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Gender Issues in *Comfort Woman* by Nora Okja Keller

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Abstract

Through an exploration of the comfort women system, this article analyzes how the female gender has been oppressed in history. It follows the story of Akiko, the main character of Comfort Woman *(1998) by Asian American author Nora Okja Keller. Keller is one of the first authors to write about comfort women, gaining publicity for this issue. This article provides an examination of terms such as sex, gender, and gender issues. Certain concepts influencing American and Asian cultures and their stance towards gender are also analyzed, after which focus is placed on the portrayal of gender roles as illustrated in the novel. The article briefly mentions the history of the relationship between the United States and Korea. The characteristics of the comfort women system are described as well as the causes leading to its establishment such as patriarchy, Confucian traditions, and the exploitability of lower-class society. Additionally, the article highlights how the comfort women issue helped define feminist theory in the US and identifies the transnational nature of the issues involved.*

Keywords

Nora Okja Keller, *Comfort Woman*, comfort women system, gender, Second World War

Gender Issues

As its title suggests, the content of the novel is dedicated to the story of a former Korean comfort woman Akiko, who managed to escape from a brothel and was later married to an American missionary with whom she moved to the United States. Akiko gives birth to daughter Beccah, the second main character of the book. The focus of this article will be mainly on the female gender.

Susan Kingsley Kent explains that almost invariably gender is part of a power dynamic between men and women. The attributes assigned to men are typically seen as superior to those attributed to women, and therefore this supremacy is used to explain why up until the last century women did not possess the same rights and did not have access to the same opportunities as men.[1] In line with this received history of gender discourse, gender issues have typically been linked to women.

Gender issues may be defined by any problems, concerns, or troubles that are brought about by differences between genders. This can include the different treatment each sex is met with in various environments such as school, the workplace, or the home. According to Joshua S. Goldstein, it should be noted that throughout history and in different cultures, gender roles have shown significant variability. Humans have developed multiple forms of marriage, sexuality, and distribution of labor in housework and childcare.[2] Discourses of gender and responses to them continue to evolve, making gender a highly debated topic in the present age.

1 Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 3.

2 Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7.

It is important to establish the difference between the terms sex and gender. Goldstein explains it thusly: "'sex' refers to what is biological, and 'gender' to what is cultural."[3] Furthermore, he comments as follows: "We are certain sex but we learn or perform certain gender roles which are not predetermined or tied rigidly to biological sex. Thus, sex is fixed based in nature; gender is arbitrary, flexible, and based in culture."[4] Gender is closely connected to a particular culture and society. Dino Franco Felluga agrees that the idea of gender is primarily, if not totally, a cultural construct influenced by a civilization's prevalent prejudices.[5]

This article will also highlight the divergent understanding of gender in two very distinct environments, Asia and the US. Therefore, it is necessary to present how gender is understood in each culture.

In Asian cultures, one fundamental philosophy that has greatly contributed to and influenced views of gender is Confucianism. In the Korean context, Uma Segal describes how Confucianism was embraced as the guiding philosophy during the Choson era. Confucianism contains a rigid code of conduct that guarantees that women will always be in subordinate and secondary positions to men, with woman's obedience to men being of utmost importance.[6] Kent elaborates on the topic further by highlighting one of the basic tenets of Confucianism, the obligation of an inferior person to obey and honor their superior. This system of relationships was supposed to maintain order in society, but also caused gender inequalities.[7]

Another related factor that contributed greatly to the view of women in the Korean social system is the fact that the society itself is traditionally patriarchal. Kent defines patriarchy in simple terms as "the rule of the father." Patriarchy has further been conceptualized by gender historians to explain a system in which dominant individuals are male, and females are subject to exploitation.[8] Felluga explains that this dominant power is exhibited not just in the political and economic sphere, but also in the other multiple ways in which culture is formed to favor men over women, for example through stereotypes that establish unequal binary oppositions, including "the alignment of women with nature, domesticity, emotion or passivity and men with science, the public sphere, reason or aggressivity."[9] Public and private practices that reify these archetypes also deepen the differences in the position of women and men, often increasing gender inequality.

