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Gender Issues in *Comfort Woman* by Nora Okja Keller

Barbora Frizelová

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Zásady pro vypracování

Závěrečná bakalářská práce se bude zabývat otázkou genderu v románu *Comfort Woman* (autorky Nory O. Kellerové) zachycující období druhé světové války a transnacionální problematiku tzv. „utěšitelék“, jež není posuzována jako pouze asijská záležitost, ale přesahující dokonce i na kontinent Severní Ameriky. S pomocí sekundární literatury studentka nastíní relevantní historicko-kulturní kontext (především pak relevantní události druhé světové války mezi Japonskem a Koreou, nastíní také problematiku „utěšitelék“ a zmíní také vliv politiky USA v tomto kontextu). Dále budou v teoretické části nastíněny stěžejní pojmy spojené s genderem, a také vhodná feministická rovina užitá v analýze. Román bude také zasazen do literárního kontextu.

Studentka dále okomentuje metafory vyplývající z problematiky „utěšitelék“ související s okupací Koreje Japonskem. V analýze se studentka také zaměří na (ne)začlenění vybraných postav do americké společnosti. Pozornost bude také věnována vztahu matky s dcerou, jak je zachycen v románu *Comfort Woman*. Své argumenty bude studentka ilustrovat ukázkami z primárních děl a bude je konfrontovat/opírat o kritické zdroje. Závěrem studentka svá zjištění přehledně shrne a vyvodí obecnější závěr ohledně zobrazení problematiky genderu.

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Vedoucí bakalářské práce:

Mgr. Petra Kohlová

Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

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doc. Mgr. Jiří Kubeš, Ph.D.
děkan

Mgr. Olga Roebuck, Ph.D.
vedoucí katedry

V Pardubicích dne 30. listopadu 2021

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ANNOTATION

This bachelor thesis discusses gender issues depicted in the novel *Comfort Woman* by Nora Okja Keller. The thesis focuses on the literary and historical context of the novel, outlines the relevant events of the Second World War, and presents the so-called “comfort women system” introduced by the Japanese army. In addition, it analyzes the relationship between mother and daughter, the two main characters of the book, and their attempts to assimilate into American society.

KEYWORDS

Asian American literature, gender, comfort women, mother-daughter relationship, Second World War

NÁZEV

Otázky genderu v románu *Comfort Woman* Nory O. Kellerové

ANOTACE

Tato bakalářská práce pojednává o problematice genderu zobrazeném v díle *Comfort Woman* Nory Kellerové. Práce se soustředí na literární a historický kontext románu, nastiňuje relevantní události druhé světové války a prezentuje takzvaný systém „utěšitelů“ představený Japonskou armádou. Dále pak analyzuje vztah matky a dcery, dvou hlavních představitelk románu, a jejich pokusy o asimilaci do Americké společnosti.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

asijsko-americká literatura, gender, utěšitelky, vztah matky a dcery, druhá světová válka

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Introduction

This bachelor thesis deals with the issue of comfort women and their representation in the novel *Comfort Woman*. The comfort women system has been a widely silenced topic in the past, which has been influenced by many factors. This thesis defines the factors that made former comfort women suffer in silence. Furthermore, this thesis aims to analyze how the female gender was oppressed to the point that it allowed the comfort women system to be established in the first place.

Nora Okja Keller is considered one of the essential women writers of Asian American literature. The sign of the success and popularity of her novel is the 1998 American Book Award and the 1999 Eliot Cades Book Award, as Allison Layfield points out. By winning the American Book Award, the novel gained more attention and was acknowledged as an American story. Therefore, the comfort women phenomenon has been accepted in the multicultural composition of the US.¹

By publishing her book, Keller intended to give voice to these silenced women and bring more attention to this topic. Daniel Y. Kim and Viet Thanh Nguyen observe that “the desire to give voice to a ‘forgotten’ trauma experienced by a prior generation is of course a familiar one.”² As Keller stated in an interview with Young-Oak Lee, she created the character of Beccah to convey the following message:

[s]he [Beccah] records the lives of the dead without knowing the true story of these people. In a way, her discovery of her mother's story parallels the world's discovery of the stories of comfort women. They will not die unknown and unrecognized, lost in history.³

The introductory chapter defines Asian American literature, focusing on Korean American writings and authors. It also introduces the novel's author, Nora Okja Keller, and analyzes the literary genres and devices used in her book *Comfort Woman*.

The second chapter outlines the historical context of the novel, consisting of the colonial period in Korea, as well as relevant events from the Second World War between Japan, Korea,

¹ Allison Layfield, “Asian American Literature and Reading Formations: A Case Study of Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman* and *Fox Girl*,” *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* 7 (2015): 67.

² Daniel Y. Kim and Viet Thanh Nguyen, “The Literature of the Korean War and Vietnam War,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature* ed. Crystal Parikh and Daniel Y. Kim (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 62.

³ Young-Oak Lee, and Nora Okja Keller, “Nora Okja Keller and the Silenced Woman: An Interview,” *MELUS* 28, no. 4 (2003): 155.

and the United States. Additionally, referring to the use of gender during wartime, the transnational issue of the comfort women system is discussed in greater detail.

The third chapter deals with the key concepts of gender and describes how they may differ in various cultures, particularly in Asia and the United States.

In the last chapter, immigration and assimilation are discussed. The last chapter also focuses on the mother-daughter relationship. In this thesis, the theoretical and practical parts are intertwined for better demonstration and connection of the overall text.

1 Asian American Literature

When analyzing the novel with which this thesis is concerned, it is essential to place it in its respective literary context. Beginning with Asian American literature, Allison Layfield observes that its writers are currently more regularly published and achieve greater success than they did in the 1970s. Asian American literature has made tremendous development, particularly during the 1990s.⁴

It is important to note that Asian America is a broad term consisting of many ethnic groups. According to Wenying Xu, Asian American literature is not entirely self-explanatory regarding the issue of what kind of authors should be considered Asian American.⁵ This issue is reflected in *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* where Asian Americans are defined in limiting terms as Filipino-, Chinese-, Japanese-Americans, born and raised in the US. In addition, the source of their *otherness* comes only from television, comic books, or radio, not from personal experience.⁶ Xu responds that while it is true that the ethnic groups stated above were the most active, it is crucial to note that nowadays there are over sixty different Asian subgroups in the United States. Therefore, the differentiation between them is of key importance due to their fundamentally diverse experiences resulting from their unique colonial pasts and traditions.⁷

Xu further describes that Asian American literature emerged as a protest against socioeconomic discrimination, marginalization, and cultural stereotypes, to name a few. Its authors frequently use the complicated past of Asian Americans, including their involvement in building the transcontinental railroad, the development of the economy in California and Hawaii, and their memories of the colonial histories of their former home countries, as inspiration. She also adds that the literature deals with the question of their identity or what it means to be an American.⁸

Female writers play an essential role in the development of Asian American literature. Layfield claims that Asian American women writers have considerably impacted the American

⁴ Layfield, "Asian American Literature," 65.

⁵ Wenying Xu, *Historical Dictionary of Asian American Literature and Theater* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012), 1.

⁶ Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong, "Preface," in *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, ed. Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong (New York: Mentor, 1991), 11–12.

⁷ Xu, *Historical Dictionary*, 1–2.

⁸ Xu, *Historical Dictionary*, 2.

literary canon since the 1970s. The female authors she mentions in particular are Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, whose literary pieces were very successful. Their success ultimately pushed the Asian American experience into the American mainstream literary canon.⁹ Nora Okja Keller is considered one of the most influential writers as well. According to the statements of Deborah Madsen, the novel *Comfort Woman* has gained recognition as one of the essential works of Asian American literature.¹⁰

Layfield claims that the positive reception of Asian American women's literature depends on various elements. She summarizes that reception is largely influenced by the following factors: First, the readers want to understand the situation of Asian women; second, the story has to be told in a structure that is common in Asian American literature, for example, the mother-daughter tale; and third, the story needs to follow successful immigration narratives, where the heroine validates the significance of the family and depicts immigration to the United States as a means of salvation.¹¹

Patricia Chu explains the meaning of mother-daughter tales as narratives of Asian women's experiences "from a perspective that is involved, yet distanced from that experience – the perspective of the American daughters."¹² The relationship between mother and daughter, one of the main topics of the book, will be discussed in the last chapter.

Chu also mentions that the emphasis on the similarity of Asian women with the supposedly middle-class American audience necessitates a thorough understanding and clever manipulation of the norm of the Anglo-American literary tradition depicting subjectivity, the *bildungsroman*.¹³ Jennifer Ann Ho describes *bildungsroman* as a story of:

[y]oung protagonist [who] embarks upon a journey—mental, emotional, or physical—instigated by a crisis of identity, and after his/her literal or philosophical adventures, s/he reconciles with his/her home (symbolized most often through his/her Asian-ethnic family) and his/her Asian-ethnic American identity.¹⁴

⁹ Layfield, "Asian American Literature," 64–65.

¹⁰ Deborah Lea Madsen, "Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* and the Ethics of Literary Trauma," *Concentric* 33, no. 2 (2007): 81. <http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:87862>.

¹¹ Layfield, "Asian American Literature," 64.

¹² 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), 77.

¹³ Chu, "'To Hide Her True Self,'" 61–62.

¹⁴ Jennifer Ann Ho, *Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 9.

