

The Vanished Bloom: The Story of Korean Comfort Women

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ABSTRACT: *The Comfort Women issue has been unsolved, leading intense conflict between surviving comfort women and Japanese government. Now, the global community also intervenes comfort women issue, asking Japanese government to offer proper history education to prevent psychological violence to the victims. I would like to mention historical background of comfort women issue, contending how the same historical issue is interpreted differently according to the different cultural expectations, which provides new form of psychological violence upon the victims by misguided education system of Japan that defends Japanese own value over Korean values*

KEYWORDS: *The Comfort Women*

I. INTRODUCTION

The mayor of Osaka in Japan, Hashimoto Tooru, who is seen by some as possible future prime minister, said the comfort women, who were forced into sexual slavery for Japanese army during the World War II, were the necessary to serve war- crazed soldiers to provide relief. He said “When soldiers are risking their lives by running through storms of bullets, and you want to give these emotionally charged soldiers a rest somewhere, it’s clear that you need a comfort women system,” additionally he mentioned that there is no proven evidence that the comfort women were forcibly drafted. His remark was condemned by lawmakers and human rights group; (Tabuchi) moreover it hurts comfort women a lot. In addition, the extreme right rock band, Sakura Ranburu, made a music video of condemning Korea, especially insulting comfort women by calling them as prostitutes. They sent their music video to the house of Nanum [house of sharing], where the former comfort women are staying on March 1st, the memorial day of Korean independence movement day.(Shin) These behaviors of ultranationalists are result of misguided understanding of history and lack of respect for human rights.

The Japanese government’s refusal to official apology and misguided understating of history make comfort women hurt deeply, and produce another violence such as calling comfort women as prostitute. I will argue that different cultural expectations interpret the same historical issue in a different way, producing new form of violence upon the victims by means of misguided educational system that defends Japanese own values over Korean values. I will approach my argument through historical and anthropological perspective.

II. HISTORY OF THE COMFORT WOMEN

The comfort house was built in Shanghai around 1932 in order to prevent soldier’s frequent rape of civilians, and especially in 1937 when the China-Japan war was intensified, many more comfort houses were built and maintained military’s line of command. In this period, Japanese military and police were involved in drafting comfort women and sustaining them until the war ended. Some historians estimate that around 200,000 women in Asia served in the comfort house for Japanese army. (Tabuchi) Lots of them were Korean young ladies, who were at the age of 12 or older, and majority of them were not Japanese but the prisoners of war from different countries.

After Korea finally became independent from Japan in the end of war, the Korean government attempted to reveal the Japanese brutal labor abuse in colonial period asking proper compensation. Though, the comfort women issue was not revealed until 1991, when the Japanese government officially presented that they were not involved in any comfort women issue, and even denied the existence of comfort women. Therefore, in August 1991, one of the victims, who got upset about Japanese government’s denial, revealed her experience as comfort women. It was very huge decision for her because there was a social atmosphere in the early 1990s that comfort women were considered as the group of people who prostituted themselves for imperial soldiers, so even Korean historians didn’t want to reveal this issue. However, her testimony as comfort women insisting that “history should remember the affair that we had to serve under Japanese pressure,” encouraged many former comfort women to testify their experiences asking for official apology to Japanese government, so Japan apologized to them in 1993 establishing private company to give some compensation to the victims; however when new prime minister Abe, Shinzo was elected, the Japanese government changed their statement and position to the comfort women, and still refuses to apologize to them, denying the involvement of the comfort women’s compulsory mobilization.

III. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SURVIVING COMFORT WOMEN AND JAPANESE GOVERNMENT

History usually has two versions, what actually happened and how the affair was perceived that was represented by verbal and visual narratives based on each country's perspective. (Mitchell 226) Therefore, Korean version of history and Japanese version of history in comfort women are different. Korean government keeps providing many evidences that prove Japanese government's involvement in the comfort women system. One of them is the secret document called "Chosun [previous Korean empire] counter plan" which proves the Japanese government's actual involvement in this issue. The document, which was written by Japanese government right after they started the China-Japan war, has a clause that "Unmarried women in Chosun shall be used to supply the military's special business." (House of Sharing) It shows Japanese military and government organization actively collaborated on drafting comfort women. In addition, the Japanese government also demanded schoolteachers for helping students to voluntarily apply for comfort women system. Some schoolteachers enticed the student, saying that the students can earn money by working at the factory, to say nothing of living in better situation, but it turned out to be working at the comfort house; besides, some were just drafted without recognizing where they were going. Therefore, this issue went down as a volunteer work in a few official documents. (Silence Broken)