With men being the favored sex in traditional societies, it is not surprising that families were typically much more prejudiced in favor of sons than of daughters. In the novel, Akiko indicates that her life was already doomed from the beginning, being born as the fourth daughter in her family. She narrates how "because of me, a wrong-sexed baby arriving on an inauspicious day, bad luck moved and became part of our family."[10] This sense of disappointment was not expressed out loud by her parents, but by Akiko's oldest sister, as Akiko recalls:

3 Goldstein, *War and Gender*, 2.

4 Goldstein, *War and Gender*, 2.

5 Dino Franco Felluga, *Critical Theory: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 112.

6 Uma A. Segal, *A Framework for Immigration: Asians in the United States*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 65.

7 Kent, *Gender and History*, 10.

8 Kent, *Gender and History*, 131.

9 Felluga, *Critical Theory*, 112.

10 Nora Okja Keller, *Comfort Woman* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998): 118.

> Oldest sister, though, snapped at me out of anger. She was old enough to realize I should have been a boy. […] She was old enough to understand what my parents wished for and what the villagers would have celebrated. If you were a boy, she used to tell me, we would have had a hundred-day party for you. […] We would have made a feast […] to show how much we loved you, if you were a boy.[11]

Akiko's voice reflects upon the inequitable situation in which having a son is something worth celebrating, but bringing forth a daughter is not. Such attitudes generate different treatment for girls and boys right from the beginning of children's lives. Akiko's oldest sister believed that Akiko being born a girl caused their family to suffer a great misfortune.

Perhaps the greatest influence that the Confucian tradition had on women is the concept of woman's chastity. Chungmoo Choi explains that "traditional Korean women were taught to believe that the loss of chastity was worse than death itself."[12] She further emphasizes that many "former 'comfort women' committed suicide upon returning to Korea, fearing allegations of promiscuity and the contempt of their own society."[13] The history of comfort women will be described in greater detail in the second part of this article. Young-Hee Shim further highlights how "the Confucian ideology stressed chastity as the greatest of womanly virtues and the wife's devotion to one husband, that is, to one descent group."[14] Having served at the comfort station, Akiko was unable to feel innocent and clean. She thought less of herself since she had been used by many men, even though that was something she was not in charge of and was unable to change. She wanted to "purify [her]self and knowing [she] never could."[15] Akiko also believed that she would "never become clean enough to keep."[16] The comfort camps completely changed Akiko's view of herself. She thought that because she lost her innocence to many soldiers, no man would want to be with her and especially marry her upon finding out. Choi also depicts the paradox of women under Confucian rule:

> [w]hile the dominant patriarchal ideology demands women to be chaste, the same ideology sometimes forces women to sacrifice their chastity in order to shield their men, in return for which they are stigmatized morally and relegated to social purgatory.

Choi further comments that many women were recruited to protect their fathers and brothers from being drafted into the Japanese army or to prevent their families from forfeiting tenant rights.[17] This statement provides the necessary psychological and social background to understand the situation that comfort women were placed in.

In terms of gender roles, Akiko did not challenge her assigned role in society, accepting it fully, which is demonstrated in many episodes. When Akiko was taken by the Japanese army

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11 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 119.

12 Chungmoo Choi, "Korean Women in Culture of Inequality," in *Korea Briefing*, ed. Donald Clark (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 104.

13 Choi, "Korean Women," 103-104.

14 Young-Hee Shim, "Feminism and the Discourse of Sexuality in Korea: Continuities and Changes," *Human Studies* 24, no. 1/2 (2001): 136. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20011307>.

15 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 54.

16 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 62.

17 Choi, "Korean Women," 105.

to the military base, she was still way too young to serve in the brothels. Although Akiko did not know what was ahead of her, she expected to serve her cultural role as a woman. She thought that she "would do what [she] has done all [her] life: clean, cook, wash clothes, work hard."[18] Such labor was not new to her, as she was taught to perform such tasks at home from a young age. Akiko described the gender roles in more detail by commenting on the norm in Korean society during that time period:

> Girls were not supposed to talk or look at boys. In our family's home, my sisters and I rarely saw my father. When he was home, we prepared his meals and served him first. After he finished eating and went into the back room to smoke or sleep, we would eat our meal. That was what was respectful. [19]

Thus, this familial respect contrasts greatly with the norm she would experience later at the mission house. In her household, there was an emphasis on differentiating between males and females, with everyone having their own role which must be honored. If these norms were violated, the individual is considered disrespectful and a shame for the family.

