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Scars, Silence, and Speculations: The Communication of Pain in Narratives of Enslaved Women

I. Introduction

Kim Soom's book, *One Left*, was the first Korean novel to center on "comfort women," young women forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese military during the Asia Pacific War. "By exposing what happened to these women in extreme detail, Kim *transcends testimonies and historical records* to capture the gut-wrenching suffering of the victims," Bonnie Oh writes in her foreword to *One Left* (x; emphasis added). Can fiction truly add something meaningful to the story told as-is by survivors? The "comfort women" issue, in particular, has become an international battleground for politicians, researchers, and activists who disagree over the basic facts. Given sharp divisions over the total number of women, the means by which women were "recruited" or abducted, and the various officials, soldiers, and middlemen who supported the system, a fictional perspective seems hardly helpful. But what Oh does confirm is this: there may be perceived "gaps" in narratives told by and about enslaved people that readers struggle to fill on their own.

The difficulty of conveying experiences far too traumatic to put into words echoes struggles voiced by women forced into the transatlantic slave trade centuries earlier. Seeking a supply of affordable labor as they colonized the Americas, Europeans shipped millions of Africans across the Atlantic as slaves ("Slave Trade: Transatlantic"). Women such as Mary Prince, who was born in Bermuda and gained her freedom in England, and Harriet Jacobs (who

used the pseudonym of Linda Brent), who escaped from her sexually-abusive enslaver in North Carolina to New York, wrote autobiographical accounts of their experiences. Comparing the narratives of women enslaved under the comfort women system and the transatlantic slave trade reveals common themes in the writers' appeals to listeners and readers who may find it difficult to empathize with their pain and suffering. In this paper, I will explore some of these rhetorical moves in writings by enslaved women and their editors, and how each functions to earn readers' trust, empathy, or responsiveness. These include describing pain through the visual language of scars and injuries, leaving pain unspoken and thus open to tentative imagination, expressing pain in figurative or abstract terms, and conveying pain as a shared experience. Through these stories, women reached out and brought readers into memories extremely difficult to express, spurring the public to believe their stories and take down the systems of oppression they relate.

II. Background and Terminology

The English term "comfort women" originates from the Japanese euphemism "ianfu" (Soh xii). The word "refers to the tens of thousands of women pressed into sexual servitude during the Asia Pacific War that began with the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and ended with Japan's defeat in 1945" (Soh xii). Underlying the system were justifications of providing relief to soldiers under the stress of combat and preventing random rape (Hicks 17, 44, 45).

As stated earlier, the facts of the comfort women's history are disputed. Estimates of the total number of comfort women vary widely, partly because no existing documents provide the exact total (Yoshimi 91); these estimates range from 50,000 to 200,000 (Soh xii). The ethnic demographic of women included women from Japan, Korea, China, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands, where Japan then held power (Soh xii). Historical records are also inconclusive with regard to the proportion taken up by each ethnic group, but several scholars mention

evidence that a significant portion were Korean (Soh xii; Yoshimi 95; Hicks 18). Japanese officials as well as local government authorities and private hired middlemen rounded up girls using methods that included promises of honest work and abduction; these women were then shipped to various “comfort stations” across the Japanese empire (Hicks 20, 16). While I agree wholeheartedly that the comfort women issue is much more complex than a conflict between Japan and South Korea, and more nuanced than the mass abduction of thousands of women against their will, the limited scope of this paper demands that I narrow my focus to Korean women whose testimonies have been translated into English, and start with my belief that they were ultimately victims of harsh exploitation. I will view their stories through the lens of analyzing their language and rhetorical strategies, and treat their words as truth, leaving the historical disputes to the work of other researchers.

These testimonies have been collected in several volumes for English readers. With the coming forward of Kim Hak-sun, a former Korean comfort woman, to talk about her experiences publicly, other survivors have followed suit and demanded the Japanese government take responsibility for their actions (Hicks 11). Translated interviews and oral histories provided by survivors have been published by such organizations as the Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues, Inc. and The Commission on Verification and Support for the Victims of Forced Mobilization under Japanese Colonialism in Korea. In light of the fact that many official documents that might incriminate the Japanese government were burned after WWII (Yoshimi 91), these women’s testimonies hold significant weight against attempts to erase their history and relieve the Japanese government of its culpability.

