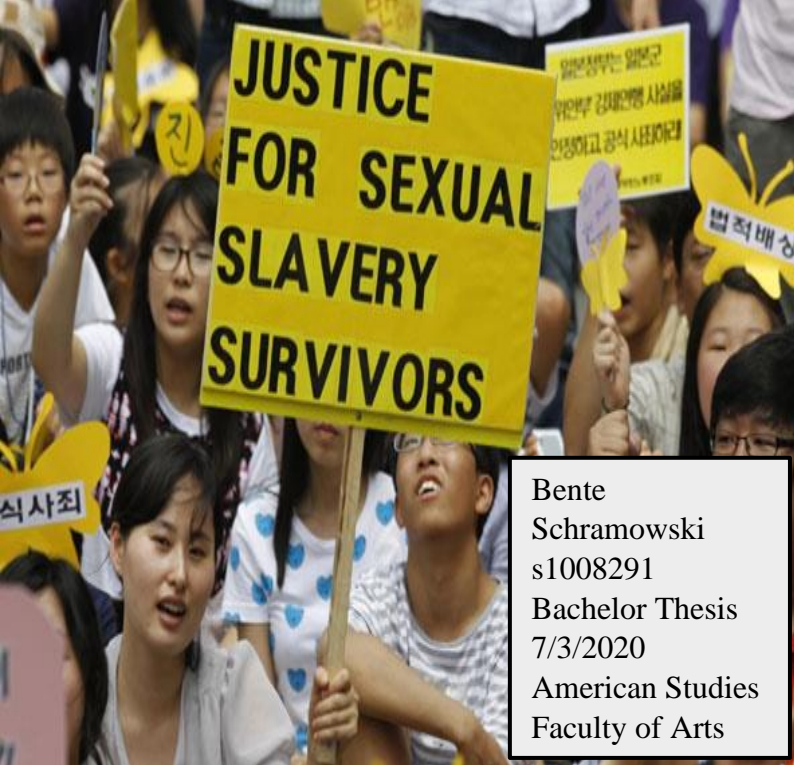




Comfort Women Narrated: A Literary Study of Sexual Slavery in Korean American Literature



Bente Schramowski
s1008291
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American Studies
Faculty of Arts

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Teacher who will receive this document: Dr. N. Mykoff

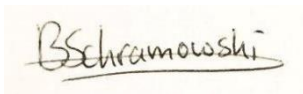
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Name of student: Bente Schramowski

Student number: 1008291

Bente Schramowski
s1008291
BA Thesis
Dr. N. Mykoff
7/3/2020

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Abstract: During World War II, many young women were made into sexual slaves by the Japanese military. These so-called “comfort women” stayed silent for close to five decades, finally breaking their silence in the 1990s. This has led to many people taking up the subject and discussing it. The topic has made its way into Korean American literature. This paper will discuss three novels on the topic of “comfort women”: *Comfort Woman* by Nora Okja Keller, *White Chrysanthemum* by Mary Lynn Bracht, and *Sunday Girl* by Kalliope Lee. These novels reveal how the “comfort system” stripped the girls of their identities and voices, how the girls found space to create their own narratives, and how the “comfort women” issue has been passed on to subsequent generations.

Keywords: Korean Comfort Women; Korean American Literature; Trauma and Memory

Introduction

Histories untold are often relegated to memoirs unspoken. Trauma is usually at the heart of both. This paper gives voice to a traumatic past by examining the stories of Korean “comfort women”¹ told in contemporary Korean American literature. The approach rests on the assumption that cultural expressions provide a means to remember and understand silenced pasts. Works of fiction based on history can provide insight into current issues, like the gendered experience of war, and the history of human trafficking. Additionally, they can tell us something about the creation of identity and history.

“Comfort woman” is the euphemistic term that refers to the girls and women that served as sexual slaves for the Japanese army from 1932 until 1946. Since most records pertaining to “comfort women” have been destroyed by the Japanese army, there are merely estimates when it comes to the number of women forced to become “comfort women” (Yoshimi 34). The numbers are assumed to lie somewhere between 50,000 and 200,000 women (House of Sharing). While there were women from many different nationalities, the

¹ I am aware that the term “comfort woman” is controversial. However, the same goes for other terms used to describe these women. For the lack of a better alternative and the sake of clarity, I will use the term “comfort women”, but add quotation marks to highlight that the term is problematic. I will do the same for terms like “comfort system” and “comfort station”.

majority were Korean (Yoshimi 95). Because of this, and the refusal of the Japanese government to take legal responsibility, the “comfort women” issue has become an important one to Koreans, as well as Korean Americans. As a result, the topic has made its way into Korean American Literature.