Compared to Asian cultures, the distinctive roles of men and women in American society of the second half of the twentieth century are shown in the novel to be far less strict. When meeting American missionaries, Akiko comments on the difficulty she had differentiating between males and females, even leaving aside their appearance:

> Their actions, too, made it difficult to label them as men and women, for they did not behave as proper men and women. In the world before the camp, the unmarried women and men lived separately. From the age of six, I was taken away from the babies of both sexes and taught the ways of women. […] At the mission house, I was embarrassed by the disrespect between the men and the women. Lives overlapping, men and women ate and worked together. They looked into each other's faces as they spoke, laughing with mouths open. Even while worshipping, they sat side by side, unseparated by a curtain or sheet, on the same bench thighs and shoulders almost touching.[20]

Akiko was bewildered by the behavior of the Americans, since it varied greatly from the behavior of the women and the men she was used to. She was exposed to another culture without knowing what to expect, which caused her discomfort. Confucian values, the teachings of her family, and Korean traditions were deeply rooted in her perception of the world. The relationships between American men and women are shown to be more relaxed and informal.

Later in her married life, Akiko's husband Richard Bradley scolded her when she would not help him. He proposed that she should: "be subject to [her] husband, as sayeth the Lord, for as Christ is the head of the church, the husband is the head of the wife and savior of her body. A good wife will turn a house into a home."[21] Richard shows the patriarchal attitude of men expecting and forcing women to do domestic chores. Despite the subservience of women in her native culture, Akiko did not follow his orders, keeping silent as a way of self-preservation and protection due to

18 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 19.

19 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 68.

20 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 68.

21 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 112.

her trauma. This behavior reflects how Akiko shifted her attitude toward her duties as a woman and as a wife, no longer exhibiting the respectful behavior that was expected of her.

The domination of the US as well as of Richard in his attitude towards Akiko is reflected upon by Patti Duncan, who points out that while the rape of Akiko represents Korea's subjugation to Japanese troops, her rape in marriage by her American husband, who vows to save her, may represent America's hegemony over Korea. This domination resulted from colonialism, as seen by the expansion of Christianity and Western ideologies within a non-Christian, non-Western country.[22] Akiko's husband was a Christian missionary, which reflects the religious influence of the United States on Korea. Pyong Gap Min comments that American Christian missionaries have been present in Korea since 1884, "actively converting Koreans to Christianity."[23] With his sense of superiority, Richard continued to lecture Akiko about the Christian way, forcing Christianity onto her while remaining ignorant of her own individual beliefs.

Akiko admitted her traumatic experience during the war to her husband: "I speak of laying down for a hundred men […] over and over, until I died. I speak of bodies being bought and sold."[24] This confession, however, was met with immediate criticism from her husband, who rebuked her to "[p]ut away perversity from [her] mouth; keep corrupt talk from [her] lips."[25] Richard accused her of not being aware of what she was saying while he asked God for forgiveness. Therefore, he disregards her story, mirroring the actions of the Japanese government and the contemporary general public in relation to victims of sexual abuse. Richard then brought their daughter Beccah into the conversation: "Think of how she would feel, knowing her mother was a prostitute."[26] As Duncan argues, by calling Akiko a "'prostitute,'" he implies her complicity.[27] Richard then continued: "It is not for me to judge, But know that 'The sins of the parent shall fall upon their children and their grandchildren.' I ask you to protect our daughter, with your silence, from that shame."[28] Rather than listening to his wife, he tried to silence her as this was in his opinion a shameful history, even though Akiko had no choice but to comply with the Japanese orders. Richard did not offer his support nor try to understand the situation of Akiko as a former comfort woman, even going so far as using violence to silence her. Patti Duncan emphasizes that "[h]is injunction to silence mirrors a larger Western Judeo-Christian silencing of Korean subjectivity, as well as discourse related to sexuality."[29] Duncan also concludes that:

> Thus, some Korean men have expressed their anger over the fact that Korean women's sexuality—seen as rightfully belonging to them—has been seized by Japanese men, thereby robbing Korean men. Similarly, Akiko's American husband, believing in his own entitlement to her body and sexuality,

22 Patti Duncan, *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2004), 180.

23 Pyong Gap Min, "Korean Americans," in *Asian Americans: Contemporary Trends and Issues* ed. Pyong Gap Min (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2006), 231.

