



Research article

'I'll tell that human tale': Documenting the Wartime Sexual Violence in Jing-Jing Lee's *How We Disappeared* (2019)

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Abstract

Sexual slavery as a phenomenon of war was rampant during the Japanese Imperial Army's occupation of territories before and during the Second World War (1939-1945). These innumerable sex slaves, or "comfort women", as the Japanese Army had named them, were women (a striking number of them being minors) who were forcefully captured and separated from their families and placed at comfort stations built to fulfill the sexual needs of the Japanese soldiers. While this entire system was created on the pretext of reducing wartime rapes and curbing the spread of venereal diseases, these comfort stations did just the opposite. Studies conducted into these comfort stations reveal how they had become sites of inhuman sexual violence, torture, disease, and death. This paper will look at how Jing-Jing Lee's historical fiction *How We Disappeared* (2019) rewrites these innumerable, nameless, brutalized women into the world's history as victims of a bloody war that had tainted unassuming lives and had snuffed out their existence ruthlessly. Lee's narrative is scarred by violence committed along gendered lines – illustrating the reduction of the female body to a disposable sexual tool, existing merely to bear the brunt of a war that was not theirs. This paper decodes the politics of gender violence behind Japan's enforced and licensed prostitution, the nature of sexual violence, the commodification of women's bodies, the place of women in the socio-cultural context of the era, and the gendered role of women, in what was quintessentially men's war.

Keywords: Sexual violence, prostitution, sexual slavery, torture, gender violence



Reduced Inequalities, Gender Equality, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

1. Introduction: Gendering Sexual Violence

The history of mankind bears testimony to the gendered nature of violence. This gender-based violence has its roots in the perennial assignation of the woman as the weaker sex. The universal socio-cultural constructions of gender have naturalized the position of women as veritable sex objects existing only for man's pleasure and for bringing life into the world. Man, on the other hand, has been created for ambitious pursuits, to venture beyond the domestic space and to continually negotiate new roles in society. In the divide thus created between masculinity and femininity, it is the latter whose position is eternally plagued by precarity. It is also important to note that the nature of violence perpetrated against women is mostly sexual – once again

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repositioning the woman as the object of lust. The woman's body then becomes the site of sexual violence where masculinity exerts itself as a controlling force over which women could not exert autonomy. Male sexual aggression becomes almost like a performative ritual that over time came to reinstate and mythologize blatantly polarizing gender roles. This gendering of sexual violence can be witnessed even in the 21st century where women remain the primary victims of sexual violence still – whether be it in the form of rape, domestic abuse, sex trafficking, prostitution, or even in the digital space. This paper attempts to explore the issue of wartime rape and the nature of sexual violence during the war with specific reference to the large-scale prostituting of women by the Imperial Japanese Army before and during the Second World War.

1.1. War and Sexual Violence

To quote Ikuhiko Hata (2018), "To speak of war is necessarily also to speak of rape" (p. 121). Historically, women have been as much a part of the war as men, but it is simply that their participation has been different. Instead of being *on* the battlefield, for by general belief the framings of femininity are unsuited to the nature of war, women's bodies have been made the site of a brutal sexual war, and it was a war from which women couldn't emerge victorious. As opposed to the 20th-century psychoanalytical theories on rape that conceived of it as an act of sex (McPhail, 2015), debates on wartime rape contend that rape is not an act of sex, but one that is imbued purely with violence. This paper draws attention to the multitudes of nameless women who were victims of mass rape and sexual violence under the consenting will of the Japanese Imperial regime from 1932 to 1945.

Theorizing on wartime rape, Hooper (2001) notes how "[s]oldiering is characterized as a manly activity...[and] [i]t has historically been an important practice constitutive of masculinity" (p. 47). Considering rape to be a reassertion of hetero masculinity (Alison, 2007, p. 77), wartime rape is merely an extension of the existing norms of gender violence. It is because of the war which necessarily mandates the suspension of all civil boundaries that mass rapes are witnessed. Nicola Henry (2016) concentrates upon the structural inequalities in society that presages sexual violence on women during times of crisis: "Attention to the structural causes of wartime sexual violence thus can help to situate the inherent connections between 'everyday' forms of violence in pre-war and post-war contexts and 'extraordinary' forms of violence during periods of armed conflict" (p. 50). Bordering on the same vein of thought Tompkins (1995) speaks of rape as something that "happens during war for the same reasons it happens during peace. It is a phenomenon rooted in inequality, discrimination, male domination and aggression, misogyny, and the entrenched socialization of sexual myths" (pp. 850-851). Wartime rape, thus, is preceded by the already existing gender inequalities in society and is to be seen as a brutal manifestation of it enabled, and at times encouraged, by the temporary suspension of law and order.

