



Representation Of Trauma And Trauma Of Representation In Crossroads In Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman

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Abstract :

Many people's accounts of social traumas like the Holocaust and war are based on secondhand accounts from older generations. Keller, like many other writers of the next generation, has shown empathy for the victim's horrific recollections, making her a secondary witness and a moral witness whose work has sought to bring to light the repressed agony of those who have been hushed for too long. Human rights and women's rights groups joined forces with former "comfort women" to wage a protracted court struggle in an effort to force Japan to admit fault, issue an apology, and compensate victims for wartime abuses. For future generations, the past will be inaudible unless such attempts are made, therefore their importance cannot be overstated. Writers like Keller bring such repressed trauma of their ancestors to the surface, illuminating and warning the future generation about their ancestral history, where their ancestors had walked the painful path of pain and suffering to lead the current generation to the end of the tunnel where there is light. Such accounts reveal human rights abuses in the past, intertwined with social trauma, establishing the validity of trauma accounts as paradigm shifters on many fronts.

Keywords : Holocaust, Victims, Witness, Social Trauma.

INTRODUCTION

The novel *Comfort Woman* (1997) by Nora Okja Keller is a protruding novel in the Asian American literary canon which has gained its significance in the recent decades. It is critically acclaimed for the subject matter it deals with and also for the language of trauma being carefully narrated. The novel traces the suppressed historical trauma of the Korean women during the Japanese military occupation which comes in crossroads with the personal trauma of the protagonist and her daughter's relationship.

Keller as a writer has no first-hand experiences of the traumatic experiences that she pens down, which often put the authenticity of the portrayal of the traumatic experiences into

question. In spite of such odds, Keller has done justice to her role as an author and narrator of the most intense historical trauma experienced by the Korean women, and ironically, the trauma of being the 'Comfort Women'.

Traumatic memories are intense and non-erasable like the carvings in a rock that remain even if it fades. Like a scar, it remains even if the wound heals. The World Wars led way to numerous traumatic experiences among which the most horrific yet silenced trauma is how the Japanese Army forced the women into sexual slavery in the countries occupied by them. The term comfort woman is a translated word for the Japanese word *ianfu* which means "comforting or consoling woman". As ironical as it sounds, it is estimated that close to 2 lakh women were forced into such sexual slavery as comfort women during the World Wars. Most such women were from the military occupied countries such as China, Philippines and Korea, predominantly. Researchers in the recent times have claimed that the term comfort women were calculatedly used to dissipate the magnitude of the crime. It was a form of human trafficking in fact, sponsored by the government body itself, which violates the physical, moral and social existence and well-being of the women.

Post-war, many such comfort women developed intense post-traumatic stress disorder, from their painful traumatic experiences. For instance, a former comfort women Kim Sook-Duk explains how she still has nightmares: "I then scream to wake myself up. Nowadays, people often come here to interview me about my life as a 'comfortwoman'. I cannot see them as often as I used to. My nightmares become worse after remembering the past at these interviews" (40). Another trauma victim Pak Du-ridiscloses, "Occasionally I meet visitors who want to hear about my ordeal. After these meetings I frequently suffer from severe headaches. Sometimes they become so bad I have to be hospitalized" (71).

Traumatic experiences when narrated, tend to make the victims relive their traumatic experiences through flashbacks, nightmares leading to fear and phobias. On the other hand, such narratives tend to be cathartic and also leads to recovery in some form for the survivors. In other ways, such testimonies leave footprints for the forthcoming generations to know about their ancestral past and hardships. Wendy S. Hesford in her essay "Reading Rape Stories: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation" recognises that such narratives, "give voice to heretofore silent histories; help shape public consciousness about violence against women; and thus, alter history's narrative. Moreover, there is strong evidence that the process of telling one's story and writing about personal trauma can be essential elements of recovery. . . ." (195).

Nora Okja Keller, in her interview in 2002, with *AsianWeek* revealed that she was inspired to write the *Comfort Woman* upon hearing the testimony of a trauma survivor KeumJa Hwang, a former comfort woman. Keller became deeply distressed over the testimony she encountered such that, it traumatised her. In Keller's own words, "I felt so haunted, I began dreaming about images of blood and war, and waking with a start. Finally, I realized that the only way to exorcise these dreams and the story from my mind was to write them down. So I got up one night and began to write bits and pieces of my dreams and the comfort woman's words." (Keller, 2002, n.p.).

