THE IMAGE OF THE "COMFORT WOMAN". A FICTIONAL DEPICTION IN THE KOREAN AMERICAN NOVEL AND THE KOREAN GRAPHIC NOVEL

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Abstract: During the entirety of the occupation of Korea by Japan, the colonized suffered deeply, after 1937 things became worse, as the Japanese "recruited" Korean girls and women for the so-called comfort stations where they had to serve as prostitutes for the Japanese soldiers and officers. As recently more and more novels depict this topic, the current research will focus on two important works that describe the Korean "comfort women". On one side, we will emphasize the brutality and violence from the novel White Chrysanthemum that presents, in great detail, the experience of Hana as a "comfort woman", while the graphic novel Grass will underline the censored but accurate representation of the same experience, as it is intended for a younger generation.

Keywords: Korean American Literature, Korean Graphic Novel, Comfort Women, Japanese Empire, Trauma, Manchuria.

The occupation of the Korean peninsula in the twentieth century by the Japanese Empire was a nightmare for the Korean population, as their language was prohibited, and Koreans had to learn a foreign language and obey a government that perceived them as second-class citizens of the empire. Unfortunately, as World War II began, things became even worse as the men and boys had to work in Japanese factories or be conscripted in the army, while many Korean girls and women had to serve as sexual workers known as "comfort women".

The transformation of the Korean state into a Japanese colony was a desire of the Japanese leaders from the sixteenth century. During the Imjin war, also known as the Japanese invasion of Korea (1592-1598), the Japanese managed to conquer a big part of the Korean peninsula, but due to the ingenious intervention of admiral Yi Sun-sin and the military help offered by the Chinese Empire, the Japanese were not able to control the Korean peninsula for a long period of time.

Unfortunately, in the twentieth century, the Chinese Empire was weakened by the Opium wars with the British Empire, and the Korean state remained a closed country that paid tribute to a collapsing empire. Unlike China and Korea, Japan opened to the Western world in 1853 due to the intervention of the United States. This led the old shogunate system collapsing and the emperor was reinstated as the true leader of the country. Furthermore, Japan had embraced Western technology, sent students to learn in the Western countries and started developing a modern army. As Japan put a lot of effort in its development, it is of no surprise that they won in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), which implied that China lost its influence in Korea and had to give Japan the island of Taiwan. Moreover, in the Russo-Japanese war, the strong Asian army managed to defeat the Russian force and eliminate the influence of Nicholas II in Korea. Therefore, in 1905, Korea became a protectorate of Imperial Japan, which meant that the foreign affairs and trading became the responsibility of Japan. As the influence of Japan grew more and more in the Korean peninsula, in 1910 the Korean Empire was annexed by the Japanese Empire and became a colony of the new Asian power[1]. The Japanese justified the occupation of the peninsula by stating that the Korean Empire was a country frozen in time which might become a security

[1] Kenneth Henshall, *A History of Japan: From Stone Age to Superpower*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 81-85, 93-98.

issue[2], as the other powers in Asia could conquer Korea and transform it into a base to attack Japan.

Once Japan transformed Korea into a colony of the Imperial Japan, they started to impose the Japanese system in administration and education. The Japanese brought the Japanese educational system offering "Korean children a four-year elementary "common school" (futsū gakkō) curriculum and a "higher common school" (four year for males, three for females) curriculum"[3]. This was innovative, as only children from the yangban (upper-class) families were encouraged to learn in state-funded school-like institutions or with a private tutor, while commoner children could only attend the Confucius private academies or vocational schools, in fortunate cases[4]. Although "Korean participation in this education was voluntary, […] the administration apparently pressured certain Korean families to send their children to school"[5]. Unfortunately, these schools were used "to convert Koreans into loyal citizens of Japan. […] In the 1930s and 1940s, Koreans were forbidden to use the Korean language. Instead, they were forced to use the Japanese language […]. Koreans were forced to learn only Japanese history. Moreover, Koreans were obliged to change their names into Japanese names. […] They limited the opportunities for education because they thought it very dangerous to spread education among the Koreans"[6].