S. Moon Cassinelli claims that *Comfort Woman* is “best interpreted as a bildungsroman.”¹⁵ Layfield stresses that it is Beccah, not her immigrant mother Akiko, who grows mentally.¹⁶ At the end of the novel, after finding the whole story about her mother, Beccah had to understand her mother’s life as well as her own. Therefore, she goes through a mental journey that reassures her identity as a Korean American. Upon this revelation, Ho emphasizes that only when Beccah learned to recognize her mother as a “strong woman” who has dealt with the hardships of her past and not as a foreigner who could not integrate herself into American culture can she begin to “come of age.”¹⁷

As this thesis focuses on the Korean American literature, only this branch of Asian American literature will be analyzed. Asian American authors are divided according to their belonging to generations based on their immigration status. This literary division does not start nor end with the third generation; however, describing other generations in detail would be beyond the scope of this thesis. The third generation is important to mention, particularly because the author of *Comfort Woman* is included in this category. Xu indicates that third-generation writers, many born in America, are heavily influenced by war. Authors such as Nora Okja Keller and Chang-rae Lee focused their works on the phenomenon of comfort women, while others reflected on the division of Korea, orphaned children as a result of the conflicts, or biracial children as a result of American military involvement in South Korea.¹⁸

In an interview with Young-Oak Lee, it is mentioned that Nora Okja Keller was born in 1965 in Seoul but moved to Hawaii with her family when she was three. Keller also revealed that she was inspired to write her first book, *Comfort Woman*, after attending the testimony of Keum-ja Hwang. Hwang was one of the first women in history to break the silence and speak about her experience in World War II.¹⁹ Keller explains that after hearing her speech, she was bewildered as to why this topic was not widely known or even covered by the history books. She felt haunted and overwhelmed until she finally decided to write it down.²⁰ In addition, Layfield notes that Keller intended to write a trilogy on the sexual exploitation of Korean women.²¹ So far, Keller has published two books on this topic.

¹⁵ S. Moon Cassinelli, “‘It Was Akiko 41; It Was Me’: Queer Kinships in Nora Okja Keller's Mother-Daughter Narrative,” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 1-2 (2019): 197.

¹⁶ Layfield, “Asian American,” 68.

¹⁷ Ho, *Consumption and Identity*, 80.

¹⁸ Xu, *Historical Dictionary*, 9.

¹⁹ Lee, and Keller, “Nora Okja Keller,” 145.

²⁰ Nora Okja Keller, “The Language of Stories,” *The Sigur Center Asia Papers* 6, no. 20 (2004), 30.

²¹ Layfield, “Asian American Literature,” 66.

The way Keller brought attention to these women proved successful, as it was not a widely discussed topic in the past. In the same interview, Keller explains that she is both honored and pleased that new stories and articles about comfort camp survivors are available on the Internet. Before her publication, topics such as homemaking appeared.²² Therefore, recognition of the comfort women's matter can be largely attributed to her name. Furthermore, Layfield claims that the popularity of the novel can also be tied to its timely publication date since the book was published in 1997, only a few years after the first testimonies of the former comfort women. An audience already interested in learning more about these hardships was the ideal match for Keller's goal of advocating for these women.²³

The novel is divided into chapters, each narrated by a distinct narrator; Akiko, a former Korean comfort woman who immigrated to the US, and her Korean American daughter Beccah. The main characters each cover different timelines, places, and experiences. The narrative is non-linear, for Keller uses memories and flashbacks to give the essential background and to unite the overall story. Duncan explains that Keller's chosen narration technique represents the divided state of Korea, Korean America, and women whose lives have been torn apart by colonialism, Western occupation, and other types of oppression.²⁴

A theme that is widely present in the novel is the use of silence. Duncan highlights that "Akiko rarely speaks and is largely silent."²⁵ Her story is, thus, narrated through memories. She states that while Akiko is communicative with the spirits, she remains mostly silent with the "so-called living people."²⁶ She further elaborates that the use of silence is to show how sexual oppression and victimization have been addressed in public discourse. Keller uses silence both as a literary device and as a theme within the tale.²⁷ Chu further points out that Keller "emphasizes how language is complicit with forms of domination that tinge imperialism with patriarchy in myriad examples, such as the narrator's forced renaming."²⁸ Throughout the story, Soon Hyo, the character's real name, was changed three times. First, she was forced to use the name Akiko in the comfort camp. She was also assigned number 41, pointing to the fact that there were 40 women serving before her. Then, the American missionaries used the name Mary

²² Lee, and Keller, "Nora Okja Keller," 155.

²³ Layfield, "Asian American Literature," 67.

²⁴ Patti Duncan, *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2004), 175.

²⁵ Duncan, *Tell This Silence*, 176.

²⁶ Duncan, *Tell This Silence*, 185.

²⁷ Duncan, *Tell This Silence*, 174.

²⁸ Chu, "'To Hide Her True Self,'" 69.

Magdalene to refer to her. And finally, after marrying the Christian minister, she used the name Akiko Bradley. All of these instances show Akiko's inability to reclaim her own identity.

2 Gender Issues

To begin this chapter, it is important to define the essential terms that are often associated with the topic of gender and to help provide the foundation for a better understanding of the concept in its entirety. The terms discussed hereafter might seem very closely connected; however, there is a notable difference between each of them.

Gender issues are problems, concerns, or any troubles that are brought about by differences between genders. This can include the different treatment each sex is met with in different environments such as school, workplace, or even home. It is important to note that gender varies across cultures and generations. The topic of gender has changed significantly throughout history, and even today, the questions of gender are still evolving. Therefore, it is still relevant in the present age.

Susan Kent explains that, almost invariably, gender is a part of a power dynamic. The attributes given 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. Due to this, gender is typically linked to women.²⁹

The first terms that will be analyzed are sex and gender. For many, these two are in agreement. However, it is possible that for some people these two terms do not correspond. Thus, it is crucial to note the potential difference that can occur. In an article by Tim Newman, sex is explained as “a physical difference between people who are a male, female, or an intersex.” Furthermore, he adds that sex is typically assigned at birth based on physiological characteristics.³⁰ According to this definition, sex refers to the biological characteristics of a person, in particular their reproductive abilities. Thus, one’s sex is defined and constant; some characteristics can be changed only by undergoing treatment and surgery.

On the other hand, that is not the case for gender, which is connected to culture and society. Dino Franco Felluga explains that the idea of gender is primarily, if not totally, a cultural construct influenced by our civilization's prevalent patriarchal prejudices.³¹ To this,

²⁹ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender And History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 3.

³⁰ “Sex and Gender: Meanings, Definition, Identity, And Expression,” *Medical News Today*, last modified May 11, 2021, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/232363>.

³¹ Dino Franco Felluga, *Critical Theory: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 112.

Newman adds that gender is a broad spectrum. It exists as a social construct, but it also involves how a person identifies.³² To characterize one's perception of themselves, the term gender identity is used. Its explanation is available by the World Health Organization, where gender identity is defined as a "person's deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person's physiology or designated sex at birth."³³ Therefore, unlike sex (not considering the option of surgery), gender identity can be changed according to how the person feels and identifies throughout their life. One's own perception of their gender is very personal and cannot be fully seen or understood by others.

The difference between gender and gender identity is in perception. Gender identity, as has been described, concerns individual views that people have of themselves, while gender discusses how people are perceived by society and what is expected of them. These expectations are based on the appearance or behavior of a person, to name a few. The definition of gender on the World Health Organization website states:

[g]ender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviors, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.³⁴

Since the main protagonist of *Comfort Woman*, Akiko, identifies as a woman; it is her sex, and she does not have any doubts regarding her gender identity, this thesis will focus only on the female and male genders.

As stated above, gender also consists of assigned gender roles. Newman defines these as "the socially constructed roles, behaviors, and attributes that a society considers appropriate for men and women."³⁵ Joshua Goldstein also points out that throughout history and in different cultures, gender roles have shown significant variability. Humans have developed several forms of marriage, sexuality, and distribution of labor in housework and childcare.³⁶ Examples of gender roles in the novel will be analyzed later in this chapter after the description of the different cultures that influence them.

³² Medical News Today, "Sex And Gender."

³³ "Gender and Health," World Health Organization, accessed 10 April 2022, https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1.

³⁴ World Health Organization, "Gender and Health."

³⁵ Medical News Today, "Sex and Gender."

³⁶ Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7.

The essence of this thesis is, among other things, to highlight the differing understanding of the gender of the main characters from two very distinct environments, Asia and the USA. Thus, it is necessary to separately present how gender is understood in each culture.

Starting with Asian cultures, there is one philosophical movement that greatly contributed to and, in a way, influenced their views of gender, and that is Confucianism. As per Tu Weiming, this philosophy originated in China during the 6th and 5th centuries BC. Throughout history, its influence eventually extended the boundaries of China and spread to other Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Japan, and Korea.³⁷ Uma Segal informs that Confucianism was embraced by Korea as its guiding philosophy during the Choson era. It is a rigid code of conduct that guarantees that women would always be in subordinate and disadvantageous positions to men; with obedience to men being of utmost importance.³⁸ Kent elaborates on the topic further by highlighting one of the bases of Confucianism, which is 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.³⁹

Another factor that contributed greatly to the views on gender and especially the view of women is the social system in Korea. Korea is a patriarchal society. Kent claims that patriarchy is, in simple terms, “the rule of the father.” It is further analyzed as a concept that is used by women and gender historians to explain a system in which dominant individuals are male, and females are subject to exploitation.⁴⁰ Felluga explains that dominant power is exhibited not just in political and economic spheres, but also in the multiple ways in which culture is formed to favor men over women – stereotypes that establish unequal binary oppositions, for example, “the alignment of women with nature, domesticity, emotion or passivity and men with science, the public sphere, reason or aggressivity.”⁴¹ This also deepened the difference in the position of women and men and increased the gender inequality between them.

In summary, Chungmoo Choi presents that “Korean women still suffer from gender inequality and sexual discrimination.” She further adds that the Korean women’s movement

³⁷ “Confucianism | Meaning, History, Beliefs, & Facts,” Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified November 13, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Confucianism>.

³⁸ Uma A. Segal, *A Framework for Immigration: Asians in the United States*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 65.

³⁹ Kent, *Gender And History*, 10.

⁴⁰ Kent, *Gender And History*, 131.

⁴¹ Felluga, *Critical Theory*, 112.

that had come to prominence in the 1920s has improved the status of women, but the pace at which it did so is very slow. Despite taking part in a variety of social, political, and economic activities, Korean women have not overcome the issues that affect them.⁴²

With men being the favored sex, it is not surprising that families were much more in favor of sons than daughters. In the novel, Akiko might have indicated that her life was already doomed from the beginning, being born as the fourth daughter in her family. Therefore, being born as the non-favored sex. Her birth brought some disappointment, as her family was not gifted with a son. Akiko thought that “because of me, a wrong-sexed baby arriving on an inauspicious day, bad luck moved and became part of our family.”⁴³ The disappointment was not uttered out loud by her parents, but Akiko wondered if her mother felt happy or disappointed when she gave birth to her. The person who was not afraid to express her disappointment with her youngest sister was Akiko’s oldest sister. Akiko recalled that:

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.⁴⁴

Through her voice, it is reflected that; indeed, having a son is something worth celebrating. It demonstrates the different treatment girls and boys received. Akiko’s oldest sister believed that Akiko being born a girl caused their family to suffer a great misfortune.

