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Comfort women surviving pandemics: From erasure to embodied hope towards a feminist- postcolonial theology of radical hospitality

ABSTRACT

The article accords epistemic privilege to comfort women as embodiment of the perversion of hospitality. It draws a parallelism between their surviving the pandemics of World War II as forcibly recruited sex slaves and COVID-19. Through their lived experience as survivors of pandemics, a feminist-postcolonial theology of radical hospitality first critiques biblical narratives of men's hospitality to men. The parallel stories of Lot's offer of his virgin daughters (Gen. 19) and the Levite's offer of his concubine (Judges 19) expose, first, the hierarchisation of male guests over women, as property of men, and secondly, the inviolable creed of hospitality conferred on men by men, that is sustained by the cultural code that marks women's bodies as violable. Secondly, the article argues that extending hospitality to comfort women (for example, war reparations) goes beyond the "law of ekstasis", as touted in Fratelli Tutti, as comfort women themselves embody love, reciprocity, and inclusion.



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1. INTRODUCTION

The year 2021 is etched in our collective consciousness as the second year that we wrestled with COVID-19. Yet amid the deluge of

unsettling global mortality and morbidity figures, footage of piled up bodies, and deserted metropolises that penetrated the interiority of our homes, day after day, month after month since 11 March 2020 when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic (World Health Organization 2020), grandmothers have made the news. How are the five “*halmeonis*” (“grandma” in Korean), aged between 90 and 104 years, at their sanctuary, the House of Sharing, surviving the pandemic,

having survived a completely different kind of ‘pandemic’ – being rounded up by the Japanese military and shoved into brothels (‘comfort stations’) in over a dozen countries

stretching across East Asia and South-east Asia (Devine 2020)? In her testimony to the NPR, Narcisa Claveria, a ninety-year-old “*lola*” (“grandma” in Tagalog) mentions: “I’d rather die in the streets ... than stay dying of sadness at home”, as she goes out masked to the market weekly and to check on her son, undeterred by COVID-19, where the Philippines has “one of the highest rates of coronavirus infection in Southeast Asia” (McCarthy 2020:n.p.). And ninety-something Grandma Lee Yong-soo, braving taunts that she is a “fake comfort woman”, says: “I hate the crime but I don’t hate the people”, who at the invitation of the Harvard Law School’s Asian-American student group, “addressed the [J. Mark] Remseyer situation directly” – the claims made by the Harvard professor in Japanese Legal Studies who discounts the forced sexual slavery of so-called “comfort women” as “pure fiction” (Gersen 2021:n.p.), essentially, fake news.

How does one make sense of these grandmothers’ accounts? Are we taken by surprise that *halmeonis* and *lolas* are still alive, having survived yesteryear’s “pandemic” not only of World War II (WWII), but also of the ordeal of sexual slavery in WWII and the recent pandemic, where the elderly have been the first and one of the hardest hit by COVID-19? Our surprise, even awe, is rapidly muted when we realise that these surviving octogenarians, nonagenarians, and centenarians were, as children and teenagers, forcibly recruited as so-called “comfort women”. For example, Claveria was only 12 years old when the Japanese soldiers “took her [and her sisters] as a sex slave for 1½ years” after murdering their parents (McCarthy 2020:n.p.). Are we bewildered that these grandmothers are not shamed into silence to carry their secrets to their graves? Our bewilderment is soon checked when we realise that, whilst the majority of these elderly survivors chose to remain silent, privately dealing with lifelong trauma, others who have become someone’s wife, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, have chosen not to remain silent; to publicly and collectively deal with their shared trauma. On 14 August 2021, South Korea

marked the thirtieth anniversary of the first survivor, Kim Hak-soon, who broke her silence in a public testimony (*Kyodo News* 2021) that launched a transnational movement agitating for gender justice, war reparations, and a formal apology by the Japanese government for war crimes committed against so-called “comfort women”. The late Kim Hak-soon, who died in 1997, 6 years after the legacy of her testimony (Choe 2021), said:

I wanted to protest to the Japanese people. ‘You say nothing like this happened, but I survived all that and am living evidence that I did’.

