mythologisation according to Kali Tal is ‘reducing a traumatic event to a set of standardized narratives (twice or thrice told tales that come to represent the story of the trauma) turning it from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative.’⁹ By sharing her traumatic experiences for the first time, Akiko tries to reduce it into a contained narrative that could be shared with someone and therefore would seem less petrifying or uncontrollable. Thus it can be assumed that Akiko tried to heal herself in a way that she had never tried before. Before her death she decided to face the real world and leave behind the truth for her daughter. Sharing the pain and the unspeakable horrors that she had been through, was like a release, a gateway of her traumatic memories to the outside world. For Akiko the confession of her past to her daughter was a kind of therapy. At the time of her demise Akiko knew that her death was not the death of her story and her acknowledgment of her past would make her story live beyond time, across countries and through generations. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their book *Reading Autobiography: A*

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Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives (2002) argue how sharing of traumatic memories help in healing.

For those suffering from traumatic or obsessional memories, autobiographical acts can work as therapeutic intervention, what Suzette A. Henke calls "scriptotherapy." Speaking or writing about trauma becomes a process through which the narrator finds words to give voice to what was previously unspeakable. And that process can be, though it is not necessarily, cathartic. Thus narrators of trauma often testify to the therapeutic effects of telling or writing a story, acknowledging how the process of writing has changed the narrator and the life story itself.¹⁰

Rebecca's acceptance of her mother's past is also symbolic of the recognition of the harrowing history of the comfort women by the contemporary American youth and society as a whole. Akiko, therefore, is a symbolic representation of the broken, fragmented and suppressed Korean history and Rebeccah symbolizes the Korean-American youth who although initially unaware and indifferent, finally comes to terms with that identity and history. As a result of this revelation, Rebeccah, who had suffered throughout her entire childhood, heals as well. For the daughter, knowledge and acceptance were the ways of associating with the troubled past. The end of the novel shows Rebeccah cremating her mother's body and sprinkling her ashes into a stream just as Akiko would have wanted it. Rebeccah accepts her Korean roots. The memories of her mother had initially turned her cold and disengaged but the same memories, when revealed in totality, link her to her roots. The retrieval of her mother's past transforms her and she decides to integrate herself with the culture which her mother belonged to. The sprinkling of the ashes by a Christian, American youth denotes an integration of the Korean and American cultures. Her mother no longer remains the 'other' but unites with her in death. Both of them unite in the universality of human pain and Rebeccah finally moves towards the future.

Although it is difficult to portray an accurate representation of trauma through a literary, visual or oral medium, novels like *Comfort Woman* create a closer perception of truth for the readers and give an account of traumatic experiences that not only affect the survivor but the generations

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after. But the most distinguished part of the narrative lies in the fact that Keller has tried to determine processes or mediums of healing through this narrative. For both Akiko and her daughter, Keller devises methods of coping up with trauma. For Akiko, her daughter was her only means and connection with the outside world. She therefore at the end tries to deliver her life's secrets to Rebeccah and make known of a suffering she had suppressed within her heart for an entire lifetime. This communication of the traumatic events from the mother helped Rebeccah Bradley come to terms with her own suffering. Accepting her mother's roots and engaging herself with an identity she had earlier denied, gives her a closure she had been in search of. Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* is therefore a story that represents millions of Korean victims who had been subjected to violence and unkindness and this novel itself is a medium of expression for them. This novel makes an attempt at reopening a chapter of world history that had been suppressed and hidden for years because this particular non-European, female mini-narrative poses a challenge to larger meta-narratives of the Second World War. Besides, it also makes way for these Korean comfort women to narrate their tales to the world and make an attempt towards healing their unresolved, unattended wounds.

Endnotes :

- ¹ Nora Okja Keller, *Comfort Woman: A Novel* (New York: Penguin, 1997).
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- ⁴ Cathy Caruth, 'Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History,' *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), p.4.
- ⁵ Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and*

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Transgenerational Trauma. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p.3.

⁶ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, p.5.

⁷ "Transgenerational Trauma," Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 27 June 2019; en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transgenerational_trauma. Accessed 10 July 2019.

⁸ Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.190.

⁹ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p.190.

¹⁰ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p.21.