One more mention of having a son being of utmost importance, is when Akiko’s mother, after having to be rushed to the countryside, recalled that she only had time to listen to the lecture of her future parents-in-law: “Marriage is not about love but about duty. About having sons. About keeping the family name.”⁴⁵ Her parents-in-law stressed the importance of the duty she had toward their family. However, the demand for bearing sons is complicated since there is no way to ensure the sex of the baby.

Perhaps the greatest influence that the Confucian tradition had on women is the concept of woman’s chastity. Choi informs that “traditional Korean women were taught to believe that the loss of chastity was worse than death itself.”⁴⁶ She further emphasizes that many “former

⁴² Chungmoo Choi, “Korean Women in Culture of Inequality,” in *Korea Briefing*, ed. Donald Clark (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 97.

⁴³ Nora Okja Keller, *Comfort Woman* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998): 118.

⁴⁴ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 119.

⁴⁵ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 180.

⁴⁶ Choi, “Korean Women,” 104.

'comfort women' committed suicide upon returning to Korea, fearing allegations of promiscuity and the contempt of their own society."⁴⁷ Young-Hee Shim states that "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."⁴⁸ Having served at the comfort station, Akiko was unable to feel innocent and clean. She thought less of herself since she has been used by many men, even though that was something she was not in charge of and was unable to change. She expressed her thoughts as follows: She wanted to "purify [her]self and knowing [she] never could."⁴⁹ Akiko also believed that she would "never become clean enough to keep."⁵⁰ When meeting an older woman as she escaped the camp, the lady called her a "little girl." To this, Akiko remembered that she wanted to cry out "but [she] didn't because [she] knew no one would ever again hold [her] in tenderness."⁵¹ The comfort camps completely changed Akiko's view of herself. She thought that because she lost her innocence to many soldiers, no man upon finding out would want to be with her or marry her. Choi also states that the paradox of women under Confucian rule is as follows:

[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.⁵² This statement provides the necessary background for the possibility of the drafting of comfort women.

In the case of gender roles, Akiko did not challenge her assigned role in society and accepted it fully. This has been demonstrated on many occasions. First, when Akiko was taken by the Japanese army to the military base, she was yet way too young to serve in the brothels. Akiko did not know what was ahead of her, but she expected to serve her role as a woman. She thought that she "would do what [she] has done all [her] life: clean, cook, wash clothes, work hard."⁵³ This role was not new to her, as she was taught at home from a young age. She explained that they had divided household chores between her and her three older sisters.

⁴⁷ Choi, "Korean Women," 103–104.

⁴⁸ 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>.

⁴⁹ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 54.

⁵⁰ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 62.

⁵¹ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 56.

⁵² Choi, "Korean Women," 105.

⁵³ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 19.

Akiko's job during childhood was to help her mother wash clothes. 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.⁵⁴

Thus, it varies greatly from the norm she will experience later in the mission house. In their household, there was an emphasis on differentiating between males and females, such as that men were served first, then mother and children. Everyone had their own role, which they must respect. If not, they are considered disrespectful and a shame to the family.

Similarly, as Korea is a patriarchal society, the same is true for the United States. Philip Cohen claims that the American society "like every society in the world, remains a patriarchy: they are ruled by men."⁵⁵ Compared to Asian cultures, the distinctive roles of men and women in American society are shown to be less strict in the novel. When meeting American missionaries, Akiko had trouble differentiating between males and females. Appearance aside, she stated that:

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 things and shoulders almost touching.⁵⁶

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. The Confucian values, the teaching 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 would scold her when she did 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

⁵⁴ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 68.

⁵⁵ "America Is Still a Patriarchy," *The Atlantic*, last modified November 19, 2012), <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2012/11/america-is-still-a-patriarchy/265428/>.

⁵⁶ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 68.

will turn a house into a home.”⁵⁷ He then lectured her on cleanliness and godliness. Therefore, Richard shows the patriarchal attitude of men expecting and forcing women to do domestic chores. However, Akiko did not follow his orders, keeping silent as a way of self-preservation and protection. This occurrence led Richard to ask her to “at least help him tidy up.”⁵⁸ Thus, it reflects that Akiko shifted her attitude towards her duties as a woman and as a wife. She no longer exhibited the *respectful* behavior that was expected of her.

One way to analyze the character of Richard Bradley is through the idea of Orientalism. In his book, Edward Said challenged and analyzed the concept of Orientalism, which is rooted in the idea of the West (the White Men) being superior in relation to the East (the Oriental). He notes that “Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand.”⁵⁹ He further describes the West as “rational, developed, humane” while the Orient as “aberrant, undeveloped.”⁶⁰ Said also argues that the United States “dominated” the Orient after the Second World War.⁶¹

The domination of the US as well as of Richard in his attitude towards Akiko is reflected by Duncan. She 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 ideology in a non-Christian, non-Western country.⁶² Akiko's husband is a Christian missionary reflecting the influence of the United States on Korea. Pyong Gap Min comments that American Christian missionaries have been present in Korea since the beginning of 1884, “actively converting Koreans to Christianity.”⁶³ With his superiority, Richard continued to lecture Akiko about the Christian way, forcing Christianity onto her while being ignorant of her individual beliefs.

The abusive aspect of Akiko's and Richard's marriage is recounted by their daughter Beccah. She remembered one night from her childhood when she witnessed her mother “dancing in the alley of our yard and [her] father on his knees before her, begging her to come

⁵⁷ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 112.

⁵⁸ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 112.

⁵⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 7.

⁶⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 300.

⁶¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 4.

⁶² Duncan, *Tell This Silence*, 180.

⁶³ Pyong Gap Min, “Korean Americans,” in *Asian Americans: Contemporary Trends and Issues* ed. Pyong Gap Min (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2006), 231.

inside, come inside before someone saw them.”⁶⁴ It is shown that Akiko had already experienced outbursts or trances in Beccah’s earlier childhood. Regardless of the gravity of the situation and Akiko’s emotional state, it seemed that Akiko’s husband truly did not care for her, but rather for the opinion of others who could have seen them. He orders her to “bow down before God,” believing that only God could cure her.⁶⁵ He compared her to the woman of Luke who had been inflicted by evil spirits. However, Akiko did not follow his orders. She managed to stand up for herself and answered that she “will never, never again lay down for any man.”⁶⁶ This occurrence symbolizes that Akiko found strength within herself and finally gained autonomy over her body. She continued chanting: “I know what I speak, for that is my given name, Soon Hyo, the true voice, the pure tongue.”⁶⁷ This part of the novel can be seen as Akiko’s momentary reclaiming of her real name despite believing that she was no longer fit for it in the past. However, she continues to narrate the story as Akiko, only reclaiming her real name in the last chapter.

In this part of the novel, Akiko admitted her 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.”⁶⁸ This was met with immediate criticism from her husband. He rebuked her to “Put away perversity from [her] mouth; keep corrupt talk from [her] lips.”⁶⁹ Richard accused her of not knowing what she is saying while asking God for forgiveness. Therefore, he disregards her story, mirroring the actions of the Japanese government and the general public in relation to victims of sexual abuse. He then brought Beccah into the conversation: “Think of how she would feel, knowing her mother was a prostitute.”⁷⁰ As Duncan argues, by calling Akiko a “prostitute,” he implies her complicity.⁷¹ He 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.”⁷² He did not offer to listen to her, but rather tried to silence her as it was, in his opinion, a shameful history, even though Akiko had no choice but to comply with the Japanese orders. He even went so far as to use violence to silence her. He is oppressive in the way he approaches this

⁶⁴ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 195.

⁶⁵ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 195.

⁶⁶ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 195.

⁶⁷ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 195.

⁶⁸ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 195.

⁶⁹ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 195.

⁷⁰ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 196.

⁷¹ Duncan, *Tell This Silence*, 182.

⁷² Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 196.

outburst of Akiko. Richard only attempted to quiet her and did not offer his support nor try to understand the situation of Akiko as a former comfort woman. Patti Duncan emphasizes that “His injunction to silence mirrors a larger Western Judeo-Christian silencing of Korean subjectivity, as well as discourse related to sexuality.”⁷³ 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, expresses anger and frustration over his perception that she has “allowed” other (Asian) men to dishonor her.⁷⁴

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 superstitions and beliefs because he was also excited to have a son. However, 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.”⁷⁵ It signals the strong bond she would have with her daughter later in life. She managed to break away from the norms, traditions, and expectations influenced by patriarchy and Confucianism after giving birth to Beccah. She prepared a hundred-day celebration for Beccah, which is traditionally only for boys:

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.⁷⁶

The novel demonstrates how Beccah is less influenced by all of these as well. One instance that showed her attitude toward men is when she claimed that “women need men like fish need bicycles.”⁷⁷ This ridiculous comparison serves as a demonstration of self-reliance. Beccah did not depend on any men in her life.

⁷³ Duncan, *Tell This Silence*, 182.

⁷⁴ Duncan, *Tell This Silence*, 180.

⁷⁵ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 116.

⁷⁶ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 119.

⁷⁷ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 127.

3 Japanese Military Occupation of Korea during World War II

As Segal remarks, Japan invaded Korea in the late 1870s. Despite China's vassal status over Korea, it withheld aid out of concern for retaliation. She further mentions that "in 1905 Korea became a protectorate of Japan and in 1910 it was formally annexed." Under the rule of the first governor general, Korea faced severe oppression and humiliation, while 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.⁷⁸

The influence of the USA on the relationship between Japan and Korea can be traced back to the so-called Taft-Katsura agreement. Kees van Dijk educates that in an agreement made in Japan in 1905 by American Secretary of War William H. Taft and Japanese Prime Minister Katsura Taro, Washington acknowledged Japanese sovereignty over Korea, while Tokyo recognized American rule over the Philippines. The US did so while neglecting the Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce and Navigation it had signed with Korea in 1882. The treaty contained a mutual obligation to intervene should other countries oppress the other party.⁷⁹

According to Jimin Kim, Japan's portrayal of Korea as unsuitable for self-rule was justified by its claims to have the inevitable responsibility for "civilizing the country." The Japanese had created publications targeting the American audience, reflecting on their actions in Korea to portray themselves as a power equivalent to Western countries. Furthermore, the Japanese authors contrasted the US stance towards the Philippines with their position in Korea. As a result, Americans relied on these narratives to support Japan's occupation due to a lack of any other English literature on the subject.⁸⁰

These biased narratives were soon met with opposition by the news of Korean demonstrations against Japanese rule. Timothy Savage informs that President Woodrow Wilson with his speech on self-determination gave hope to the nations suffering under their colonizers that the US will be of help. His speech inspired Koreans to set the March First Movement in motion.⁸¹ Kim explains that it was the first large-scale uprising against Japanese control. Kim

⁷⁸ Segal, *A Framework for Immigration*, 66.

