

INTERACTIVE ARTICLE COVER

RUPKATHA JOURNAL
ON INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES IN HUMANITIES



About the Journal

Journal DOI	https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha
Journal Home	www.rupkatha.com
Indexed by	Scopus Web of Science: Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) DOAJ
Journal Metrics	CiteScore 2020: 0.2 SJR 2020: 0.162 SNIP 2020: 0.193 JCI 2020: 0.50

About the Issue

Issue	Volume 14, Number 2, 2022
Editor	Tirtha Prasad Mukhopadhyay
Issue DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2
TOC	https://rupkatha.com/v14n2.php

About the Article

Title	The Corporality of Trauma and Testimony: Nora Okja Keller's <i>Comfort Woman</i>	
Author/s	Khushboo Verma¹ & Nagendra Kumar²	
Affiliation	^{1,2} Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, IIT Roorkee, India	
Author ID	None	
Funding	No funding received. Published free of any charge.	
Article DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2.04	Pages: 1-14
Abstract	https://rupkatha.com/v14n204	
Full-text PDF	https://rupkatha.com/V14/n2/v14n204.pdf	
Article History	First Published: 18 June 2022	
Article Impact	Check Dynamic Impact	
Copyright	Aesthetics Media Services	
Licensing	Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0	

This Open Access article is published under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For citation use the DOI. For commercial re-use, please contact editor@rupkatha.com.

The Corporality of Trauma and Testimony: Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*

Khushboo Verma¹ & Nagendra Kumar²

¹PhD candidate, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, IIT Roorkee, India.

Email: kverma@hs.iitr.ac.in

²Professor, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, IIT Roorkee, India.

Email: nagendra.kumar@hs.iitr.ac.in

Abstract

The history of sexual violence taken into consideration for the present study goes back to the period of Second World War, where hundreds of thousands of young girls, euphemistically called the 'comfort women' from different Japanese colonies of the time like Korea, China, Philippines, Indonesia, and Taiwan, were abducted and rounded up by Japanese Imperial Army to provide sexual services to the Japanese soldiers at the military camps before and during the war. The most heinous acts of sexual violence, multiple gang rape, vaginal mutilation, venereal diseases and suicides are manifested in the testimonies and autobiographies of many former comfort women who after fifty years of silence finally found their voices to talk about their ordeal and the trauma they suffered. For the present work, Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997) is studied with a psychoanalytic lens to explore the traumatic history of the real comfort women or the victims of sexual violence. Further, the essay is divided into three other parts where in the first part, the significance of the survivors' testimonies is investigated through Wendy S. Hesford's essay "Reading Rape Stories: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation" (1999). The second part of the paper discusses the rise of trauma theory that has provided novelists with new ways of conceptualising trauma and has shifted attention away from the question of what is remembered of the past to how and why it is remembered charted out by Cathy Caruth's 1996 published work, *Unclaimed Experiences*. And the final part is devoted to the transmission of intergenerational trauma as represented in fictional narratives studied through Anne Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction* (2004).

Keywords: intergenerational trauma, sexual violence, comfort women, survivors' testimonies.

"Certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so cruel, that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, or rights, or the goodwill of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination."

Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditation*.

Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a noticeable surge in the scholarly works from different disciplines like psychology, sociology, and philosophy dealing with the aftermath of traumatic events, the impact of trauma on the survivors and also, the transmission of intergenerational

trauma on the subsequent generations. The focus of this paper thus falls upon one such traumatic event which had long been ignored and denied space in the political discourse until the 1990s, the issue of forced sexual enslavement of hundreds of thousands of women, euphemistically called "comfort women", from different former Japanese colonies like Korea, China, Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia etc., by the Japanese Imperial Army during and before the Second World War and thereby the silence ensued even after the passage of several decades. The most heinous acts of sexual violence, multiple gang rape, vaginal mutilation, venereal diseases and suicides are manifested in the testimonies and autobiographies of many former "comfort women" who after fifty years of silence finally found their voice to talk about their ordeal and the trauma they suffered. For the present work, Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997) is studied from a psychoanalytic lens to explore the traumatic history of the real comfort women and the victims of sexual violence during armed conflicts. Through the analysis of the novel, selected for the purpose, this paper tries to implicate that the silence of the trauma is not only its manifestation but also becomes an instrument of its transmission to the others, especially the near ones of the survivors. And, it is only when this silence is broken, as can be seen in the novel, that their sufferings are embodied with meanings which subsequently prevent both their re-traumatizing and the further psychological harm to the later generations. So, before we delve deep into the traumatic lives of these "comfort women" and Keller's portrayal of one such woman, it is important to carve out the most significant works that have been published around the theme of trauma.

