

Marginalized Korean Female sex worker in the context of Korean *Minjung* and Feminist Theology¹

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Abstract

Minjung and feminist theology play an pivotal role in exploring the experiences of the exploited Korean women, and most significant tasks for us is to liberate power, which frees oppressed Korean women from the many layers of cruelty and it helps them to let go of Han. Therefore, its transformative power heals Korean women to wholeness and enables them to rejoice their lives with other oppressed folks.

• Keywords

Korean Female Sex Worker, Han, *Minjung*, Feminist Theology, Wholeness.

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I. Introduction

When I was in Nashville before I came to Drew University, I had a chance to watch one of the independent nonfiction films as a part of P. O. V. series, titled *The Women Outside*, broadcasted on the national public television (P.B.S) in 1996 to celebrate Asian cultural heritage month, actually to improve the public awareness of Asian American history and culture for a specifically assigned month. It was a documentary film about Korean women who had worked in the sex industry near U.S. military bases in South Korea and married to U.S. soldiers, going through indescribably harsh—I should say as such—life journeys for survival.

As soon as the narrator began to tell the stories, the film caught my attention, because it was about the lives of Korean women—surprisingly, the interviews were run mostly in Korean with English captions on the TV screen as they had been originally performed in the first place, and, more importantly, because it dealt with core experiences of the most oppressed people, Korean women in recent Korean history through the testimony of their sufferings. As I listened to their personal stories, I found myself trembling and weeping in silence with them. Since then, the film has remained as a vivid sequence in my memory. Among the several stories features in that film, two came to my mind: One is the story of a Korean woman, who is now married to an American G.I., trying to find a new life in America; the other is of a Korean single mother who is struggling for survival with her son born to an American father in the hostile environment of South Korean society. The first one will be the case for this paper.

I chose the film as the case for my paper, because I think the lives of those Korean women are one of the most devastating cases of marginalized people, raising all the critical issues of our time such as sex, gender, race, social justice, capitalism, and globalization. But the film rarely touched ethical or psychological issues, not to mention theological concerns for them. I used to see those sociopolitical issues from Marxist perspectives based upon my previous concerns in the Korean students' anti-dictatorship and anti-American movement in the 80's when I was a college student in Korea. For Christian students like me, Korean *Minjung* theology inspired by Latin America's Liberation Theology was one of the critical perspectives to engage in social criticism of South Korean capitalist society at that time. In this case study, I will discuss the experience of those Korean women in the context of double socio-cultural burden of the Korean society and the interracial marriage imposed upon them from the perspectives of Korean *Minjung* and feminist theology. Being critical of its theoretical indifference to the aspect of ethical and pastoral concerns that the case challenges us to explore, I will pay attention to how to articulate theologically the issues that it raises from the perspective of pastoral care, by focusing on the emotions and feelings in particular that an extremely marginalized woman has in her struggle for survival, doubled with the burdens of Korean culture and interracial marriage. Finally, I will situate myself as a Korean pastor who is willing to listen to the stories of those women, trying to empower them by his earnest efforts to give pastoral care with his critical understandings of Korean *Minjung* and feminist theology.

II. Description of the Case

The main characters in *The Women Outside*, a documentary film by J. T. Orinne Takagi and Hye Jung Park, are the women called bar women, hostesses, sex workers, or “western princesses.” They came from poor families, struggling to earn a decent wage, only to be forced into prostitution, or the world’s oldest profession. They are the women who work in the camp towns surrounding American military bases in South Korea. In forty years, over a million women have worked in Korea’s military sex industry, but their existence has never been officially acknowledged by either government. In *The Women Outside*, some of these women bravely speak about their lives for the first time. It took Takagi and Park months to persuade current and former sex workers to speak out. “It was difficult getting them to talk, and extraordinary that we were allowed to film their faces,” says Park.²

In addition to the main interviews with those Korean women, the film also features interviews with representatives of the women’s movement, Korean scholars, and U.S. Army personnel in South Korea. It charges that the Korean and American governments working together have allowed the camp town entertainment industry to flourish at the expense of countless Korean women. According to the film, priorities are heartbreakingly clear: all Korean prostitutes are forcibly checked every two weeks for venereal disease, and regularly for H.I.V.; the American soldiers are not. “If prostitutes and prostitution were really so natural, why does it require so many decision by military commanders, why does it require so many negotiations? Asks Cynthia

2 This testimony and the followings are from the interview with the main character in the Press Release of the documentary film.

Enloe, a professor of government at Clark University. Military prostitution, she maintains, “is not natural. It’s negotiated --- it’s got a long memo trail behind it as the fanciest weaponry.” For some, the consequences were deadly. Yoon, Kum Yi, a sex worker, was brutally murdered in October 1992 by Kenneth Markle, a U.S. military serviceman stationed at Camp Casey. When Korean women’s groups organized massive protests, Markle became the first American soldier ever tried in Korean criminal courts after several diplomatic negotiations between Korean and U.S. governments were pressured by those protests. He was given a life sentence—although it was later reduced to 15 years in prison. Covering such a symbolic case, the film thus asks provocative sociopolitical questions about military policy, economic survival, and the role of women in global geopolitics.