⁷⁹ Kees van Dijk, *Pacific Strife: The Great Powers and their Political and Economic Rivalries in Asia and the Western Pacific, 1870-1914* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 463.

⁸⁰ Jimin Kim, "Empire versus Empire: American Critique of Japan's Colonial Rule in Korea in the 1920s and 1930s," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 22, no. 4 (2015), 318–19. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43898435>.

⁸¹ Timothy L. Savage, "The American Response to the Korean Independence Movement, 1910-1945," *Korean Studies* 20 (1996): 192. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23719607>.

further comments that “after Korean political and religious leaders issued a proclamation of independence in Seoul on 1 March 1919, over a half million Koreans participated in peaceful demonstrations.” However, these protests resulted in the killing and imprisoning of thousands of Koreans by Japanese authorities. The American audience was moved by the news of Japan’s harsh response.⁸² Savage adds that exiled Koreans in the US, together with Christian groups, asked the White House and the State Department for support, but the Wilson administration chose to overlook the question of Korean independence despite the movement's apparent alignment with the president's stated principles.⁸³

The novel covers many historical events, the March First Movement being one of them. Akiko’s mother experienced the March First Movement first-hand. During the demonstration, she described the cheerful atmosphere in which everyone came together to celebrate and embrace the national spirit. However, the celebrations were cut short when the Japanese arrived, violently putting an end to the demonstration. During the chaos, the boyfriend of Akiko’s mother was shot dead. As a result of attending the protest, Akiko’s mother had to be declared dead and forced to leave her family and travel to the countryside to marry a stranger so that she would not get abducted by Japanese forces. Akiko’s mother, whose name remains unknown, was among the first generation to experience forced Japanese assimilation and oppression. Akiko’s mother also described the events during which her father and his colleagues were taken away or in which her friend was forced to drop out of school because her family could no longer afford to pay the fees and could not spare money for the education of her daughter. This demonstrates the difference in the situation in Korea during Akiko’s mother’s adolescence and Akiko’s own. It can be assumed that Akiko’s mother was of a wealthier class since her family could afford to provide her with an education. Since her father was a middle-school official, he could treat his family to fancy dresses and even ice cream, which was very rare in Korea. On the other hand, Akiko experienced poverty, coming from a family of farmers.

Savage notes that there was a growth of anti-Japanese sentiments in the US because of their oppressive treatment, as well as anti-American sentiment in Japan. Japan blamed American Christian missionaries for the Korean uprising, which further deepened their distrust in Christianity.⁸⁴ He further informs that the US-Japan ties were at an all-time low ever since the Treaty of Versailles. Although they were officially allies, the Americans and the Japanese

⁸² Kim, “Empire versus Empire,” 322–23.

⁸³ Savage, “The American Response,” 192.

⁸⁴ Savage, “The American Response,” 194–95.

had different opinions on many issues. In addition to Japan's response to the March First movement, the United States harshly condemned Japan for “wanting to annex the former German colonies in China and the Pacific.”⁸⁵ Later, during WWII, it was mainly Japan’s expansionism that led the US to join the war.⁸⁶ Savage declares that it was particularly the bombing of Pearl Harbor that brought the United States into conflict with Japan.⁸⁷

Although the US-Japan relations were strained, the relationship between Korea and the United States strengthened. Kim highlights that the US-Korea relationship reached a new height when the Pacific war broke out. The conflict also affected the American position on the Korean issue, since the US government eventually regarded the Korean nationalist groups as beneficial in its fight against Japan.⁸⁸

Kim notes that by the end of World War II, the US negotiated with the victorious Allies on the future of former colonial countries. The United States suggested a trusteeship over postwar Korea, and the other Allies accepted.⁸⁹ Kim emphasizes that the perception that Koreans were unprepared for self-rule due to Japan’s forty years of colonial rule was the most fundamental idea behind trusteeship despite efforts by Korean nationalists for immediate postwar independence. The United States did not change its general perception of the Korean people as “uncivilized and deserving of foreign tutelage.”⁹⁰ Kim also adds that “in 1945, at the Yalta Conference, Roosevelt and Stalin agreed on an international trusteeship for Korea.”⁹¹ However, the country’s division did not go smoothly, resulting in the Korean War. Viet Thanh Nguyen and Daniel Y. Kim declare that civil wars raged between those who supported a communist vision of postcolonial Korea and those who supported the West.⁹²

Segal further comments that since the end of the Korean War, there have been extensive military, political, and economic ties between Korea and the United States. As a result, the US has had a considerable cultural impact on South Korea.⁹³ You-Me Park also analyzes:

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

⁸⁵ Savage, “The American Response,” 201–2.

⁸⁶ Savage, “The American Response,” 204.

⁸⁷ Savage, “The American Response,” 207.

⁸⁸ Kim, “Empire versus Empire,” 337.

⁸⁹ Kim, “Empire versus Empire,” 341–42.

⁹⁰ Kim, “Empire versus Empire,” 339.

⁹¹ Kim, “Empire versus Empire,” 342.

⁹² Kim and Nguyen, “The Literature of the Korean War and Vietnam War,” 61.

⁹³ Segal, *A Framework for Immigration*, 106.

of, and interaction with, Korea through comfort women, base women, and women available to them through sex tourism.⁹⁴

The use of women for sexual service during wartime has a long history. Joshua Goldstein explores 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 because war destabilizes social norms and relationships.⁹⁵ 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.”⁹⁶ He mentions the so-called “Rape of Nanking” as one of the cases of horrifying wartime atrocities carried out by widespread rape. Rape was one of several ways in which Japanese forces imposed their domination through extreme cruelty and humiliation from 1937 to 1938 in Nanking. Iris Chang notes that the actions of the Japanese were met with criticism on a large scale and eventually led to opposition to Japanese militarism in foreign countries by the United States. In response to this, the Japanese army invented their own system of organized sexual service called comfort women.⁹⁷

According to Hicks, the comfort women system is 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.⁹⁸ Chungmoo Choi notes that depending on the source, estimates of the overall number of comfort women range from 60,000 to more than 200,000. Documentation is challenging due to an extensive destruction of evidence-based documents and the fact that many of the women were murdered or left behind by the Japanese when they withdrew from Korea.⁹⁹ Kazuko Watanabe explains that the women affected were from Japan’s neighboring countries, such as Korea, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. He further highlights that 80 percent of them were of Korean descent.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ You-Me Park, “Pursuing Korean American Literature,” *The Sigur Centre Asia Papers* 6, no. 20 (2004): 46–47.

⁹⁵ Goldstein, *War and Gender*, 333.

⁹⁶ Goldstein, *War and Gender*, 356.

⁹⁷ Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 170–180.

⁹⁸ 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.

⁹⁹ Choi, “Korean Women,” 103.

¹⁰⁰ 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>.

However, Watanabe also adds that women from European countries were also recruited, such as Dutch “from the Japanese prisoners-of-war camps in Indonesia.”¹⁰¹

Yuki Tanaka reflects on the reasons for establishing the comfort camps. The Japanese thought that by having more women available for their armed forces, the number of rapes will decrease. Their soldiers were encouraged to use brothels to increase their “fighting spirit.” They identified the activities in the comfort camps as suitable for leisure time. In addition, they were concerned about the spread of venereal diseases. Japanese military personnel assumed that by setting up the comfort system, they would be able to take preventive measures.¹⁰² Japan showed interest in the health of their soldiers by checking the women for signs of sexually transmitted diseases and infections, as Hicks reported. He also notes that each unit had a medical officer.¹⁰³ The medical officer present in the novel proved to be of the same nature as the soldiers in regard to the treatment of women. He also participated in their services. During the abortion of Akiko’s first baby, the Japanese doctor lectures her 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.”¹⁰⁴ His words could symbolize the general mindset the Japanese had about their colonies. Japan viewed itself as superior to Korea. This also demonstrates the repeated theme of dominance over women. Furthermore, 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.”¹⁰⁵

Hick highlights the fact that many women were tricked, kidnapped, or forced into sexual slavery. Although licensed prostitution 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 looking for their own financial profit or working under the Japanese government.¹⁰⁶ Hicks further claims that in a country where Confucian filial piety principles were highly valued, the true appeal to girls was the possibility of sending money home.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ Watanabe, “Trafficking in Women’s Bodies,” 20–21.

¹⁰² Yuki Tanaka, *Japan’s Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution During World War II and the US Occupation* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 28–30.

¹⁰³ Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 14.

¹⁰⁴ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 22.

¹⁰⁵ Chu, ““To Hide Her True Self,”” 67.

¹⁰⁶ Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 20.

¹⁰⁷ Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 13.

This is recorded in the story of Akiko, who said that, in general, girls were “bought or stolen from villages outside the city, sent to Japanese recreation centers.”¹⁰⁸ 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, in some cases sold by their families, many against their own will. The protagonist of *Comfort Woman* lived through the same experience as she was sold as a dowry to provide money for her older sister so that she could marry and carry on the family business after their parents’ death. One way to interpret this occasion is as a betrayal. Keller said in an interview with Lee that her intention was to demonstrate the betrayal comfort women felt by their own country’s inability to protect them. By presenting that Akiko was sold by her sister, Keller wanted to show that she was betrayed by someone very close to her.¹⁰⁹ What can also be said about this occurrence is that it reflects the power disbalance of Confucianism with the older sibling bearing the superior position and exercising more power over the younger ones.