In the third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Sigmund Freud describes a particular pattern inexplicably emerging in the lives of certain individuals from the battlefield (both the returning soldiers and the survivors of war) and their recurring nightmares and repetitive re-enactments of the traumatic past. Freud, in his work, argues that these nightmares are not representational or symbolic as could be misunderstood based upon his previous work of the "Pleasure Principle", what they are, he says, is repetition. It brings an individual back to the situation of the traumatic past. So, both the nightmare and the awakening because of the nightmare are repetitions, repeating an event; the experience with death outside of the self. The nightmares turn the symbolic into the vehicle. The dream, instead of being the place where fantasy can be turned into symbolism that fulfils an unconscious wish, in this case, it serves the function of bringing back a traumatic encounter that was not fully assimilated or grasped as it first occurred, which is what we define as trauma; an event that breaks through the stimulus barrier of the psyche. Thus, the significant trauma experienced by the survivors of sexual violence during conflicts or genocides is not really manifested in the act of survival itself, rather it manifests much later after the occurrence of the event. Though Freud's work is mainly associated with psychological studies, it is Cathy Caruth's pathbreaking work, *Unclaimed Experiences*, first published in 1996, that has redefined the conceptualizations of the trauma theory which began with Freud's psychic manifestations. Caruth, using Freud's work, defines trauma as "a wound inflicted not upon the body but the mind, [...] not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that it is very unassimilated nature- the way it was precisely not known in the first instance- returns to haunt the survivor later on" (*Unclaimed Experience* 1996, 3-4). It is these delayed re-enactments and the often uncontrolled and destructive repetitiveness without the exposure of the survivor's traumatic past, that give birth or create a new set of subsequent generations of trauma survivors. There has been a significant

amount of research works available that trace the psychological effects of the trauma suffered by the genocide survivors of the Holocaust, but only a few in the literature that map the impact of the trauma of sexual violence and massive rapes committed against these “comfort woman” during the Second World War. Thus, it becomes the central focus of the present study to not only explore what happened to these women but, also to demonstrate what it means to live with such a traumatic past for fifty years in silence.

The Significance of Painful Testimony of the Former “Comfort Women”

There is very little testimonial literature available on the said subject because of understandable reasons. But since the first international recognition of the comfort women issue in 1992 and 1993, there are some women who have come forward with their painful testimonies from different countries like Korea, Philippines, Indonesia, Taiwan etc to testify in front of the world and expose the unspeakable truth about the state-sanctioned sexual slavery forced upon them by the Japanese Imperial Army beginning with the colonization until the end of the Second World War. The painful re-emergence of the trauma and traumatic memory at the time of giving testimony is expressed by many former “comfort women” who have confessed of their physical illness during the re-enactment of their ordeal in the act of speaking up: for example, Pak Du-ri explains, “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” (Schellstede 2000, 71); Kim Sook-Duk admits,

“I still have nightmares. I then scream to wake myself up. Nowadays, people often come here to interview me about my life as a ‘comfort woman’. I cannot see them as often as I used to. My nightmares become worse after remembering the past at these interviews” (Schellstede 2000, 40);

Yi Young-sook tells how when,

“Occasionally people come to hear my story of a former ‘comfort woman’. I am reluctant to talk about it because it is my shameful, terrible past. Recollecting such a past is so emotionally draining” (Schellstede 2000, 101) (as quoted in “Nora Okja Keller’s Comfort Woman and the Ethics of Literary Trauma” by Deborah L. Madsen pg. 82).

Thus, these re-enactments and re-emergence of the traumatic memory in the survivors call upon the question of the significance of these testimonies: What is the need for these survivors to go back to that site of trauma and relive those painful experiences? What is the relation between telling and surviving? Also, how are we to make sense of the recollections of events in their testimony that are not without lapses or memory gaps? Analysing the importance of the “comfort women” testimonies, Yoshimi admits,

“these testimonies, if we set aside lapses in memory and omissions concealing facts, are extremely important- not only because the information they contain does not exist in written form, but also because these intense experiences sometimes gave rise to strikingly vivid memories, and as the questions are repeated, facts and relationships that can only be narrated by those involved come to light. Only through these women’s

testimonies can we discover the stark realities that never appear in military and government documents, reports, or statistics" (*Comfort Women* 1999, 100).

