Colonial Stereotypes and Gendered Representation: A Postcolonial Feminist Study of Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*

Abinaya S
Assistant Professor, Mailam Engineering College, Mailam

***Abstract*—The representation of Asian women in colonial and postcolonial literature has frequently been shaped by racial stereotypes, patriarchal ideologies and unequal structures of cultural power. Asian femininity has often been associated with submissiveness, sexual availability, silence and cultural inferiority, positioning women as objects of colonial representation rather than independent subjects. Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman (1997) challenges these constructions through the experiences of Akiko, a Korean survivor of Japanese military sexual slavery, and her daughter Beccah, who struggles to understand her mother's traumatic past. This paper examines the relationship between colonial stereotypes and gendered representation in the novel through a postcolonial feminist perspective. Drawing on Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of cultural hybridity and ambivalence, Lisa Lowe's discussions of Asian American cultural politics, and Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, the study investigates the representation of the female body, sexual exploitation, patriarchal authority, cultural silence and intergenerational trauma. Through qualitative textual analysis and close reading, it explores how colonial power transforms the Asian female body into a site of racialised domination and how gendered violence continues to influence identity beyond the historical period of colonial occupation. Particular attention is given to Akiko's fragmented memories, spiritual experiences and relationship with Beccah as significant narrative strategies through which historical suffering is remembered and communicated. The paper argues that Keller challenges the stereotypical representation of Asian women as passive and submissive by presenting female identity as complex, historically situated and resistant to fixed cultural definitions. It concludes that storytelling, memory and intergenerational recognition become important means of challenging colonial erasure and reclaiming Asian female subjectivity.**

***Index Terms*—Asian American Literature, Colonial Stereotypes, Gendered Representation, Postcolonial Feminism, Orientalism, Female Body, Sexual Violence, Cultural Identity, Intergenerational Trauma, Female Resistance.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Asian American literature has developed as an important literary field for examining the relationship between race, gender, cultural identity and historical experience. The literary representations of Asian American women are particularly significant because their identities are influenced by multiple systems of power, including colonialism, patriarchy, racial discrimination and cultural expectations. Historically, Asian women have frequently been represented through stereotypical images of submissiveness, exotic beauty, sexual availability and cultural dependence. These representations have contributed to the construction of Asian femininity as an identity defined by external expectations rather than individual experience.

The relationship between colonialism and gender is especially important in understanding the historical experiences of Asian women. Colonial systems do not operate exclusively through political occupation or economic exploitation. They also regulate bodies, sexuality, cultural practices and social identities. Women's bodies frequently become sites through which colonial authority and patriarchal power are exercised. Consequently, the representation of Asian women requires an examination of both racial domination and gender inequality.

Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman offers an important literary perspective on these concerns. Published originally in 1997, the novel explores the

experiences of Akiko, a Korean woman forced into sexual slavery during the Japanese occupation, and her daughter Beccah, who grows up in Hawaii without fully understanding her mother's traumatic history. Through their interconnected narratives, Keller investigates the continuing consequences of colonial violence, cultural silence, displacement and intergenerational trauma.

The novel is significant because it moves beyond the representation of historical suffering as an isolated experience. It examines how violence affects the body, memory, family relationships and cultural identity. Akiko's experiences demonstrate the vulnerability of women under colonial and patriarchal structures, while Beccah's search for her mother's past reveals how historical trauma can influence subsequent generations.

The term "comfort woman" itself requires critical attention. It is a euphemistic expression historically associated with women and girls subjected to military sexual slavery by the Japanese imperial military. The terminology conceals the violence and coercion experienced by the victims. Keller's novel challenges the implications of this language by foregrounding the experiences of an individual woman whose history has been marginalised.

This paper argues that Comfort Woman represents the Asian female body as a contested site of colonial domination, patriarchal regulation and cultural resistance. Through Akiko's experiences, Keller exposes the racialised construction of Asian femininity and challenges the assumption that Asian women are naturally passive or submissive. Through Beccah's narrative, the novel further demonstrates how the recovery of suppressed histories can contribute to the reconstruction of female and cultural identity.