In general, the women selected to serve in the comfort stations lived in 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.¹¹⁰ Min further points out that Korean comfort women were treated this way due to Japan’s colonization of Korea.¹¹¹ To this statement, Patti Duncan indicates 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.”¹¹² Therefore, the control Japan exerted over Korea is a significant contributor to the suffering of Korean women. Goldstein also mentions the metaphor of women’s connection to the nation: “nation is often gendered female and the state male. Women in some sense embody the nation.”¹¹³ The metaphor of comparing a woman’s body with a country is demonstrated in the novel by the death of Induk, the woman who was Akiko 40, that is, the woman that the character of Akiko replaced. Induk was murdered after denouncing the soldiers and telling them to “stop their invasion of her country and her body.”¹¹⁴ Induk reclaimed her identity by embracing everything Korean: her true name and family

¹⁰⁸ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 19.

¹⁰⁹ Lee, and Keller, “Nora Okja Keller,” 152.

¹¹⁰ 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>.

¹¹¹ Min, “Korean ‘Comfort Women,’” 939.

¹¹² Duncan, *Tell This Silence*, 179.

¹¹³ Goldstein, *War and Gender*, 362.

¹¹⁴ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 20.

surname, their history, and even the family recipes she inherited from her mother. Her corpse was then displayed as a warning signal for the other women to remind them of what will happen to them if they attempt to go against the Japanese.

Furthermore, the treatment of 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 as boxes of ammunition in their documents.¹¹⁵ Akiko also acknowledged this approach because she noted that women were viewed as "disposable commodities."¹¹⁶ Akiko described one of the last moments of her stay at the recreation camp by narrating a horrific incident in which women were shot dead after Japanese soldiers learned of their defeat in the war.

The Japanese committed several oppressive tactics on Korea that have been marginally described in this chapter. Regarding Duncan's statements, "Koreans were forbidden to speak their own language; they were forced to speak Japanese."¹¹⁷ 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."¹¹⁸ 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 make ends meet and serve the military men, which was their only purpose. In *Comfort Woman*, the women created their own ways of communicating. Since Akiko was still too young to serve as a comfort woman when she first got to the military base, she took care of the women who were stationed there. Because of this, she was able to move around and had more freedom than the comfort women. Therefore, the women used her to pass messages to each other. On many occasions, while caring for them, she would sing. They decided to use this to their advantage. Akiko revealed that "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.¹¹⁹ By using this system, they were able to communicate with each other and check on each other as well. They also used body language to communicate, as explained in more detail by Akiko:

¹¹⁵ Choi, "Korean Women," 104.

¹¹⁶ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 147.

¹¹⁷ Duncan, *Tell This Silence*, 182.

¹¹⁸ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 16.

¹¹⁹ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 20.

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.¹²⁰

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 had a name and a number stenciled on her jacket – Akiko, 41. Others would be named Hanako 38, Miyoko 52, Kimi-ko 3, Tamayo 29, and so on. As has been noted, the Japanese forced Japanese identity onto the Korean citizens, comfort women received no different 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 faith; however, she was still afflicted by what had happened to her. Therefore, she chose to remain silent. Her thoughts were 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.”¹²¹

She felt that she had no right to use her true name, Soon Hyo, since it means pure in Korean. Akiko kept her given Japanese name throughout the whole book. She accepted her real name in the last chapter, which is shown by the renaming of the narrator from Akiko to Soon Hyo. The way she kept the name the Japanese gave her demonstrates the effect that the sexual abuse and trauma she experienced had left on her. The abuse changed her view of herself and her identity.

Min emphasizes that as victims of sexual violence, these women were forced to keep quiet and live isolated lives.¹²² The silence the women kept 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.¹²³ He also claims that “the key role in the suffering of Korean comfort women after their return home” was the gender hierarchy. Most comfort women have kept their stories to themselves for more than fifty years due to “strong patriarchal traditions and sexual double standards in Korea.”¹²⁴ Vipin Chandra further adds that class also played an important role. It seems that women of well-off and well-connected families managed to escape recruitment or

¹²⁰ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 16.

¹²¹ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 93.

¹²² Min, “Korean ‘Comfort Women’,” 947.

¹²³ Min, “Korean ‘Comfort Women’,” 939.

¹²⁴ Min, “Korean ‘Comfort Women’,” 948.

abduction.¹²⁵ 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.”¹²⁶ The status of women also played an important role because women of the wealthier class were usually not subjected to becoming comfort women.

The phenomenon of comfort women came to the surface 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.”¹²⁷ Min elaborates that several hundred former comfort women came out during the early 1990s with the help of feminist organizations in South Korea and other Asian nations to share their horrifying experiences, thus breaking a half-century of silence. An active redress movement has emerged in Asia due to feminist and democratic movements. Despite the fact that this movement has spread throughout many Asian countries, it has been the most active in South Korea, which accounts for a majority of the victims, and in Japan, the nation that committed the crime.¹²⁸ According to Choi, there were revelations about comfort women in 1991 that shocked Korean society, but she stresses that what is actually shocking is the lack of publicity this issue faced.¹²⁹ 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.¹³⁰ However, as Choi further informs, there was accessible information on the comfort women system, but what prevented public discussions about them were men with legal and social power and their relationship with women.¹³¹

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 the campaigns for redress. Additionally, petitions to national and local governments have been submitted requesting them to pressure the Japanese government to apologize and make reparations.¹³² After the testimonies and demonstrations, Mina Chang informs that:

¹²⁵ Vipin 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>.

¹²⁶ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 17.

¹²⁷ Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 21.

¹²⁸ Min, "Korean 'Comfort Women'," 938–39.

¹²⁹ Choi, "Korean Women," 98.

¹³⁰ Choi, "Korean Women," 98.

¹³¹ Choi, "Korean Women," 99.

¹³² 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.

The 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.¹³³

Chang further comments that there were personas such as Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama who acknowledged the comfort women's suffering while expressing a sense of deep regret. However, the Japanese government's denial of the existence of state-run brothels followed by its reluctance to admit its involvement in their management of them fell short of the expectations of the former comfort women.¹³⁴

Chang mentions that in 2007, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made some highly controversial remarks regarding the evidence of 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."¹³⁵

According to Chang, the lack of explicitly state-funded payments has kept this matter heated. Many comfort women collectively declined the sum of two million yen given by the Asian Women's Fund in 1995, which was officially backed by the Japanese government but funded by private donations from individuals. Official organizations insisted that funds should not be received until the Japanese state grants them. Some of the women who took the money were heavily criticized for their choice. This raises questions, as Chang argues, to what extent was the matter designed for the benefit of the victims rather than to express the nationalistic anti-Japan ideology. Although the politicization of the problem by activists was well-intended, it may have had the unintended consequence of eliminating the decision-making of individual comfort women.¹³⁶

Hicks stresses that affected women want the Japanese government to acknowledge that they were forced into sexual service.¹³⁷ Chang also stresses that without a formal apology, the type of reconciliation by Japan's decision to "wait it out" remains insufficient. The Japanese government underestimated the degree of transnational involvement in the subject, which extends beyond East Asia.¹³⁸

¹³³ 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>.

¹³⁴ Chang, "The Politics of an Apology," 34.

¹³⁵ Chang, "The Politics of an Apology," 36.

¹³⁶ Chang, "The Politics of an Apology," 37.

¹³⁷ Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, 11.

¹³⁸ Chang, "The Politics of an Apology," 37.

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.”¹³⁹ Seo Akwi elaborates that in the early 1990s, South Korea became the 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 in all conflicts.¹⁴⁰ Silvia Schultermandl claims that “the ramifications of the movement have also reached and continue to shape feminist theory and practice in the United States.”¹⁴¹ Schultermandl claims 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.¹⁴²

Therefore, the comfort women issue is of transnational character as the violence perpetrated against women is universal, not bound to certain boundaries of any country.

¹³⁹ Mackie, “One Thousand Wednesdays,” 249.

¹⁴⁰ 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.

¹⁴¹ 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>

¹⁴² Schultermandl, “Writing Rape, Trauma and Transnationality,” 94.

4 The Aftermath of World War II

Following the story of the main character of *Comfort Woman*, Akiko, and her journey after the end of World War II, the process of immigration to the US, assimilation into American society, and later after settling down, the relationship between a mother and daughter will be discussed.

To begin this chapter, it is worth mentioning that the United States are a relatively young country made up primarily of immigrants, as Uma Segal notes. She states that all ethnic American groups, excluding Native Americans, immigrated there to start a new life.¹⁴³ Hyun Sook Kim and Pyong Gap Min also agree with this statement by calling the United States a country of immigrants.”¹⁴⁴ Therefore, the United States are a country with a long history of immigration.

There could be numerous reasons for one’s need for migration. According to Segal, the possibility of residents leaving their native country is limited when conditions there are favorable and fulfill their physical, social, and emotional needs.¹⁴⁵ Thus, it can be presumed that one must feel a greater sense of discomfort or danger to leave their homeland. This discomfort and discontent are present in the novel, as Akiko was unsatisfied in her home country due to her traumatic experiences. Akiko has escaped her native country to start a new chapter of her life in the United States. However, the word escaping does not have a literal meaning in this scenario, as her past continues to haunt her throughout her whole life.

This chapter will primarily focus on the Korean immigration waves, as it is the most relevant topic to this thesis. Wenying Xu notes that Korean American history dates back to 1882 when the government of the United States and Korea signed a treaty of peace, friendship, and commerce that permitted each nation to set up diplomatic missions on the land of the other party. At first, a few Korean diplomats, political exiles, merchants, and students entered the country.¹⁴⁶ Segal states that the number of Korean immigrants before 1900 was insignificant. She further comments that more people searched for alternatives outside of Korea due to famine and the cholera epidemic in 1901. During this time, despite the unacceptability of emigration in Korean culture, the government reduced its strict emigration restriction.¹⁴⁷ Xu further

¹⁴³ Segal, *A Framework for Immigration*, 3.

¹⁴⁴ Hyun Sook Kim and Pyong Gap Min, “The Post-1965 Korean Immigrants: Their characteristics and Settlement Patterns,” *Korea Journal of Population and Development* 21, no. 2 (1992): 121. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43783258>.

¹⁴⁵ Segal, *A Framework for Immigration*, 6.

¹⁴⁶ Xu, *Historical Dictionary*, 8.

