The Comfort Women’s Activism through the Arts

“Art was used as a gateway to explore the past, the present, and the future of the comfort women activism”
(Yae-Jin Ha, “Comfort Women Wanted”, 2014, p. 12)

This essay explores how "comfort women", used as sexual slaves, turned to art to showcase the deep emotional scars they suffered. The comfort women use different forms of artistic expressions to start the healing process within their lives. Before I talk about the artwork, I will refer to how the comfort women manifested to become one of history’s inequalities of human rights and torture.

“Comfort Women”

During World War II, the Japanese Government and Japanese soldiers organized brothels stations for soldiers to sexually abuse women who were called the "comfort women.” According to Soh (1996),

Coerced sexual labor, that is, sexual slavery, was inflicted primarily upon lower class young females of colonial Korea by imperial Japan during the Pacific War, but Japanese women and women of other occupied territories such as Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Burma, and Thailand were also used as “comfort women” (p.1226).
The Japanese government and its soldiers dismissed these women’s human rights and voices. Park, Lee, Hand, Anderson, and Schlewiler (2016) said, “Once in the ‘comfort stations’, these girls and young women were regarded as military supplies and were physically, sexually, and emotionally abused ... They were repeatedly raped, in some cases 20 - 30 times per day” (p.333). The suffering and the abuse these women lived through touches on the subject of trauma, which can cause mental and physical health issues. Some of the disorders experienced include posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicide, as well as depression. Yoko (2000) referred to one comfort woman who said, “I refuse to be called a comfort woman. Although the word suggests something related to affection or warmth, in reality, ‘comfort women’ were subjected to the systematic rape of the Japanese state as well as its armed forces” (p.54). This woman’s comment illustrates the emotional scars comfort women carry for the rest of their lives.

**My Own Voice Suppressed**

I have my own story to share about a sexual assault when I was only twelve years old. I can remember going with my mother and sister to Rome, New York, to visit my Aunt Mary and Uncle Guy during our summer vacation. We loved going up to visit them; I remembered Uncle Guy always took me roller skating along with buying lunch for us at the roller-skating rink. My family would always go every summer to my aunt and uncle's house, which was nice because we had friends in Rome that we would play with all the time while we were there. We would have fun playing different games like red light, green light, catching frogs, as well as getting ice cream from the ice cream truck almost every day.

I was a normal twelve-year-old kid on vacation with my family when my whole life changed one early morning. My Uncle Jack is the youngest in my mom's family; my mom is the second youngest. They were very close to each other because of being born a year apart from each other. Uncle Jack came to my Aunt Mary's house to see us all and was happy to see my mom, along with my sister and myself as well. He lived a little ways away from Aunt Mary's home so when Uncle Jack came, he would stay a few days overnight. I wish my uncle had never stayed overnight. I wish he never visited because of that one night when my mom and sister slept on the pullout couch. I had a smaller size mattress to sleep on, which I had to put next to the sofa that my Uncle Jack was going to sleep on.
while he was there. I could have moved the mattress closer to my mom and sister instead of being next to my uncle, but my aunt had a lot of living room furniture, so there was not enough room.

I can remember getting ready for bed as my mom told me to; I put on my favorite nightgown that I loved to wear. I wish I never wore that nightgown because instead of wearing that I could have worn my pajama bottoms; it would have been harder for him to put his hands down my pants to assault me as he did. My mom told my sister and I that we could watch television until nine o'clock, and then we had to go to bed. I wish with all my heart and soul that I knew what was going to happen to me in the early morning the next day. I was asleep when I felt something strange. That something was my Uncle Jack assaulting me by touching my private parts. When I opened my eyes, my uncle pulled his hand out of my underwear and turned over fast as if he were sleeping. My first reaction was to jump up off the mattress and run into the bathroom. I noticed that my mom and sister were still sleeping when I got up to get away from my Uncle Jack. When I got in the bathroom, I started to cry, but I made sure that I was quiet. I then wiped my tears away so no one would see my tears rolling down my face.

I was only twelve-years-old; I thought I was going to get into trouble even though I did not do anything wrong but be a child. I was afraid my mom was going to get mad along with yelling at me. Then I thought she might think I was lying and believe my uncle instead of me. Therefore, I decided to suppress my voice about what had happened. Years later, I started to remember the assault and asked myself why? Why did my Uncle think it was okay for him to assault me sexually like that? Did I do something that made him think I wanted him to touch me like that? He was my favorite Uncle; he would always horse around with my sister and me as well. After he did this to me, I made sure that my sister was not going to be his next victim.

