

# Of Ghosts and Hauntings: Contesting the Meanings of a Nation in *Comfort Woman* by Nora Okja Keller

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**Abstract.** Narratives of war can function as sites of resistance to that which was erased or silenced. This paper explores subversive feminist resistance to humiliating inscriptions of patriarchy and colonialism onto the sexual bodies of women. It focuses on the trope of ghosts and haunting that Nora Okja Keller in *Comfort Woman* employs to depict women's transcendence over the natural order of patriarchal society that defines the meanings of their sexuality and its relation to a nation. Keller demonstrates resistance to humiliating perception with regard to Korean women's sexuality through the main Korean women figures in *Comfort Woman* – Induk and Soon Hyo who resisted male-defined meanings of a nation and re-invented concepts of Korean national identity through various subversive techniques. The resistance and transcendence of Soon Hyo in *Comfort Woman* through the trope of ghost and haunting demonstrate resistance against patriarchal definitions of women's identity and the feminization of a colonized nation. In *Comfort Woman*, women's sexuality is reconstructed – disrupting conventional, male-centred narratives in order to re-write the meanings of women as national subjects.

**Keywords:** Haunting, Nation, Women

## 1. Introduction

How is Asian women's relationship with the nation defined? In nationalist discourse, women often exist as national symbols for male ownership of the nation. According to Choy (1998) for instance, the standard/ideology of chastity that Korean men impose on their women originates from anti-colonial discourse. A nation that is colonised is often represented as a feminized nation. Korean men "have obsessively disciplined and regulated women's bodies as metaphors for their uncontaminated, uninterrupted homonational (or homosocial) identity and imposed on women the ideology of chastity" (13). Any interruption or deviation from this ideology would be an insult to masculine integrity and considered "national defilement" (13).

Korean culture stresses that chastity is more important than life (Jensen). The very existence of the idea of chastity speaks of "a proper place where female sexuality belongs" (Yang 1998, 131). The patriarchal idea of chastity as a high ideal that relates to women's identities has been internalized by Korean women, enhancing the psychological effects of rape. Sexually violated Korean women "represent damaged, disgraceful, and unchaste female bodies that lack the "feminine essence"" (Kim 1997). This ideology of chastity has silenced hundreds of thousands of former comfort women who fear that they might be stigmatised as "emblems of promiscuity" (13).

"Home-coming woman" (a term used to describe Korean women victimised by Korea's history of foreign dominations) are shunned and regarded as symbols of emasculation of the Korean nation. The rape of Korean women by Japanese soldiers evokes the "decentering of Korean national, ethnic, and patriarchal identities" (Kim 1997, 93). According to Duncan (2004), some Korean men are angry that Korean women's sexuality – "seen as rightfully belonging to them – has been seized by Japanese men, thereby robbing Korean men" (180). The national humiliation associated with being "robbed" is reflected in a letter, written in 1992 by a Korean man who claims that the history of Japanese colonization and the comfort woman system "amounts to an act in which the Japanese throw their dirty sperm bucket into our Korean people's face" (Yang 1998, 130). The assumption is since Korean women have been raped and humiliated by the Japanese, all Koreans have been humiliated. Yang rightly points out that this reader's letter "exemplifies how males become the only subjects involved in questions of nation and sexuality. The nation becomes gendered, and

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women's sexuality becomes nationalized. Nation is equated with male subject position, and women's sexuality is reified as property of the masculine nation" (130). As such, the existence of comfort women had been completely erased until 1991 when three women took the issue into their own hands and demanded compensation from the Japanese government.

## 2. Of Ghosts and Hauntings

Haunting is defined not as rare supernatural occurrences, but more often as unexamined irregularities of everyday life (Gordon 1997). The trope of ghosts" and hauntings can represent the gaps and erasure of history as the silences of the past becomes reenacted in the present. The present version of official history is often haunted with the language of "ghosts" in the form of marginalized figures who tell alternative stories. According to Cho (2008), "studying ghosts allows us to rethink a society's relationship to its dead, particularly to those who were subject to some kind of injustice, the ghost and its haunting effects act as a mode of memory and an avenue for ethical engagement with the present" (30). Narrating about ghosts and hauntings inevitably gives acknowledgement to previously "unacknowledged history of violence" (Cho, 30). These narratives can function as sites of resistance to that which was erased or silenced.