¹⁴⁷ Segal, *A Framework for Immigration*, 69.

elaborates that in the following years many Koreans spread around the Pacific coast as farmers, laborers in mining companies, as well as section hands on the railroads.¹⁴⁸ Pyong Gap Min also adds that between 1905 and 1924, many Korean women arrived in Hawaii and California as “picture brides.”¹⁴⁹ Ronald Takaki informs that “Korean picture brides entered the United States with Japanese passports issued to them as colonial subjects of Japan under the terms of the Gentlemen's Agreement.”¹⁵⁰ This demonstrates the reason why there was quite a large number of female Korean immigrants, which is also reflected in the significant number of Korean American women writers.

Xu comments that in 1924, the US government issued The Immigration Act, which banned Asian immigrants from entering the country. Very few Koreans immigrated to the United States between 1924 and 1953 because of this act, along with other factors, including the World Wars and the Korean War. After the end of the Korean War in 1953, the second wave of migration began.¹⁵¹ Hyun Sook Kim and Pyong Gap Min observe that the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 had the biggest impact on the Korean American community, even though Koreans have been coming to the US for more than a century.¹⁵² Pyong Gap Min educates that nowadays Korean Americans continue to be the fifth largest Asian ethnic group in terms of population.¹⁵³

Akiko is from the first generation of immigrants, born abroad, then arriving in the country, while her daughter, Beccah, born in the US, is considered the second generation. The character of Akiko left because of the consequences of WWII and for witnessing the violence and abuse of Japanese soldiers. Akiko is also one of the first women immigrants to come the country through marriage with a white man.

In Akiko's case, it is Richard Bradley, a Christian minister whom she met when she found sanctuary with missionaries in Pyongyang after managing an escape from the recreation camp. By claiming to hire the girls as workers of the Heaven and Earth Mentholatum and Matches Company, the missionaries could save a number of young girls. The building was used as protection against the Japanese, who banned Christianity but supported enterprises to give

¹⁴⁸ Xu, *Historical Dictionary*, 8–9.

¹⁴⁹ Min, “Korean Americans,” 231.

¹⁵⁰ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989), 56.

¹⁵¹ Xu, *Historical Dictionary*, 8–9.

¹⁵² Kim and Min, “The Post-1965 Korean Immigrants,” 122.

¹⁵³ Min, “Korean Americans,” 230.

back money to the Emperor. Akiko thought she had lost her hearing since she could not understand the missionaries. Furthermore, due to her trauma, Akiko could not speak for her entire stay at the mission house. Eventually, the minister, who took an extra liking to Akiko, mistook the silence for obedience and submission and made it his intention to marry Akiko. Their marriage was possible thanks to Akiko, who lied about her age, which was presumably fourteen at the time. She said that she was eighteen to avoid being placed in an orphanage “where many of the older children were adopted by Japanese families looking for an extra worker.”¹⁵⁴ Akiko further explains that:

I knew I had to leave with the missionaries. I knew, had known the moment I crossed the Yalu and entered the recreation camps, that my home village of Sulsulham was as far away as heaven for me. So, when the minister told me I should marry him if I wanted to leave Pyongyang and come to America with them, I did. I made it easy for him to take me.¹⁵⁵

Akiko continued to feel shame for what happened to her. She had completely given up on her life. To become the minister’s wife, Akiko was baptized. However, after hearing the words “you are born again [...] as a Christian, as a wife, and as an American”¹⁵⁶ it is revealed that none of these things matter to Akiko. She would never have chosen any of it, if not for the recreation camp. Chu explains that “Akiko accepts the marriage pragmatically, as the only way to be sure of escaping the Japanese.”¹⁵⁷ Her intention was self-preservation, not religious insight, or love of the white man.

After the war, Akiko traveled with her husband, first throughout Korea and then throughout the United States, to preach the word of the Lord. However, their marriage was unhappy because Akiko never truly loved her husband. In turn, he did not try to understand her and did not provide the proper care she needed.

The topic of assimilation is closely related to the concept of immigration, since after leaving their homeland, immigrants face the challenge of assimilating into the society of their new home. According to Elizabeth Prine Pauls, assimilation is a process of individuals or groups of different ethnic heritage immersing into the dominant society to the point that they are indistinguishable from other members of said society. She further comments: “although assimilation may be compelled through force or undertaken voluntarily, it is rare for a minority

¹⁵⁴ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 93.

¹⁵⁵ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 101.

¹⁵⁶ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 104.

¹⁵⁷ Chu, ““To Hide Her True Self,”” 69.

group to replace its previous cultural practices completely.”¹⁵⁸ In response to this, Xu points out that the latest studies on multiculturalism and race have questioned the melting pot concept, which is very frequently related to the idea of assimilation in the United States. She also emphasizes that to be absorbed into the mainstream and gain access to social and economic sectors, non-white immigrants must renounce their heritages such as language, religion, traditions, rituals, and food practices.¹⁵⁹ This stance is very limiting for immigrants and usually not achieved well, as demonstrated by the large number of writings produced by Asian American authors where the said heritages are ever so present. Min Hyoung Song notes the stereotype that “Asians in America have been viewed as newcomers to the country and destined always to be outsiders.”¹⁶⁰ For Asian Americans, it is, among other things, their appearance that makes it difficult for them to assimilate. Jennifer Ho reflects that:

Of all the major racial groups in the United States, Asians in America have had to self-consciously transform themselves into Americans. It is not taken for granted that someone with Asian physical features is native to the United States. Instead, Asian Americans experience an ongoing tension of looking “different” from those deemed to be “typically American.”¹⁶¹

In the literary tradition of mother-daughter narratives, Ho further explains that mothers and daughters experience a profound feeling of loss of original culture, history, and community throughout their immigration and assimilation to the US. Their melancholy depicts the challenging transition from an “Asian past to an American future.”¹⁶²

In the case of Akiko, she lived the rest of her life in America. However, it can be said that she died as a foreigner. There are mentions of how she dealt with assimilating into a new society, which can help to picture the whole process. Akiko did not fit fully into American society and had some trouble, since staying there was a completely new experience. She had to familiarize herself with a culture that in many ways differed from the one she was familiar with.

Some occasions show how the behavior of Koreans differed from that of Americans. For example, when Akiko visited a restaurant with her husband, she commented that even getting into restaurants could be difficult for them, as some places would not accept them

¹⁵⁸ “Assimilation | Definition, History, & Facts,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed September 21, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/assimilation-society>.

¹⁵⁹ Xu. *Historical Dictionary*, 30.

¹⁶⁰ Min Hyoung Song, “Asian American Literature within and beyond the Immigrant Narrative,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature* ed. Crystal Parikh and Daniel Y. Kim (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.

¹⁶¹ Ho, *Consumption and Identity*, 3–4.

¹⁶² Ho, *Consumption and Identity*, 4.

because she looked Japanese. They were seated at the table when Akiko could not refuse the meat that the woman from the side table finished eating:

I [Akiko] picked up one of her [the woman's] bones and bit into it. Excuse me, the woman said as she jumped up. The husband grabbed the bone from my hand and put it back on her plate. No, Akiko!, he said to me, and then to the woman: Excuse us. She is not from our country; her people tend to share plates.¹⁶³

This event symbolizes the treatment foreign people received when their actions differed from the social norm and the culture accepted in the states. The woman's view of Akiko is "how quaint, [...] a poor little orphan Jap."¹⁶⁴ Calling Akiko a "Jap" is something completely unimaginable for her since she was abused by them. The woman had no way of knowing Akiko's story, but still, it demonstrates how insensitive it is to assume things about people. Another occasion in which Akiko came across people's assumptions about her occurred when meeting the acquaintances of her husband. They proposed that they: "never knew he was married to a Chinese. All them people are so small, see? How adorable! You speakee English?"¹⁶⁵ These parts of the novel show the racist views of Americans about Asian people. In both cases, people assumed Akiko's ethnicity without asking her where she came from. They based their opinion on cultural stereotypes of Asian people. In addition, it can be deduced from their reactions that they did not view Akiko as someone equal to them.

The clash of Korean and American cultures is very apparent in the marriage of Akiko and her minister husband. Her husband was not very fond of her religious and spiritual practices, always ordering Akiko to pray to God to save her from *evil spirits*. However, Akiko was essentially very in touch with Korean practices. She kept Korean traditions, believed in Korean superstitions, and consumed Korean food. Akiko never accepted Christianity as her religion. Instead, she became a female shaman performing various ceremonies, which were also rooted in Korea. An example that demonstrates Akiko's devotion to Korea is her performing a ritual right after her baptism. Carefully so that nobody could see her, she consumed a little bit of soil to "taste the earth, metallic as blood, take it into my body so that my country would always be part of me."¹⁶⁶ When Akiko was pregnant with Beccah, she again consumed the soil. This time, she made tea from the dirt outside their home for her daughter so that "she would never feel homeless, lost."¹⁶⁷ She practiced the same thing while breastfeeding so that Beccah

¹⁶³ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 109.

¹⁶⁴ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 109.

¹⁶⁵ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 111.

¹⁶⁶ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 104.

¹⁶⁷ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 113.

“would know that [Akiko] [is], and will always be, her home.” This instance is explained by Ho as follows:

Knowing that her daughter must identify with America because Beccah's father is American and Beccah herself is a U.S. citizen, Akiko/Soon Hyo uses both breast milk and dirt to connect her daughter to herself as well as to America—effectually grounding them both in their adopted homeland.¹⁶⁸

After the death of Beccah's father, Akiko tried to return with her daughter to Korea. However, they could only manage to travel to Hawaii, where they stayed. Akiko could speak English, Korean, and Japanese, which could benefit her in Hawaii, but she still struggled to find a stable and good paying job, which meant they had to live in poor conditions. Contrary to this, Akiko observed that the country is rich. She analyzed the following:

To learn to be an American was to learn to waste. Food, paper, clothes – everything was thrown away when we got tired of it, because there was so much. [...] That's what America was to like to me. When you see it for the first time, it glitters, beautiful, like a dream. But then, the longer you walk through it, the more you realize that the dream is empty, false, sterile. You realize that you have no face and no place in this country.¹⁶⁹

In the novel, it is mentioned that the cities did not look appealing to her because of the amount of trash. She was also not fond of American food as the taste was too bland for her liking. All of this symbolizes that Akiko was longing for her native country. The trouble of displacement is also depicted by Akiko dreaming of people who look like her.¹⁷⁰ Akiko never fully assimilated. She was rather separated from the happenings in American society, and by doing so, she restricted her daughter from Americanization as well. Regardless, her daughter Beccah was undoubtedly connected with American culture.