As the body politic of South Korea has memorialised 14 August every year for the past thirty years to date, how do we remember these so-called “comfort women” from the perspective of a “sympathetic dominant group” (Narayan 2013:376), which Narayan, a postcolonial feminist, theorises as allies who are sympathetic, even emphatic, to the plight of these survivors but are unable to fully comprehend the indignities and inhumanity to which they were and continue to be subjected? In this article, I do, and accord epistemic privilege to the narratives of so-called “comfort women”; privileging their stories of survival as bases for grounding the theorising and theologising of hospitality. I join other feminist interlocutors in problematising Derrida’s notion of absolute male hospitality that is premised on the absolute objectification and violation of women’s bodies in the biblical narratives of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19) and Judges 19 (Diprose 2009). Tales of horror by so-called “comfort women” of being repeatedly raped, tortured, and killed or kept (barely) alive for the perpetuation of this cycle of violence – for the absolute gratification of the Japanese Imperial Army during WWII (from 1930s to 1945) (Choe 2021) – deeply resonate with the threat of gang rape of the daughters of Lot and the gang rape and murder of the “concubine” of the Levite. The “comfort stations” in Japanese-occupied territories that dot East Asia (South Korea and Taiwan) and South East Asia (Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam), where an estimated 200,000 girls and women were forcibly recruited (McCarthy 2020) as prisoners of war, are a desecration of “home” that are sustained by girls and women “giving” and men “taking”. These “comfort stations”, to which soldiers return at sunset, the locus of such systemic sexual-and-gender-based violence for the girl-child and woman – to extend the use of their bodies to strangers (Japanese soldiers as alien and hostile) – become a perversion of hospitality which is exemplified by the euphemistic label, “so-called ‘comfort women’” (McGregor 2016:68) about which most of the stakeholders (“comfort women” themselves and their allies) are, at best, ambivalent.

Tales of survival, where so-called “comfort women” claim the right to speak, as subaltern women, as the abject, become the basis of a feminist-postcolonial theology of radical hospitality (Kwok 2011). In doing so, so-called “comfort women” revision hospitality as embodied care unto themselves, as the paradigmatic stranger – unrecognisable as human being or mis-recognised as non-human being – and challenge the moral economy and imperative to give at all costs when giving not only disproportionately falls on girls and women, but also robs them of their human dignity. Re-visioning hospitality from the standpoint of a feminist-postcolonial theology of radical hospitality is engendered by the narratives of so-called “comfort women” that are, first, “life-denying”, where their subjectivities are threatened by exclusion and erasure, and secondly, “life-giving”, in embodying hope for the least, the last, and the lost among us. Comfort women, in that regard, as the paradigmatic stranger, show how we may extend hospitality to other strangers whose disenfranchisement is exacerbated in the time of COVID-19, in particular, women, sexual minorities, and the migrant who are more disproportionately affected.

2. LIFE-DENYING: EXCLUSION AND ERASURE

The sacrifice of women’s bodies ... *are* (at), and feed, the borders of the home, and insofar as the borders of a place of dwelling – whether of the self, the home, the city, or the nation – are secured and disrupted by the play between conditional and unconditional hospitality (Diprose 2009:145).

Diprose’s thesis literalises women’s bodies “giving time for hospitality”, given the use and abuse of women’s bodies and time in the name of hospitality. Diprose starts her article by referencing, as many do, Jacques Derrida’s *Of hospitality* albeit from a feminist perspective that fewer apply. Her starting point is Derrida’s point of departure – Lot’s offer of his “virgin daughters” and the host’s similar offer of his “virgin daughter”, and the Levite’s “alternative offer of his ‘concubine’”, rather than turn out the two male angels to be raped by the Sodomite men (Gen. 19) and the Levite man to be raped by Benjaminite men (Judges 19) (Diprose 2009:143). Two points are deeply problematic: first, the hierarchisation of guests – two male angels and the Levite – over women, as property of men; secondly, the inviolable creed of hospitality that is conferred by men to men that is sustained by the cultural code that marks women’s bodies as violable. Lot’s plea to the Sodomite men is articulated as:

No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof (Gen. 19:7-8).