The novel *Comfort Woman* (1997) is Nora Okja Keller's first published novel. The story shifts between the mother-daughter perspectives. Beccah, the daughter is a Korean-American woman who was born and raised in Hawaii. Her mother Akiko on the other hand, strives to connect with her ancestral roots in Korea but in vain. The relationship that

Beccah has with her mother is extremely strained and worsens with time as Akiko behaves strangely, trying to communicate with spirits. Although loving and kind, Akiko instantly transforms into a furious person during her supposed connection with the spirits. Beccah dreads her mother's strange and unruly behaviours and wish she was normal like other mothers.

It was during Akiko's deathbed; does she reveal the long-veiled secret to her daughter that she has been a comfort woman for the Japanese soldiers in the concentration camps during the war. She reveals that her real name was Soon Hyo and she was sold by her own sister to the Japanese who was in need of money for her dowry after her parents die during the World War II. "I was her dowry, sold like one of the cows before and after me" (18). Initially, Akiko was made to help the women in the stalls, put up in the recreation camp for the Japanese soldiers. Each woman is expunged of her real name and given new names such as Akiko 30, Tamayo 19 etc. This very stripping off of their identity is a harbinger of the threatening experiences these women will be exposed to. The women in the stalls were forced to oblige as prostitutes for the Japanese soldiers and are ironically called as 'comfort women', who are abused animalistically by the soldiers. The men queue up in front of the stalls for their turn, and the women live a life nothing short of an animal or an object. It is extremely ironical and intentional to have named the women as comfort women whereas, they neither have comfort nor freedom but only live a life of a slave violated mercilessly.

Akiko 40 who was brave enough to retaliate and rebel against her plight as a comfort woman, under the terrible circumstances would scream: "I am Korea, I am a woman, I am alive. I am seventeen, I had a family just like you do, I am a daughter, I am a sister" (20). Distressed with her revolt, the soldiers decide to teach her and the other women a lesson to those who rebel against their wretched situation. Consequently, Akiko 40 is executed heartlessly in a violent manner such that it serves as a lesson to the other comfort women to not rebel against the soldiers. "They took her out of her stall and into the woods, where we couldn't hear her anymore. They brought her back skewered from her vagina to her mouth, like a pig ready for roasting" (20). The animalistic murder of Akiko 40, represents the animalistic situation in which the women are placed, who are looked at as mere commodities to fulfil the needs of the soldiers. If rebelled, they are murdered even more brutally, which threatens the other women and makes them submit to the soldiers' demands without rebellion.

Consequently, upon the execution of Akiko 40, Soon Hyo is made to be Akiko 41, taking Akiko 40's place. "That was my first night as the new Akiko. I was given her clothes, which were too big and made the soldiers laugh. . . Even though I had not yet had my first bleeding, I was auctioned off to the highest bidder, after that it was a free-for-all, and I thought I would never stop bleeding" (21). Akiko finds herself in an inescapable situation where her dignity is trampled and is often beaten, raped and abused by the soldiers lining up in front of the stall for their turn. Akiko becomes pregnant in the process and is forced to abort the child in a horrific and unsafe manner, which leads to chronic illness.

This unescapable situation eventually leads to her psychological death and also her social death where she begins to live a life without any hope or meaning attached to it. After two years of terrible experience as a sex slave, she escapes the camp and she takes refuge at a missionary's house where she stays till the end of the war. She was then forced

to choose between staying back in Korea or to marry a missionary named Richard. Akiko chooses to marry him and leave the traumatic space to settle in America; however, she is unable to truly love her husband. Immersed in her traumatic past, she has episodes of her traumatic past that haunts her which disrupts her everyday life and also her family. Her daughter Beccah grows up thinking that her mother is rude and uncompassionate and has always been ashamed of her because she communicated with spirits, which terrified her. When Akiko reveals her buried dark secret of being a comfort woman to her daughter Beccah, she is terrified and is equally filled with guilt for not being supportive of her mother's inner turmoil and trauma.