The transatlantic slave trade took place over a much longer span of time from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century (“Slave Trade: Transatlantic”). The earliest slaves in this

system were sent to islands in the Atlantic, São Tomé, and Europe, then were followed by slaves sent to Hispaniola, Spanish America, Brazil, the Caribbean, and other parts of the Americas (“Slave Trade: Transatlantic”). The sugar industry was a major factor in the European demand for African slave labor (“Slave Trade: Transatlantic”). Several autobiographical writings by enslaved or formerly enslaved people were published to advocate for the abolition of slavery for an English-speaking audience. Women writers including Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs worked with white abolitionist editors who recorded their stories, added editorial notes and made changes – sometimes through a lens that may have differed from that of the writer – and helped push the text toward publication.

Throughout this paper, I will generally use the terms “enslaved” to refer to the Africans and African descendants who were exploited in the transatlantic slave trade, and “enslaver” to refer to those who exerted their power over them. I chose to use these terms to avoid personally reinforcing the systems of hierarchy and power connoted by “slave” and “master.” However, I have continued to use the term “comfort women,” while acknowledging its absolute misrepresentation of the trials these women underwent. This is in accordance with other academic research on the topic, which Aniko Varga suggests may “be a way to reflect on the cynicism of the term itself” (289). In the following sections, I will explore four rhetorical patterns that emerge in the narratives of enslaved women and how they engage the audience.

II. “Look at my fingers now, all crooked”: The visual language of scars and wounds

For the comfort women, pointing to physical scars and wounds were one way that they communicated the pain of their past experiences. In interviews conducted by the Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues, several former comfort women made references to the visible evidence of abuse their bodies provided. For example, Kim Yoon-shim recalled being

beaten by the military police after she tried to escape from the comfort women station: “The police beat my body severely and smashed my hands, weaving a stiff pen between my fingers like this. Look at my fingers now, all crooked” (Schellstede 46). While no one but the women themselves can speak to their intentions in sharing certain details of their experiences, the frequency of their references to the scars and wounds suggests that they see power in bringing this visual evidence into their testimonies. The interviewers, too, seem to encourage the visuality of these stories to make them more “powerful.” In the English edition of *Can You Hear Us?: The Untold Narratives of Comfort Women*, a collection of survivor testimonies, the editors insert phrases in parentheses such as “(suffocating sob)” and “(crying loudly)” throughout the interview transcripts, which are written in a question and answer format (Park 87). The purpose of this, the editors note, is to convey the “emotional status” of the narrators and interviewers to enhance the readers’ understanding of the situation (Park 87, 20). Their editorial decision suggests that visualizing the speaker’s demeanor or tone of voice is necessary to truly grasp what that speaker says. Accordingly, the editors apologize that even their attempts to recreate these visuals through editorial notation fall short: “we regret that we could not do anything about the limitations in expressing the dynamics of [the] interview scene in words” (Park 20). In the exchanges between comfort women and their listeners, the consensus seems to be that the visual language of pain, whether through scars or tears, is the most effective for conveying these stories.

In the narratives of enslaved Black women writers, white abolitionists are often the ones making the request to see visual proof of the pains of slavery. Thomas Pringle worked with Mary Prince as the editor for her narrative, *The History of Mary Prince*. In an appendix to the text, a letter from his wife, Mrs. Pringle, responds to a fellow abolitionist’s request for a “description of

the marks of former ill-usage on Mary Prince's person" (Prince 64). Mrs. Pringle writes in the affirmative: "the whole of the back part of her body is distinctly scarred, and, as it were, *chequered*, with the vestiges of severe floggings" (Prince 64). Mrs. Pringle's emphasis on the pattern of stripes on Prince's back treats her suffering as verifiable through visible means. Mrs. Pringle also describes the gashes and cuts on other parts of Prince's body, and writes that she finds them convincing both because she trusts Prince's word and because Prince's appearance appears similar to other cases of enslaved people (Prince 64). In this letter, Mrs. Pringle becomes the one evaluating Prince's body, relegating Prince's own authority over her narrative to secondary status. Lydia Maria Child does something similar in her introduction to Harriet Jacobs' memoir, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The atrocities of slavery, she writes, are behind a veil, and she takes "the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn" (Jacobs 410). The metaphor of a veil connotes the concealing of something private, not meant for intrusive eyes; yet, Child's use of it here suggests that some kind of propriety must be violated so that the free "women of the North" can educate themselves. The enslaved woman whose bodily injuries and sufferings are exposed is the one who bears the cost. The issue of seeing enslaved women's bodies as a source material to prove the existence or the severity of slavery's injustices is not unique to Child and Pringle. Sandra Gunning points out that Sojourner Truth was subjected to the request of a white attendee at a rural anti-slavery meeting to "submit her breast to the inspection of some of the ladies present" to prove that she was indeed a woman (274, 275). People who otherwise seemed sympathetic to the causes of Black enslaved women showed that they also were willing to demand visual evidence to verify what these women wrote, even if it placed a burden on them.