This paper focuses sharply on three literary works on “comfort women” written by Korean American women. They are *Comfort Woman* by Nora Okja Keller published in 1997, *White Chrysanthemum* by Mary Lynn Bracht published in 2018, and *Sunday Girl* by Kalliope Lee published in 2013. Analyses of these works draw from theories of gender, colonialism, subject and narrative formation, and memory. This paper argues that cultural expressions like literature provide insight into social constructions of gender and military history, the politics of remembering, and how trauma passes from one generation to another. It does this by spotlighting women’s experiences of war, and how nationality constructs gender. Literary renditions of ‘comfort women’s’ histories reveal that the girls and women lost their identities and voices, regained them, and shaped the identities of younger generations

Keller, Bracht, and Lee identify as Korean American ². In interviews, they mention growing up not having known about “comfort women” (Keller, Choi; Bracht, Cowdry; Lee, Williams). Why then did they choose to write about this topic? Each states that when they learned about the “comfort women”, their stories resonated. Both Keller and Bracht mention they felt the need to tell the story so current generations would know about this part of history. Lee thought it was important to give “comfort women” a voice (Keller, Johnson 97; Bracht, Kidd; Lee, Williams). ³

Keller and Bracht provide two perspectives. One of the characters speaks from the past. The other speaks from the present. Lee’s story is told from a contemporary perspective, but is interwoven with images from the past. This brings the “comfort women” issue into a more contemporary setting, showing the connections of the past with now, and how these issues inform younger generations. By choosing these formats, the three authors show just how interwoven the past and present are.

² Nora Okja Keller was born in Seoul, Korea to a German father and a Korean mother, but grew up in Hawaii, where she still lives (Birnbaum, Keller). Mary Lynn Bracht, born in Stuttgart, grew up in Texas with an American father and Korean mother (Lang, Bracht). Kalliope Lee was also born in Korea, but moved to New York when she was four years old (Kwon, Lee).

³ Other novels dealing with the same topic include *A Gesture Life* by Chang-Rae Lee and *A Gift of the Emperor* by Therese Park. *Comfort Woman*, *White Chrysanthemum*, and *Sunday Girl*, however, are all unique in that they explore how the past haunts the present.

The presence of the past is especially important in Korean American literature, which often deals with trauma. The importance reflects in the concept of *han*⁴. *Han* is the notion that trauma is passed down from one generation to the next. It is not something that merely affects the individual, but the whole nation of Korea (Soh 81). Just because the generation who suffered them has now mostly gone, does not mean that the horrible events are simply erased from public memory. As Kalliope Lee explains, “wounds that are not dressed and healed will recur and get passed down” (Lee, Williams).

Currently, only 18 of the registered former Korean “comfort women” are still alive, a number that will keep on decreasing in the coming years. This makes novels about them that much more important. When these women, lovingly called *halmonis*⁵, are not there anymore to tell their stories, these novels will. This is not just important for the *halmonis* themselves, but it is important for everyone. This is because history does not just stay in the past, but very much shapes our contemporary world.

The following analysis begins with a discussion of the current debates about “comfort women”. The historical context follows. Attention then shifts to brief summaries of the novels. Analyses of the power of language and relationships follow.

Literature on “Comfort Women”

Scholarly treatment of “comfort women” is extensive. Approaches differ. For example, some scholars focus on gender. In *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*, Chunghee Sara Soh gives a historical overview of the “comfort system”, arguing that the “comfort women” issue is one where multiple aspects intersect, such as colonialism, racism, and patriarchy (Soh 227). This intersectionality is explored in other works as well. Pyong Gap Min, for example, says that “Colonization had greater effects on the forced mobilization of the Korean women to the military brothels and their brutal treatment there, while gender hierarchy and patriarchal customs in Korea had greater effects on their suffering after returning home” (953). Yonson Ahn explores how

⁴ *Han* “takes the form of a painful, invisible knot that an individual carries in her heart over a long period of time, made of a complex of undesirable emotions and sentiments such as sadness, regret, anger, remorse, and resignation” (Soh 80). *Han* developed because of the turbulent history of Korea. Think for example of the Japanese occupation and the Korean War, which divided Korea in two. According to Seo-Young Chu, *han* is passed on from Korean mother to Korean American daughter (100). This means that even though younger generations might not have experienced traumatic events themselves, they still carry scars with them.

⁵ *Halmoni* is the Korean word for grandmother.

patriarchy, colonialism, nationalism, and militarism created ideologies of gender and imposed those ideas on both men and women (Ahn). Angella Son focusses on how the “comfort women” were “shamed into nonexistence” (186). The violent means with which they were recruited, the way they were treated in the “comfort stations”, and the scrutiny and disapproval they had to face when returning to Korea dehumanized them, making them afraid to speak out (Son, 188-190).

Other scholars have focused on rape as a weapon of war. Shannon Heit, in her work *Waging Sexual Warfare: Case Studies of Rape Warfare Used by the Japanese Imperial Army During World War II*, explains that war is a patriarchal construct, which means that the ways war impacted women is often ignored (363). She then mentions that women used to be seen as property of men, so raping the women that “belonged” to the enemy was “the most humiliating symbol of defeat for the opposition” (364). Women were often victim of rape warfare⁶, but these cases rarely lead to prosecution. (Heit 369).

As of today, Japan has yet to take legal responsibility. This fits into a bigger discussion about war crime, restitution, and apologies surrounding the issue of “comfort women”. One person who deals with this topic is Yoshiaki Yoshimi⁷, the first person to find documents that prove the military involvement in the planning and running of “comfort stations”, and their involvement in the “recruitment” of “comfort women” (Suzanne O’Brien 7). In his book *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, Yoshimi provides a detailed account on the history of the “comfort system”, with one chapter dedicated to the “violations of international law and war crime trails” (152). He says that the “comfort system” violated human rights, and that “the gravity of the issue lies in the fact that it was by no means a contingent occurrence, but rather a government policy promoted by the state itself” (207). He ends with a list of what steps need to be taken in order to lay the issue to rest. These include increasing transparency, acknowledgement of the responsibility of Japan, and compensation (207-208).