On the other hand, Japanese government insists that the comfort women actually got money for their prostituting; thus, they contend that the apology is not necessary to the prostitutes. Like Green states about her friend's experience in Central America where the ongoing terror has occurred. Her friend was upset about the presence of military; however, when he witnessed that "many young women are flirting with soldiers and local residents are casually leaning on tanks," (Green 60) he realized that the situation was not miserable as he expected. The comfort house had a similar situation. Japanese soldiers treated women with respect and some of them proposed to the women who served as comfort women. The popular women could choose the person who she wanted to have sex, earning some money; in addition, war prisoners voluntarily sold themselves to earn money. Though, the fact is that being comfort women was the only way to avoid dying in starvation, so people had to adjust the situation to survive. In addition, all the money that they earned was spent for returning trip to their countries. (Soe 182)

IV. THE EMOTIONAL VIOLENCE

Although many comfort women survived from the frontline of the war, they had to live with the violence containing not only the physical pain but also the emotional trauma of the social shame and the violation of humanity. In general, former soldiers and officers who had sex with comfort women had no problem having conventional family in their life, and they even wrote about sexual experiences with women of different ethnic backgrounds in their wartime memories. On the other hand, women survivors were living very different lives. They attempted their best to conceal their experiences. "What makes rape so grievous an act isn't just the assault against the body, but the attack against family, dignity, self-worth, and future" (Nordstrom 63) They have lived under low self-esteem due to the loss of their virginity, being unable to have conventional families because of childlessness and chronic pain originated from the past physical injuries or sexual abuses. They also felt that they were disqualified to have married life. Even though they got married, their husbands called them as "dirty bitch." (Soe 177) Their psychological sufferings remain much deeper than their physical sufferings. Therefore, Hashimoto's remark as well as ultranationalists' ones insulting comfort women is huge violence to the former comfort women. This violence is different from Jihad's or Sikhs' case of fighting in which they were suffering from current Indian government's discrimination, deciding to fight against state power to protect their human rights, committing violent action as self-defensiveness method. (Robinson 172 ; Mahmood 66) "This is emotional contents of violence" (Nordstrom 62) which reminds the negative emotional memory of painful past to the comfort women that they had to suffer living in dishonored life losing reputation.

V. CONCLUSION

'No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment,' (Asad 111) but Japanese government's refusal of apology and insults ruin the reputation of comfort women and create emotional torture to them. The former comfort women accused the rock band who insulted them, and refuse to meet Hashimoto to discuss the comfort women issue, but the current international law is not allowing punishing those people who committed emotional violence. (Shin) Therefore, the United Nation criticizes the Hashimoto's statement, asking Japanese government to provide proper history educations in order to prevent other insulting incidents from occurring to the former comfort women group. (The Asahi Shimbun) In addition, many international communities and even civil organizations in Japan ask Japanese ultranationalists to stop insulting the comfort women and provide correct historical education to next generations in order to stop another emotional violence committed to the comfort women.

Comfort women who are mostly in their age of over 90's claim that "Even though Korea broke off and reached independence from Japan a long time ago, we still have not reached complete freedom. We are living within those memories." They are still suffering from past memory, so they hold demonstration to protest against Japanese government's official position to the comfort women in front of Japanese embassy in every Wednesday to recover their honor. They don't want to get huge money to support their finance for the rest of their lives, but they hope to compensate their vanished bloom and future being supposed to be most beautiful in their lifetime through official apology of Japanese government. Their wishes are so simple, they wished to get married, bear a child and have a family. (Najeun Moksori) Calling those people as prostitutes is cruel violence that tramples their simple wishes, giving huge emotional violence. "The individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an 'ideological' representation of society," (Foucault 194) therefore, to prevent the emergence of rock band like 'Sakura Ranburu' that seems like being fabricated by disciplines of education provided by specific power that contains ultranationalism, Japanese government should make a proper interpretation of history avoiding one-sidedness and its providing suitable education is the only way to avoid creating emotional violence to the victims, the comfort women, who already suffered enough.

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