In a parallel structure, the host ("owner of the house") pleads with the Benjaminite men:

No, my friends, don't be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don't do this outrageous thing. Look, here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine. I will bring them out to you now, and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But as for this man, don't do such an outrageous thing (Judges 19: 23-24).

When men rape men, it is a "wicked thing", an "outrageous thing". It is markedly "vile" when men are guests who have "come under the protection of [another man's] roof". On the other hand, women, especially virginal daughters who are of some value (to their fathers or fiancés), are seemingly expendable: "you can do what you like with them" and "you can use them and do to them whatever you wish". Noteworthy also is the boundary of the home, sacralised as the locus of hospitality that necessitates the offer of virginal daughters to be raped *outside* the home – they are brought "out to you (violators)", gifted by men to men. It is as such heart-breaking that, when the Benjaminite men had "raped (the Levite's 'concubine') and abused her throughout the night", she had "fallen (dead) in the doorway of the house, with her hands on the threshold" (Judges 19:25, 27). Devastated (and I suspect, with his male pride wounded), the Levite is compelled to "cut up his concubine, limb by limb, into twelve parts and sent them into all the areas of Israel" (Judges 19:29).

Men raping men is "wicked", "outrageous", and "vile" not because homosexuality among men is demonised, as interlocutors who offer a queer reading of Judges 19 maintain (Toensing 2005:72-73). In the above contexts of Genesis 19 and Judges 19, men raping men is "wicked", "outrageous", and "vile" because it violates the creed of a man's hospitality to his male guests; it shames him *more* than violated virginal daughters would, notwithstanding the

cultural code wherein female virginity was a potential source of shame to either the father (before betrothal) or the fiancé (from the time of betrothal onward) (Toensing 2005:73).

It is the sin of inhospitality rather than the sin of homosexuality that is contested. In that regard, Lot's "virgin daughters" who are offered as an appealing "collateral"¹ (Toensing 2005:71) make cultural sense and, in turn, reaffirm the heterosexuality of Sodomite men. The "virgin daughters" (distinguished by this male-conferred virtue) were spared the indignity of rape by Sodomite men – hence the refusal of Lot's offer – because raping them would have meant shaming the honour of the Sodomite men to whom they were betrothed (Toensing 2005:73).

Where Lot's "virgin daughters" serve as "collateral", the Levite's "concubine" is "collateral damage"² as are so-called "comfort women". As the name implies, "comfort women" is derived from "the Japanese term '*jugun ianfu*' (military comfort women) or just *ianfu* (comfort women)" (McGregor 2016:68). For many, the euphemism is offensive, as it erases the state-sponsored sexual slavery (including the collusion of local governments with the Japanese government during and post-WWII) or "systematic rape in wartime" that was first named by the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda (McGregor 2016:69-70). The imperative to "comfort" and entertain is a twisted extension of an "*unconditional* hospitality", where

welcoming the absolutely (unknowable) other into one's home or one's political community, constitutes the home; the self, the nation, one's dwelling place as open to the other (Diprose 2009:144).

Such an "*unconditional* hospitality" or absolute hospitality is premised on the law of the father – the Japanese Imperial Army rampaging through its occupied territories in Asia-Pacific during WWII. Absolute or "*unconditional* hospitality" is marked by "welcoming the absolutely (unknowable) other into one's home", where Japanese soldiers embody that "alterity (strangeness, absolute otherness)" (Diprose 2009:144) in terms of the depravity to which they had subjected so-called "comfort women".