The issue of restitution is the focus of another body of works. For example, in *When Sorry Isn't Enough: : The Controversy Over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice*, edited by Roy L. Brooks, several scholars discuss redress for human injustices. Karen Parker and Jennifer F. Chew, for example, look at the reasons why Japan seems reluctant to offer

⁶ According to Heit the term “rape warfare” is “rape used in a conscious effort by a military or government to affect the outcome of war” (364).

⁷ As a Japanese man, he uses his family name first, and then his personal name. For clarity, I have rewritten his name in a “Western” fashion: personal name first, followed by his family name.

compensation to the victims. Japan maintains that they have already “settled all claims arising from World War II”, that it is something that happened in the past, and that there are too many victims to compensate (Parker and Chew 141). Parker and Chew, however, argue that Japan did not settle all claims through treaties, because not all countries where “comfort women” came from were included, nor did the treaties contain anything about war-rape victims (141-142). Additionally, time should not play a role in these cases, nor should the number of victims (Parker and Chew 143). They conclude by stating that Japan should “undertake immediate action to redress all serious wrongs committed in the course of Japan’s military operations in the World War II period” (144).

The “comfort women” issue also speaks to the creation of identity, history, and memory. Hyun Sook Kim explores how “comfort women” have been represented in Japanese and Korean textbooks. She found that Japanese and Korean textbooks either ignore the topic completely, or mention it in passing (100). Kim explains that the stories of the “comfort women” are a threat “because these women are new subjects who have stepped out of their class-gender positions and who are revealing a partial truth about the nations’ hidden past that has officially been rendered invisible” (100). Because of this, the place of “comfort women” in history is denied

Testimonies, both written and spoken, are another focus of “comfort women” scholarship. The testimonies of surviving “comfort women” are considered historically accurate. Some do note that there are inconsistencies, but most of the time this is handled in one of three ways: they more or less ignore it, they say that the women cannot remember everything correctly due to trauma, or they use the disparities to discredit the testimonies (Kim, 95; Kimura 9). Maki Kimura argues against reading the testimonies as the unequivocal truth. She says the stories “should be seen as the moment of – and space for – subject formation, where subversive agency can also emerge” (19). In other words, the narratives of the “comfort women” allow them to shape the debate surrounding them, which enables them to regain agency and form their own identity (Kimura 18).

One thing seems to be missing in the conversation. Hardly anyone is talking about the effects of this traumatic episode in history on subsequent generations. To me, the perfect way to investigate this is through literature written by Korean American women. They carry the “comfort women” issue with them as a part of their *han*. By writing a novel about “comfort women”, these authors are shaping part of their own narrative as well, by exploring their own identities as Korean-Americans. The novels spotlight the ways that colonialism and militarism

play out on women's bodies, by focusing on rape, trauma and transnationality. They do so by crossing generations, providing insight into the contemporary significance of "comfort women"

A Brief Overview of "Comfort Women" History

In order to properly understand Korean American "comfort women" literature, it is important to know something about the history. First, the reason for the creation of comfort stations is established. Then, the life of comfort women inside those stations will be discussed. Lastly, I will give an overview of what happened when the first "comfort women" stepped forward with their stories and trace the impact to the present.

While there is much unclear when it comes to many of the details surrounding "comfort stations", due to the lack of documents, it is generally accepted that they were created for a few reasons. One of the explanations given by both Yoshimi and Soh is that the Japanese military wanted to prevent their soldiers from raping other women. He uses the example of the Nanking Massacre, also known as the Rape of Nanking. On their way to Nanking, Japanese soldier ran rampant, pillaging, killing, and raping Chinese citizens. The Japanese army, afraid of international criticism and outrage, decided that they needed to establish "comfort stations", in order to stop the soldiers from raping local women (Yoshimi 49, Soh 135).

Another aim of the military was to stop the spreading of sexually transmitted disease. When Japanese troops had been sent to fight in Siberia before, many soldiers were found to have contracted sexually transmitted diseases, which the military traced back to the brothels the soldiers had visited. "Comfort stations" were, in the eyes of the Japanese military, a good way of preventing this from happening again. There were many regulations in place in order to get the spreading of venereal diseases under control, for example the regular medical examinations the comfort women had to undergo (Yoshimi 47, Soh 135).

Yet another reason was the "comfort" provided for the soldiers. Yoshimi paints the picture of a merciless war, and the chances of winning were not very high for the Japanese (72). Other than the "comfort stations", there were no facilities for the soldiers to relax and let off some steam. They were not even permitted leave. As a result, the troops were restless, and the commanding officers generally did not have them under control all that well. To boost morale and to increase the authority over the soldiers, "comfort stations" were established, so

as to offer the soldiers sexual comfort (Yoshimi 73). This, according to Soh, proves that the “comfort system” was based on the idea that men have an “uncontrollable “biological need” for sex” (140). As stated before, the Japanese army felt the need to establish a way to resolve their problems. Thus, the “comfort system” was born.