24 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 195.

25 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 195.

26 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 196.

27 Duncan, *Tell This Silence*, 182.

28 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 196.

29 Duncan, *Tell This Silence*, 182.

> expresses anger and frustration over his perception that she has "allowed" other (Asian) men to dishonor her.[30]

When Akiko was pregnant, she had a dream that her newborn baby would be a boy. This is the only occurrence where her husband did not scold her for her superstitious beliefs, because he was also excited to potentially have a son. Nevertheless, she ended up giving birth to a girl. Instead of being disappointed for not bearing a son, Akiko was beyond thrilled: "I realized I had a daughter and knew a fierce joy, more awesome because of its unexpectedness. […] This baby was for me, mine, not my husband's son but my daughter."[31] This signals the strong bond she would have with her daughter later in life. Akiko managed to break away from the norms, traditions, and expectations influenced by patriarchy and Confucianism after giving birth to Beccah. She prepared for Beccah a hundred-day celebration, which is a Korean tradition:

> I want my own child to know that I gave her a hundred-day celebration, that I love her and thank the spirits for her health, even though she is not a boy and not in Korea. Or perhaps I celebrate her because she is a girl, an American girl.[32]

The novel demonstrates how Beccah herself is also less influenced by all of these patriarchal expectations. One instance that shows her attitude toward men is her claim that "women need men like fish need bicycles."[33] This strange simile serves as a demonstration of self-reliance, as Beccah did not depend on any men in her life.

World War II and the Comfort Women

Japan first invaded Korea in the late 1870s, and "in 1905 Korea became a protectorate of Japan and in 1910 it was formally annexed," as Uma A. Segal remarks. She further describes how under the rule of the first governor general, Korea faced severe oppression and humiliation as the Japanese tried to force the nation to acculturate and adopt a Japanese identity. The colonial period spanned from 1910 to 1945, in accordance with the end of World War II and the start of the Korean War.[34]

Segal outlines the extensive military, political, and economic ties between Korea and the United States since the end of the Korean War. As a result, the US has had a considerable cultural impact on South Korea.[35] You-Me Park elaborates on the gender culture enforced in Korea:

> This "special" relationship between the US and South Korea is also necessarily a hypersexualized one, thanks to the militarized and masculinized US presence in South Korea […] Korea and Korean Americans are also sexualized through the US's memory of, and interaction with, Korea through comfort women, base women, and women available to them through sex tourism.[36]

30 Duncan, *Tell This Silence*, 180.

31 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 116.

32 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 119.

33 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 127.

34 Segal, *A Framework for Immigration*, 66.

35 Segal, *A Framework for Immigration*, 106.

36 You-Me Park, "Pursuing Korean American Literature," *The Sigur Centre Asia Papers* 6, no. 20 (2004): 46–47.

The use of women for sexual services during wartime has a long history. Goldstein comments that although it may not apply to every woman in every war, the exploitation of women significantly increases during warfare. He indicates that more women are engaged in sex work under more abusive conditions, since war destabilizes social norms and relationships.[37] Goldstein further argues that "men's participation in combat depends on feminizing the enemy and enacting rape symbolically (and sometimes literally), thereby using gender to symbolize domination."[38] He mentions the "Rape of Nanking," a series of horrifying wartime atrocities against Chinese civilians by the Japanese Army, including widespread rape of women of all ages. Brutal sexual assault was one of several ways in which Japanese forces imposed their domination through extreme cruelty and humiliation in Nanking from late 1937 to early 1938. Iris Chang notes that these actions were met with criticism on a large scale at the time. It was one of the factors which eventually led to opposition to Japanese militarism in foreign countries by the United States. In response to this public outcry, the Japanese army invented their own system of organized sexual service called comfort women.[39]