Besides acting as representation of the silences of history, notes that ghost stories by women have been deployed as critiques of patriarchal unfairness and more recently, used to forge female community and history (Ng 2007). The analysis of the employment of ghosts and hauntings in women's narratives can illuminate the active contestation and resistance of women writers against patriarchal conceptions of women's sexuality and identity.

### 2.1. *Comfort Woman*

According to Huang (2005), wars in Asia contribute the subject matter for a large proportion of literary works in the second half of the twentieth century (3). Among the voices that chronicle the effects of wars on women in Asia, Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* stands out as a poignant account of women's sexual victimization and victorious transcendence. Through women characters who transcend victimisation, Keller contests the "feminization and implied degeneration of Korea" (Duncan 2004, 203).

*Comfort Woman* is an unsettling tale that interweaves the voices of a Korean American mother (Akiko/Soon Hyo) and her daughter, Beccah. The mother is haunted by her harrowing experience as a comfort woman during World War II, an experience so agonizing it caused her to live the rest of her life straddling between the world of the living and the dead and the spirits, not living nor dead. The structure of the novel shifts back and forth in time and space, from Akiko's/Soon Hyo's childhood in Korea, to the World War II military camps, to Hawaii in the 1980s and 90s where Soon Hyo/Akiko grapples with her traumatic past.

Keller depicts a woman haunted by war, sexual trauma and betrayal. The trope of haunting is simultaneously capitalized to portray both victimization and transcendence from victimization in the form of a deranged character who is haunted by her memories as a comfort woman and who aligns herself with Induk, the ghost of the comfort woman whose identity she took over after her death. Haunting becomes a "salvific motif" and is "redemptive" (156).

Spivak (1992) notes that "nation and identity are commodities in the strictest sense: something made for [(neo)colonial] exchange" and women are "the medium of that exchange". Sexuality is often the vehicle of oppression as the commodification of the female body for rape and sexual abuse implies the eradication of the victim's subjectivity and individuality. In *Comfort Woman*, the women are self-less and nameless replaceable commodities. Soon Hyo is named Akiko 41, after the comfort woman whose identity and stall in the camps she replaces, and once her virginity was auctioned off to the highest bidding soldier, she becomes a "free for all" (*Comfort Woman*, 21).

From her silences in the comfort camps to her marriage with the American missionary, Akiko seems to have maintained a veneer of silent passivity which can be interpreted as active resistance. Her later shamanism offers multiple interpretations of her identity and serves to wrestle back the identities and recognition for the thousands of comfort women that would otherwise be forgotten. We see Soon Hyo's employment of different forms of resistance against patriarchy's inscription upon her body. She revolts

against patriarchy and imperialism by transcending the physical realm and adopting and performing the spiritual identity to re-inscribe her body and re-invent her identity from victim to national heroine as ways of challenging Eurocentric models of powerful speech/passive silences binary.

The novel demonstrates the shift from performance of passivity to performance of spiritualism which results in transcendence of the physical realm. It also explores the connection between women's sexual bodies, colonialism and Korean nationalism through a deranged character who performs passive silences in the comfort camps but graduates later to paranormal articulations as a shaman. Akiko's shamanism, as Chen suggests, emerges as a response to "multiple agents of oppression" (116). The following sections of this paper will focus on Akiko's shamanism and her relationship with Induk in order to highlight the elements of ghosts and haunting and depict how they contribute to the revision of women as national subjects in order to contest the feminization of a nation.

## 2.2. Induk – the Ghost Lover

Akiko's shift from performance of passivity to articulation of transcendence and into the realm of the spiritual is seen through the "absurd" same-sex soul and body relationship with Induk in the spiritual world. Even as her sexuality functions as a site of victimization and horrific abuse, Akiko's sexual empowerment is seen in the physical and spiritual connection she attains with Induk, which is exclusive of men and humans.