Since the event we are discussing happened to these women almost five decades before their first revelation on the international stage, it is understandable to consider the abbreviations, contradictions and memory lapses reflected in the statement of these survivors as natural and humanly. At the same time, many trauma studies scholars notice that these testimonies serve the needs of both the survivors and the writers who take it upon themselves to painstakingly record the horrendous lives of these "comfort women" at the "comfort stations" as well as their traumatic events, in their both historical or fictional works. Dori Laub, in her exemplary study work on the theme of Testimony analyses the relation between telling and surviving for the Holocaust survivors which can also be applied to the "comfort women" issue. She reveals,

"The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life." (Laub 1995, 63).

Laub also emphasizes the importance of the dialogical emergence of truth through these testimonies where the trauma survivors are finally "reclaim[ing] their position as witness" (Laub 1995, 70). It is through the retelling of their traumatic past at the "comfort stations" that these women try to embody their experiences with meaning, of the past that was not earlier understood as "crime" or human rights violations by the women themselves. Also, Wendy S. Hesford, in her essay, "Reading Rape Stories: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation" warns against the risk of identifying the testimonial narrative or autobiographies of survivors as the absolute truth, but simultaneously finely distinguishes as,

"survivor narratives do expose oppressive material conditions, violence, and trauma; 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" ("Reading Rape Stories" 1999, 195).

This element of recovery is highly influential when it comes to the act of speaking the unspeakable, the past that is not only broken through their traumatic memories but also which resurfaces in its new manifestations in the survivors much later when the reality of that event has already elapsed. The process of testifying in front of the world, about their horrific past which had been hidden for five decades, thus infuses meaning to their present identity, emboldening their present self away from the demeaning names they had been identified with by the Japanese soldiers at the camps.

The Silence around the Screaming Trauma

Nora Okja Keller's first novel, *Comfort Woman* (1997) has been critically appreciated as an exemplary work of Asian American literature which is the first and only book in its significance which deals not only with the powerful portrayal of a "comfort woman" but also brings out the imaginative broken lives of the second generations borne to these women if they may have had.

Sandra Cisneros describes the novels as, "A beautiful first novel, lovingly written and lovingly told. *Comfort Woman* speaks eloquently for everyone who tries to imagine a parent's past, who tries to piece together a history that involves as much as the dead as it does the living" (*Comfort Woman* 1997). It is also painfully expressed by many former "comfort women" in their testimonies that because of the atrocities and violence inflicted upon them during the armed conflict, they were unable to bear any children, several women faced vaginal mutilation, multiple abortions, venereal diseases like syphilis and many of them were left with torn bodies and injured wombs. The 83-year-old Park Young-Shim, in an interview, recalls her ordeal at the camp and reveals that she, after returning to her home country, had to undergo a few medical operations including the one where her womb had to be removed because of the indelible wound inside her body. She confesses that she still suffers from heart disease and nervous tension along with the all-encompassing and excruciating body pain. "I still wake up in the middle of the night when I recall the past nightmare," admits Park. "I cannot die before they apologize to me and other comfort women." ("Japan Boiled Comfort Woman to Make Soup" n.p).

In an interview with Asianweek in 2002, Nora Okja Keller describes how she stumbled upon the writing of her novel upon experiencing the testimony of a former "comfort woman", Keum-ja Hwang at a University of Hawaii symposium on Human Rights in 1993, who inspired her to write about the ordeal as well as to pay tribute to the courage of these women to break the silence of fifty years. Her novel stimulates the issues of patriarchy, gendered structural violence, sexuality, colonialism and Japanese imperialism. The predominantly used term "comfort woman" is actually a euphemism used by Japanese soldiers, translated from Japanese *ianfu* and Korean *wianbu*, trying to give this whole system a deceptive image of women at the camps simply providing comfort to the wounded soldiers, but in reality, it was one of the most atrocious gendered sexual violence the world has ever seen. So, to use the same misleading and demeaning term for these women could be distasteful as expressed by Suzanne O' Brien: "I place the terms 'comfort women' and 'comfort station' in quotation marks on first use to emphasize the fact that these terms themselves played a role in concealing and normalizing the violence used against these women. Many survivors explicitly reject the term 'comfort woman' (Translator's Introduction). However, Keller notes,

"The suffering of the comfort women can represent both the suffering of Korean women and the nation of Korea itself. The term, given to them by the Japanese soldiers is a horrible euphemism; using the term as the title of my novel is meant to underscore the unjust irony" ("Nora Keller and the Silenced Woman: An Interview" 2002).