According to George Hicks, the comfort women system was a "large-scale, officially-organized system of rape by the Imperial Japanese forces across Asia." This system affected thousands of women, from young village girls to older women.[40] Choi notes that, depending on the source, estimates of the overall number of comfort women range from 60,000 to more than 200,000. As is common with war (and other) atrocities, documentation is challenging due to the extensive destruction of evidence-based documents by the conquerors. This case is made even more difficult to document due to the fact that many of the women were murdered by the Japanese when they withdrew from Korea.[41] As alluded to above, shame and a feeling of dishonor also prevents many victims from revealing their story. Kazuko Watanabe explains that while the affected women were from several neighboring countries of Japan, such as China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, 80 percent of these victims were of Korean descent.[42] Watanabe also adds that women from European countries were also recruited, such as Dutch females "from the Japanese prisoners-of-war camps in Indonesia."[43]

Yuki Tanaka reflects on the reasons comfort camps were established by stating that the Japanese thought that by having more women available for their armed forces, the number of rapes would decrease. Their soldiers were encouraged to use brothels to increase their "fighting spirit." The military culture identified the activities in the comfort camps as suitable for leisure time. In addition, officials were concerned about the spread of venereal diseases. Japanese military personnel

37 Goldstein, *War and Gender*, 333.

38 Goldstein, *War and Gender*, 356.

39 Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 170–180.

40 George L. Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War* (New York: W. W. Norton& Co, 1995), 11.

41 Choi, "Korean Women," 103.

42 Kazuko Watanabe, "Trafficking in Women's Bodies, Then and Now: The Issue of Military 'Comfort Women,'" *Women's Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 1/2 (Summer-Spring 1999): 20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40003395>.

43 Watanabe, "Trafficking in Women's Bodies," 20–21.

assumed that by setting up the comfort system, they would be able to take preventive measures.[44] The Japanese Army attempted to protect the health of its soldiers by checking the women for signs of sexually transmitted diseases and infections, as Hicks reports that each unit had a medical officer assigned to such a purpose.[45] The medical officer in the novel seems to share the same view as the soldiers regarding the treatment of women, with the doctor himself also participating in these activities. On one occasion, the Japanese physician lectures Akiko about how "nature ensures that there is one dominant male to keep the others at bay and the female under control." He further comments that: "Perhaps it is the differences in geography that make the women of our two countries so morally incompatible."[46] The doctor's words could symbolize the general mindset the Japanese had about their colonies, for Japan viewed its people as genetically superior to Koreans. This type of attitude also demonstrates the repeated theme of dominance over women. Furthermore, Patricia Chu points out that "the doctor's discourses, like official euphemisms such as 'comfort women' and 'comfort stations,' distance the Japanese from recognizing their crimes as human violations."[47]

Hicks highlights the fact that many women were tricked, kidnapped, or forced into sexual slavery. Although licensed prostitution had existed in Japan before the war, many of the comfort women were innocent young girls who were forced into the system. He elaborates that in the process of locating the women, private individuals were involved, either seeking their own financial profit or working under the Japanese government towards the war effort.[48] Hicks further explains that in a country where Confucian filial piety principles were highly valued, the major appeal to the girls was the possibility of sending money home.[49]

Such events are recorded in the story of Akiko, who indicates that in general girls were "bought or stolen from villages outside the city, sent to Japanese recreation centers."[50] What many people thought would happen to the drafted girls was that they would learn factory work or serve in restaurants. However, this proved to be a piece of misleading information spread by the Japanese. The girls were lured in by false offers of work or even kidnapped, and in some cases sold by their families, many against their own will. The protagonist of the novel lived through the same experience. She was sold as a dowry to provide money for her older sister so that her sister could marry and carry on the family business after their parents' death. This rationalization of securing the future of the family served as a betrayal to the younger sibling. Nora Okja Keller stated in an interview with Young-Oak Lee that one of her intentions in the novel was to demonstrate the betrayal comfort women felt by their own country's inability to protect them. By presenting Akiko as being sold by her sister, Keller wanted to show the cruel betrayal of the girl by someone very

44 Yuki Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution During World War II and the US Occupation* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 28–30.

45 Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 14.

46 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 22.