III. "I felt like a living corpse": when pain is unspoken

The way enslaved women write about their bodies sometimes takes pain completely out of the picture. Mary Prince writes about one time when her enslaver Captain I– whipped her with a hundred lashes in a strangely detached tone: “When he had licked me for some time he sat down to take breath; then after resting, he beat me again and again, until he was quite wearied, and so hot (for the weather was very sultry), that he sank back in his chair, almost like to faint” (17). Rather than describe the situation in terms of how her own body took the lashes, Prince writes about her experience in terms of the enslaver’s body. Describing Captain I–’s apparent fatigue on that hot day leaves a disconcerting impression on the reader: absent from the whole scene is what Prince felt, which obviously seems much more important than Captain I–’s sweat. Barbara Baumgartner speculates that the middle of Prince’s narrative, which lacks more effusive descriptions of her pain, can be explained by her struggle to confront pain itself – a struggle which strips attempts to describe it down to the bare minimum. In contrast to earlier parts of Prince’s narrative, which dips into figurative language and emotional descriptions of, for example, her separation from her family, in this part of her story “the affect is remarkably flat” (Baumgartner 256). Because “the body becomes a source of obsession when it suffers pain,” Prince’s descriptions of her physical suffering are shorn of other reflections and attempts to bring the reader in, though it might seem that now would be the ideal time to appeal to readers’ sensitivities in view of getting them to support the cause of emancipation (Baumgartner 256). If the body itself shuts down while experiencing pain, expressing it to a listener who has never experienced or witnessed anything like it may be doubly difficult. Even if graphic depictions of pain might seem to make them more “real,” the impact of cruelties on enslaved people may preclude their use of such a narrative device in their stories.

The oral testimonies of comfort women often describe moments with the pain curiously redacted. Moon Pil-gi's account of a soldier throwing burning coal at her is unaccompanied by any notes on what it felt like; instead, she states what happened in literal terms: "It hit me and burned my back. It took three months to heal. You could still see the scar there" (Schellstede 66). Kim Young-shil compared her consciousness during her time at the comfort station to a state of death: "I was totally exhausted ... I felt like a living corpse. When soldiers came to my room and did it to me one after another, it was done to a lifeless body. Again. And again. And again. . . ." (Schellstede 51). The unfeeling, unseeing metaphor of death removes the sensibility of pain in the text once more. There is a sense of entering an out-of-body experience borne from continual subjection to extreme pain. Like in Prince's narrative, where times of pain led her to strip away other thoughts, Kang Do-ah responds to some questions about the factual details of her experience with insight into her deadened mental state at the time: "I wasn't myself then. My only concern was to hide my body away. I did not want to see anyone, anything. Nothing else was on my mind" (Park 59). While each woman's testimony is different, each to their own degree of detail, several women state that talking about their past has a real cost to them in the present. Sharing their stories in a way that listeners find compelling can understandably be relegated to secondary priority when the telling itself is already a great challenge. Kim Sang-hi speaks of this difficulty bluntly: "What I had to go through from then on, what had been done to me, I don't ever want to talk about it again, I don't ever want to hear about it" (Schellstede 30). Several other women speak of having nightmares, serious headaches, or other symptoms after agreeing to speak with interviewers (Schellstede 40, 71, 101). This makes Bonnie Oh's foreword to Kim Soom's novel *One Left* all the more significant, as Oh writes that "The author felt urgently that the comfort women's *real, excruciatingly painful* experiences might be forgotten

unless depicted in a personal narrative (ix). The implication is that Kim's novel fills in what the survivors themselves or other documentative writers could not say. Because it "was not enough to describe in plain text that these young women were raped thirty to forty times a day," Kim "needed to graphically illustrate what happened to the young women's privates parts after being raped so many times" (ix). While women enslaved under the transatlantic slave trade and the comfort station system at times submit to pressure, real or perceived, to show visual proofs left behind from their time in enslavement, they often choose not to breach the graphic subject of pain itself. This leaves the door open for others to imagine it for them in trying to communicate their experiences to a broader public.