1.2. 'Comfort Women': Who were they?

Nothing is comforting about the lives of comfort women. "Comfort women", according to Kim et al. (2019), was a system of sexual slavery introduced by the Imperial Japanese government between 1932 and 1945, and it happens to be the largest reported case of government-sanctioned human trafficking and sexual slavery in recent history. Scholars have estimated that hundreds of thousands of women, including minors as young as twelve years old, were violated (Kim et al., 2019, p. 58). While the 'comfort women' that we know today, thanks to widespread reportage, is

the licensed prostitution system created by the Japanese government, it was a system that had been in existence for quite some time. Ikuhiko Hata in her work *Comfort Women and Sex in the Battle Zone* (2018) traces the genealogy of these 'comfort women' which revealed that there were several other euphemisms for prostitution including geisha, tea-pouring girls, drink-pouring girls, and so on. Hata makes the following observation on the system of comfort women in Japan: "It is appropriate to understand the system of comfort women and comfort women for the military as the wartime version of the system of licensed prostitution from prewar Japan" (p. 23). It is a well-acknowledged theory that comfort stations exclusively for the Japanese army were first built in Shanghai during the First Shanghai Incident in 1932 (Hata, 2018, p. 53).

The 'comfort women' of the Imperial Japanese Army were the casualties of a war where they were nothing more than usable and dispensable objects, victims of a cruel regime's warped machinations to keep soldiers satisfied on the battlefield. What happened to these comfort women was Government sanctioned rape for which "comfort women" or *ianfu* became a euphemism. It is only as recent as in the early 1990s that several former comfort women from Korea and Japan came forward to seek redressal and an official apology for the gross violation of human rights before the Japanese government. Hata (2018) lists the headlines of the Japanese daily *Asahi Shimbun* on January 11, 1992, which reported on the arrangements made by the Japanese government for comfort women and comfort stations –

"Documents show military involvement in comfort stations"

"Written instructions, journals of former Japanese military found at Defense Agency library"

"Units instructed to set up [comfort stations]"

"Control, supervision of [comfort stations], including recruitment, instructed under the name of the chief of staff. Some documents had the seal of the administrative vice minister"

"Government view that 'private operators were in charge' challenged"

"Calls for apology and compensation intensifying" (Hata, 2018, p. 01).

The undocumented suffering of the comfort women gained global attention when three Korean former comfort women filed a class-action lawsuit in Tokyo court to "demand an apology and reparations from the Japanese government on behalf of an estimated 100,000 victims" (Brownmiller, 1993, p. 18). While this entire system was created on the pretext of reducing wartime rapes and curbing the spread of venereal diseases, these comfort stations did just the opposite. Studies conducted into these comfort stations reveal how they had become sites of inhuman sexual violence, torture, disease, and death. Women, even minors, were coerced and abducted, and forced to become comfort women. However, some women had volunteered to become comfort women – primarily because they were former prostitutes, or because that was the only way for them to fend for themselves. The comfort women were routinely raped and abused. They were frequently medically examined to detect venereal diseases and those who were found to be diseased were executed. A similar fate of execution awaited those who resisted the soldiers. Ok-sun Yi, a former Korean comfort woman, testified that many women were murdered, brutalized, and even committed suicide at comfort stations, so much so that Yi compares those comfort stations with slaughterhouses (Kim et al., 2019, p. 60).

Jing-Jing Lee's *How We Disappeared* (2019) stands out as one of the very few novels in existence to document wartime sexual violence on Singaporean women during the Japanese occupation of Singapore. This paper will take a look at how the novel rewrites these innumerable, nameless, violated, abused women into the world's history as victims of a bloody war that had tainted unassuming lives and had snuffed out their existence ruthlessly. Lee's narrative is scarred by violence committed along gendered lines – illustrating the reduction of the female body to a disposable sexual tool, existing merely to bear the brunt of a war that was not theirs. The novel documents the trauma of rape, witnessing murders, the aftermath of surviving the comfort stations, and society's attitude towards these survivors – all portrayed through the life of Lee's protagonist Wang Di. This paper will decode the politics of gender violence that went on behind Japan's enforced and licensed prostitution, the nature of sexual violence, the commodification of women's bodies, the place of women in the socio-cultural context of the era, and the gendered role of women in what was quintessentially men's war.