The study therefore investigates the relationship between colonial stereotypes and gendered representation by examining the female body, sexual exploitation, cultural silence, spiritual identity and intergenerational memory.

II. RESEARCH GAP AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Existing scholarship on Comfort Woman has examined the novel from several important critical perspectives. Paula Ruth Gilbert's study, "The Violated Female Body as Nation: Cultural, Familial, and Spiritual Identity in Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman," investigates the relationship between bodily violence, cultural identity and female representation. Kittiphong Praphan examines domestic and colonial patriarchy as structures contributing to the exploitation of the Korean female body. Yoo-Hyeok Lee explores Akiko and Beccah's search for decolonising subjectivity, while Barbora Frizelová considers the gender issues represented through Akiko's experiences.

More recent research has also developed discussions of memory, historical representation and intergenerational trauma. Cristina Naranjo Lobato's study examines the transmission of traumatic memory between Akiko and Beccah through the framework of postmemory. These studies demonstrate the continuing academic importance of Keller's novel.

Although these critical approaches provide valuable interpretations, the present paper seeks to develop a focused comparative connection between colonial stereotypes, gendered embodiment and narrative resistance. It investigates how racialised representations of Asian femininity operate through the female body and how the novel challenges these representations through the recovery of personal and familial histories.

The research does not claim that the relationship between colonialism and female oppression in the novel has been overlooked. Instead, its contribution lies in bringing together Orientalist representation, gendered bodily experience and intergenerational narrative resistance within a single postcolonial feminist framework.

The study is significant because it contributes to discussions of Asian American women's writing by examining how literary narratives challenge the reduction of women to racial and sexual categories. It also demonstrates the importance of recognising individual female experiences within broader historical narratives of colonial violence.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the representation of Asian femininity through colonial stereotypes in Comfort Woman.

2. To analyse the relationship between colonial authority, patriarchy and the exploitation of the female body.
3. To investigate the representation of sexual violence, trauma and cultural silence.
4. To explore the relationship between memory, storytelling and female resistance.
5. To examine the intergenerational transmission of trauma through the relationship between Akiko and Beccah.
6. To identify how Keller challenges fixed racial and gendered representations of Asian women.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research employs postcolonial feminist criticism as its primary theoretical approach. It combines selected ideas from Orientalism, cultural hybridity, Asian American cultural politics and postmemory to examine the relationship between colonial power and gendered identity.

4.1 Edward Said's Concept of Orientalism

Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) provides an important foundation for understanding the construction of Asian identity through Western cultural representation. Said argues that Orientalism operates through systems of knowledge and representation that construct the East as an inferior, exotic and culturally different opposite of the West.

Although Said's original study focuses primarily on Western representations of the Middle East, its broader critical framework can be applied carefully to the study of Asian representations. In colonial discourse, Asian women have frequently been associated with submissiveness, mystery, exoticism and sexual availability. Such images establish racial and gender hierarchies by positioning the Asian woman as an object of observation and control.

In Comfort Woman, the experiences of Akiko reveal the consequences of a historical environment in which the female body is subjected to military and patriarchal power. The novel challenges the cultural assumptions that reduce Asian women to sexualised racial categories.

4.2 Homi K. Bhabha: Hybridity and Cultural Ambivalence

Homi K. Bhabha's The Location of Culture (1994) introduces the concepts of hybridity, mimicry and ambivalence to explain the instability of colonial cultural relationships. Hybridity challenges the assumption that cultural identity is fixed or homogeneous. It describes the negotiation of identities within spaces shaped by unequal cultural relationships.

This concept is relevant to the relationship between Akiko and Beccah. Akiko's experiences are influenced by Korean cultural memory, colonial violence and her later life in the United States. Beccah, meanwhile, negotiates an identity shaped by her mother's history and her own American upbringing. Their experiences demonstrate that cultural identity develops through historical displacement and negotiation rather than through exclusive belonging to one cultural category.