The description of Induk coming to her when her child was born and also the first time - "She comes *in* singing, *entering* with full voice ..." (*Comfort Woman*, 36, emphasis mine), "filling me, so that no one except for her, Induk" hints strongly of sexual connection. She and Induk are becoming one physically just as a man and his wife becomes one through their physical union. What they are able to share clearly transcends that which can be shared between a man and a woman. They share not only a sexual but a spiritual oneness as she "discarded [her] empty body" (*Comfort Woman*, 36). Their relationship symbolizes the power of a union inaccessible and incomparable to relationships with men. Akiko says, "How could he compare what went on between men's and women's bodies with what happened spiritually?" (*Comfort Woman*, 146). Just as Induk's and Akiko's sexuality had been a site of victimization and pain, they have re-appropriated their sexuality through a relationship with each other that transcends that of man and woman, and woman and woman. Its occurrence in the spiritual realm makes it triumphant and transcendent beyond any social order of the patriarchal society. It is un-definable and therefore, powerful and invincible. It transcends commodification and abuse, and invokes fear and frustration in her husband who accused her of "self-fornication", exchanging natural relations for unnatural ones" (*Comfort Woman*, 146).

Despite attempts by her husband to control not only her body but her spirituality, Akiko remains unconverted. Her silences become acts of defiant empowerment. In the "darkest part of the night", it is not to the Christian God, or any other gods, but to Induk whom she calls out. Her silences empower and contain her secret communion with her lover, Induk. The silent compliant of the outside is countered inwardly with her communion with Induk as she prays and pines for Induk to return to her (*Comfort Woman*, 92). Akiko's prayers are subversive performances; performed to re-inscribe what had been inscribed onto her body and identity. Her by now strategic silences are enhanced by chantings of Induk's name. While her oppressor/protector lusts after her, she shuts out the patriarchal world and the world of imperialism by pining after and aligning with Induk, who is not only Korean but as she declared before dying, Korea itself.

As a lover, Induk enables Akiko to re-inscribe onto her body resistance and independence from male-dominated ideologies of women's sexuality. Just as Akiko has been doubly colonized, first by the Japanese and later by her American missionary husband, her sexual relations with her Induk, a woman spirit speaks of double resistance and double transcendence; transcendence from patriarchal regulation and control of her sexuality as her sexual desires are satisfied by another woman and transcendence from the physical world dominated by circumstances and discourse which favour patriarchy through ascension into the spiritual level.

It remains textually ambivalent whether Induk is a fragment of Akiko's imagination or a spirit who haunts her. Keller offers no explanation to Induk's presence during those times Akiko felt sexually satisfied. Her missionary husband may have perceived correctly when he found her sexually pleasuring herself. Nevertheless, whether it was Induk or otherwise, Akiko became her own agency, owning her sexuality as a form of resistance against patriarchy who had abused her sexuality thus far (*Comfort Woman*, 144-5).

Keller's portrayal of Akiko's American husband's helplessness represents the emasculation of American men. Lee (2004) asserts that he fears Soon Hyo's female sexuality for he believes that female sexuality has to be "expressed and contained in "natural relations" between man and woman". Her "self-fornication" is "her symbolic castration" of him as she "rejects his patriarchal authority over her" (449).

At the national level, Akiko invokes Induk's presence as a spiritual guide to transcend her victimization in order to perform the nationalistic mission of bringing the rest of the thousands of comfort women's spirits home to Korea with her. Induk, the Korean and Korea itself is her vital link as guide and symbol of nationalism and reconciliation with Korea. Duncan (2004) says that "one of the primary assumptions of a unified Korean nationalism is that of maleness" (179) and Induk, Soon Hyo and the other comfort women are women.

### **2.3. Shamanism – Spiritual Transcendence**

After her husband's death, Akiko, appropriates the role of a shaman, taking on a new mystical self and speaking a new spiritual language which is meaningful to her and no one else. Akiko's ascension is deployed through her shamanism and symbolized through the various alternative discourse which points to a distrust of language and employment of alternative language to re-invent the self and circumstances.