IV. "I wish I could find words": the abstraction of pain

However, enslaved women writers did make an effort to express pain. Speaking to readers likely without the tools to empathize with the intensity of trauma these women have experienced, narrators from both the Black Atlantic and the comfort women system often turned to analogies to help readers understand pain of horrific proportions. This is especially significant because, as Elaine Scarry argues, "physical pain is not only resistant to language but also actively destroys language, deconstructing it into the pre-language of cries and groans" (172). This unspeakability of pain explains why enslaved women writers resort to other narrative devices instead of describing pain itself. Mary Prince, for example, explains that she only "wish[es] [she] could find words to tell you all [she] then felt and suffered" (Prince 10). An anonymous comfort woman, simply referred to as HOO, also voiced to interviewees her inability to "express in words what the pain and burning sensations were like" from tumors she said she developed on her body (Park 285). These gentle acknowledgements of the limitations of language to express pain asks the reader to give the narrator permission to stop short of fully expounding upon

hurtful experiences. Readers are thus invited to use their own imaginations to fill in what is left unsaid, to try to fathom what pain beyond words might feel like. The pain of these women's experiences thus begins to take on an abstract conceptualization, something that individual readers begin to define and outline in their own minds. And the extraction of that concept from literal truth is further strengthened by the narrators' use of metaphors that conflate physical pain with mental and emotional pain. Kang Do-ah uses the same metaphor to describe two kinds of pain: "My whole lower body was torn in pieces. My mind was torn into shreds as well" (Park 58). And Prince likens the unfeeling comments of white onlookers to "cayenne on the fresh wounds of our hearts" when she and her sisters are put up to be sold as slaves (11). What all these abstract stand-ins for literal pain show is that there is a formidable gap between speaker and listener that words cannot perfectly bridge. Meaning cannot travel from narrator to reader easily when pain is the subject.

V. "I know what slaves feel": the communality of pain

Yet in contrast to this gap, an imagined connection exists among enslaved individuals that audiences find powerful. Prince perhaps says it best, declaring: "I have been a slave myself – I know what slaves feel – I can tell by myself what other slaves feel, and by what they have told me" (38). This understanding of others' internal experiences does not require words to be the conduit from person to person. Instead, this knowledge of shared pain is automatically and wordlessly acquired, making it that much more unified and powerful in Prince's eyes. This mindset influences how Prince talks about her own individual pain. For example, she speaks of Mr. D-'s harsh beatings, leaving her "raw with gashes," with a great degree of detachment: "Yet there was nothing very remarkable in this; for it might serve as a sample of the common usage of the slaves on that horrible island" (20). Prince recasts her pain as a pain experienced by many,

downplaying her own suffering in the process as “nothing very remarkable.” Jacobs writes that rather than seeking sympathy for herself, she writes “to kindle a flame of compassion in [readers’] hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered” (Jacobs 438). This makes sense in light of the fact that Prince’s and Jacobs’ narratives were both published in conjunction with the abolitionist movement, thus becoming mobilized in the activist political scene seeking an end to, respectively, British and American slavery. Their purpose was not to dwell on themselves alone but to point to a broader injustice. Since they read slave narratives more to gain knowledge of slavery as an institution rather than become familiar with an individual slave, the nineteenth-century white audience would have found an increasingly absent first-person narrator to be more trustworthy (Andrews 5, 6). The less filtering of reality the individual narrator did, the more readers could trust that they were reading objective truths about slavery in general (Andrews 6). This increasing sense of subsuming one’s own pain under the cause of the group’s pain is what gives these narratives their character as tools for political and social change to an audience that bases validity and truth upon corroborating accounts.

