

Coming and Going at Sundown

A Korean comfort women play

Jung-Soon Shim

A SHAMAN RITUAL AS COUNTER-IMPERIALIST STRATEGY

Possibly, some of you, in the course of this performance, may be suspicious of the authenticity of this story, saying:

"How could such an atrocious act be possible?"

However, this is not a "believe-or-not story"

or a creation to arouse the audience's interests; unfortunately this is the real story of a military sexual slave whose name is Bok-Yeo Lee.

One of the major issues in the current Korean women's movement intersected by the specificity of race, class and imperialism is that of the Korean comfort women, or enforced sexual slavery by the Japanese military during World War II.

Korea was under Japanese imperialist rule from 1910 to 1945. During this period, Japanese imperialism executed the "Policy of Making the Korean People True Subjects of the Empire" and thereby attempted to eradicate the Korean national culture.

From the early 1930s to the mid 1940s the Japanese military forced countless young women from various Asian countries into sexual slavery. During the day these young women carried ammunition and acted as temporary nurses, at night they were sex slaves.

These drafted women, ranging from age eleven to thirty-two, were used as sex slaves in all of the areas Japan occupied such as Manchuria, China, Miyanma, South Sea Islands. It is estimated that up to two-hundred thousand women were drafted, of which approximately eighty per cent were Korean.

The so-called military comfort women were expected to serve as many as sixty to seventy men per day. Though in nearly all cases the women were supposed to have been paid for their "services" and collected tickets instead of the pay they were due, only very few saw any "earnings" at the end of the war. At the end of the war, many comfort women were killed by the retreating Japanese troops, or forced to take part in military operations including suicide missions with the soldiers, or simply abandoned to their fate.

For those left alive, however, their poor physical and mental condition, and their feelings of shame, due to internalised cultural oppression and anticipated social ostracism in their own communities, prohibited most of them from ever returning home to their families.

In the play *Coming and Going at Sundown*, Her Kilcha, an old woman character and former comfort woman, tells her

personal story of violated body and humanity from a subjective position. The text is based on the testimonies, the unwritten oral histories of comfort women. This play was performed at the 4th International Women Playwrights Conference in Ireland and received a standing ovation from a full house.

Actually this play constitutes a post-colonial dramatic counter-discourse. For such purpose the play makes use of the following discursive and performative strategies.

In the drama, an elderly former comfort woman character tells of her personal experience of sexual slavery by the Japanese Military. This story consists of nine episodic scenes from the time of kidnapping and rape to that of the national liberation, permanent wandering and alienation after return and finally leaving this world in search for her other dead comfort women friends, which is followed by a brief shaman ritual scene offering spiritual consolation to the dead souls still having not found their rightful places. Time, in these episodic scenes, does not proceed in a linear logic but is arranged synchronically, shifting between the past and the present.

The play utilises the Korean indigenous performative strategy. Drawing on the shaman ritual, the performer enacts the subjectivity of the old former comfort woman in the manner a shaman creates a persona in a ritual, by totally immersing herself in the spirit of the comfort woman. The present subjectivity of the old comfort woman controls her split selves as a teenage girl, and at different time phases of sex slave years, post-liberation years, return to the motherland, wandering years and the moment of dying, as she, placed in the subject position of the play structure, recalls each scene as she wishes. Instead of role-playing each split self in a realistic acting style, the performer enacts the split selves in the past, from the

present subject position of the old comfort woman adopting her same hollow voice throughout the performance. This is comparable to a Korean shaman ritual in which a shaman possessed by a dead soul speaks on behalf of the dead soul through the mouth of the shaman as a mediator-controller.

Actually, the consciousness of the performer is comparable to that of a shaman when she says: "Each time around the beginning of the performance, something ominous happens as if to obstruct me from performing. I think it is the dead spirits of the Japanese soldiers. Then I pray, and have the courage to begin."

The assumption of the possessed consciousness of a shaman by the performer is maintained throughout the play, and reaches its peak at the short shaman ritual at the end of the performance in which the performer-shaman recites consolatory phrases to lead the dead spirits of comfort women into the other world.

The audience reception also reminds us of the powerful sense of horror and mystery usually generated at the site of an authentic shaman ritual. In most of the performances in Korea as well as in Ireland at the 4th International Women Playwrights Conference, many of the theatre women audiences responded with crying, shocked with the powerful story exposing inhuman atrocities and horror involving sexual violence. Some Western women said that "they could not take it any more." This kind of genuine sense of shock and horror is rarely achieved in contemporary performances.

Another strategy that this play employs is to capitalise on the violated colonised body and its physical as well as mental sufferings: rape scenes are amplified in detailed portrayals.