2. 'Wang Di' or 'to hope for a brother'

This section of the paper tackles the popular contention that structural inequalities of gender precede any form of sexual violence, even wartime rapes. To establish this point of view, Wang Di's life will be illustrated from the vantage point of gender inequality to reveal the intersections of gender, sex, and violence. Wang Di's birth was but an anticlimactic start, a dashing of all hopes of a father who desperately looked forward to having a son, and stopped short of terminating her life upon reconsideration. While surviving the comfort station was no less a miracle than being spared by her father after her birth, this tug of war between life and death seems to shroud women's lives like a catastrophic foreboding. In the course of the novel, the meaning of her name is revealed: "*Wang*, meaning 'hope' or 'to look forward to'. *Di*, 'little brother'" (p. 25), and the fact that her birth was followed by the births of her two younger brothers, is taken to be a sign of "good luck" for her parents (p. 25). Much later in the novel, after surviving the comfort house, Wang Di would realize the self-negatory aspect of her name – how her entire existence was predicated upon the existence of her brothers who could carry on the family name, while she alone must bear the burden of war so that they can be spared: "But perhaps this was all for them – as my name suggested. My life for two of theirs" (p. 178).

Before being bundled into the troop carrier like shackled livestock to be taken to the slaughterhouse by the Japanese soldiers, Wang Di's life was remarkably ordinary, yet safe. Abiding by her father's opinion that women's utility lies only within the domestic sphere and that schooling girls is useless, Wang Di decides to help out in the house. It is only after that rumours started spreading about the abduction of girls by the Japanese Army from the neighbouring villages that it is decided to get Wang Di married off. But before that could happen, Wang Di is forcefully taken by the Army to the comfort station where she would spend the next three years of her life in unspeakable agony. When exposed to the routinized sexual abuse in the black-and-white house, Wang Di realizes the price of being a woman. Her mother's words "You are a woman now" when she had had her first bleed sits heavily in her mind and she ponders how being born a man could have saved her from this torture: "Not for the first time, I wondered how my life would have been if I had been...[a] boy instead of who I was" (p. 178).

As a wartime sexual violence survivor, Wang Di tries to rationalize her tragedy by ascribing it to her duty as a daughter. As a daughter, the only way for her to help her family was by being away from them at the black-and-white house. This was the motivational factor that gave her the strength to tolerate all of the rapes and abuse:

I was, in the words of my parents during their most desperate (poorest) moments, useless. Disposable. In my little cell in the black-and-white house, I had comforted myself with the thought that my time there might give my family some relief in the way of much-needed cash for food or medicine. That there, at least, I wasn't absolutely useless...That was how I bore it, the rapes, the unforeseeable beatings, the humiliation of never having a choice when they told me to sit up, open wide, lie down, and shut up (Lee, 2019, pp. 276-277).

Given the picture of pitiable femininity that comes alive before the readers, it is perhaps not too hard to imagine the role of women in war. Of course, there were other women, like Wang Di's and Yan Ling's mothers, Huay's sister, and Lim Mui Joo, who could escape being comfort women but suffered all the same. It remains a fact that Wang Di, Huay, Jeomsun, and other comfort women across several comfort stations were embroiled in the war in a manner that enabled them to witness the depravity, needless violence, and quintessential dehumanization of men caused by war firsthand. Mrs. Sato, the one in charge of the black-and-white house, enunciates how her patriotism will go unrecognized simply because she is a woman:

The men we see every day, they do their soldier's duty, their shouting and killing, glorifying our country and saving others, like yours, from the white man's rule. Back home, they celebrate what their sons and fathers are doing. Even the dead go back heroes. But the women [...] I won't go home to a hero's welcome. I am just a woman (Lee, 2019, p. 193).

By the logic of war, dead men are better than living women – no matter what role they had played in war. From the perspective of the comfort women, war's cruel reductive mechanism had robbed them of their bodily autonomy, had shown them the purview of their existence, and proved to them that their usefulness lie only in being sex slaves.