47 Patricia P. Chu, "'To Hide Her True Self': Sentimentality and the Search for an Intersubjective Self in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*," in *Asian North American Identities: Beyond the Hyphen*, ed. Eleanor Ty, and Donald C. Goellnicht (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 67.

48 Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 20.

49 Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 13.

50 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 19.

close to her.[51] What can also be said about this occurrence is that it reflects the power imbalance of Confucianism, as the older sibling bears the superior position and may thus exercise more power over the younger ones.

In general, the women selected to serve in the comfort stations lived under very harsh conditions. According to Pyong Gap Min, Korean women specifically differed from other Pacific war victims due to the centered humiliation and brutality they received.[52] Min further points out how Japan's colonization of Korea was a factor that exacerbated the treatment that Korean comfort women were subjected to.[53] Patti Duncan adds that "the Japanese army equated Korea's women with the nation in its attempt to humiliate and subjugate Korean women as a visible signifier of its control over Korea."[54] The control Japan exerted over Korea is a significant contributor to the suffering of Korean women. Goldstein also points out how "the nation is often gendered female and the state male. Women in some sense embody the nation."[55] The metaphor of comparing a woman's body with a country is demonstrated in the novel by the death of Induk, the woman known as Akiko 40, and the woman that the character of Akiko replaced in the brothel. Induk was murdered after denouncing the soldiers and telling them to "stop their invasion of her country and her body."[56] Induk reclaimed her identity in death by embracing everything Korean: her true name and family surname, their history, and even the family recipes she inherited from her mother. The corpse of Induk was then displayed as a warning signal for the other women to remind them of what would happen if they attempted to go against the Japanese.

Furthermore, the treatment of comfort women is characterized by Choi's comments that women were considered objects, as demonstrated by the case of military shipping clerks who had comfort women listed in their documents as boxes of ammunition.[57] Akiko also acknowledged this approach, noting that the women were viewed as "disposable commodities."[58]

Apart from the mistreatment of comfort women, the Japanese employed many other oppressive tactics in Korea to maintain their dominance. Duncan states that "Koreans were forbidden to speak their own language; they were forced to speak Japanese."[59] What is presented in the novel about the colonial power the Japanese exercised over Korea is the assumption that: "The Japanese say Koreans have an inherent gift for languages proving that [they] are a natural colony, meant to be dominated."[60] In the case of comfort women, it was not expected that they would understand the Japanese language, yet speak it, since they were forbidden to do so. They were taught only the necessities to serve the military men, which was their only purpose. In the

51 Young-Oak Lee, and Nora Okja Keller, "Nora Okja Keller and the Silenced Woman: An Interview," *MELUS* 28, no. 4 (2003): 152.

52 Pyong Gap Min, "Korean 'Comfort Women': The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class," *Gender and Society* 17, no. 6 (2003): 947. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3594678>.

53 Min, "Korean 'Comfort Women,'" 939.

54 Duncan, *Tell This Silence,* 179.

55 Goldstein, *War and Gender*, 362.

56 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 20.

57 Choi, "Korean Women," 104.

58 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 147.

59 Duncan, *Tell This Silence*, 182.

60 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 16.

novel, the women created their own ways of communicating. Since Akiko was still too young to serve as a comfort woman when she first arrived at the military base, she was made to take care of the women who were stationed there. Because of this, she had more freedom than the comfort women, so the women used her to pass messages to each other. On many occasions, while caring for them she would sing, which the women also used to their advantage, as Akiko revealed: "when [she] hummed certain sections, the women knew to take those unsung words for their message." In this way, women could find out who was sick, who was new, or who had served the most men the previous night.[61] By using this system, the women were able to communicate and check on each other as well. Body language was also used to communicate, as explained by Akiko:

> We taught ourselves to communicate through eye movements, body posture, tilts of the head, or – when we could not see each other – through rhythmic rustlings between our stalls; in this way we could speak, and in this way, we kept our sanity.[62]