I finally revealed to my mother when I was older what her brother had done to me, along with how I thought it was my fault. My mother, of course, was furious at my Uncle for what he did. He had taken my childhood away from me. My mom was heartbroken that I blamed myself for what happened. She took me into her arms and hugged me, telling me it was never my fault. Even though that made me happy that she believed me, it did not take away the pain that tore
inside me every day as I started to remember what my Uncle did to me. Even so, I was not going to let this change the person I became; I was going to keep being that strong woman. Even today, I look at my reflection in the mirror and I see that innocent twelve-year-old looking back at me, tears running. I know I became a strong woman for that twelve-year-old inside me and that we persevered through that traumatic time in our life.

I understand why comfort women chose to keep their secrets about being sexual slaves, because I suppressed my voice about my own sexual assault. I turned to art when I was a young girl, in order to start my own healing process from within. Many comfort women also used art to express the inequality and the severity of becoming sexual slaves. They persevered by sharing their stories of how the government and its soldiers inflicted inhuman suffering upon them as young girls and women. For that is what happened to these young girls and women who were kidnapped or lied to: their innocence and bodies were stolen repeatedly time and time again with no hopes to escape the torture they lived through day after day.

The Voices that Survived

The women who did survive returned home. Many turned to art to make their voices heard within the communities they call home. Paula Allen from Amnesty International (2015) said:

When South Korea’s Kim Hak-Soon testified in August 1991 about her experiences as a sexual slave for the Japanese military, she was the first woman in her country to break over 50 years of silence. When she did so, she opened the door for survivors all over Asia to start speaking up about their own experiences (p.1).

The presence of these art pieces enabled comfort women to move forward and to have a voice. The emotional depth in these artistic images and the stories they tell will keep living on even after these women have passed away.

The title of the image in Figure 1 is, “Stolen Away in a Ship.” The artist’s name is Soon-Duk Kim. She painted this image in 1995, showing girls and women stolen from their homes on a boat, standing next to soldiers. In this painting, the artist represents the unknown of what is to happen to the young girls and women when they reach land. The soldiers knew they had lied to these women about good paying jobs just so the women would come with
them. The significance of this picture is the word “stolen,” which reflects on how these women's lives were stolen away from them. They were innocent young girls with their own hopes and dreams ahead of them, such as education and possibly marriage one day. Instead, these young girls were taken away from their families, reflecting the cruelty of these soldiers. One thing that was "stolen" from them was their bodies because the minute that boat hit landfall, their bodies became sexual slaves and their bodies would never belong to just them.

The title of the painting in Figure 2 is “Nightmare.” The artist’s name is Duk-Kyoung Kang. Kang created this art piece to show how soldiers killed these innocent women by throwing them overboard, so their voices would be suppressed forever (Yang, 1997). It is heartbreaking that the soldiers did not see the qualities of either these women’s lives or the women’s families back home. The other women are watching, not

knowing if they were going to be next. The soldiers’ purpose was to put fear into these women in hopes they would never tell their stories about being forced into sexual slavery as comfort women. The soldiers did not seem to consider that some of these women would someday come forward to report their experience as a comfort woman and how they were used as sexual slaves. (Wonhaeng, 2004).

The painting in Figure 3 is called, "In that Place, at that Moment in Time." The artist’s name is Soon-Duk Kim. Kim’s painting reflects the emotional pain that comfort women endured night after night as they were sexually assaulted 20 to 30 times each night (Yang, 1997). Comfort women suffered abuse and emotional instability. The soldiers equated them to military supplies. This is why the soldiers referred to them as “comfort women”, shunning their identities as if they were not human beings. The three soldiers in Kim’s painting are looking down at a woman, not seeing the emotional state she is in, but only desiring to sexually abuse this woman again and again for their own comfort.

The painting in Figure 4, titled “Unblossomed Flower”, was created by Soon-Duk Kim in 1995. This image features a comfort woman holding an unblossomed cherry tree. The unblossomed tree pertains to the lack of growth that she felt internally as a woman. Comfort women’s minds, hearts, and souls, along with their bodies, became dead inside like the unblossomed tree she is holding. This is not the life that these women ever imagined for themselves. Being forced into sexual slavery by the soldiers dishonored this woman along with all the other women as well.