Beccah's assimilation story differs from that of her mother due to her biracial status. She tried to assimilate into two cultures – Korean by her mother and American by her father. Beccah was in touch with American culture, as demonstrated by her imagining various events or people according to American movies or famous personas. At the beginning of the novel, she tried to imagine her late father, but could not recall him wholly. Therefore, she “gave him the face and voice of Mr. Rogers” (an American television presenter).¹⁷¹ On another occasion, she enjoyed American music: “Whenever I was alone, I'd sing—usually something by the Carpenters or Elvis.”¹⁷² She imagined that while singing, she would be discovered as “The New

¹⁶⁸ Ho, *Consumption and Identity*, 91.

¹⁶⁹ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 110.

¹⁷⁰ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 113.

¹⁷¹ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 2.

¹⁷² Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 27.

Marie Osmond.”¹⁷³ In an attempt to assimilate into American society, Beccah also tried to act like her classmates. Despite her efforts, her classmates bullied her in middle school because she differed from them, and in high school she felt invisible because others overlooked her. She used to eat in the school cafeteria, but it was met with criticism from her mother. Beccah’s mother tried to protect her from the *impurities* of both the “red disaster” that symbolized Beccah becoming a woman (since it refers to Beccah’s menstruation) and the white genes inherited from her biological father, “the odor of cheese and milk and meat – animal waste.”¹⁷⁴ Thus, Akiko ordered Beccah to eat mostly vegetables and rice to cleanse her. Jennifer Ho comments that:

[b]y controlling Beccah's consumption, Akiko/Soon Hyo believes that eating Korean vegetarian meals will simultaneously purge Beccah of her whiteness and affirm her Korean affiliation: to eat Korean is to become Korean.¹⁷⁵

Beccah did not resist and even began to starve herself so that she could “slip completely into the world [her] mother lived in.”¹⁷⁶ Therefore, Beccah’s development of anorexia was her attempt to assimilate into the culture of her mother and to be closer to her. However, as Beccah noted, she could not do so because no matter how much she tried, the *impurities* were essentially a part of her that she could not change. This unhealthy mindset stayed with her. Beccah said: “As an adult, I am too conscious of the eyes of the neighbors, of the law, of the Kapu sign warning off trespassers. I am too aware that is what I am now, a trespasser out of place and time.”¹⁷⁷ Beccah felt like she did not belong anywhere. Thus, Beccah, who is undeniably Korean and American, was unable to fully assimilate into either American or Korean culture, let alone both. She cannot assimilate because she felt like the members of both communities did not accept her, no matter how hard Beccah tried.

The close influence of Akiko on Beccah’s (non-)assimilation leads to a more general view of their relationship. As discussed in the previous chapter, mother-daughter relationships are very often present in the works of Asian American women writers. Nora Okja Keller is not an exception. The relationship between mother and daughter presented is rather complicated, but it also indicates the strong bond this relationship can hold.

¹⁷³ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 27.

¹⁷⁴ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 84.

¹⁷⁵ Ho, *Consumption and Identity*, 94.

¹⁷⁶ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 86.

¹⁷⁷ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 133.

The relationship between Beccah and her mother is complex and intricate in terms of their roles. Beccah and her mother switched roles on many occasions, due to which she had to care for her mother while she slipped into her trances, as well as tending to herself from a very young age. She herself was aware of this situation. After her mother attempted her second suicide by drowning, Beccah realized that “our roles had reversed. Even at ten, I knew that I had become the guardian of her life.”¹⁷⁸ Later, when Beccah was an adult, Akiko told her that she had been wanting to see her settle down. Akiko gave her a lesson: “You need a good man to give you babies. Someone to take care of you.”¹⁷⁹ To this, Beccah remembered her thoughts: “How ironic and how convenient that my mother thought of taking care of me only when I was a grown woman. And even then, to delegate the responsibility of that care.”¹⁸⁰ Growing up, Beccah felt abandoned and lonely because she lacked the proper care and attention from her mother. This demonstrates the severe consequences Akiko’s past had left on her. Beccah commented:

Most of the time my mother seemed normal. Not normal like the moms on TV – the kind that baked cookies, joined PTA, or came to weekly soccer games – but normal in that she seemed to know where she was and who I was.¹⁸¹

This gives a bit of background on the severity of Akiko’s mental state and the environment in which Beccah grew up. Beccah said that she loved her mother during *normal* times, but the times when Akiko slipped away always haunted her. When Akiko communicated with the spirits, Beccah was left alone, scared that her mother would not return from the spirit world. Akiko’s trances and her communication with spirits terrified Beccah deeply, which also added a level of fear to their relationship that resulted in the loss of the comfort of home.

During Beccah’s childhood, she was often fascinated by the idea that her mother had led a life before her. Whenever Beccah asked about her mother’s past, Akiko’s answer would always be that her life started only with Beccah. When she spoke about her past life, Akiko was not honest with Beccah. Instead, she came up with fictional stories. Reflecting on the trauma, Akiko could not come to terms with her past, let alone let her young daughter know about it. This reflects the strong (although complicated) bond between mother and daughter. To this, Patti Duncan points out that “sexuality represents threat and danger, and as the incidents of

¹⁷⁸ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 125.

¹⁷⁹ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 126.

¹⁸⁰ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 126.

¹⁸¹ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 2.

Akiko's past have been virtually erased from historical accounts, so, too, have they been erased from her own stories to her daughter."¹⁸²

During Beccah's teenage years, she was often embarrassed by her mother's behavior, since her teenage years were accompanied by Akiko's frantic attempts to stop Beccah from maturing. Akiko warned Beccah that "this is the critical year, the year you become a woman and vulnerable."¹⁸³ Calling this age vulnerable hints at the trauma her mother suffered during this age, being used by Japanese soldiers. Of this, however, Beccah was still unaware because her mother did not offer any further explanation or revelation of the traumatic history.

After the death of her mother, Beccah experienced a spiritual revelation when she entered her mother's house. She dropped to the ground, and when she could open her eyes again, she found "the colors in my mother's home shimmering, outlining for me what needed to be done."¹⁸⁴ She then tended to the spirits and rearranged the talismans. Beccah no longer feared the spirits and continued to perform the tasks her mother used to do. In this way, Beccah demonstrates the Confucian tradition of filial piety by inheriting the parent's tasks which are often attributed to sons. Moreover, in this scenario, Keller continues to illustrate the shift from tradition and the focus on women.

Afterward, Beccah found a cassette tape marked "Beccah" in her mother's jewelry box with an envelope containing missing person reports and old newspaper articles. In this way, she discovered the true story of her mother, which has remained unspoken until now. It was the first time Beccah saw the real name of her mother. Beccah was shocked while studying the articles her mother prepared for her, as well as listening to the tape. She could not imagine her mother as one of the comfort women, since she had always perceived her as frail and defenseless.

Akiko's last plea to Beccah, shared with her through the recording, is "to lead the parade of the dead."¹⁸⁵ Akiko's wish could be interpreted as a suggestion for Beccah to educate the world about the suffering she and many other women endured. Chu agrees that "it is possible to recuperate the novel's sentimental ending as a serious demand for renewed attention to the ongoing struggle of the historical comfort women for recognition of their squandered human rights."¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² Duncan, *Tell This Silence*, 177.

¹⁸³ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 81.

¹⁸⁴ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 168.

¹⁸⁵ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 197.

¹⁸⁶ Chu, "'To Hide Her True Self,'" 64.

After Akiko's death, Beccah performed a ritual for her. She came to peace with their past. Beccah proposed that she "could see [her mother] in her entirety, without guilt or judgment."¹⁸⁷ She no longer felt ashamed of her, but instead found understanding and a newfound appreciation. Beccah sprinkled her mother's ashes in the water behind their backyard by also mirroring the actions of Akiko:

I opened my mother's box, sprinkling her ashes over the water. I held my fingers under the slow fall of ash, sifting, letting it coat my hand. I touched my fingers to my lips. "Your body in mine," I told my mother, "so you will always be with me, even when your spirit finds its way home. To Korea. To Sulsulham [...]."¹⁸⁸

Beccah was not aware that the lack of care and comfort she received from her mother was caused by Akiko's experience of *comforting* the soldiers. When Beccah learned the entire truth, she started to appreciate her mother and everything she had done for her. This is also in agreement with Chu's statements that "the Asian American daughter is typically cured of her malaise by hearing about some trauma or ordeal endured by her mother."¹⁸⁹ Beccah realized that "while [she] had felt invisible, unimportant, while [her] mother consorted with her spirits, [she] now understood that [her mother] knew [she] watched her. That in her way, she had always carried [Beccah] with her."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 209.

¹⁸⁸ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 212.

¹⁸⁹ Chu, "To Hide Her True Self," 62.

¹⁹⁰ Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 198.

5 Conclusion

Through the comfort women system, this thesis aimed to analyze how the female gender has been oppressed in history. The comfort women issue has been highly controversial in the past, since the denial of the Japanese government and the fact that the documents with the most evidence have been destroyed. The issue became public after the testimony of former comfort women that triggered major reactions from the world. The former comfort women generally lived in harsh conditions. However, their suffering did not end after the war. The women were forced to keep silent about what happened to them due to many factors. This thesis defined that the patriarchal system with gender hierarchy and sexual double standards, with Confucian traditions and its emphasis on women's chastity, as well as the poor class from which the women were from, all negatively influenced their lives and even allowed the establishment of comfort women in the first place. The movement for redress emerging after the testimonies has been supported by many organizations, notably by feminists. Furthermore, the comfort women issue helped to define feminist theory and practice in the United States. The thesis highlighted that the comfort women phenomenon is transnational because the violence perpetrated against women is universal and occurs all over the world.

The thesis dealt with the gender issues presented in the novel *Comfort Woman*. It analyzed that gender can be perceived differently in various cultures. The female gender has been widely influenced by patriarchy and Confucianism in Asian cultures. This thesis also defined that the USA is considered patriarchal; therefore, it treats women similarly. The gender roles as presented in the novel have been discussed in greater detail. The thesis concluded that roles of the female gender were similar in both cultures; however, the relationships between men and women in the United States are much less strict and relaxed.