At the beginning of the 1930s, when Japan's army advanced in Chinese territory, there were testimonies of the establishment of the first comfort station in Shanghai. These institutions began to be spread only after the 1937 Nanking Massacre, as the army intended to stop the raping of local women and offer to its soldiers good conditions to relax with "volunteer" women. Unfortunately, the "volunteer" women were gathered from occupied Japanese territories, such as Taiwan, China, Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and so on, and especially from the Korean peninsula[7]. The recruitment of Korean women was carried out either by Women's Volunteer Labour Corps that recruited Korean girls from school with the help of Japanese school teachers or through the employment agencies that selected women between 18 and 30 to serve as "comfort women" at military bases although being promised well-paid jobs[8]. Other Korean women or girls were "forcibly taken [by the Japanese] from their homes or kidnapped […] from the streets. While the women were procured by means of illegal acts, such actions were nonetheless legally authorised through Imperial Ordinance"[9].

Theoretically, the comfort stations had strict rules, the soldiers had to use a condom and the "comfort woman" had to go through regular medical inspections, the soldiers had to come at certain times and drunk clients were prohibited from entering[10]. Unfortunately, the rules were not always enforced and not all soldiers used condoms, others were violent towards the girls due to being drunk. Therefore, the "comfort women" were not only raped, but also physically abused, others became pregnant and had to abort the babies. All of these

[2] Mark E. Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea 1910-1945,* Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2009, p. 88.
[3] *Ibidem,* p.92.
[4] *Education in Korea: 1999-2000,* Seoul, Ministry of Education, s.a., pp.28-29.
[5] Mark E. Caprio, *op.cit.,* p.92.
[6] *Education in Korea: 1999-2000,* p.31.
[7] Yonson Ahn, *Whose comfort? Body, sexuality and identities of Korean "comfort women" and Japanese soldiers during WWII,* 2020, pp. 3-9, disponibil pe https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=ro&as_sdt=0,5&q=korean+comfort+women+history#d=gs_cit&t=1730355506346&u=%2Fscholar%3Fq%3Dinfo%3AFhE6u1XN-ogJ%3Ascholar.google.com%2F%26output%3Dcite%26scirp%3D8%26hl%3Dro, vizualizat la data de 31.10.2024.
[8] *Ibidem,* pp.10-13.
[9] Grace Lai, "Comfort Women in Japan and Korea", in *Dalhousie Journal of Legal Studies,* vol. 11, 2002, p.35.
[10] Ziyang Zhou, "On the Japanese Government's Implementation of "Comfort Women" System", in *Frontiers in Business, Economics and Management,* vol.10, no.2, 2023, p.133.

factors contributed to the development of trauma for the surviving "comfort women". After World War II ended and the survivors returned home, "the trauma of living in the comfort stations was replaced by the unending physical and psychological trauma of having survived them. Aside from the physical injuries that may have eventually healed, former comfort women have been diagnosed with the long-term effects of sexually transmitted diseases: sterility and infertility, complications from hysterectomies, insomnia, nervous diseases, and mental illnesses such as severe post-traumatic stress disorder and depression"[11].

In her novel, *White Chrysanthemum,* Mary Lynn Bracht "makes use of history to create a narrative that explores the organised violence that happens as expected when a particular culture is conquered by powerful forces"[12]. In other words, the novel of Mary Lynn Bracht is constructed on describing the unleashed violence of the Japanese against other Asians who became their fellow-citizens through the annexation of their lands. Unlike Therese Park's novel, *A Gift of the Emperor,* which censors the rape scenes, because she doesn't want to underline the way in which the victims suffer, Mary Lynn Bracht describes this scene because she wants to emphasize the way in which they suffered and how this was not only a wound of the body, but also something that affected the mind[13].

The main character of *White Chrysanthemum* is Hana, a girl from Jeju Island, that is taken by force by a Japanese officer from the beach where she was diving alongside her mother. After being taken from the beach by Corporal Morimoto, she is transferred to the police station where she registers under the Korean name Kim JangHa in the hope that "this false name will keep them from finding out her family alive and perhaps returning for her sister"[14]. Afterwards the gathered girls are boarded on a ship headed towards the Korean mainland and from there they board a train towards Manchuria. On the ship, Hana finds out that the rest of the girls were sold by their families due to debts, but Hana and another older woman were taken by force, as their families had no debts. Moreover, she knows what to expect from her new life as a Korean woman in Japanese hands as her mother told her about the fact that the women caught by the Japanese army become prostitutes for the Japanese soldiers. Furthermore, on the ship, Hana is requested by the Japanese officer and raped. Although the scene is presented in detail, we will focus more on the way in which Hana coped with the situation. While being raped, she closes her eyes and thinks that the soldier is "a black Jeju pig that lives beneath the latrine of her house and eats human remains"[15].