For the comfort women, speaking on behalf of others’ pain is much less apparent in their oral testimonies. Discrepancies among the oral testimonies of the comfort women, as might be expected for any group, particularly highlight the range of experiences that women faced at the stations, even though they were all part of one system overseen by the Japanese government. The varied situations of different women show how particularly challenging it is to cast one woman’s account as representative of all the others. Methods for obtaining women for the comfort stations, for example, differed widely and included a variety of players. While some women were forcibly abducted, others went “voluntarily” after being deceived by promises of factory employment and wages to send home to their families. The women were taken from many other

countries besides Korea, including China, the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan itself, and other countries. Both Japanese officials and local middlemen were responsible for the work of recruiting or abducting girls for the stations. Testimonies indicate that some girls made close friends among themselves at the stations, but the conditions of war and the disorder ensuing from the defeat of Japan at the end of WWII meant that many girls were separated from each other as they each tried to make their way home, alienating individuals from one another and causing many names to be forgotten. Treating all these stories as a single story is thus difficult and not altogether realistic. But similar to the white readership expecting at least the partial erasure of self from Prince's and Jacobs' narratives, this audience is taught to expect a single story. Sangmie Choi Schellstede wrote in her editor's note to the interview compilation of comfort women testimonies that

There are only nineteen testimonies of surviving rape camp victims in this book, but we hope that these powerful stories will enable us to imagine some of the suffering and pain of 200,000 'comfort women' who did not survive to tell their stories and from whom so much was taken. (ix)

The 200,000 number is actually an approximation, as scholars disagree on the exact number; some estimates range from 80,000 to 200,000 Korean women alone (Yoshimi 91). This in itself shows that readers and listeners are invited to think beyond what is apparent from historical documents or limited oral testimonies alone, which are inadequate to nail down the full scope of what happened. Obviously so much has been left unsaid and unwritten, but just how much more? Like the five loaves of bread and two fish, nineteen testimonies are expected to multiply into thousands in readers' imaginations so that the readers can come closer to grasping the horrific amount of suffering that took place. In order for this amplification to take place, however, there

necessarily takes place a downplaying of the individual person's pain. Park In-hwan, chairman of the commission that published the collection of interviews that became *Can You Hear Us?: The Untold Narratives of Comfort Women*, wrote in the publisher's acknowledgement that the testimonies of these women "will live forever as the historical and truthful proof of what really happened, which could easily be forgotten as mere personal sufferings" (6). Here, the implication is that seeing these testimonies as personal accounts of tragedy are not enough to convince people of the "evil deeds of imperial Japan" (6). Instead, the women's stories must be seen as suffering on a much grander scale than any one individual's past. Aniko Varga points out that this re-toning of the comfort women issue as one of national pride has been a catalyst for raising awareness of the issue and mobilizing a broad base of activism. However, this has unfortunately come at the cost of attention to the individual survivors' material needs, because "individual sufferings [have turned] into collective victimisation, thus homogenising the nation into a single unified entity" (Varga). The nationalist rhetoric that has dominated the conversations around the comfort women issue in Korea has led to survivors being shamed or punished for accepting charity money from the disfavored Japanese Asian Women's Fund as a betrayal to the nation's ideal of what constitutes sincere restitution (Varga). Unlike the narratives of Prince and Jacob, the testimonies of comfort women do not necessarily indicate a strong unity with other enslaved women of their time. Yet, political, social, and editorial authorities have often tapped into the power of conflating a single story with those of many other victims, or with a nation as a whole – but sometimes at the expense of the survivors themselves.

VI. Conclusion

Comparing current debates micro-analyzing comfort women testimonies with the debates over the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade shows that many of the same issues continue to

appear. Questions of authorship and credibility, dramatic editorial choices, and the tricky issue of expressing pain through language appear now just as they did centuries earlier. What remains clear is that the experiences of enslavement are extremely difficult for survivors to communicate. Yet, paradoxically, when non-survivors try to graft their own standards for making stories more impactful onto survivors' narratives, sometimes important meanings are lost. For tragedies of this scale, misunderstandings may be inevitable – but sensitivity to survivors' struggles to talk about memories they would rather forget, and being thoughtful about how editorial choices can support those conversations, is crucial for defending freedom across the world. As Dongwoo Lee Hahm writes in his foreword to *Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military*, our willingness to not only hear, but make an effort to empathize with, these women's stories is paramount – because “[i]n another place or time, any one of us could have been one of these women, and their stories could have been ours” (vii).

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