Though Akiko is no longer silent and passive but articulating, her articulations are unheard and misunderstood. Her adoption of a new language which no one else understood, besides signaling an inability to speak of the extent of atrocities which had governed her life, also signifies a refusal to participate in any social discourse and a rejection of the language of the colonizers. Akiko's silences, as well as her "strange articulations" are active assertions of her attempts at reconstructing a new identity through her own exclusive language. Her shamanism points to her resistance of both Japanese and Western imperialism. By transporting and transforming herself and her sexuality into the realm of the spiritual, she makes herself and her sexuality unreachable and unattainable. It is through shamanism that Akiko escapes the definition imposed upon her identity through her sexuality. Akiko uses what is termed as "strategizing victimization" (Chen 2005, 138), using spirit possession as a strategy of empowerment to speak the unspeakable and to perform the resistant self into existence. As her sexual body bears traces of "colonial disfiguring and mutilation" (Lowe, 1996, 139), Akiko's shamanism as Chen suggests, emerges as response to "multiple agents of oppression" (Chen, 116), comprising the Japanese soldiers in the comfort camps, the Christian missionary who marries her and her own daughter "whose ignorance of Korean cultural practices causes her to label Akiko "crazy"". Shaman is "a figure of gendered resistance" (145) and as Akiko takes on that role, she occupies a position to challenge the "ellipses of history" (116).

There is a striking paradoxical parallel of her shamanism to her life as comfort woman during World War II to highlight the extent of Akiko's empowerment. Customers waiting for words from their dead relatives and for their fortunes to be told are waiting in line, like the soldiers waiting in line for her body. Only this time what she has to offer are her spiritual gifting; she is respected and honoured and not abused and humiliated. Her old identity was that of a victim, but with her other identity, she has attained a powerful status. Her position of authority as a shaman is her means of turning the tables on her 'fate' and on patriarchy which had victimized her. In the comfort camps, she was threatened into silence but as a shaman, she is paid and revered for her articulations. From her status as a victim, she has recreated herself as "a renowned fortune-teller and spirit medium in Japan and Korea" (*Comfort Woman*, 11) and has attained a powerful status. Akiko plays along with the heavy drumbeats that are turned on for her dancing and let it enhance her performance, deliberately letting herself be used, for economic survival and personal empowerment. She is beheld in awe as she once was, in lust.

Chen suggests that Akiko's shamanism is "multivalent and open to divergent interpretations" (116). Akiko could be so traumatized by her past that she allows herself and her "mental instability" to be exploited by her manager, Reno, or her shamanism is merely a sham for economical reasons. Or is it real that she has the ability to reach the realm of the dead, to communicate with spirits? Keller does not resolve the ambivalences for us. Akiko's shamanism could be a result of a combination of the possibilities mentioned. Her necessity to survive both her traumatic past and her present circumstances calls for an innovative act of re-inventing herself as a figure which transcends the physical into the realm of the spiritual. It is one of her

acts of re-appropriating her ownership of her identity. As she condones the flamboyant and exaggerated props, she has successfully appropriated a new identity which is not subjected to debates of sham or “real” as she “becomes adept at assuming a shape not her own in order to survive the various oppressive conditions she undergoes”. I concur with Chen that she “perform[s] convincingly” her roles and “[t]he impersonation she performs as wife, as convert, and as comfort woman lay the groundwork for the spiritual impersonations she enacts as shaman” (126). Her shamanism elevated her from the place of the downtrodden to a place of a celebrity, someone to be feared and revered and held in awe, if not for herself, for the spirits who inhabit her body. People wait “for months”, camped in the “kitchen and living room and out in the apartment hallway” for her to deliver messages from their dead loved ones and for her advice and pray (*Comfort Woman*, 10). Akiko rides along majestically on the other identity assigned to her.

It is only through shamanism, as a “particularly *gendered* and a particularly *Korean* practice” (139), that Akiko displays active ownership of her own agency and nationality and wrestles back her sexuality. As “the education of Korean in official Japanese culture equally depended on the erasure of native Korean cultural practices” (Lowe 1996, 137), the invoking of cultural practices and myths distinctively Korean, like shamanism and Princess Pari in Keller’s novel points to a form of resistance against not only Western imperialism but all forms of domination. Akiko’s shamanism can be re-dictated as a Korean nationalistic movement.

### 3. Conclusion

Duncan notes that through the deployment of heroic women as national subjects, Keller contests the “feminization and implied degeneration of Korea”. Keller re-writes the feminine construction of a colonized nation by capitalising on the trope of ghosts and haunting as a form of empowerment and transcendence. The women characters who represent not feminization of a colonized nation but who proclaim themselves as the nation itself transcend the perception of women as commodities to be looted or to be protected against looting. Keller’s narrative poses a challenge to and revises patriarchal definition and notion of the meaning of a nation.

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