On the ship, the Korean girls "are placed in one [small cabin] packed with at least thirty others"[16] and they have "to settle in for the journey, lying down and falling asleep"[17], "[l]ike cattle"[18]. Moreover, as there is no bathroom in the cabin, Hana "lets her bladder go, not caring if she smells like a toilet"[19]. This vivid description reminds the readers of novels that depict the Holocaust and the similarities between the Korean prisoners and the Jews that were transported in livestock wagons towards the concentration camps. Furthermore, during the train journey, one of the girls next to Hana dies. After Hana realises this, she screams, but

[11] Sue R. Lee, "Comforting the Comfort Women: Who Can Make Japan Pay?", in *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Economical Law,* vol. 24, 2003. p.518.
[12] Klirni Terangpi and Indu Swami, "Victimization of Korean "Comfort Women" in Mary Lynn Bracht's White Chrysanthemum", in *Transcript. Journal of Literature and Cultural Studies,* no. 8, 2020, p.96.
[13] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative and History,* Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2016, p. 3.
[14] Mary Lynn Bracht, *White Chrysanthemum,* Vintage, Dublin, 2021, p.26.
[15] *Ibidem,* p. 38.
[16] *Ibidem,* p.30.
[17] *Ibidem,* p.48.
[18] *Ibidem.*
[19] *Ibidem,* p. 50.

the Japanese soldiers just pick up the death body and put her in another wagon with the other dead girls and at the first station she is buried in a common pit.

After arriving at a comfort station from the Manchurian countryside, Hana is shocked to see a "comfort woman" giving birth to a dead baby. While sharing this experience to the other "comfort women" from the camp, they tell her that it is better if the baby and mother die than continue living in that place. The next day, Hana begins the "work" as the new Sakura girl, and she becomes traumatized by so many sexual interactions. This time Hana cannot escape by only imagining something else, and she tries to scream and fight, but everything is in vain. Therefore, "[b]y the time the procession of soldiers finally ends, night has descended. Hana lies semi-conscious on her bloodstained mat, lost in unspeakable darkness"[20]. Another girl from the brothel tells Hana not to fight the soldiers because "[t]hey won't leave until they're satisfied. Fighting them will only make your suffering greater"[21]. Furthermore, this "silence, too, can speak many tongues"[22]. Therefore, by giving up fighting through words and screaming, Hana realises that she can resist in silent suffering. This silence is not giving up, but resistance by not expressing the trauma of the rape. Morimoto wrongly interprets this silence as obedience and the Stockholm syndrome, which means that the prisoner sympathizes with their guard. Therefore, when Morimoto tries to help Hana escape from the brothel alongside him, he is shocked that Hana runs in the opposite side and manages to lose him. It can be said that Hana's silence was not obedience, but a way to cope with the trauma and a way to fake her obedience towards the Japanese. Furthermore, silence was a way to "become invisible"[23] and "distance herself from the suffering that her body endures"[24].

The rape was not the only traumatic experience of the "comfort woman" as she had to go through humiliations during the medical consult of the Japanese medical doctors. During which the doctors put the "comfort woman" to "lie back, bend […] [the] knees and lift […] [the] dress"[25]. Furthermore, "[h]e inserts a cold metal instrument into her vagina, feels inside her with his fingers, and then douches her with an orange liquid"[26]. Another humiliating episode is when an important captain "visits" Hana in the comfort station and he forces her to wash by "instructing her at times to scrub harder, to clean herself more thoroughly, and to ensure she is sanitised"[27]. Furthermore, the captain with "the tip of his sword, he searches through her […] hair"[28] and afterwards, "proceeds to shave her, nicking the tender skin, drawing blood"[29]. All of these are humiliations that Hana must endure in order to survive, but she managed to keep it to herself and after this encounter she tries to avoid other women, as she doesn't want them to know what happened to her. But Keiko helps Hana understand that, between "comfort women", sharing a humiliating episode is not shameful and that even if she will be pitied by others, this will be an act of kindness as "[t]here is nothing left for us but to bestow what little kindness we have onto one another"[30].