The forcing of the Japanese onto the Korean nation in the comfort women system is also reflected in the renaming of the girls and women while serving in the brothels. Akiko described that she was issued a name and a number which was stenciled on her jacket – Akiko, 41. Others would be deemed Hanako 38, Miyoko 52, Tamayo 29, to name a few. As has been noted, the occupiers forced Japanese identity onto the Korean citizens, with comfort women receiving the same or even worse treatment. When the Christian minister whom she had met after escaping the brothel spoke to Akiko, he called her by the name on her jacket. She felt repulsed and angry at her fate. Akiko was still afflicted by what had happened to her, therefore, she chose to remain silent. Her thoughts are voiced as follows:

> I felt as if he had slapped me with the name the soldiers had assigned to me. I wanted to shout, No! That is not my name! but I said nothing, knowing that after what happened to me, I had no right to use the name I was born with. That girl was dead.[63]

Because she had been defiled by the Japanese, she felt that she had no right to use her true name, Soon Hyo, since it means pure in Korean. The way she kept the name the Japanese gave her demonstrates the effect that the sexual assault and trauma she experienced had left on her, with such abuse destroying her view of herself and her identity. Akiko keeps her given Japanese name throughout the length of the book, only accepting her real name in the last chapter in a moving gesture of closure.

Min emphasizes that as victims of sexual violence, these women were forced to keep quiet and live isolated lives.[64] The silence the women maintained and their trauma can be attributed to many factors, including patriarchy, Confucian traditions, and gender hierarchy. Min notes that the state-supported patriarchal system in Japan was fundamental to the development of Japanese military brothels.[65] He also claims that "the key role in the suffering of Korean comfort women

61 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 20.

62 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 16.

63 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 93.

64 Min, "Korean 'Comfort Women,'" 947.

65 Min, "Korean 'Comfort Women,'" 939.

after their return home" was the gender hierarchy. Most comfort women kept their stories to themselves for more than fifty years due to "strong patriarchal traditions and sexual double standards in Korea."[66] Vipan Chandra further adds that class also played an important role, as it seems that women from well-off and well-connected families managed to escape recruitment or abduction.[67] Akiko recalled that: "perhaps if my parents had not died so early, I might have been able to live a full life. Perhaps not; we were a poor family. I might have been sold anyway."[68] The status of the women also played an important role, as women of the wealthier class were usually not subjected to the horrors of becoming comfort women.

The phenomenon of forced prostitution came to the surface in the early 1990s after the public testimony of former comfort women. Hicks explains that "the changing attitudes of women, and towards women, in Asia were an essential precondition" for these revelations.[69] Min elaborates that several hundred former comfort women were able to share their stories with the help of feminist organizations in South Korea as well as other Asian nations, thus breaking a half-century of silence. An active redress movement has emerged in Asia in line with other feminist and democratic movements. While this movement has spread throughout many Asian countries, it has been most active in South Korea, which accounts for a majority of the victims, and in Japan, the nation that committed the crime.[70] According to Choi, certain revelations about comfort women in 1991 shocked Korean society, but she stresses that what is particularly shocking is that this issue had remained hidden for so many years.[71] Choi emphasizes that the reason for the lack of publicity could be the fact that after the defeat of Japan in 1945, most of the documents that could prove the existence of comfort women were destroyed by the Japanese.[72] Nevertheless, as Choi further informs, there was in fact a degree of accessible information on the comfort women system, but what prevented public discussions about them were men with legal and social power, and their relationships with women.[73]

Vera Mackie states that protests, demonstrations, lawsuits, a people's tribunal, and petitions submitted to the International Commission of Jurists and the United Nations have all been part of disclosure and restitution campaigns. Additionally, petitions to national and local governments have been submitted requesting them to pressure the Japanese government to apologize and make reparations.[74] Mina Chang comments that with all the testimonies and demonstrations:

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66 Min, "Korean 'Comfort Women,'" 948.

67 Vipan Chandra, "Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military," *Pacific Affairs* 74, no. 3 (Fall, 2001): 435. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/comfort-women-speak-testimony-sex-slaves-japanese/docview/217703317/se-2>.

68 Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 17.

69 Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 21.

70 Min, "Korean 'Comfort Women,'" 938–939.

71 Choi, "Korean Women," 98.

72 Choi, "Korean Women," 98.

73 Choi, "Korean Women," 99.

74 Vera Mackie, "One Thousand Wednesdays: Transnational Activism from Seoul to Glendale," in *Women's Activism and "Second Wave" Feminism: Transnational Histories*, ed. Barbara Molony and Jennifer Nelson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017): 249.