Even though there are hardly any military documents about their lives in the “comfort station”, we do have a fairly good idea of what their days looked like from various former “comfort women’s” accounts. There were several kinds of comfort stations and the conditions differed vastly. For this paper, however, only one kind, houses of prostitution, will be discussed as the majority of Korean women seemed to have served there (Soh 123). The “comfort women” were subject to sexual abuse and violence. While the numbers vary, some women had to service as many as 20 to 30 soldiers a day (Yoshimi 139). The women could not refuse for fear of the men growing aggressive and forcing them. Indeed, they often had to deal with drunken violence of the soldiers even if they acquiesced (Yoshimi 140). While the guards could protect the women from unruly soldiers, it seems more likely that the goal was to keep the women from escaping (Yoshimi 144). The women worked every day, with little to no time to rest (Yoshimi 141).

Although they were subject to routine medical examinations, soldiers violated the safety measures by not using protection. This naturally increased the chances of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (Soh 123). Even if they did contract a disease, in mild cases they were still forced to work (Yoshimi 148-149). More severe cases, and unrelated illnesses, resulted in the deaths of many “comfort women”. In addition to physical illnesses, the women also had to deal with their mental health. Many coped by turning to drugs (Yoshimi 147). Others attempted suicide (Yoshimi 149-150).

After the war, the “comfort stations” did not immediately disappear. Some were used by Allied forces after Japan surrendered. It was not until 1946 that the last comfort stations closed (Yoshimi 184). After closing the “comfort stations”, there was a long period of silence. This is not to say that people did not know about “comfort women”. On the contrary, media such as documentaries and movies had addressed the topic before the first testimonies. In fact, some survivors already made their story public (Soh 172). However, up until the mid-1990s, Korean and Japanese textbooks lacked information on the topic (Soh 145). Additionally, the Japanese government denied that the military had any role in it and said the crimes had been committed by private citizens (Heit 367).

There are several possible reasons why the topic remained obscure for over four

decades. First of all, there were many women that did not survive. Many died because of disease, abuse, or suicide (Heit 366). For the women that did survive, they had to deal with things such as PTSD, lasting physical effects of illness or abuse, and discrimination on account of having been a “comfort woman”, even from their own families (Yoshimi 193, 196). It was not until 1991 when the redress movement began, after former “comfort woman”, Kim Hak-Soon, stepped up to give her testimony. The Japanese government responded with an apology, but worded it carefully in order to not take legal responsibility (Yoshimi 25). While they did set up the so-called Asian Women’s Fund to compensate the survivors, the fund relied on donations of private citizens, which can be seen as yet another way to deny legal responsibility (Heit 367). Until this day, the remaining victims are still demanding a sincere apology from the Japanese government.

Summary of Stories

The following section provides a summary of each novel. The summaries spotlight relationships between a mother and a daughter; siblings and friends. Longing, anguish and love are at the heart of the stories. Each speak to the constructions of girlhood.

Comfort Woman by Nora Okja Keller tells the story of a mother and a daughter. The mother, Soon Hyo, is born in Korea, into a poor family. At age twelve, she is sold to the Japanese army by one of her sisters. Although she is first made to think she will go to a factory to work, she ends up as a “comfort woman”. There, she soon sees a woman stand up against the Japanese soldiers in the hope that they will end her suffering and kill her. This has such an impact on Soon Hyo that she will, until the end of her life, see the girl named Induk as her personal guiding spirit.

After the girl’s death, Soon Hyo gets assigned the name Akiko and has to take the other girl’s place, serving the soldiers. She soon gets pregnant, but the baby is violently removed from her womb, leaving Soon Hyo broken both inside and out. Eventually, Soon Hyo manages to escape the camp and ends up in a home with American missionaries. She marries one of them, and he takes her to America.

In America, she struggles in her role of wife, as she is unable to trust men after being a “comfort woman”. Soon Hyo feels dead inside, but this changes with the birth of her daughter, Rebeccah Bradley, or Beccah for short. Soon Hyo is overprotective as a mother, wanting to shield her daughter from all evil, but especially the evil of men and the evils she

associates with womanhood. For the reader, it is completely understandable knowing what we know about Soon Hyo's past. However, Beccah does not know about her mother having been a "comfort woman", and feels as if her mother is suffocating her.

While Soon Hyo's story is about her girlhood in Korea and how it shaped her life, Beccah's story is about trying to find her place in Hawaii, as an Asian American girl whose father has died and whose mother is seemingly insane. To support the two of them, her mother works as a shaman and talks to spirits for other people. Beccah becomes more and more estranged from her mother, as Soon Hyo seems to spiral out of control, falling into trances and having strange fits. To Beccah, and many other people, Soon Hyo comes across as insane. At the end of the story, Soon Hyo dies. While going through her belongings, Beccah finds a tape addressed to her, left by her mother, as well as some clippings of newspapers. These little snippets of her mother's past together with the tape tell Beccah the true story of her mother. After finding out her mother was a "comfort woman" and the hardships she had to face in life, Beccah feels closer to her mother than ever, now also being able to communicate with the same spirits her mother communicated with. Beccah gives her mother a proper burial to make sure that her spirit can finally rest. She now understands the importance of the past and will make sure to honor the spirits and their memories, making their lives her own memories.

Like *Comfort Woman*, *White Chrysanthemum* written by Mary Lynn Bracht, is also written from two perspectives. The book tells the story of two sisters, growing up as *haenyeo*, female divers of Jeju Island. Hana, the oldest sister, lets herself be taken away by Japanese soldiers at age fourteen in order to protect her younger sister Emiko, also called Emi. The soldier that captures her, Morimoto, takes Hana to be shipped off to Manchuria to be a "comfort woman". He then goes on to rape her, and leaves Hana at a brothel. Here, Hana is continuously raped by soldiers.