Figure 5, “Comfort Station in Labaul” was created by Duk-Kyoung Kang in 1995. This artwork shows a comfort station where a comfort woman suffered incarceration for six years. The woman is sitting outside while the soldiers are watching her from a tower that looks over the brothel station. These soldiers as well as the Japanese government disregarded this woman’s rights. This woman showed courage for sacrificing herself by standing up for her rights and the equality for the other women as well. This picture reflects on how strong these women had to be while living through the enslavement of being somebody’s sexual pleasures and nothing more. (Yang, 1997)

The title of the painting in Figure 6 is “Innocence Stolen.” Duk-Kyoung Kang created this piece to reflect the innocence stolen from a comfort woman.
when she was sexually abused by a soldier. Cherry Blossom leaves are falling from the tree, around both the woman and the soldier. The soldier’s body is the tree and its roots, showing dominance and enslavement over the woman. This painting suggests girls’ and women’s lives cut short, having no power over who they were as individuals as well as their bodies. Cantu (2017) said, “The cherry blossom represents the fragility and the beauty of life … It’s a reminder that life is almost overwhelmingly beautiful but that it is also tragically short” (p. 1). This statement reflects feminist theory. Women are viewed as beautiful fragile human beings easily broken -- a woman’s life can be cut short. Kang portrays this in her artwork, along with showing the skeletons of the other women who lost their lives and voices from either being thrown overboard or

getting sexually transmitted diseases from being forced to have sex with multiple soldiers every night. This is the life that these women lived every day without knowing if they would ever survive to tell the real truth of how they became comfort women during World War II.

Duk-Kyoung Kang’s “Punish the Guilty! – For the Sake of Peace” (Figure 7) shows the emperor tied to a dead cherry blossom tree with his eyes covered. White doves, representing purity, fly around him to indicate “the emperor must take sole responsibility for peace” (Wonhaeng, 2004, “Dialogue for the preparation of collected Paintings book”). The artist used red as the color of the background to reflect the women’s innocence and the blood shed when they lost their virginity. Three women are holding guns pointing at the emperor. The tables have now turned; the emperor is the one tied up and blinded. This is what the soldiers did to these women every day, holding comfort women captive against their will.

“Punish the Guilty!” reflects on the torture that these women lived through day after day as comfort women. Kang, along with other women, felt dead inside every day that they were sexual slaves. Their voices never mattered to these Japanese soldiers.

“Liberation” (Figure 8) is created by Soon-Duk Kim. In this artwork, comfort women are holding flags from the many places they called home. The artist is reflecting on the end of sexual slavery. Imprisonment, along with their oppressed voices, is no longer. “Liberation” is the true meaning of the word “feminism,” when these women did not have to be subservient to the Japanese soldiers or the Japanese government any longer. On this important day of liberation, people still have to remember everything these women lived through by the hands of these soldiers. When the comfort women came home, the people within their own communities as well as some of their families shunned them. The comfort women were blamed for something that was never their fault.

Even after their liberation, voices of the comfort women continued to be oppressed for over fifty years, until Soon-Duk Kim finally shared her story about what happened to her as a comfort woman. Other women then stepped up and shared their own stories for the whole world to hear. That is when their true liberation happened. This was also when the Japanese government and soldiers were held responsible for the inequality they made these girls and women suffer for so many years.
The drawing featured in Figure 9 is titled “My Innocence.” I created this piece in 2019. In this artwork, you see a young girl who was sexually assaulted by her uncle. This young girl suppressed her voice until she started remembering what this man had done to her so many years ago. I don’t even associate with that side of the family any longer. I see this man today as a coward who did not think about the pain and the suffering that I have gone through throughout the years. Today I am a strong woman who stands up for herself. I share my sexual assault story so it can help someone else share their story as well.

Figure 4. Karapinar. “My Innocence” (2019)
In conclusion, comfort women suffered through horrendous pain within their young lives and still found the courage to share their artwork with the world. After my sexual assault, I found comfort in creating an art piece that reflects my own feelings of what happened to me. My mom was my rock after I told her what her brother did to me. The comfort women were each other’s rock by coming together and letting their voices be heard, by coming forward and sharing their stories verbally and pictorially. When they came forward, their own healing process began. Sadly, there are not too many comfort women left today, but their voices will never be silenced, because through their art pieces, they have shared their history. They refused to keep their voices suppressed any longer.

References

ALLEN, P. (2015, September 2). 70 years on, the comfort women speaking out so the truth won’t die. Retrieved from https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2015/09/70-years-on-comfort-women-speak-out-so-the-truth-wont-die/