Although Hana sacrificed so that her sister could be safe in Jeju, Emi was not safe, as in 1948 her father was killed by a policeman, and she was forced to marry another young

[20] *Ibidem,* p. 93.
[21] *Ibidem,* p.94.
[22] King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences. Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa,* New York, Cornell University Press, 2018, p. 1.
[23] Mary Lynn Bracht, *op.cit.,* p.25.
[24] Klirni Terangpi and Indu Swami, *op.cit.,* p. 98.
[25] Mary Lynn Bracht, *op.cit.,* p.120.
[26] *Ibidem.*
[27] *Ibidem,* p.123.
[28] *Ibidem.*
[29] *Ibidem.*
[30] *Ibidem,* p.125.

policeman. Furthermore, Emi participated in the Wednesday Demonstration in 1992, during which Koreans asked the Japanese government to obtain justice against those that abused the Korean "comfort women" as she was trying to find out about the life of her sister. Emi did not share anything about Hana's fate until the demonstration, because she was ashamed, but Emi's son, YoonHui tells her that she has no reason to be ashamed as the "Japanese […] are the ones who should feel ashamed for what they did"[31]. As Emi lived in a Confucian and patriarchal society, she could not heal her traumatic experience from when her sister was taken as a "comfort woman", as she could not talk about such topics, but the new globalist generation can better understand the trauma and go beyond the societal norms. Indirectly, Emi will find her sister in the statue that represents a "haenyeo girl"[32], a girl that dives for molluscs and seaweed in Jeju island. The statue was donated to the Museum of Sexual Slavery by the daughter of a woman who was captured by a Russian soldier, and this coincidence might lead readers to think that the statue really represents Hana, as Hana was rescued from Morimoto by Soviet soldiers and continued to live in Mongolia.

The Korean graphic novel by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim, *Grass*, like the previously discussed American novel, portrays the difficult experience of a Korean "comfort woman" while at a comfort station. Unlike the *White Chrysanthemum*, which makes the adult readers experience the tragic events, the graphic novel has a more didactical approach, as it is intended as a way for a younger reader to understand how the Japanese had brought suffering to Korean women during the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula. The most important aspect is how granny Lee Ok-sun shares her life story with the young Korean comic artist by emphasizing each important historical aspect, from the beginning of the war in 1937. The granny reminds the readers how the "Japanese captured Beiping (now Beijing) and Tianjin"[33] and how they "boasted Shanghai would fall in eight days"[34]. Furthermore, she brings highlights that "along the way [the Japanese army] […] set fire to all villages they passed"[35] "and raped and murdered countless civilians"[36]. Furthermore, she also draws the reader's attention to the fact that after the Japanese conquered Nanjing "civilians were gunned down en masse and became victims of bayonet practice and sword-killing competition"[37] and soldiers "buried people alive or mutilated them with bayonets"[38]. Through this recollection of the cruelty of the Japanese army, granny distances herself from her own subjective experience and therefore offers authenticity to her own story. Furthermore, by introducing these historical truths, the author portrays the whole historical image of the Japanese atrocities in the same way in which various authors portray the Holocaust in fictional books by respecting the unwritten rules of historical fictional writing, which were explained by Terrance Des Press in an article from 1988[39]. Moreover, "diagrammatic representation of maps, replication of buildings from real life, and citing other sources of the narrative (a Japanese soldier's diary), add to the believability of the narrative and its authenticity"[40] and transform the graphic novel *Grass* into a "biographical documentary".

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[31] *Ibidem*, p.205.
[32] *Ibidem*, p.290.
[33] Keum Suk Gendry-Kim, *Grass*, translated by Janet Hong, s.l., Drawn & Quarterly, 2022, p.54.
[34] *Ibidem.*
[35] *Ibidem*, p. 55.
[36] *Ibidem*, p. 56.
[37] *Ibidem*, p.57.
[38] *Ibidem.*
[39] Terrence Des Pres, "Holocaust Laughter?", in *Writing and the Holocaust*, Berel Lang (ed.), Holmes and Meier, New
York, 1988, p.217
[40] Sandra Mariam Xavier, "Preserving the Invisible: Historical Revisionism Through the Graphic Narrative", *Aureole*, vol. XV, 2023, p. 320.