Explaining her difficulty in writing this book, she says:

"But the topic was too big, I couldn't even find the words to express how horrified I was, much less find the vocabulary to talk about the pain in this woman's life. But her story took hold of me. 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 theme of silence is pervasive in Keller's novel which leads to the specific trauma experienced by a "comfort woman" Akiko, which delves deep into her psyche every passing day since her

escape from the camp, "slipping [her] into trances" (*Comfort Woman* 1997, p.2). This trauma, as argued before, not only manifests through the silence for her as a survivor but also transmits onto the second generation, her daughter Beccah, in the novel which shall be discussed in the latter part of the paper. The silencing, however, is not Akiko's own choice as she says,

"I know what I speak for, that is my given name. Soon Hyo, the true voice. The pure tongue. I speak of laying down for a hundred men- each one of them Saja, Death's Demon soldiers- over and over until I died. I speak of bodies being bought and sold, of bodies that were burned and cut and thrown like garbage to wild dogs by the river" (1997, 195).

But this silence is forced upon her by her American Missionary husband, Richard Bradley, who, like the patriarchal society which shames the rape victims and considers them taboo, continually reminds her to: "Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk from your lips, or- ye shall be struck down!" (p.195). Extrapolating the value of turning these repressed memories into narration, van der Kolk and van der Hart assert, "Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language" ("The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" 1995, 176).

Although, most of the "comfort women" were forcefully rounded up by the Japanese Imperial Army, but there are instances where some women were sold by their own family members which is also the case of Akiko in the novel. She describes how, after the death of her parents, her sister had to pay for her own dowry to get married to a neighbour as, "they wouldn't take her without a dowry. How they could buy cattle without any capital, they reasoned" (p.18). So, her sister sold her "like one of the cows" without the knowledge of the Japanese' real intentions and was told that "the Japanese say there is enough work for anyone in the cities. Girls, even, can learn factory work or serve in restaurants. You will make lots of money" (p.18).

Keller's novel portrays how the lack of reception of Akiko's past experiences on her husband's end re-traumatizes her even more in this familial structure. Richard, failing to let Akiko narrativize her traumatic memory, strikes her down:

"Quiet! What if someone hears you speaking like this? The boys, the brothers? What if Beccah hears you? Think of how she would feel, knowing her mother was a prostitute" (p.196).

The overt sexualization of an Asian woman by an American Missionary, the reflection of a dominant gendered ideology, has been rightly captured by Keller in the portrayal of Richard as a paedophile whose only intention to marry her is based upon his lust. As Akiko recalls later in the novel, "this is his sin, the sin he fought against and still denies: that he wanted me- a young girl- not for his God but for himself" (p.95). And the only way he could define Akiko's harrowing past life as a "comfort woman" is as a "prostitute". Keller, through subtle descriptions, suggests Akiko's rape by her own Missionary husband, who not only silences her but contributes to aggravating her agony as a raped victim:

"When he pushed me into the bed, positioned himself above me, fitting himself between my thighs, I let my mind fly away. For I knew that my body was, and always would be, locked in a cubicle at the camps, trapped under the bodies of innumerable men" (p.106).

Due to her repressed trauma, Akiko engulfs herself in various imaginary and mythological spirits, visions, and hallucinations. Keller has beautifully portrayed the inner repressed psyche of a "comfort woman" using poetic language which justly captures the fragmentary, psychedelic, and spiritual world of her mind. Akiko, particularly, becomes obsessed with the spirit of one "comfort woman" called Induk, who "was the Akiko before [her]" in the camp (p.20). Through Induk, she delineates, to the readers, the horrific lives of these women at the 'comfort stations'. Akiko recalls how,

"One night she talked loud and nonstop. In Korean and Japanese, she denounced the soldiers, yelling at them to stop their invasion of her country and her body. Even as they mounted her, she shouted: 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" (p.20).

And this disobedience results into her brutal death:

"Just before daybreak, 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. A lesson they told the rest of us, warning us into silence" (pp. 20-21).