The historical fact of "women's bodies giving time to hospitality", despite protracted attempts to erase this episodic trauma in *his*-story (naysayers such as Remseyer (2021) and the refusal of the Japanese

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- 1 Lot's counterproposal is read as that of a "hostage exchange" where his virgin daughters – a point he emphasises – "are to be held safely overnight, and are to be released unharmed, when the two visitors vacate the premises in accordance with Lot's assurance". Thus, Lot is not giving the Sodomite men a "free reign to rape his daughters, then and there, as is often interpreted".
 - 2 I refer to Toensing's title of the article, "Women of Sodom and Gomorrah: Collateral damage in the war against homosexuality", which suggests that a queer reading of texts of terror such as Genesis 19 recuperates homosexuality for men but leaves, uncontested, the position and treatment of women.

government to formally apologise till the present day) – a life-long trauma in *her-story* – finds voice in the following testimonies:

“It was horrifying when those monstrous soldiers forced themselves upon me,” she said during a news conference, wiping tears off her face. “When I tried to run away, they caught me and dragged me in again ... On days when the soldiers returned from expeditions, we each had to take as many as 10 to 15 men”, Kim (Hak-soon) said on South Korea’s KBS-TV in 1992. “They took us as if we were some kind of object, and used us however they wanted. When we broke down with problems like diseases, they abandoned us like objects or killed us” (Choe 2021:n.p.).

Narcisa [Claveria] begins to cry as she thinks back to her childhood in the Philippines during World War II. “If I could prevent the sun from setting, I would, because whenever night fell, they would start raping us”, she says. She was 12 years old at the time ... Soldiers dragged her and two older sisters off to a garrison. The oldest she never saw again. Narcisa was among eight girls and women who by day cooked, cleaned and did laundry. By night, she says, the troops raped them. “I was in a different room every night”, Narcisa says. She says if they protested, “they flayed us with horse’s whip”. The building, she says, heaved “with crying” (McCarthy 2020:n.p.).

The temporal dimension is notable in these testimonies through the documentation of the approximate number of men who were “comforted” and the period of service rendered by each so-called “comfort women” (Devine 2020)³ and girls in the case of Kim Hak-soon, Narcisa Claveria, and countless others. Hospitality – within the spatial dimension of the garrisons, for Japanese soldiers, is contrived as a home away from home – also took the form of cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry, quintessentially, women’s labour. The so-called “comfort women” were subjected to weekly gynaecological examinations to ensure that they were not “diseased” or pregnant, so that they could continue the labour of production but not reproduction; as Kim puts it, “They took us as if we were some kind of object, and used us however they wanted.” Being “used ... however they wanted” hauntingly resonates with the male host’s offer to Benjaminite men “do to them (his “virgin daughter” and the Levite’s “concubine”)

3 The “military ‘pandemic’” carried out by Japan was “a living hell on over 200,000 young women”. According to the Testimonies of Comfort Women (as told in five volumes from the Korean Council for Women Drafted into Military Sexual Slavery, published between 1993 and 2003), “each woman gritted her teeth through an average of 15 sex acts with Japanese soldiers daily – and 45 to 50 over two-day weekends.” The House of Sharing residents’ ages began their lives as comfort women from ages 12 to 27 years (Devine 2020).

whatever you wish” (Judges 19). The fate of the latter who was “raped and abused ... throughout the night” until she collapsed to her death at the threshold of a home not her own – excluded and forsaken in death, as in life – had been the fate endured by many so-called “comfort women and girls”. And for those who survived, theirs is the trauma of reliving and remembering the inhumanity of men unto themselves.

There is a parallelism in “women’s bodies giving time to hospitality” between so-called “comfort women” and women in the time of COVID-19 who were in lockdown with their familial abusers, and who experienced greater precarity with regard to job and food security. Life-denying narratives that highlight exclusion and erasure show how women bear the brunt of the disproportionate impact of crises.