2.1. 'Black-and-white house': Wang Di's human tale

I'll tell my human
tale, tell it against
the current of that vaster, that
inhuman telling. (Li-Young Lee, 'Furious Versions')¹

The sexual violence depicted in the novel plays out in the "black-and-white house", which is the name of the comfort station where Wang Di was imprisoned along with other girls. Lee has not shied away from graphically depicting the inhuman torture that went on in the comfort stations. Lee has taken care to portray historically accurate details about the operative ways of the comfort stations. In the narrative, the black-and-white house is described as a shabby-looking dilapidated building where rooms were divided using slim wooden panels. The windows were boarded up from the outside so that the women could not escape. Each comfort woman was given a room where there would be a rattan mat and a small table along with a bottle containing an antiseptic

¹ The extract has been used as an epigraph to the novel by Jing-Jing Lee

fluid which was to be used after every soldier was done for sanitation purposes. The rooms would also be padlocked to prevent any escape attempts. Each soldier would have twenty minutes and there would be an unending line of soldiers waiting outside each door. The girls would be medically examined every week initially, and then every month, to prevent the spread of venereal diseases. Girls who would get infected, or pregnant, would be executed since they could no longer serve their purpose.

All the girls were given Japanese names. Wang Di is rebranded as Fujiko. Her *raison d'être* for the next three years was clarified by Mrs. Sato: "You're here to serve the Japanese troops. Make them feel welcome" (p. 135). She was told that for her work her family would receive money – a blatant lie to kindle some hope while the girls withstood innumerable rapes daily. Her clothes are taken away and she is given a thin dress that barely covers her and soon would also lose all the buttons after numerous encounters with the soldiers. Fujiko/Wang Di is jolted into a new reality where most of the time, when the soldiers are not beating her up without the slightest provocation, she lies with eyes closed, hoping that it would be over soon: "After the initial week, I served around thirty men a day. On weekends and festival days, the number went up. Forty, fifty." (168) Maria Rosa Henson, a former Filipina comfort woman in her autobiography *Comfort Women: A Filipina's Story of Prostitution and Slavery Under the Japanese Military* (1999) testifies to undergoing torture which is not too different from what Wang Di experiences in Lee's narrative:

Twelve soldiers raped me in quick succession, after which I was given half an hour rest. Then twelve more soldiers followed. They all lined up outside the room waiting for their turn. I bled so much and was in such pain, I could not even stand up. The next morning, I was too weak to get up...I could not eat. I felt much pain, and my vagina was swollen...I could not resist the soldiers because they might kill me (Henson, 1999, pp. 36-37).

Jan Ruff O'Herne, another former comfort woman who had been forcefully captured and prostituted during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies voiced how she was robbed of her basic human rights: "They had stripped me of everything. They had taken everything away from me, my youth, my self-esteem, my dignity, my freedom, my possessions, and my family" (Kim et al., 2019, p. 61). Henry (2016) is of the opinion that "the common thread between all wars is that rape is a product of warped (yet normalized) militarized hegemonic masculinity, which arguably is structurally embedded in pre-conflict gender inequality and unequal power relations" (p. 44) Wartime rape is a product of the culturally embedded binaries of femininity and masculinity, but it is also so much more than just that. Yuki Tanaka in his book *Hidden Horrors* (2018) brings the issue of ethnicity and nationality to the conversation. In the same book, he talks about how the rebranding of the Chinese comfort women with Japanese names reflects the Japanization of the Imperial Army's occupied regions, while also maintaining the purity of their own people:

There were Japanese prostitutes during the war, but most were in a different position from the comfort women. The Japanese prostitutes mainly worked in brothels that served high-ranking officers, and they experienced much better conditions than the comfort women. The Japanese military forces did not believe Japanese women should be in that role because they were supposed to be bearing good Japanese children who would grow up

to be loyal subjects of the emperor rather than being the means for men to satisfy their sexual urges (Tanaka, 2018, p. 97).