Thus, in her representation of Akiko's traumatic past, Keller maintains a sense of incomprehensibility without appropriating or risking the "truth" of the survivor's trauma. As Cathy Caruth in her work, "Recapturing the Past", argues, "The danger of speech, of integration into the narration of memory, may lie not in what cannot understand, but in that it understands too much" ("Recapturing" 1995, 154).

The Representation of Intergenerational Trauma

Brave Heart and De Bruyn suggest, specifically about the Holocaust, that there are "far-reaching implications" of trauma and argue that "wherever people are being decimated and destroyed, subsequent generations will suffer" ("The American Indian Holocaust" 1998, 71). In *Comfort Woman*, Keller captures the same implications that the offspring of "comfort women" survivors would have faced if any. Her novel renders a surreal time-flow between past and present, juxtaposing the narratives of both mother (interwoven with nightmares, myths and madness) and daughter (fraught with confusion and incomprehension) alternatively along with the subtle depiction of the transmission of intergenerational trauma. Through this novel, Keller fills the scholarly gap in writing down the potential traumatic lives of the second generation of the present sexual violence survivors, which is presented not without their own confused identities and helpless conditions. Keller presents some of the most pitiful moments in Beccah's narratives as the latter tries to protect her mother in every way possible:

"At Ala Wai Elementary, where I was enrolled, I was taught that if I was ever in trouble, I should tell my teachers or the police; I learned about 911. But in real life, I knew none of

these people would understand, that they might even hurt my mother. I was on my own" (p.5).

This hyper consciousness and apprehensive nature towards her mother eventually and gradually destroy her childhood. Initially, Beccah, with her naïve understanding as a young girl, attempts to normalize her mother's madness saying, "Most of the time my mother seemed normal. Not normal like the moms on TV- the kind that baked cookies, joined the PTA, or who came to weekly soccer games- but normal in that she seemed to know where she was and who I was" (p.2).

However, as the novel progresses, the frightful manifestations of Akiko's repressed traumatic psyche starts puzzling Beccah's own psychological state that she, following her mother's rituals, begins to starve herself for the guardian spirits, drinking "endless bowls of blessed water while my mother chanted and sprinkled the ashes of burnt incense stick on my stinking parts" (p.84). Robin Fivush, in her essay, "The Silenced Self: Constructing Self from Memories Spoken and Unspoken" asserts,

"The transfer of silence [of the parents' traumatic past], in effect creates disability in the second generation to construct a coherent narrative [which...] in turn, may lead to a fragmented sense of self, especially if the trauma occurs early in development before children have a stable self-concept or are able to construct a coherent narrative of a past without adult guidance" (Fivush 2004, 89).

Fivush's concept of a 'fragmented sense of self' is further expressed in Beccah's words when she realizes that, "not only could [she] not trust [her] mother's stories; [she] could not trust [her] own (p.34). This also echoes one of the most essential characteristics of inherited trauma maintained by Anne Whitehead as she asserts, "Trauma carries the force of a literality which renders it resistant to narrative structures and linear temporalities" (*Trauma Fiction* 2004, 5). In trying to understand her mother's traumatic symptomatology, Beccah begins to associate herself more and more with her mother, reversing the role of a child to a nurturer:

Even at ten, I knew that I had become the guardian of her life and she the tenuous sleeper. I trained myself to wake at abrupt snorts, unusual breathing patterns. Part of me was aware of each time she turned over in bed, dreaming dreams like mini-trances where she travelled into worlds and times I could not follow to protect her. The most I could do was wait, holding the blue thread of her life while her spirit tunneled into the darkness of the earth to swim the dark red river toward hell. Each night, I went to the bed praying that I would not let go in my own sleep. And in the morning, before I even opened my eyes, I'd jerk my still clenched, aching hand to my chest, yanking my mother back to me. (p.125)

Akiko's trauma not only re-visits her through her nightmares and traumatic memories but also gets transmitted onto Beccah through her behaviour and inhibitions. Replicating her mother's actions, Beccah also scrutinizes her developing body and avoids feminine clothes, wearing only

"large, oversize T-shirts, which I pulled toward my knees to flatten my breasts. The kids called me a "mini-moke" because I slunk around the playground rolling my hands into the front of my shirts and slouched over my desk like one of the big, tough boys" (p.83).

This incident especially echoes Akiko's trauma when she tells the readers of how she and her other counterparts at the "comfort stations",

“all tried to walk the same, tie [their] hair the same, keep the same blank looks on [their] faces. To be special there meant only that [they] would be used more, that [they] would die faster” (p.143).