Regarding the relevant historical context, this thesis highlighted that Korea has been let down by its partner countries on many occasions. The most fundamental for this thesis was the Taft-Katsura Agreement, which allowed to set the Japanese colonization of Korea into motion despite the previous agreement between Korea and the USA to provide assistance should other countries treat the other party oppressively. There were many attempts by Koreans, either by exiled nationalist groups or by citizens of Korea, to gain independence from Japanese rule. Japan has behaved oppressively toward its Korean colony by instituting Japanese as the official language and forcing Japanese identity onto Korean citizens, which has also been reflected in the comfort women issue. Korean comfort women were very often humiliated due to Japan's

superior position to Korea. As has been demonstrated, that is one of the ways the enemy can portray their dominance, by enacting rape either literally or symbolically, but in this case, both. The question of Korean independence has long been ignored by the United States. Not until the protests, growing anti-Japanese sentiment, and the bombing of Pearl Harbor was the Korean problem brought into their attention. After the end of WWII, the United States, together with the Soviet Union, administered the territory of Korea despite Korea's appeal for independence. The United States, just as Japan at the beginning of the colonial period, regarded Korea as incapable of self-rule.

In terms of literary context, this thesis briefly analyzed Asian American literature with a focus on women writers. Women writers are an essential part of Asian American literature. Women writers have developed a certain tradition to specifically follow the requirements of American audiences. This thesis indicated that the readers want to understand the experience of Asian women from a familiar genre while following a successful immigration narrative. As noted above, these requirements are fulfilled through genres such as the mother-daughter tale and the bildungsroman. The mother-daughter tale is especially favored because of the possibility to tell a foreign story of Asian mothers through a set of familiar eyes – Americanized daughters. Keller followed these traditions while writing her novel by making the mother-daughter relationship one of the main topics of the book. According to Bildungsroman tradition to reflect one's personal journey of reconciliation with one's roots and identity, it has been described how the character of Beccah was allowed to come of age after getting to know her mother's full story as well as reconcile with their complicated past.

This thesis also discussed the process of immigration and assimilation. It has been mentioned that Asian Americans have often been doomed to be perceived as foreigners and outsiders in American society due to their appearance and their habits and traditions, which differ greatly from the American norm. The thesis highlighted the fact that Akiko, the Korean mother, and Beccah, the Korean American daughter, have not succeeded in their attempts to integrate themselves into American society. Akiko was troubled because she never accepted the society of the place she moved into. She kept many aspects of her Korean ethnic background, such as traditions and beliefs. Beccah's assimilation has been complicated due to her biracial status. She found herself not fitting into American or Korean culture, and additionally, she felt unwelcome in both.

Resumé

Cílem této bakalářské práce je analyzovat literární, kulturní a historický kontext románu *Comfort Woman* od Nory Kellerové. Tato práce si také klade za cíl definovat takzvaný systém utěšitelék, metafory vyplývající z okupace Koreje Japonskem a dále okomentovat vztah matky a dcery a jejich pokusy o asimilaci do Americké společnosti.

Z hlediska literárního kontextu tato práce stručně analyzuje asijsko-americkou a korejsko-americkou literaturu a její autory. Práce se zaměřuje především na spisovatelky. Je důležité zdůraznit, že asijsko-americké spisovatelky jsou nedílnou součástí asijsko-americké literatury. Tyto autorky vytvořily specifickou tradici řízenou požadavky amerických čtenářů. Tato práce pojednává o tom, že čtenáři chtějí porozumět životním zkušenostem a příběhům asijských žen skrze čtenářům známý žánr. Zároveň také chtějí sledovat úspěšný příběh o imigraci do Spojených států amerických. Tyto požadavky jsou splněny prostřednictvím žánru, jako je bildungsroman a příběhy matky s dcerou. Příběhy o matce a její dceři jsou velice oblíbeným žánrem mezi asijsko-americkými spisovatelkami a jejich čtenáři především proto, že umožňují vyprávět neznámý příběh asijských matek očima dcer již ovlivněných americkou kulturou. Kellerová se při psaní svého románu řídila těmito tradicemi a učinila ze vztahu matky a dcery jedno z hlavních témat knihy. Podle tradice bildungsroman, která odráží osobní cestu smíření se se svými kořeny a identitou, tato práce popisuje, jak Beccah mohla dospět teprve poté co poznala úplný příběh své matky a smířila se s jejich komplikovanou minulostí.

S ohledem na relevantní historický kontext tato práce poukazuje na to, že Korea byla svými partnerskými zeměmi při mnoha příležitostech zklamána. Nejzásadnější pro tuto práci je dohoda mezi americkým ministrem války Williamem H. Taftem a japonským premiérem Katsura Taro, která umožnila uvést do pohybu japonskou kolonizaci Koreje. Stalo se tak i přes předchozí dohodu mezi Koreou a Spojenými státy americkými o poskytnutí pomoci v případě, že by ostatní země měli napadnout druhou stranu smlouvy. Korejci, ať už ze strany exilových nacionalistických skupin nebo občanů v Koreji, se mnohokrát pokoušeli získat nezávislost na japonské nadvládě. Japonsko se vůči své korejské kolonii chovalo opresivně, což je demonstrováno zejména tím, že zavedlo japonštinu jako oficiální jazyk a nařizovalo korejským občanům japonskou identitu. Toto se odrazilo i v systému utěšitelék. Korejské utěšitelky byly velmi často ponižovány kvůli nadřazenému postavení Japonska vůči Koreji. Metafora vyplývající z této skutečnosti je přirovnání ženského těla k zemi. Japonští vojáci utlačovali korejské ženy, aby si prosadili svojí dominanci nad Koreou. Otázku korejské nezávislosti

Spojené státy americké dlouho nebraly na vědomí. Korejský problém upoutal jejich pozornost až protesty na 1. března 1919 a rostoucími protijaponskými předsudky v USA. Spojené státy americké se do druhé světové války zapojily po bombardování Pearl Harboru japonskou armádou. Po skončení 2. světové války se Spojené státy společně se Sovětským svazem dohodly o správě území Koreji. Učinili tak navzdory tomu, že Korea od začátku požadovala nezávislost. Spojené státy, stejně jako Japonsko na začátku koloniálního období, považovaly Koreu za neschopnou samovlády.

Otázky genderu jsou analyzovány prostřednictvím systému utěšitelek, který byl zaveden Japonskem v období druhé světové války. Japonsko se snahou poskytnout svým vojákům dostatek žen se snažilo zmírnit znásilňování, zvýšit jejich „bojového ducha“ a také zavést preventivní opatření k šíření pohlavních chorob. Ženy byly mnohdy koncipované skrz falešné nabídky práce, prodány svými rodinami, a v některých případech dokonce uneseny. Problematika utěšitelek je velmi kontroverzní z důvodu, že dokumenty obsahující důkazy byly zničeny Japonskem po jejich kapitalizaci na konci druhé světové války. K problematice přispívá i postoj Japonska, které se ze začátku zdráhalo přiznat vinu ve vedení tohoto systému a poté odmítlo připustit, že při rekrutování těchto žen a dívek bylo použito donucení a násilí. Problém utěšitelek se dostal do veřejného vědomí až po svědectvích bývalých utěšitelek o padesát let později. Tato svědectví vyvolala bouřlivé reakce po celém světě. Bývalé utěšitelky, zejména z Koreji, ve svých svědectvích popisují, v jak drsných podmínkách žily. Avšak jejich utrpení neskončilo ani po válce a jejich návratu domů, protože kvůli mnoha faktorům byly nuceny mlčet o tom, co se jim stalo. Tato práce definuje, že patriarchální systém s genderovou hierarchií, společně s konfuciánskými tradicemi s důrazem na cudnost žen, a také chudá vrstva, ze které ženy pocházely, negativně ovlivnily jejich životy. Právě tyto všechny faktory přispěly k umožnění zřízení systému utěšitelek. Hnutí za nápravu po svědectvích bylo podporováno mnoha organizacemi, zejména feministkami. Problém utěšitelek je považován za nadnárodní a netýkající se pouze hranic Koreji, protože násilí páchané na ženách se děje po celém světě. Nápravné hnutí utěšitelek dokonce formuje feministickou teorii a praxi ve Spojených státech amerických. Tudiž, tato práce analyzuje, jak bylo ženské pohlaví v období kolonizace Koreji Japonskem a v průběhu druhé světové války utlačováno.

Vztah matky a dcery, který je prezentován v románu je velice komplikovaný, ale zároveň naznačuje velice pevné pouto, které tyto vztahy mohou mít. Akiko, po traumatech, co zažila jako utěšitelka, propadá transům a není schopna být plně přítomna a starat se o svou dceru. Beccah si uvědomuje, že jejich role jsou prohozené. Již od dětství je nucena starat se

sama o sebe a zároveň i o svou matku. Když matka propadá stavům, při nichž komunikuje s duchy, Beccah je osamělá a má strach, že se k ní matka už nevrátí. Po smrti své matky a poté, co se Beccah dozví celý příběh o své matce a její minulosti jakožto utěšitelky, si Beccah uvědomí, čím vším si její matka prošla a odpustí ji.

Poslední kapitola rozebírá proces imigrace a asimilace. Akiko imigrovala do USA s Richardem Bradleyem, křesťanským misionářem, kterého potkala, když se jí podařilo uniknout z vojenské základny, kde sloužila jako utěšitelka. Akiko je tak jedním z příkladu žen, co byli přivedeny do USA jako partnerky Američanů. Asijští Američané byli často odsouzeni k tomu, být vnímáni jako cizinci a outsideři v americké společnosti kvůli svému vzhledu a zvykům a tradicím, které se značně liší od těch amerických. Tato bakalářská práce zdůrazňuje také skutečnost, že matka Akiko a její dcera Beccah byly neúspěšné ve svých pokusech začlenit se do americké společnosti. Akiko nikdy nepřijala kulturu země, kam se přestěhovala, zachovala si tradice, učení, a pověry ze svého korejského etnického původu. Asimilace Beccah je komplikovanější kvůli její dvojité národnosti. Beccah zjišťuje, že nezapadá ani do americké a ani korejské kultury, a navíc se v obou necítí vítána.

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