3. LIFE-GIVING: EMBODIED HOPE

But this is not the only way that so-called “comfort women” demand to be remembered. As a counterpoint to the exclusionary practice of a life-denying hospitality and the concomitant erasure of the humanity of women who are bartered between men, we have so-called “comfort women” claiming their right to speak. Kim Hak-soon was compelled to break her silence on 14 August 1991:

I wanted to protest to the Japanese people, ‘You say nothing like that happened, but I survived all that and am living evidence that I did’ (Choe 2021:n.p.).

It would have been too convenient for the sake of the family’s name and honour that so-called “comfort women” returnees continue to uphold the “moral economy of the family” that is predicated on the feminisation of values such as “indebtedness, gratitude, and (one-sided) sacrifice for the family” (Ong 2011:38). The loss of one’s virginity (that is conflated with purity), regardless of how it was “lost”, relegates a woman’s body as irrevocably sullied. Kim’s revelation disrupts a prevailing patriarchal narrative of sexual politics that feeds off the gender binary of male domination and female servility that finds its worst expression in the degradation to which so-called “comfort women” were subjected. Kim inspired others like her, beginning with the 238 so-called “comfort women” who, preceding the occupy movements by a decade, protested every Wednesday outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul (Choe 2021). These Korean so-called “comfort women” who, in turn, moved other survivors in the Asia-Pacific to come forward, thus heralding a transnational movement, become unintelligible, unrecognisable as non-compliant women and so-called “comfort women”

at that, who are shamelessly not shamed into silence and have risen above societal expectation that they should live out their remaining years in concealment and self-stigmatisation.

I find Butler's twin concepts of "gender performativity" and "precarity" instructive in this instance, as she poignantly asks:

How does the unspeakable population speak and make its claims?
What kind of disruption is this within the field of power? And how can such populations lay claim to what they require? (Butler 2009:xiii).

Performativity has everything to do with 'who' can become produced as a recognizable subject, a subject who is living, whose life is worth sheltering, and whose life, when lost, would be worthy of mourning (Butler 2009:xii).

"Precarious life" she adds, "characterizes such lives who do not qualify as recognizable, readable, or grievable" (Butler 2009:xii-xiii). Thirty years ago, Kim Hak-soon claimed a right that no one had conferred on her or on any surviving so-called "comfort women". In claiming the right to speak of "that" – a single word signifying the crimes of humanity done to them – she became a "recognizable subject" and, in turn, conferred that recognition to other war crime survivors and those who did not survive. Statues memorialising (Chun 2020) so-called "comfort women" pay homage to their lives as one that "is worth sheltering, and whose life, when lost, would be worthy of mourning". Theirs is undoubtedly a "precarious life" that, for Kim, becomes totally negated by those who refuse to recognise their dignity as human persons, remember the indignities they were subjected to, or grieve for their lost innocence and personhood. "You say nothing like that happened, but I survived all that and am living evidence that I did." In claiming the right to speak, the right to not be erased, Kim and so-called "comfort women" are not unlike queer subjects for whom "gender performativity" lies in saying "No", standing up and speaking out in unrecognisable ways against a conscription not only as so-called "comfort women" (in supplication to the Emperor of Japan), but also as daughters, single women, wives, mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers, in obedience to the law of the father.

So-called "comfort women" become the female subalterns who speak. In theologising on Gayatri Spivak's "subaltern woman", Kwok Pui-Lan (2011:43) explores what she calls "the love for the female subaltern as an expression of planetary love". It is applicable in the ways that we extend hospitality to so-called "comfort women", by remembering but not fetishising their lived realities as one-dimensional or monolithic

(Kwok 2011:44), as so-called “comfort women” are neither irreducibly downtrodden nor homogenous. Kwok (2011:44) adds:

the most radical love displayed is in the form of refusal to fetishize the subaltern so that she can fit into our epistemological framework, whether it is Eurocentric and nationalist historiography or in subaltern studies.