4.3 Lisa Lowe and Asian American Cultural Politics

Lisa Lowe's Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics (1996) provides a framework for understanding Asian American identity through immigration, racialisation, historical displacement and cultural difference.

Lowe challenges the representation of Asian American identity as a unified or homogeneous experience. Her work is particularly useful for examining how gender and race intersect within Asian American cultural narratives.

In Keller's novel, Akiko and Beccah occupy different historical and cultural positions. Their identities cannot be understood independently of migration, family memory and racial categorisation. Lowe's approach therefore helps explain the complexity of their experiences.

4.4 Marianne Hirsch and the Concept of Postmemory

Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory is particularly relevant to the relationship between Akiko and Beccah. In The Generation of Postmemory (2012), Hirsch explains how later generations develop relationships with traumatic experiences that they did not directly witness but inherit through stories, images, behaviour and family memory.

Beccah's understanding of her mother's experiences develops through the gradual recovery of suppressed family history. Her identity is influenced by events

that occurred before her birth, demonstrating the continuing effects of historical trauma. Postmemory therefore provides a useful framework for examining how colonial violence influences family relationships and cultural identity across generations.

V. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on textual analysis and close reading. Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman serves as the primary text, while selected theoretical books and peer-reviewed scholarly articles constitute the secondary sources.

The research examines characterisation, narrative structure, symbolism, imagery, memory, dialogue and the representation of the female body. Particular attention is given to Akiko's experiences of sexual violence, her spiritual identity, her relationship with Beccah and the daughter's gradual understanding of her mother's history.

The study uses an interpretative approach to investigate how literary representation challenges colonial and patriarchal structures. It also incorporates historical and cultural perspectives to contextualise the novel's treatment of Japanese military sexual slavery. The research does not treat the novel as a substitute for historical documentation. Instead, it investigates how fiction represents the experiences of marginalised women and reconstructs histories that have been excluded from dominant narratives.

VI. COLONIAL STEREOTYPES AND THE REPRESENTATION OF ASIAN FEMININITY

One of the significant concerns in Comfort Woman is the construction of Asian femininity through colonial and patriarchal expectations. Asian women have historically been represented through contradictory images of obedience, sexual availability, exotic beauty and cultural inferiority. Such representations transform women into objects of racialised imagination. Their identities become associated with the expectations of those who possess political, military or cultural power.

Keller challenges this process by presenting Akiko's individual experiences within the historical circumstances of colonial occupation. Akiko is not represented merely as an abstract image of Asian femininity. Her memories, emotions, cultural background and personal relationships establish her as an individual subject.

The novel reveals that the categorisation of women through racial and sexual stereotypes has material consequences. Colonial power does not simply influence how women are perceived; it also affects their physical existence, social position and opportunities for autonomy. Akiko's experiences therefore challenge the assumption that Asian femininity can be defined through a fixed set of cultural characteristics. Her identity is shaped by suffering and historical displacement, but it also includes memory, spirituality, motherhood and the possibility of resistance. The novel consequently exposes the limitations of colonial representations by giving narrative importance to the experiences of a woman whose identity has been historically marginalised.

VII. THE FEMALE BODY AS A SITE OF COLONIAL VIOLENCE

The representation of the female body is central to Keller's exploration of colonial domination. Akiko's experiences of military sexual slavery demonstrate how colonial authority extends into the most intimate dimensions of human existence. The body becomes a site through which military power and patriarchal control are exercised. The exploitation of Korean women during the Second World War illustrates how colonial systems can regulate female sexuality and transform women's bodies into instruments of institutional power.