It's interesting to note that Akiko is a name assigned to her in the camp whereas her real name is Soon Hyo. Striping of one's identity is a form of brutal social death. Soon Hyo, is an identity that she grew up with, yet, she chooses to continue to live with her assigned name Akiko, even after moving to America which reveals how much the traumatic experiences have impacted Akiko. The painful experiences have become an integral part of her, such that it becomes almost impossible to get rid of her past. Her past traumatic experiences haunt her in belatedness, and the identity remains unchanged or unchangeable from within because of its intensity with which it affects her forever.

Albeit Akiko becomes free from such clutches as she gets married and settles in America, the traumatic impact remains and she is unable to live her life in the present. "In the end, I let the missionaries strip me down, burn my clothes, bathe my skin. I wanted to tell them that it would do no good; I would never become clean enough to keep" (62). Akiko, reclaims her past as her identity even though she is shown way to a new future, for the past consumes her and claims her existence.

The traumatic moments are re-experienced belatedly, which causes intense pain through various symptoms. As the prominent trauma theorist Ruth Leys puts forth:

"The idea is that, owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or dissociated: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary normal consciousness; instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories. The experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented as past, but is perpetually reexperienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present". (2)

Ruth Leys also adds that, "language is capable of bearing witness only by a failure of witnessing or representation" (Leys, 268). Akiko, remains a classic example where she fails to communicate her sufferings to her daughter Beccah or anyone around her, for her traumatic experiences remain suppressed within her unable to find a voice.

Keller deliberately parallels the invasion of the Japanese forces on Korea, placing on the other side, the physical exploitation of the Korean women and their bodies by the Japanese army. When the women are forced to serve in the stalls, they are assigned new names and are even expected to speak only in Japanese, due to which most of them remain silent which denotes the physical and metaphorical silencing of the women. This situation, yet again reiterates the silencing of the women in the camps. Such instances prove that like the African women during the Colonisation, the Korean women are also doubly oppressed and made powerless on the grounds of both race and their gender.

The very survival after her traumatic experiences in the camp becomes a challenge for Akiko. However, she finds strength through her spiritual practices in which she

communicates with the spirits especially the spirit of Induk, as she claims, which is spirit of the Akiko before her who was brutally murdered. She finds a sense of purpose in her work that she takes up as a spiritual healer in a café, which she believes that the sufferings she had to go through led her to.

Social trauma such as the holocaust, war is not experienced by everyone, but is often narrated by the next generation that only heard of the stories that were passed on to them. LaCapra explains such association known as secondary witness as: “Historical trauma is specific and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject-position associated with it. It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim’s voice or subject-position” (722). Empathetic towards the traumatic memories of the actual victim, qualifies Keller, like many other next-generation writers to be both a secondary witness and a moral witness who aimed at bringing to light the buried painful experiences of those were silenced for long.

Avishai Margalit in *The Ethics of Memory* (2002), explains that: “[c]onveying the sensibility of events from the past that should be landmarks in our collective moral consciousness calls for a special agent of collective memory. Such an agent needs to be invested with special moral authority akin to that of the religious witness or martyr” whom Margalit calls, “the moral witness” (14). Through *Comfort Women*, Keller takes this place as a moral witness who neither has a first-hand experience, nor an exposure towards the gruesome experiences of the comfort women in Korea.

Margalit claims that, a moral witness “has knowledge-by-acquaintance of suffering” (149). This claim reassures Keller’s position as a moral witness, who was inspired to write the *Comfort Woman*, deeply inspired by and also acquainted the knowledge from the real comfort women whom she met.

The surviving victims, i.e., the past comfort women along with the human rights and women rights organizations worked together on a long difficult legal battle and indeed pursued an admission of guilt and apology from Japan’s government, and demanded the compensations, and acknowledgement of the atrocities the women suffered during the war times. Such endeavours are to be valued, for without such efforts, the past will only remain a silenced past for the future generations. Writers like Keller, bring to the surface such suppressed trauma of their ancestors, thus enlightening and also warning the future generation about their ancestral history where their ancestors had walked in the painful path of pain and suffering to lead the current generation towards the end of the tunnel where there is light. Such narratives unearth the violation of human rights in the history, entwined with social trauma which validates the narratives of trauma as an eye-opener at multifarious levels.

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