Morimoto seems to be quite taken by Hana, as he returns to the brothel for her. There, he offers Hana a chance to escape with him. Hana does not want to stay in the brothel as a "comfort woman", but she does not want to leave with Morimoto either, as he has become the face of the soldiers that have used her against her will. Hana manages to run off on her own, trying to go home, but is found by Morimoto a few days later, and gets captured again.

Morimoto takes Hana to Mongolia and leaves her with a family there, so he can take care of business, while she cannot run off. Hana starts doing chores for the family and, despite

being weary of them at first, warms up to the family. They treat her as one of their own. The youngest son of the family, Altan, and Hana start to develop a friendship. Soon, they fall in love. This is when Morimoto returns.

Morimoto makes it clear he wants to take Hana away. After abusing her, Hana wants to end her misery by killing him. She tries to cut his throat in his sleep, but is stopped by Altan, who then helps Hana to flee. The two get caught by Morimoto, who once again captures Hana, while Altan is forced to leave them. Morimoto, heartbroken by Hana's betrayal wants to leave her behind, but the two of them get captured by Soviet soldiers. The Soviets force Morimoto to kill himself, and Hana herself is almost killed as well, but survives.

After a few days, she is released by the Soviets, as the Mongolian family returned and made a deal for her release. Hana joins the family again. She knows that she has to give up on trying to go home to Korea. However, having been accepted and taken into a new family, she feels at peace.

Whereas Hana's story takes place entirely in 1945, Emi's story takes place in 2011. Emi is an old woman, travelling to Seoul. She has two purposes for this visit: to see her children, and to join the 1000th Wednesday Demonstration. This is a weekly demonstration calling attention to the story of the "comfort women" and asking Japan to address the problems it created. Emi goes there in hope of seeing her sister again. A new statue is unveiled to commemorate the comfort women, and it is revealed that this statue was sculpted after a picture of Hana, whose photograph miraculously came into the hands of the sculptor.

Shocked from seeing her sister's face again, Emi collapses and is rushed to the hospital, where it is revealed that she suffers from a heart condition and does not have very long to live. Despite her state, Emi insist on seeing the statue of her sister again. She sits next to the statue, holding her hand, and finally feels that her sisters has returned to her. She can now stop searching for her and die in peace. Emi's story ends with her passing away, and her daughter returning to Jeju island, to honor her mother's life as a *haenyeo*.

The final novel is *Sunday Girl* by Kalliope Lee. The story, set in the early 90s, follows Sybil and Jang-Mee, two Korean American girls living in Seoul to discover their roots. Sybil, the daughter of an American GI and a Korean mother does not know much about her Korean heritage, due to her mother's early death. After discovering the affair between her best friend and boyfriend and struggling to finish college, Sybil decides to take a sabbatical and move to Korea. There, she lives with her friend Jang-Mee. At age four, Jang-Mee was adopted and

brought to America. Her motivation for moving back to Seoul is to find her birthmother.

Early on in the novel, Jang-Mee receives a letter from her adoptive mother which seems to upset her greatly. In order to cheer her up, Sybil suggest they go out dancing. Unfortunately, the night does not go as planned. On their way back home, the girls stop by the river to wind down a bit. There, they are attacked by a man, who first robs them and then attempts to rape Sybil. Jang-Mee tries to stop him. In the struggle, Sybil ends up unconscious, while the man turns to Jang-Mee and rapes her instead.

After returning from the hospital, Sybil finds Jang-Mee gone, and hears nothing from her for weeks, until she suddenly returns one day. Sybil, trying to understand why Jang-Mee left, asks Jang-Mee why she has returned. Jang-Mee reveals that during her rape she had a vision of a girl being raped by Japanese soldiers, later revealed to be a “comfort woman”. Jang-Mee feels the girl appeared to her “so she could be released from the past, from history. So she could finally speak of the atrocities that she and other girls had to endure” (Lee 91). Jang-Mee says she came back so she can reconnect with the girl again. This results in her seeking out increasingly more dangerous situations, including prostituting herself. At one point, she ends up in a coma.

Sybil desperately wants to understand Jang-Mee, and tries to find out what happened with the help of her neighbor, Min. However, when Sybil meets Min’s brother, Greg, her objective of finding out the truth turns into trying to experience what Jang-Mee did, and trying to find the “comfort woman” as well. After some violent sexual encounters with Greg, Sybil has some of the visions as well. Feeling like she now shares her experience with Jang-Mee, and feeling a connection with the “comfort woman” seems to release Sybil, who slowly returns to her senses.

At the end of the novel, Sybil prepares to go back to the United States. Her and Jang-Mee’s role as mouthpiece for “comfort women” seems to have failed, with Sybil moving and Jang-Mee still in coma. However, right before leaving, Sybil watches a press conference on tv. In this press conference, Kim Hak-Soon tells the story of how she was forced to be a sexual slave for the Japanese army. With her testimony, Sybil and Jang-Mee are released from their burden.