The euphemistic expression "comfort woman" is particularly significant in this context. It conceals the coercive nature of the system by presenting sexual exploitation through language that suggests service or assistance. Keller challenges this terminology by focusing on the individual experiences and consequences of violence. Akiko's body also functions as a repository of historical memory. Her past cannot be separated from her present identity because the consequences of violence continue to influence her relationships and psychological existence.

The novel therefore presents the body as more than a physical object. It becomes a historical and cultural site where the effects of colonialism are remembered. However, Keller's representation does not reduce Akiko to the experience of victimisation. Her identity

includes forms of cultural and spiritual agency that challenge the assumption that violence completely determines a woman's life.

VIII. COLONIAL AND PATRIARCHAL POWER: THE COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN

Colonial domination in Comfort Woman is closely connected to patriarchal structures. The novel reveals that women's vulnerability is produced through the interaction of military authority, family expectations and social inequality. Akiko's experiences demonstrate that the exploitation of women cannot be understood exclusively through colonial power. Domestic patriarchy and social hierarchies also contribute to the conditions under which women become vulnerable.

The female body is positioned within unequal systems in which women's personal choices and physical autonomy are restricted. Sexual exploitation consequently becomes both a gendered and a political form of domination. Kittiphong Praphan's article, "Sex Slavery under Domestic and Colonial Patriarchy in Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman," examines the relationship between domestic patriarchy and colonial patriarchy in the novel. His discussion is particularly useful for understanding the transformation of the female body into a commodity within intersecting systems of power.

Building on this perspective, the present study argues that the commodification of Akiko's body also reflects a broader process of racialisation. Her identity is interpreted through categories imposed by military and patriarchal authority rather than through her own experiences and desires. Keller's narrative therefore exposes the relationship between gender inequality and colonial exploitation. It demonstrates that the control of women's bodies is inseparable from the wider structures of power that shape their social existence.

IX. MOTHERHOOD AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF TRAUMA

The relationship between Akiko and Beccah provides one of the most significant narrative dimensions of the novel. Their relationship demonstrates how historical violence can influence family structures and personal identities across generations. Akiko's traumatic past affects her ability to communicate with her daughter. Beccah experiences emotional distance and confusion because she does not fully understand the historical circumstances that have shaped her mother's life.

The daughter's gradual discovery of Akiko's experiences becomes a process of historical and personal reconstruction. She begins to understand that her mother's behaviour cannot be separated from the suffering and displacement she has experienced. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory provides an appropriate framework for interpreting this relationship. Beccah inherits aspects of her mother's trauma through family memory, emotional experience and the gradual recovery of suppressed history.

The novel therefore demonstrates that trauma is not restricted to the generation that directly experiences violence. Its consequences can influence later generations through family relationships and cultural transmission. Motherhood is consequently represented as a complex experience involving love, silence, memory and historical inheritance.

Keller challenges simplified representations of Asian motherhood by presenting Akiko as a woman whose identity is shaped by both personal suffering and maternal responsibility. Beccah, in turn, develops a more complex understanding of herself through the recovery of her mother's history. Their relationship reveals the importance of intergenerational recognition in reconstructing cultural and personal identity.

X. RACIALISATION, DISPLACEMENT AND ASIAN AMERICAN IDENTITY

The novel also examines the relationship between colonial trauma and the experiences of Asian immigrants in the United States. Akiko's relocation to Hawaii does not automatically free her from the consequences of her past. Although geographical displacement creates a new social environment, the memories of colonial violence continue to influence her existence. Her experiences demonstrate that migration does not necessarily produce an immediate sense of belonging or cultural security.

Akiko and Beccah occupy different positions within American society. Their experiences are influenced by race, cultural difference and family history. The novel reveals that Asian American identity is shaped not

only by the experience of migration but also by the historical circumstances that precede it. Lisa Lowe's discussion of Asian American cultural politics is useful in understanding this complexity. Asian American identity cannot be reduced to a single cultural or historical experience. It is shaped by immigration, racialisation, gender and the continuing influence of historical power relations.