Speaking of the larger socio-political connotations of rape, Tompkins (1995) avers how enemy women are targeted for sexual violence because of “women’s vital importance in constructing and maintaining the ethnonational group” (pp. 850-851). To amplify the matter further, Seifert (1994) talks about how the female body itself is a “symbolic representation of the body politic” and that the rape of women can be seen as the “symbolic rape of the body of [the] community” (pp. 62-4). The black-and-white house, itself a site of violence, also made women’s bodies the site of violence. The twelve-year-old girl that was brought was murdered by a soldier because she kept resisting. While women were being brutally killed for no reason, some even succumbed to being subjected to prolonged violence. One girl cracked her head by simply fainting in the bathroom, and another girl’s stab wounds got infected and she died. Reflecting on the amplifying inhumanity of the soldiers with the increasing tension in the war, Wang Di surmises that perhaps this show of violence was a manifestation of being completely powerless on the battlefield like these women were before them: “These incidents were becoming more frequent with the bombings as if fear was chipping away at the men, the people they once were, before they left home and came here, and made monsters out of them” (p. 229). These women existed so that the soldiers could vent their frustrations on their bodies.

Violence becomes the essence of the black-and-white house, but it also witnesses the blossoming of a beautiful friendship among the girls, especially between Wangi Di, Huay, and Jeomsun. It was a friendship that allowed them to forget for a while the animalism that they just witnessed in their rooms. It was a friendship involving caregiving that kept them close to their humanity: “The three of us took care of each other in turns by way of saving any food we got from the soldiers and passing it along to the one who felt poorly” (p. 179). Their friendship sustained them through hard times, but finally, the false sense of complacency cracked. Huay was the first one to fall. Struck with a venereal disease that left painful rashes all over her body and even caused her to lose her memory, Huay’s disorientation worried Jeomsun and Wang Di. The psychological toll is heavy on Huay as she experiences every rape anew and finally, after getting tired of her resisting, screaming, and crying, a soldier shot her. After Huay is shot, the impossibility of escape and freedom settles in, and Wang Di realizes that this is how these women will be obliterated from existence: “This, I thought, this is how we’re going to disappear” (p. 200).

2.2. Fujiko’s Afterlife: Survivor’s Guilt and Shame

Wang Di lives three lives – there is the pre-war Wang Di, then Fujiko of the black-and-white house, and finally, the post-war Wang Di, Fujiko’s afterlife, the “comfort woman”. Wang Di returns home after being the only one to survive the black-and-white house. She is plagued by nightmares where she is haunted by Huay and Jeomsun, and sometimes even Cheng Xun, her deceased son whom she had given birth to in the black-and-white house:

With sleep though, came dreams; I would see Huay and Jeomsun most nights, and if I was lucky, Cheng Xun as well. Then I would wake, my face damp, remembering how I’d left them like that. The relief of being back with my family and the guilt of it spilling over into each other so that I almost wished I hadn’t survived. Almost (Lee, 2019, p. 272).

Wang Di is in the grip of survivor's guilt as she feels that by surviving she has somehow betrayed her comrades. This does not mean that she would rather have died along with them, but a bitter realization that her grief of losing them will forever continue to weigh heavily on her conscience for surviving the brothel. She is unable to share her grief with her family since they strictly avoid bringing up the issue like it is a shameful past that must be shaken off. According to Kelly et al (2016), rape survivors have historically been ostracized and exiled from their families and community and sometimes even refused entry into the household. In the novel, Wang Di recounts an incident where another comfort station survivor went home only to have the door shut in her face because her family members blatantly refused to recognize her (p. 275). Wang Di's own brother spat out, "Why did you come back?", and, "You should have just stayed dead" (p. 273). Wang Di's traumatic past is blanketed by a politics of silence undergirded by victim blaming that forbids her from even making a faint reference to her past. Her mother becomes society's mouthpiece through which victim shaming is articulated:

Don't tell anyone. Not me or your father or any of the neighbours. Especially not your future husband [...] No one must know. You need to forget her, Huay, and the other girl. *They didn't exist.* You understand?" [my italics] (Lee, 2019, p. 279).

Lee's novel, then, effectively addresses the invisibilization of these comfort women and how it had come to be. The post-war nation-state refused to bring to light the nation's shameful defeat where the spoils of war had been their women. Wang Di's mother's statement "They didn't exist" tersely captures the politics of erasure, silencing, and invisibilization which had begun at the grassroots level. Wang Di was not looked at as a victim, but as an ally of the Japanese army despite belonging to the enemy party. Initially, after Wang Di's return, people started to avoid and even ignore her entire family. They would make Wang Di feel like an outsider to society by refusing to buy things from her. Even her father would refuse to speak to her when she would be alone, and during meals the entire family would be busy discussing daily affairs, not even acknowledging the fact that Wang Di had not been home for the better part of three years. Addressing the silence surrounding Singaporean comfort women, the novelist Jing-Jing Lee mentioned in an interview with Alan Fisk the factors of shame and exposure that threatens the people:

Although Singaporeans take for granted the fact that local women were abducted during the Occupation, no victims have come forward to give testimony. During my research, I came across several interviews in which war survivors mentioned having seen, or heard about, such events. The women involved, invariably, would be a distant relation or a friend of a neighbour – someone conveniently removed from the interviewees' own private sphere so that they can remain fairly untouched by the trauma and shame. So no, the issue is not being discussed as openly as in Korea and China. I believe the size of the country is a one factor. Its smallness prohibits any sense of anonymity so that there's nowhere to hide from the shame of being a rape victim once you've confessed to having been a comfort woman for the Japanese soldiers (Fisk, 2019, para. 6).

It is only her husband whom she addresses as "the Old One" who encourages her to pour out the torrent of trauma swirling inside her: "There's nothing to be ashamed about. You did nothing – nothing wrong" (p. 9). He tries to absolve her of any modicum of shame and guilt she might be having for being forced into prostitution. Wang Di's husband has an inkling of her past but never

brings up the issue against her will. No one, then, in her life knows what happened to her in the black-and-white house, and about her departed son Cheng Xun, whom Wang Di had desperately wanted to keep even though he was born of rape, violence, and bloodshed. The death of Wang Di's son, which happens simultaneously with her escape from the brothel and the defeat of the Japanese army, comes to symbolize a new beginning for Wang Di and her country. But the memory of Cheng Xun comes as a bitter aftertaste once again symbolizing the country's pyrrhic victory and Wang Di's scarred existence.

2.3. Memory and Trauma

In a study conducted by Kuwert et al (2014) where the long-term effects of conflict-related sexual violence were compared with non-sexual war trauma in World War II female survivors, it was revealed that survivors of wartime rape had greater severity of PTSD-related symptoms and also experienced anxiety along with severe sexual problems during their lifetime. These survivors also went unrecognized and unacknowledged as trauma survivors as opposed to non-sexual survivors. Such is the fate of Wang Di in the narrative. While the study undertaken by Kuwert et al (2014) talks about the psychological state of sexual abuse victims that leads to sexual problems later in life, Wang Di's condition was more physiological. She has to undergo a hysterectomy because of her pelvic inflammatory disease which was in all probability a result of suffering years of sexual abuse within the unsanitary walls of the black-and-white house. Aware that she is unable to fulfill the most important role as a wife – motherhood – she is apologetic: "I'm so sorry I never gave you children. That I'll never give you children. Can you forgive me?" (p. 217)

Wang Di's husband, Chia Soon Wei, is also a victim of the war albeit his victimization was different from hers. As they began their journey as husband and wife, they both realized that there were gaping wounds marking their individual histories. They come together as victims of war, and while her husband wants to open up and share their past trauma to unburden themselves, or perhaps to share their burden of trauma, Wang Di refuses to have that conversation. That Wang Di has still not healed from her past is made amply clear in the physical manifestation of her trauma when approached by the Old One to initiate a conversation on their past:

[The Old One] had brought it up one day at home, was beginning to tell Wang Di what happened during the invasion but stopped when he saw that she was drawing back from him as he spoke, as if she were an animal, netted in the wild; and her face, how wide her eyes had become, how very still. The point was made even clearer when she woke that night, kicking and thrashing, cracking the dark with her cries (Lee, 2019, p. 8).

Wang Di's present existence comes filtered through a past whose memories have been etched deep into her psyche. Mentally, Wang Di is still trapped inside the black-and-white house, along with Jeomsun and Huay. Unwelcome memories of her past infiltrate her consciousness without prior warning and she is transported back to the brothel. In an attempt to forget her traumatic past, Wang Di muffles the voices of her comrades, but their voices keep ringing in her head as both Jeomsun and Huay have become a part of her: "She couldn't stop hearing their voices – not just Jeomsun's, Huay's as well. After decades of muffling their voices in her head. Of trying not to see them when she closed her eyes at night" (p. 16)

Judith Herman (1992, as cited in Card, 1996) avers that shell-shocked soldiers' post-traumatic stress disorder syndrome was quite similar to post-traumatic stress disorders seen among female survivors of sexual violence. Herman makes the following case: "The subordinate condition of women is maintained and enforced by the hidden violence of men. There is a war between the sexes. Rape victims, battered women, and sexually abused children are its casualties" (pp. 28-32). Memories of Huay and Jeomsun and her deceased son linger in her waking life, and Wang Di's refusal to bring up the invasion is but a feeble attempt to push them back deep into her subconscious. Every reference to the war triggers in Wang Di a vitriolic manifestation of her post-traumatic stress disorder:

Why talk about what happened during the war? Why now? [...] That night, the nightmares returned (her first in years) and he had to hold her hand while she slept, as if trying to prevent her from being swept away by a swift current (Lee, 2019, p. 63).