The Power of Language

The term “comfort women” obscures the history of the sexual enslavement of girls. The term “military comfort woman”, a direct translation of the Japanese *jūgun ianfu*, means “following the military”. It implies that the girls and women followed the troops willingly (Soh 70). This supposed voluntary behavior contradicts how most girls were actually rounded up. Most girls were either deceived by false promises of employment or abducted (House of Sharing). The word “comfort” also hides the truth. The word refers to the comfort offered to the Japanese soldiers. This ignores the fact that the “comfort women” were put into situations that were anything but comfortable. By focusing on the pleasure of the soldiers, the true pain the girls had to endure is masked. The word “woman” masks the youth of those providing the comfort. Most were pre-adolescent and adolescent girls. The term distorts the facts. By distorting the facts, the identity of the girls is distorted as well. The term “military comfort women” makes them come across as women, not girls, that voluntarily offered comfort to soldiers, when in reality, “Comfort women” refers to sexually enslaved girls.

Another way in which the girls were denied their identity comes from their names. Most “comfort women” had their names changed into Japanese names, “thereby losing the Korean names that had constituted an important part of their personal identities” (Soh 74). This is clearly illustrated in the character of Soon Hyo. Throughout *Comfort Woman*, the reader only knows her as Akiko, the name given to her at the comfort station. After receiving her new name, Akiko claims that she was ‘murdered’ (Keller). By taking everything from her, including her name, Soon Hyo ceases to exist. She regains a sense of self by becoming a mother, an identity and title she embraces. Unfortunately, this is the only part of her identity she has as other people still call her Akiko, not knowing what that name means to her, so Soon Hyo starts clinging to her identity as mother, in order to “stay alive”.

Soon Hyo’s real name is not revealed until the end of the novel, when Beccah finally discovers her mother’s past. Acknowledging Soon Hyo’s past means that she no longer is forgotten. Her story is known now, which gives her back her identity. After learning about Soon Hyo, Beccah now has gained the ability to communicate with the dead, like her mother before her, meaning that she is in a position to lend her voice to those who cannot speak, including her mother. This ensures that her mother and the other ghosts do not just get lost in history, but that their stories can be continued to be told.

The novels also speak to the power of language. During the Japanese occupation, “comfort women” were not allowed to speak their mother tongue. They were expected to speak Japanese (Ahn). The reason was that “every effort to retain Korean culture was suppressed in order to destabilise the identity of the women and weaken the foundations of solidarity amongst them ” (Ahn). The power of language was strategically used to oppress the girls, using language as a weapon against them.

In addition, limited knowledge of Japanese meant that women and girls did not fully understand the soldiers. In *Comfort Woman*, Soon Hyo mentions and sings snippets of the Korean River Song. Most of the song is not translated into English. The result is that readers who do not speak Korean do not fully understand its meaning. This helps readers empathize with the “comfort women” whose limited knowledge of Japanese resulted in limited understanding.

Sunday Girl connects this to the current generation of Korean Americans and speaks clearly to the connections between past and present. Sybil is Korean American, but grew up speaking English. As a result, while she is mostly fluent in Korean, she does not understand every nuance and quite often is not fully able to grasp what is said to her. This gives her some trouble in regard to her job, as she is tasked with translating documents from Korean into English. Her boss explains that “translation is not just about connecting one language to another” and “it requires a special skill in interpretation, an inspiration. I would go as far as to say, a certain imagination. You must have a talent for it – be able to read between the lines” (Lee 77). This fragment shows us just how difficult it is to translate language, even for people that speak a language fairly well. This knowledge underscores the “comfort women’s” inability to clearly express themselves.

This limited knowledge of a certain language was used against the “comfort women”, in order to limit their chances of escaping. Many Korean “comfort women” were brought to China. Since they did not speak the language of the country they were stationed in, they were completely isolated from the local community. Therefore, receiving help from that community would be very difficult (Ahn).

Speaking a foreign language *can* be empowering. Speaking a different language could help “comfort women” escape. Additionally, it increases the number of people you can reach with your story. In *White Chrysanthemum*, Hana, when staying with the Mongolian family, mentions that “words are power (...) The more words you know, the more powerful you become. That is why the Japanese outlaw our native language. They are limiting our power by limiting our words” (Bracht 215). Hana takes her father’s advice to heart and sets out to learn

more Mongolian words, so she can grow more powerful. In her own way, she is empowering herself. Other than being able to reach more people, speaking more languages could also give Hana a sense of agency, and perhaps even a new identity. While she had no choice in having to speak Japanese, it is her own choice to learn Mongolian. She has decided that she wants to be a part of the Mongolian family.

Language, like the term “comfort woman”, is used to deceive. *Comfort Woman* extensively deals with this topic of deception. Soon Hyo had repeatedly been lied to and deceived by various people. Like many other girls, she was told that she was merely being taken away to work in a factory, but instead ended up as a “comfort woman”. Soon Hyo eventually realizes that she cannot trust language, so she shows her daughter love in the only way she knows how: by using her body and body language. For Soon Hyo, actions really do speak louder than words. Her daughter Beccah, in turn, shares a distrust of language. She does not realize that her mother tries to show her love through actions instead of words. Instead, Beccah ends up not trusting her mother, dismissing everything her mother says as crazy.

This distrust in language leads to different ways of communicating. As mentioned above, Soon Hyo starts to rely more on actions rather than words, which is true for Hana as well. Even though Hana tries to learn Mongolian and keeps improving, she is not able to freely communicate with anyone besides one member of the family, who happens to speak Japanese. In order to communicate, she and the other members of the family rely mainly on gesturing and actions. For Hana this seems somehow freeing. She knows that words can be empty and deceiving, while actions speak for themselves. For example, Morimoto promised her many beautiful things, yet these words always followed after he raped or beat her. She realizes Morimoto’s true nature through his actions rather than through his words. This makes her relationship with Altan that much more meaningful, as he can only show actions and is sincere in them, saving her from her captors.