> [t]he comfort women's demands are: one, a clear apology accepting the government's role in planning and maintaining sex slavery; and two, monetary reparations to be given to victims directly from the government as a symbolic gesture of taking responsibility for the harms caused.[75]

Chang further comments that personas such as Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama have acknowledged the suffering of comfort women while expressing a sense of deep regret. However, the Japanese government's official denial of the existence of state-run brothels followed by its reluctance to admit its involvement in their management of them has fallen far short of the expectations of the former comfort women.[76]

Chang mentions that in 2007 Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made a number of highly controversial remarks regarding the evidence for the forced drafting of the comfort women, which was met with extensive criticism by international organizations. He later made an apology "though still voiced in vague language and carefully drafted wording."[77]

According to Chang, the lack of explicitly state-funded payments has kept this matter heated. In 1995, many comfort women collectively declined the sum of two million yen offered by the Asian Women's Fund, an amount which was officially backed by the Japanese government but funded by private donations from individuals. Official organizations insisted that funds should not be accepted until the Japanese state itself grants them. Some of the women who took the money were heavily criticized for their choice, which raises questions, as Chang argues, as to what extent the matter was designed for the benefit of the victims rather than to express a nationalistic Korean and anti-Japan ideology. Although the politicization of the problem by activists seems to have been well-intended, it may have had the consequence of reducing the agency of individual comfort women.[78]

Hicks stresses that the affected women who still remain alive want the Japanese government to unequivocally acknowledge that they were forced into sexual service.[79] Chang emphasizes that without a formal apology, the type of reconciliation by Japan's decision to "wait it out" remains insufficient. Yet it seems that the Japanese government underestimated the degree of transnational involvement in the subject, which extends beyond East Asia.[80]

Mackie argues that the comfort women issue is transnational "by its very nature, involving the history of military conflict between nations and involving women who were transported across national borders and subjected to militarized sexual violence."[81] Akwi Seo asserts that in the early 1990s, South Korea became the very first country to politicize Japanese military sexual slavery as a question of women's rights. The problem quickly expanded beyond war reparations between Japan and Korea, opening the door to global initiatives to end violence against women

75 Mina Chang, "The Politics of an Apology: Japan and Resolving the 'Comfort Women' Issue," *Harvard International Review* 31, no. 4 (2009): 36. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42763319>.

76 Chang, "The Politics of an Apology," 34.

77 Chang, "The Politics of an Apology," 36.

78 Chang, "The Politics of an Apology," 37.

79 Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 11.

80 Chang, "The Politics of an Apology," 37.

81 Mackie, "One Thousand Wednesdays," 249.

in all conflicts.[82] Silvia Schultermandl claims that "the ramifications of the movement have also reached and continue to shape feminist theory and practice in the United States."[83] Schultermandl further adds that:

> [r]ape and trauma are universal forms of oppression regardless of a woman's sexual orientation, ethnicity, nation, religion, class, or age, women's protest rape and other violations serve as a bridge that unites feminist struggles beyond the different rhetoric of mainstream US feminist theory and practice. There is nothing particularly "Korean" about what happens to Akiko's body.[84]

The issues associated with comfort women are of a transnational character, as violence perpetrated against women is widespread, not bound to certain boundaries of any country. The patriarchal system of gender hierarchy and sexual double standards, the Confucian traditions and their emphasis on women's chastity, as well as the class poverty from which comfort women came from, all negatively influenced the lives of these women and even allowed the establishment of the comfort women system in the first place.

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82 Akwi Seo, "Toward Postcolonial Feminist Subjectivity: Korean Women's Redress Movement for 'Comfort Women,'" in *Rethinking Japanese Feminisms*, ed. Julia C. Bullock, Ayako Kano, and James Welker (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 230.

83 Silvia Schultermandl, "Writing Rape, Trauma and Transnationality onto the Female Body: Matrilineal Em-Body-Ment in Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman," *Meridians* 7, no. 2 (2007): 72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40314247>.

84 Schultermandl, "Writing Rape, Trauma and Transnationality," 94.

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