A case (testimony by Chong Ok-Sun) recorded by the U.N. Human Rights Commission report describes:

One Korean girl who was with us once demanded why we had to serve so many - up to forty - men per day. To punish her for questioning, the Japanese company commander Yamamoto ordered her to be beaten with a sword. While we were watching, they took off her clothes, tied her legs and hands and rolled her over a board with nails until the nails were covered with blood and pieces of her flesh. In the end, they cut off her head. Yamamoto said: "It's easy to kill you all, easier than killing dogs." He also said: "Since those Korean girls are crying because they have not eaten, boil the human flesh and make them eat it." ¹

All these images of sexual violence suggest that women's bodies often constitute the spaces on which larger battles for hegemony between race, sex and cultural ideology are fought symbolically.

This play also aims at bringing to light the double oppression that comfort women were subjected to. After the liberation of the country by the Allied Forces, this former comfort woman longs to go back to her family, but because of the sense of shame as well as the fear of social ostracism, against the women whose bodies are defiled, she became a permanent wanderer, always wondering whether they will accept her at home.

Coming and Going at Sundown clearly exposes the long lasting harmful impact of sexual slavery on the life of an innocent woman, who, regardless of her will or aspirations, had to live the rest of her life in shame and in seclusion. This play also attempts to write back the unwritten record of the violated body and humanity of the Korean comfort women into the history of humanity for posterity to learn a lesson.

1. Coomaraswamy, Radika. Report on the Issue of Military Sexual slavery in Wartime for UN Commission on Human Rights. 1995.

Gil-Cha Hur COMING AND GOING AT SUNDOWN

Extracts from the play

...
In a strict sense, this performance is not really a play, rather it is closer to a testimony or a confession based on historically hidden facts. Possibly, some of you, in the course of this performance, may be suspicious of the authenticity of this story, saying: "How could such an atrocious act be possible?"

However, this is not a "believe-or-not story" or a creation to arouse the audience's interests; unfortunately this is a real *her* story of a military sexual slave whose name is Bok-Yeo Lee.

...
Now I am going to take a humble step to explore the dark secrets of history, by theatrically restoring to life Our Grandmother, Bok-Yeo Lee, beginning in autumn 1933, when she was removed by force.

*Were you there?
When Your Grandmother,
then a young maiden, was weeping so sadly?
Did you see Your Grandmother as
a young girl with her white shirt torn apart
and her black skirt ripped in tatters?*

...
Sir, oh please, spare me.
I am fourteen, a foolish child.
What can you do with me, a silly poor girl.
Don't take me away.
I am useless. *
The only thing I can do is cook,
clean and sweep.
What else can I do?

...

The truck was full of girls ranging from a twelve year-old girl to a young mother weeping in silence. We were moved to Pusan port, where I saw about two hundred girls waiting in groups. I was transported to Manchuria with thirty other girls. Several who got sick on the way to Manchuria were stabbed to death with bayonets. I was again moved with a group of other girls to Shanghai.

There were a lot of Korean girls at various comfort women's houses in Shanghai. There were forty small rooms each with one Japanese style mat. I was in room N. 12.

...
My long-cherished dream of setting my feet on the soil of the motherland came true in late September 1945 after twelve years as a military sexual slave.
...



Gil-Cha Hur in *Coming and Going at Sundown*.

Friend, whither are you going?
No place to go?
With a sick body, you cannot
go to your native village?
Friend, whither are you going?
No place to go back?
With a broken body, you cannot
go back to your home?
Friend, who are you going to meet?
No one to meet?
With a defiled body, you cannot
meet your Mom and Dad.
...
My Mommy and Daddy
will be ashamed at my appearance;
How could I face them?
Rather I will go as far away as possible
from my native village
where nobody can recognise me,
where no-one will point their finger at me
with scorn.
There if I will work myself to the bone
totally absorbing myself in just living,
then as years go by, maybe my pain
will disappear.

(Theme song)
*In the empty air,
A soul like dust floating
Flies, floats and drifts away
Aimlessly, this way or that way,
Whirling, furling,
Who will welcome this poor soul with
Nowhere to go?
Who will open their arms to embrace*

This suffering soul?
...
But my friends, having survived
the living-hell together,
will be more than willing to embrace me.
Let me go and find every one of them,
living or dead.
If dead, I will decorate their tombs myself.
...
With a heart, grief-stricken, let me go
and find my friends ...
...
May your grievances be dissolved,
by receiving this Gift of purification,
Our Mother, Our Grandmother
Our Mother, Our Grandmother.
...

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GIL-CHA HUR (Korea) is both writer and performer of the play *Coming and Going at Sundown* and was awarded the 8th Korea Catholic Mass-Communications Committee Prize. The play was produced by the theatre group Pitnuri in 1996.