Akiko even tries to delay her daughter’s menstruation as she remembers her haunting memory of what it meant to attain puberty at the camps, of being feminine. She recalls

“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” (p.21).

This “over-protectiveness” is also pointed out by Natan where she suggests that it manifests as excessive worrying and restrictions, preventing the child’s exposure to the outside world which could be viewed as threatening (“Second Generation” 1981, 13). Akiko’s disturbing experiences at the camp of sexual imprisonment, living in shame and trauma in silence for decades, being raped by as many as 30-40 soldiers a day, and the physical violence and sadistic experiments performed by the military physicians made her mind spiral into the madness which also begins to reflect in her daughter’s behaviour and activities to a lesser extent. Just like her mother’s intermittent fasting and consuming only spirit food, she also

“began to feel the spirits fill [her] body, making [her] stronger, smarter, purer than [her] normal self. Each bite of the food tasted and tested by the Birth Grandmother and the Seven Stars seemed to ripen and bloom in [her] mouth, so that even one grain of rice, one section of orange, one strand of bean sprout, filled [her] to fullness” (p.85).

Beccah also starts to envision the same spirits as her mother. She passionately informs her about the visibility of the spirit of Soja, The Death Messenger, to her mother,

“He stinks, Mommy, with his bubbling skin, black and green, fermenting with pus! I wanted her to know that I saw him, as clearly as she ever did, and that I knew he was real” (p.44).

This inherited trauma can also be seen in the more personal moments of Beccah with her boyfriend Max, where Beccah, after the lovemaking, muses, “My body smelled clean, electric like a rainstorm on the Ko`olaus” but is interrupted suddenly by her mother as she informs, “when I walked through the door, my mother yelled, “Stink poji-cunt!” and charged with a knife” (p.134). It is important to notice that this specific term ‘poji-cunt’ is used by the Japanese soldiers while raping the “comfort women” which still haunts Akiko. Unconscious of her mother’s past as a “comfort woman”, Beccah, vicariously adopts her mother’s trauma, although to a less threatening manner, and begins to perceive her relationship from her mother’s eyes, as she opines later:

I began to watch Max again. I discovered little things- the way he licked his top teeth before he smiled, the way his head lolled as if unanchored by his spine when he played the drums, the way his jaw slackened, then gaped when he slept- that started to bother me. And I begin watching the two of us making love, the way we groped and lunged, as from another’s eyes. As if from my mother’s eyes: When I finally told him it was over, I could not bear to look at him; his face, hovering so close to mine, seemed grotesque. (p.136)

Thus, imbibing her mother's trauma, Beccah also reconstructs her relationship with Max, in her own eyes, from lovemaking to grotesqueness.

Silence Broken

In order to dismantle the further transmission of the parental trauma onto the children, Keller has most beautifully employed a medium of voice; a tape recorder that Akiko uses to break her silence about her horrifying memories as a "comfort woman" in the camps during the Second World War. Akiko manages to record her tapes in the form of singing before her death wherein she reveals the most traumatic violence subjected to her and other young women from different parts of Japanese colonies, she reveals:

"Chongsindae: Our brothers and fathers conscripted. The women left to be picked over like fruit to be tasted, and consumed, the pits spit out as Chongsindae, where we rotted under the body of orders, we were beaten and starved. Under the Emperor's orders, the holes of our bodies were used to bury their excitement. Under Emperor's orders, we bled again and again until we were thrown into a pit and burned, the ash from our thrashing arms dusting the surface of the river in which we had sometimes been allowed to bathe. Under Emperor's orders, we could not prepare those in the river for the journey out of hell" (p.93).

And just as the second generations of the Holocaust survivors attempt to preserve the testimonies of their survivor parents by different media "to fill in the gaps in their own memory and identity", outside the familial structure ("Trauma and Telling" 2016, 29), Beccah also "rummaged through the kitchen cabinets for paper and pen, wanting to write down [her] mother's song" (p.192). The act of bearing witness to a survivor's testimony is powerfully played out in the novel where Beccah is shown, not merely listening to the testimony of her mother, but she also partakes in assigning the meaning to Akiko's heretofore silenced trauma of her past as a "comfort woman": *"Chongsindae. I fit the words into my mouth, syllable by syllable, and flipped through my Korean-English dictionary, sounding out a rough, possible translation: Battalion slave" (p.193).* The dual nature of bearing witness by Beccah is further explained by Dori Laub as she says,

"The emergence of the narrative that is being listened to- and heard- is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the "knowing" of the event is given birth to. The listener is, therefore, a party to the creation of knowledge de novo. The testimony to the trauma, thus, includes, its hearer, who, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time" ("Bearing Witness" 1992, 57).