It is only after the Old One passes on, Wang Di realizes the importance of a person's history. Parted by death, Wang Di strives to get closer to her deceased husband by uncovering his past, what happened to him during the invasion, how the Japanese had rounded the civilians in his village and murdered every one of them, leaving aside her husband and his son who went missing after the incident. When Wang Di finally finds Kevin, the Old One's grandson, he inspires in her the courage to record her own life for other people to hear. After her story is told and recorded, in several attempts, she faintly says "Everything I just told you [...] [is] true" (p. 337), as if she suspects so much violence is humanly incomprehensible to someone who has not experienced it. But as she was narrating her life story it was as if she was "reliving" every moment and subjecting herself to the violence once again.

However, Wang Di leaves it up to the readers' and Kevin's imagination to figure out what she did with Cheng Xun. Did she give him up to an old, childless couple, did she leave him behind in the hospital where she was brought, or did her son pass away in her arms knowing that she'll have to leave him behind just like she has to leave the black-and-white house behind, buried him in the earth along with his mother, Fujiko of the black-and-white house? Wang Di's memories and consequent trauma becomes a larger analogical playing field to illustrate the millions of women whose existence has been wiped out. Their unrecorded, unspoken, painfully lived, and undocumented lives are now remembered as statistical figures of irrevocable loss and irreparable damage.

3. Conclusion

Virginia Woolf famously stated in *Three Guineas* (1938) that war is a problem created by a male-dominated society. It is in these wars that women get violently involved. Women's bodies become battle zones where the gender war is fought. Theorizations on wartime sexual violence have declared rape to be a natural product of war. Indeed, cases of mass rape during wars are frequently heard of and aren't uncommon. Take for example the mass rape of Jewish women during the German invasion of Poland in 1939 hailing the initiation of the Second World War. In a conflict as recent as the Russo-Ukraine war, it has been reported that mass rape has been committed by the Armed Forces of Russia. The weaponization of mass rape has been exhaustively addressed by

conflict theorists. Claudia Card (1992), who equated mass rape with martial rape, sees civilian rape as a form of terrorism (p. 6). Identifying wartime sexual violence with Card's notion of martial rape leads to the conclusion that wartime rape can also lead to genocide as the victims are more often than not executed after they are raped. This was the case with the comfort women. In the novel, when the war was over and the comfort women were allowed to walk away, most of them were shot to death before they could have safety. This happened primarily because the Japanese government did not want survivors to tell the world about what the Japanese Imperial Army had done.

It can thus be ascertained that rape is a quintessential aspect of war and that it is a universal phenomenon witnessed in every war that has happened in the history of mankind. What, then, is the specific need to study the "comfort women" as introduced by the Japanese Army? The main significant point that justifies the need to study the phenomenon of comfort women separately is that in the case of other wartime rapes, the act was not sanctioned by the rival government. It had been a case of human savagery and bestiality that war inspires among men. Japan has been under fire for this because they made special arrangements for women to be raped to boost their soldiers' morale while they are fighting for their nation in foreign territories. All the rapes, beatings, torture, murder, and execution happened under the watchful eyes of the Japanese regiment who proactively aided the soldiers in the kidnappings of women for prostitution and even sponsored a medical team to check the women.

In 2007, Japanese ex-Prime Minister Abe Shinzo also roused international interest in the matter after he denied allegations about Japan sanctioning comfort stations (Hayashi, 2008, p. 123). The incident was first brought to light when a former comfort woman from South Korea decided to break decades of silence. Since then Japan's atrocity has become a controversial topic upsetting international relations. It can be said that in the case of other wars there had been silent consent for rape from the rival government, but in the case of Japan the soldiers were given the license for mass rape and as such it becomes a cause for humanitarian concern. It goes on to show the precarity of women's lives and the subjugated role that they play in the world's political economy.

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