Another important sequence is when the young girl asks granny Lee if there were some good hearted Japanese soldiers during the war, and granny tells the story of the good soldier that promised to come for her and left his watch with her, but in order not to transform the Japanese soldiers from perpetrator into victim, she recounts that another Japanese soldier asked for the watch back in the name of his military colleague. Although the granny could conclude that the second soldier was lying due to greed and wanted the watch for himself, she preferred to believe he was telling the truth and therefore "they're all the same"[41], creating a faithful recollection of the historical truths that will not excuse the perpetrators.

Granny Lee's childhood was a difficult one, as her parents could not afford to send her to school, and she had to take care of her younger siblings. Even if she tried to help her family, as they were poor and could not afford food for all the children, Lee Ok-sun was sold/ adopted by a Korean family that had a udon shop in Busan and afterwards to a gisaeng tavern in Ulsan. Unfortunately, as she was taking something to another member of the owner's family, she was kidnaped by the Japanese. Afterwards, granny explains that, while some girls where kidnapped in a similar way to her, others volunteered to go work for the Japanese. The girls were transported by train to the destination in "freight containers without any windows"[42]. This way of transportation of the Korean prisoners is similar to the way in which Nazi Germany transported the Jewish to the force-labour camps or to the death camps.

Lee Ok-sun arrived at the labour camp at East Yanji Airport where she, alongside other ten girls, were imprisoned in a special house, named the comfort station. The girls were forced to receive Japanese names, as their managers were a Japanese couple and it was easier for them to call them by a Japanese name. The girls, alongside Korean and Chinese men, had to work at the extension of the current airport so it could support Japan's expansion into China. As in the case of the Jews imprisoned in the concentration camps in Poland, the Korean and Chinese from this camp received little food as payment for their work. Therefore, it is of no surprise that "since we worked with very little food or rest, many people got sick and died"[43]. Furthermore, during the night, the Japanese soldiers came and raped the girls. As "all contents of consciousness are … indescribable"[44], Keum Suk Gendry-Kim offers us only black windows without any explanations of the way in which they were raped, but granny Lee remembers that after the rape they felt "dirty"[45] and so "many girls tried to kill themselves after rape"[46]. Each night "more soldiers came. They never wore condoms"[47] and this led to the spread of venereal diseases and pregnancies.

Even after World War II was over, Lee Ok-sun did not have an easy life, as "the Soviet soldiers came. Those bastards did brutal things. They snatched any girls they saw, raped them, and did whatever they wanted"[48]. Furthermore, Lee Ok-sun had to find work and a shelter, but luckily, she stumbled upon "Shim Yeonseop, the captain from Yanji airfield"[49] that helped her with food, and Ok-sun decided to remain in his house as a wife, but after they got married he ran away, and after ten years of waiting, Ok-sun married a decent man with children. When Ok-sun returned to South Korea to find her family, the "sisters and brothers I'd been longing to see, when they found out I'd been a comfort woman, they wanted nothing

[41] Keum Suk Gendry-Kim, *op.cit.,* p.332.
[42] *Ibidem,* p.169.
[43] *Ibidem,* p. 187.
[44] Susan Sontag, *Against interpretation and other essays,* New York, Picador, 2001, p.36.
[45] Keum Suk Gendry-Kim, *op.cit.,* p.206.
[46] *Ibidem.*
[47] *Ibidem,* p.208.
[48] *Ibidem,* p.366.
[49] *Ibidem,* p.371.

to do with me"[50], which is sad as she did nothing wrong and was forced to be a "comfort woman".

In conclusion, we can say that the novel *White Chrysanthemum* is an intense and violent novel that describes in ample detail for a more experienced public the humiliation through which the Korean "comfort women" went through, while the graphic novel *Grass* is more a pedagogical book for a younger audience. Even if *Grass* doesn't have a chronological story and has many time gaps between various moments, these inconsistencies transform the story of granny Lee from a simple reading into a complex one, as the teenagers are encouraged through this experience to read other novels regarding the comfort women and research more on the suffering of the Korean people during the Japanese occupation.

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[50] *Ibidem*, p.436.