Beccah also finds a scrap of papers inadequate to historicize the testimonial truth of her mother, "needing a bigger canvas", she strips off the bedsheet, "laid it on the living room floor in front of the speakers, pressed Play on the recorder, and caught [her] mother's words" (p.192).

It is also interesting to note that Keller has provided Beccah with a profession of a recorder of the lives of the dead, a writer of the obituary, but, as the time comes for her to write her own mother's obituary, she realizes,

"as [she] held a copy of her death certificate in [her] hand, [she] found that [she] did not have the facts for even the most basic, skeletal obituary. And [she] did not know how to start imagining her life" (p.26).

Thus, for her discovering the hidden truth about the history of her mother as a "comfort woman", "listening to her accounts of crimes made against the woman she could remember, so many crimes and so many names" (p.194) also parallels, in Keller's own words,

"the world's discovery of the stories of comfort women. They will not die unknown and unrecognized, lost in history" ("An Interview" 2003, 155).

Beccah, thus, has a three-fold function to play in the novel, first, she becomes the target of the transmission of an intergenerational trauma visited upon by her mother, second, she becomes an important instrument for witnessing the testimony of a "comfort woman" survivor, in this case, her mother, and third, she is portrayed as a preserver of these memories, probably for the future generations or the world to break the silence around the Comfort Women problematic. And it is only after her mother's silence is broken through the cassettes that Beccah could break the shackles of her own trauma as she expresses at the end of the novel,

"I opened my mouth to drown, expecting to suck in heavy water, but instead I breathed in air, clear and blue. Instead of ocean, I swam through sky, higher and higher, until dizzy, with the freedom of light and air" (p.213)."

Conclusion

Keller, in a way, through her literary imagination in the novel, justifies the significance and representation of the fictional stories of many such "comfort women" and their testimonies. Although, taking the very nature of incomprehensibility and inexpressibility of trauma into consideration, the novel evokes a sense of paradox or contradictions as expressed by Whitehead in her work, *Trauma Fiction*, as "if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativized in fiction?" (Introduction to Part I 2004, 3). However, it is only through the ability of novelists like Keller in fictionalizing and symbolizing a trauma narrative that can help create a safe space wherein the experiences of survivors, specifically "comfort women" survivors, "appear to defy understanding and verbalization, that concern existential dimensions of the human condition- especially threatening experiences of vulnerability or mortality- can be explored from multiple perspectives" ("Theorizing Trauma" 2013, 3). Literary trauma narratives often work through this crucial paradox that defines trauma narratives in general, where it becomes a medium through which presenting the unrepresentable is attempted, the unspeakable is spoken and which resists the comprehension and remembering is narrated. As Geoffrey Hartman agrees, "literary verbalization, however, still remains a basis for making the wound perceivable and the silence audible" ("Trauma" 2003, 259).

In the novel, Keller depicts that the traumatic memories, which surround and haunt Akiko in her entire life, are unconsciously further transmitted to her daughter as the offspring of a warfare sexual violence survivor, and are only exorcised when this silence is broken through the cassette tapes. This mirrors the second-generation survivor of Bay Area genocide, Deborah A. Miranda's expressions from her memoir, who while grappling with her own personal trauma, admits,

"I thought perhaps the cure was telling. Then I thought the cure was telling the truth. Now in the cool of dawn, I think to myself, maybe it's each woman telling her truth in a language forced from every knife ever held to her throat, or wielded in self-defence. It's not about destruction or forgetting, but transformation" (*Bad Indians* 2012, 118).

It is only after Beccah becomes aware of her mother's traumatic past that she could make sense of the strange world and the otherworldly visions of spirits her mother used to live in. This move from silence to revelation also further helps break the continued chain of the transmission of trauma from one generation to other. And acknowledging the trauma that resides in her and her mother's life, she effectively attempts to transform what Murray would call,

"the traumatic memory into a memory of trauma- one that remembers the trauma and the damage that is caused but can no longer continue to harm the generations that follow" ("Trauma and Telling" 2016, 54).