While Sybil in *Sunday Girl* does not necessarily rely on actions, she does realize that there are different ways to communicate. At one point in the novel, she is talking about the Korean War with an older woman. The older woman tells her about the scarcity of food during the war, and how much more she appreciates food now (Lee 42). This makes Sybil think about how her own mother, who never talked about the war, always made sure to stock their fridge and pantry. She then says: “I understand that she’d been telling me about the war in a different way. I’ve been blind to it, this silent language of objects” (Lee 43). This, again,

reflects the lives of many “comfort women”. While for a long time others tried to silence them, they still found their own ways to speak out in the hopes of being heard.

Relationships

A shared theme in all novels is how being a “comfort woman” shaped relationships that, in turn, provide insight into how their histories were told. Two types of relationships are central. The first is familial relationships, and the second the relationship between the “comfort women” themselves.

In both *Comfort Woman* and *White Chrysanthemum*, the bond between family members is the bond that is most central to the story. *Comfort Woman* very clearly is about the relationship between mothers and daughters. Soon Hyo and Beccah have a difficult relationship, partly because of Soon Hyo’s silence about having been a “comfort woman”. This dynamic is one that is present in *White Chrysanthemum* as well, between Emi and her daughter, Yoon Hui. While Emi herself was not a “comfort woman”, her sister was, which she did not tell her children. This has to do with how Korean society treated comfort women. Angella Son mentions that “they were indoctrinated by the Confucian teaching elevates chastity to the highest virtue for girls and women” (190). In fact, survivor Lee Young-Ok, in an interview with Pyong Gap Min, stated that the virtue of a woman was considered to be more important than her life (Min 950). This made it incredibly hard for “comfort women” to step forward and tell their story, as they had been “stained”. According to Son, they were “rejected and abandoned as damaged goods and denigrated as prostitutes, i.e., impure girls and women” (190). Most women were terrified of telling their families (Min 949) but in the novels, sharing their stories with their daughters results in a knowledge that strengthens family ties, respect, and individual identity.

Another central familial relationship is the one between sisters, most notably between Emi and Hana in *White Chrysanthemum*. When it comes to Emi, we once again see the connection to shame. Emi admits that she does not talk about Hana because she was ashamed. However, she was not ashamed of the fact that her sister was a “comfort woman”, but rather of the fact that she let it happen. Emi stayed quiet while Hana protected her. While Emi herself was never a “comfort woman”, the fact that her sister was taken still caused her trauma. Afraid of what others would think, she remained silent about her sister. By eventually

telling her children, she is able to pass on her sister's story to the next generation, leaving them with the responsibility of carrying the story forward.

The bond between "comfort women" is complicated. First, the situation they were forced into also forces them into a relationship in which the decisions and fate of one girl informed the fate of the other girls, which could have deadly consequences. This dynamic can clearly be seen in *Comfort Woman*. When Soon Hyo was taken to the "comfort station", she was too young to be a "comfort woman", so they made her do chores instead. This changes when Induk, the former Akiko, decides to put an end to her misery by goading the soldiers into killing her. By getting herself killed, Induk finally obtains some form of peace, but this comes at the cost of Soon Hyo, who is made to replace Induk (Keller).

In *White Chrysanthemum*, Hana discovers this dynamic too. The first time she does is when she is transported to Manchuria. Two soldiers come in to choose a girl. They first pick Hana, until they realize she just wet herself. Disgusted, they choose SangSoo instead, a younger girl that reminds Hana of her sister (Bracht 50). The next time Hana encounters her friend again, SangSoo has been assaulted to the point she succumbs to her wounds (Bracht). Hana blames herself for SangSoo's death, wishing that she could have protected the girl, while at the same time feeling relieved that she was not chosen (Bracht 52). She feels the responsibility of the lives of other "comfort women" again when she is offered a way to escape by Morimoto. Hana knows that if she decides to leave, the other girls will be punished for her decision (Bracht 151). In the end, her own survival is more important to her and she leaves, betraying the other girls.

Sunday Girl brings the dynamic of the relationship between "comfort women" to a contemporary setting. The two central characters, Sybil and Jang-Mee share the same type of relationship as the one between "comfort women". When the two women are threatened by an unknown man, the man has the intention of sexually assaulting Sybil (Lee 27). In a turn of events, Jang-Mee tries to protect Sybil. In the skirmish, Sybil falls and loses consciousness, and the man rapes Jang-Mee instead (31). Like in the other novels, the fate of Sybil decides the fate of Jang-Mee.

"Comfort women" also supported each other. When Hana first arrives at the brothel, she is unable to form a bond with the other girls, with the exception of Keiko. She acts strong and does not want the other girls to pity her, but she later realizes that that is exactly what keeps the girls from bonding. She admits that "lost in her own misery, she has failed to notice that the other girls are experiencing the same miseries too" (Bracht 125). Once Hana admits

that she suffers as much as the others, a bond develops. Hana mentions that, after opening herself up, the girls start talking to her. The conversations result in Hana smiling for the first time since arriving at the “comfort station” (Bracht 126).