Beccah's search for her mother's history consequently becomes an important part of her own identity formation. Her understanding of family and culture develops through the recognition of experiences that were previously hidden from her. The novel therefore challenges the idea that identity can be reconstructed simply by leaving the geographical location associated with historical violence. Cultural memory continues to influence the individual beyond physical displacement.

XI. CONCLUSION

The present study has examined colonial stereotypes and gendered representation in Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman through a postcolonial feminist perspective. It has investigated the relationship between colonial domination, patriarchal authority, sexual violence, cultural silence and the reconstruction of Asian female identity.

The analysis demonstrates that the Asian female body functions as a contested site where racial ideology and gendered power intersect. Akiko's experiences reveal the consequences of colonial sexual exploitation and demonstrate how historical violence continues to influence personal and familial identity. The novel challenges the euphemistic language surrounding sexual slavery by foregrounding the experiences of a woman whose history has been marginalised.

The study also demonstrates that Asian femininity cannot be reduced to stereotypes of passivity, submissiveness or sexual availability. Akiko's memories, spiritual practices and maternal experiences reveal a complex identity that exists beyond the categories imposed by colonial and patriarchal structures. The relationship between Akiko and Beccah further establishes the significance of intergenerational memory. Through the daughter's gradual discovery of her mother's past, Keller explores how historical trauma influences subsequent generations and shapes the development of cultural identity.

The integration of Orientalism, cultural hybridity, Asian American cultural politics and postmemory provides a theoretical framework for understanding the multiple dimensions of gendered representation in the novel. These perspectives reveal that the experiences of Asian American women must be examined through the intersection of race, gender, history and cultural displacement.

Ultimately, Comfort Woman challenges the historical construction of Asian femininity through colonial stereotypes and presents storytelling, memory and cultural continuity as important forms of resistance. The novel demonstrates that reclaiming female identity involves recognising women's experiences, challenging the structures that silence them and restoring their authority to narrate their own histories.

The study concludes that Asian female identity is neither fixed nor homogeneous. It is shaped by historical experience, cultural negotiation and individual agency. Through its representation of Akiko and Beccah, Keller contributes to a broader understanding of Asian American women's literature as a space for questioning colonial power and reconstructing marginalised identities.

WORKS CITED

Primary Source

[1] Keller, Nora Okja. Comfort Woman. Penguin Books, 1998.
[2] Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. Routledge, 1994.
[3] Hirsch, Marianne. The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust. Columbia University Press, 2012.
[4] Lowe, Lisa. Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics. Duke University Press, 1996.
[5] Said, Edward W. Orientalism. Vintage Books, 1978.
[6] Soh, C. Sarah. The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan. University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Secondary Sources

[1] Frizelová, Barbora. “Gender Issues in Comfort Woman by Nora Okja Keller.” American and

British Studies Annual, vol. 16, 2023. https://doi.org/10.46585/absa.2023.16.2509.

[2] Gilbert, Paula Ruth. “The Violated Female Body as Nation: Cultural, Familial, and Spiritual Identity in Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman.” Journal of Human Rights, vol. 11, no. 4, 2012, pp. 486–504. https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2012.730915.

[3] Lee, Yoo-Hyeok. “The Search for Decolonizing Subjects in Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman.” English-Speaking Cultural Studies, vol. 11, no. 2, 2018, pp. 95–128. https://doi.org/10.15732/jecs.11.2.201808.95.

[4] Naranjo Lobato, Cristina. “Echoes of War: Postmemory and the Haunting of the Past in Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman (1997).” DIVE-IN: An International Journal on Diversity and Inclusion, vol. 5, no. 2, 2025, pp. 129–150. https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.2785-3233/25808.

[5] Praphan, Kittiphong. “Sex Slavery under Domestic and Colonial Patriarchy in Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman.” KEMANUSIAAN: The Asian Journal of Humanities, vol. 29, no. 1, 2022, pp. 97–115. https://doi.org/10.21315/kajh2022.29.1.5.