In singing the names of the women who suffered at the hands of Japanese soldiers and recording the horrific memories of hers and others' lives as "comfort women" in the Japanese military camps during the Second World War, Keller has shown Akiko to be a very powerful political agent who finally transforms herself into a writer of an almost erased historical truth. This parallels the powerful moments of the real "comfort women" at the time of their testimony who, after a long five decades of silence, finally found the courage and voice to speak about their ordeal in front of the world.

Declaration of Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

Funding

No funding has been received for the publication of this article. It is published free of any charge.

References

- Brave Heart, M. Y. H., & DeBruyn, L. M. (1998). The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief. *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research: Journal of the National Center*. 8.2: 56-78.
- Caruth, C. (2010). *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Caruth, C. (1995). Recapturing the Past: Introduction. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP. Vol.151, 151-57.
- Felman, S., & Laub, D. (1992). Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening. *Testimony: Crisis in Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge. 57-74.
- Fivush R. (2003). The Silenced Self: Constructing Self from Memories Spoken and Unspoken. In Denise R. Bieke et al. (Eds.), *The Self and Memory*. New York: Psychology Press, 75-93.

- Freud, S. (1920). Beyond the Pleasure Principle. In *The Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, London: Hogarth. Vol.18, ch.3.
- Hartman, G. (2003). Trauma withing the Limits of Literature. *European Journal of English Studies* 7.3: 257-74.
- Jeyathurai, D. (2010). Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*. 16:3, 62-79, DOI: 10.1080/12259276.2010.11666092
- Keller, N. O. (1997). *Comfort Woman*. USA: Penguin Group.
- Keller, N. O. (2002). Asianweek http://www.asianweek.com/2002_04_05/arts_keller.html
- Lee, Chang-ree. (1999). *A Gesture of Life*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Lee, Y. O., & Keller, N. O. (2003). Nora Okja Keller and the Silenced Woman: A Interview. *Speech and Silence: Ethnic Women Writers*. London: Oxford University Press. Vol. 28, No.4, 145-165.
- Laub, D. (1995). Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle. In Trauma: Explorations in Memory, ed. Cathy Caruth, 61-75. *Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press*.
- Madsen, D. L. (2007). Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* and the Ethics of Literary Trauma. *Concentric, special issue: Ethics and Ethnicity*, ed. Shirley Lim. 33. 2, pp. 81-97.
- Miranda, D. A. (2012). *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Morrison, T. (2019). *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Murray, J. (2016). Trauma and Telling: Examining the Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Through Silence. MA Thesis, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL.
- Natan, T. (1981). Second Generation Holocaust Survivors in Psycho-social Research. In *Dapim Leheker Tkufat Hashoa*. 2: 13-26. (In Hebrew)
- O'Brien, S. (1999). Translator's Introduction. In *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II* by Yoshiaki Yoshimi. New York: Columbia University Press. 1-21.
- Park, T. (1997). *A Gift of the Emperor*. Duluth: Spinsters Ink.
- Soh, C. S. (2008). *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Schellstede, S. C. (2000). *Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military*. New York: Holmes & Meier.
- Schönfelder, C. (2013). Theorizing Trauma Romantic and Postmodern Perspectives on Mental Wounds. In *Wounds and Words*. Germany: Transcript Verlag. 27-86.
- Stetz M., & Oh B. B. C. (2015). *Legacies of the Comfort Women of World War II*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Van der Kolk, B., & Van der hart, O. (1995). The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth, Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press. 158-171.
- Whitehead, A. (2004). Introduction to Part I. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 3-11.

Khushboo Verma is a Research Scholar in the Department of Humanities & Social Sciences at IIT Roorkee, Uttarakhand, India. Her research concentrates on War Crimes Against Women during WWII. Her ORCID is 0000-0002-0288-2647.

Nagendra Kumar is a Full Professor of English in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Roorkee, Uttarakhand, India. He specializes in English Language, Literature and Communication Studies. Besides publishing a widely reviewed book he has published research papers in reputed, Scopus and Web of Science indexed journals. He has delivered invited lectures and plenary talks in dozens of FDPs around the country and has successfully conducted around 15 AICTE/TEQIP Sponsored Short Term Courses and Workshops on various aspects of teaching pedagogy, Soft Skills, Communication and Culture. He has been the recipient of Outstanding Teacher Award of IIT Roorkee for the year 2015.