Camaraderie requires bravery and provides comfort. Keiko risks punishment, for example, by going to Hana and comforting her after she has just arrived (Bracht 114). *Comfort Woman* also illustrates ways that the women and girls comforted each other. Before Soon Hyo becomes a “comfort woman”, she does chores in the camp, including taking care of the women. She even passes messages between them, which is not allowed (Keller). Like Keiko, she risks a lot, potentially her life, by helping the other women. These actions speak to agency within captivity.

Albeit in a different way than in the other novels, Sybil and Jang-Mee form a bond with “comfort women”. Jeongyun Ko, professor at Dong-A University explains that “Lee creates Jang-Mee as a rape victim and Sybil as a witness to the crime to make them female successors of comfort women: the only way Jang-Mee and Sybil become spiritually connected to the ghost of a comfort woman is by facing physically extreme sexual violence” (107). They do not know any actual “comfort women”, but instead are linked to their ghosts. When Sybil watches Kim Hak-Soon testify on tv, Sybil has a vision. In this vision, Sybil, Jang-Mee, the ghost of the “comfort woman” they have been seeing, and Kim Hak-Soon all turn into the same girl, showing the connection between them (Lee 284). At this point, Sybil acknowledges that while she might not now the “comfort women themselves”, she can feel what they are feeling. This is not merely because she was sexually abused, but because they belong to her ancestry:

“I had shared myself, opened myself to the spirits of ancestors whom I had not been allowed to know. Those who had beckoned me back to the land where my mother was born and the generations who had come before. They had been within me, within my blood. I had let them come, colonize me, rape and pillage me with their fury, their bitterness, their han. I had let them have their say, those who never had a voice. And they had etched their trials on my flesh, leaving traces of their stories for me to remember” (287).

The relationship that Jang-Mee and Sybil have with the “comfort women” show how the “comfort women’s” history still lives on in subsequent generations.

Conclusion

The novels by Keller, Bracht, and Lee demonstrate the loss of identity “comfort women” had to endure. The novels speak to a variety of issues surrounding the history of the “comfort system”. All of them explore the intersection of gender and war, and look at what role nationality and colonialism played as well. Perhaps most importantly, though, is that the novels are about the construction of narrative and memory.

The story of “comfort women” is a story that, for a long period of time, was ignored. After the war, years of silence followed. For years, the women were “perceived as shameful to Korea as a nation” (Son 190). After they came forward, people had the tendency to paint them as helpless women who were victims of sexual exploitation by the Japanese military (Kimura 16). What is often overlooked is that by speaking out, the women have become active participants in shaping history, and have created their own narrative. At the end of *Sunday Girl*, Kim Hak-Soon gives her testimony for the very first time. She decided that she would no longer let others define her life. By breaking their silence, “comfort women” did not just shape their own story, but they began to play a role in knowledge production as well. They redefined “the limits of who can speak and whose memories matter in dominant accounts of the war throughout Asia” (O’Brien 4). They stepped forward to rewrite history.

The novels by Keller, Bracht, and Lee speak to the creation of one’s own narrative. They show that “comfort women” were able to create a space in which they could speak out, and regain their identities, even while captive. While language was weaponized by the Japanese military, the girls found ways to use it to their own advantage. The same holds true in the relationship between “comfort women”. There were obstacles put in place to prevent the girls from bonding, but the girls overcame this, too. In the limited space they had, the girls were still able to control a bit of their lives.

Despite the years of silence, “comfort women” still became part of the story and identity of Korea, and mainly Korean women. The novels demonstrate that the history of “comfort women” transcends generations. The past and present are connected through *han*. The trauma runs so deep that it does not only transcend generations, but nations as well. Korean American Seo-Young Chu says there is a specific way in which memory plays a role in Korean American identity, which she calls “postmemory *han*” (97). According to

anthropologist and feminist Hae-Joang Cho⁸, Korean-American women seem to have great interest in the problem of comfort women”. She continues, saying that “they explained that it was because they were living in a racist society as Korean descendants and this problem is really close to their hearts”. The fact that the novels used in this paper were all written by Korean American women speaks to her point.

Unfortunately, sexual slavery is not something from the past. For example, in 2014, thousands of Yazidi women and children were kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery (Ochab). This makes the “comfort women issue” that much more important. The issue can be used to uncover the inner workings of organized sexual slavery, as well as predict the aftermath. By looking at the “comfort women”, we can learn from the mistakes that were made, for example how the women were treated as culprits and shamed into non-existence. The debate about restitution can help victims of sexual slavery and exploitation get the justice “comfort women” were denied.

History is often told by one dominant group. The stories of people that fall out of that group are ignored. The “comfort women” issue tells us what happens when people are erased from history. Some of these women were brave enough to take matters into their own hands and tell the world what had happened. Unfortunately, there are not many survivors left. As it is still not widespread, the story of the “comfort women” runs the risk of disappearing from history, despite the effects it had on subsequent generations. History shapes the present, but the present has the ability to decide what history gets told. Therefore, it is our responsibility to speak out on behalf of those who cannot anymore, and pass down the history of “comfort women”. That way, these women will not become invisible again. They will live on in our history and memory.

⁸ As a Korean woman, she uses her family name first, and then her personal name. For clarity, I have rewritten her name in a “Western” fashion: personal name first, followed by her family name.

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