What comes to mind is the crafting of the “model survivor story” by gender justice allies, where Mardiyem, an Indonesian survivor, was chosen to provide the first international testimony at the International Forum on War Compensation for the Asia Pacific Region in Tokyo, in 1995, “as she was duped, a virgin, tried to resist, suffered physical hard and was unpaid” (McGregor 2016:72). Can so-called “comfort women’s” voices be heard above the din of contesting claims by well-meaning allies with saviour complexes and different agendas?

How do we extend hospitality to so-called “comfort women”? Within a secular framework, the Malaya Lolas (“Free grandmothers”) of the Philippines, a civil society organisation, has used the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court that broadens the scope of what constitutes crimes against humanity, notably sexual and gender-based violence against women, to expand the reach of gender justice domestically. This includes holding the Japanese government accountable, by demanding a formal apology and redress for “victims of sexual slavery” (Waller *et al.* 2014:366). The Philippines and South Korea are among the few countries in the Asia-Pacific that have ratified the Rome Statute (Waller *et al.* 2014:360). In tandem with legal obligations (at least for countries that have ratified the relevant conventions) that potentially prosecute the absence of hospitality – systemic rape in wartime as a crime against humanity – how would a religious framework mandate the gift of hospitality? Is hospitality for so-called “comfort women” beyond war reparations and the elusive formal and full apology by the Japanese government adequately effected by spiritual grace (biblical emphasis on neighbourliness)? A masculinist logic that governs the creed of hospitality then and there positioned women alongside livestock, as the property of men, and bartered as collateral to prop up the honour of the male host, the father, the fiancé, and in the here and now, is recast as the Japanese soldier.

In picking up from Kwok’s (2011:45) provisional thoughts on a “postcolonial planetary feminist theology”, we turn to the “law of *ekstasis*”, as touted in *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis’ (2020:paragraph 88) latest encyclical, where we are called to uphold a “sacred duty of hospitality” that requires us to move beyond ourselves “in openness to others” to

attend to their needs, build their capacities, and heal their wounds. When this “law of *ekstasis*” is tested against the lived realities of so-called “comfort women”, there is a hollow ring to it. The moral imperative to give *ad nauseam* – to attend to the needs of others, to build the capacities of others, to heal the wounds of others – whilst one’s needs remain ignored, one’s capacities cut down, and one’s wounds still raw, is gender-blind and tone-deaf to the voices of so-called “comfort women”. A radical transformation directed at those who have not yet atoned for their war crimes and daily transgressions that systematically perpetuate gender injustice in the home, at the workplace, within the church (and other places of worship), institutions and society at large, is first necessitated.

And we take the lead on love, reciprocity, and inclusion from so-called “comfort women” themselves. As the paradigmatic stranger, they show the way – a gender-sensitive and culturally sensitive approach in extending hospitality to other bodies that are marked by intersectional axes of discrimination such as gender, sexuality, class, nationality, and so on. In doing so, they embody a feminist-postcolonial theology of radical hospitality. Radical love in that regard is neither gender-blind nor colour-blind. It foregrounds resistance and resilience. Narcisa Claveria attributes her survival to her loving husband, Anaceto Claveria: He

would always say to me, ‘Fix your mind. I don’t think less of you. You are lucky because you came back alive. Everything the Japanese did to you, throw out of your mind’ (McCarthy 2020:n.p.).

Grandma Lee Yong-soo tells Asian-American students at Harvard Law School, sans bitterness, that Ramseyer was “maybe actually a blessing in disguise”, in reviving interest in the pandemic of WWII and the embedded “history of comfort women” despite COVID-19 (Gersen 2021). And for the survivors at the House of Sharing, a home to call their own, there is a tribute to them:

If the old saying, ‘inmyong jaechun’ (life rests with heaven), holds true, heaven calls the shots on the timing of a human’s life and death – and these survivors have so far outlived WWII, the Korean War, and the threat of nuclear apocalypse by North Korea. Now, they face COVID-19. May all ‘grandmas’, publicly known or not, living throughout the world, ride in their own sweet time, the ‘sweet chariots’ to ‘swing low’ for them – long after COVID-19 bites the dust (Devine 2020:n.p.).

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