Challenging the audience seriously with very emotional scenes describing the harsh reality of the lives of those Korean women, the film focuses on several women, all of whom share a fierce determination to survive despite the discouraging odds. One of the film’s central characters is Yang Hyang Kim, who applied for a job in what she thought a coffee house, only to be sold to a brothel outside Camp Stanley. She tells her wrenching story on camera with remarkable candor. After her first sexual experience was in the brothel, “I felt like a dirty woman,” she recalls, wincing at the memory. She tried to commit suicide, but another woman stopped her. “Physically I am not a virgin,” she says softly. “But mentally I try to keep my pure heart.” When she finally escaped from the brothel, her family rejected her—shamed by her experience. Yang Hyang ended up returning to the camp towns. However, she is one of the lucky (?) ones. *The Women Outside* follows her deepening relationship with Todd, an American G.I., as they work

to accommodate their cultural differences. Eventually, they marry, and Todd is transferred to Hawaii, where Kim, now pregnant, begins the difficult process of adapting to life in America. She movingly concludes her story in trembling voice, “My hope is to see my baby...I want to educate myself more. So I can become independent. So I can get a better job so I can afford my baby, my son. And raise him proudly.”

III. Analysis of the Situation and its Emerging Issues

1. Cultural Analysis

In Korean society, women have been the most afflicted single group throughout the history under feudalistic Confucianism, foreign colonialism, authoritarian patriarchy, and exploitive capitalism. Under the restriction of this male-dominant society, Korean women have never been regarded as autonomous human beings but only as appendages to the male members of a family. The only identity a woman had was as someone’s daughter, wife, or mother, and she should live her life only through her father, husband, or son. Men have been legally and socially bestowed authorities with all rights in family affairs. Women have always had an inferior status to that of men, serving primarily as child-bearers and child-carers in the system.

In the last century, the status of Korean women has probably undergone more changes than of any other time before by the impact of western civilization on Korean society in accordance with their rapid modernization marked by industrialization and urbanization. These changes have helped break some of the patriarchal family system into

an enhanced status of women. Accordingly, socialization for women has been modified to accommodate the changing situation. Their socialization, however, proceeded on a dual-track course, that is, they were simultaneously socialized on two seemingly contradictory courses: (1) they were socialized in the traditional patterns in the face of many new, competing patterns, and (2) they were socialized in such emergent patterns as seemed to produce the attributes demanded by more desirable members of the modern society, although it was done in an ornamental fashion. Despite of some gains in their rights and status in recent decades, Korean women's social and economic activities and achievements are still seriously curtailed and consistently repressed by Korean society. The rising tide of violence in the family and sexual discrimination practices have become increasing pressures on alienated, vulnerable Korean women.³

The case of this paper also needs to be contextualized in terms of marriage between the Korean woman and the American soldier. Since the World War II, marriage between Asian women and American military men has become a legacy of the U.S. military presence in Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. The Korean War ended in 1953, but 37,000 American troops remain in South Korea to defend against possible invasion from the North in this, the most militarized zone in the world. Around each of the 99 bases and installations are camp towns filled with bars, clubs, brothels—and over 27,000 women. Like migrant laborers, they work long hours for a meager base pay of only ₩ 200,000 (\$ 250 U.S.) a month. The income barely covers food and rent; many become trapped in the camp towns as they struggle to pay off

3 Young I. Song, *Battered Women in Korean Immigrant Families: The Silent Scream* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 27.

their ever-growing debts. Some dream of marrying U.S. military men and getting a fresh start in America, drawn to the U.S. military uniform symbolizing economic power and affluence. But even for those who find American G.I. husbands, resettling in the United States usually means confronting racism, anti-immigrant sentiments, a new way of life ahead, and even ostracism from the Korean American community like that from their motherland society. The divorce rate for these Korean-American marriages is a staggering 80%.⁴

The historically dominant position of the United States in relation to South Korea is reflected in the relationship of those interracial couples. Whether this comes from racism or sexism, the relationship is often characterized by the combination of sexist expectations and cultural colonialism, a special form of racism. In many cases, the husband's superior and dominant position in such a couple's relationship is affirmed and reinforced. For a woman who comes to such a marriage with low socioeconomic status and low self-esteem, her dignity and identity are further diminished. Moreover, the arduous tasks of learning English and becoming acculturated to the American lifestyle are placed upon the wife, whereas the husband is almost exempted from learning his wife's language and culture. The couple's expectation that they will start a new life, and the dictates of Korean culture that the wife must adopt her husband's way, all add to the pressure on the wife to become Americanized. It means that her own heritage of language and culture is unworthy of her husband's attention and respect; it further supports and reinforces the unequal and unbalanced relationship.

4 The Press Release of *The Women Outside: Korean Step out of the shadows of U.S. Military Bases*, a film by J.T. Orinne Takagi and Hye Jung Park.

2. Psychological Analysis

Before illuminating the core experiences of the oppressed Korean women like the one in this case from a theological perspective, it is preliminary to explore the culturally bound feeling of their sufferings in Korean historical context. Korean feminist and *Minjung*⁵ theologians call it *Han*. *Han* is a particularly Korean term to describe the depths of their sufferings, but it is essentially untranslatable; even in Korean, its meaning is difficult to articulate. *Han* is, however, the most prevalent feeling among Korean people who have been violated throughout their history by the surrounding powerful countries. According to Chi Ha Kim, a *Minjung* poet, “*Han* is the *Minjung*’s angry and sad sentiment turned inward, hardened and stuck to their hearts. *Han* is caused as one’s outgoingness is blocked and pressed for an extended period time by external oppression and exploitation.”⁶ This feeling comes from a sense of impasse, an abysmal experience of pain. Often Korean people, especially the poor and women, have not had any access to public channels through which they can challenge the injustices done to them. They have long been silenced by physical and psychological intimidation and bodily violence by the oppressor. When there is no place where they can express their true selves, their true feelings, the oppressed become stuck inside. In other words, their angry and sad sentiment from social powerlessness is turned inward, hardened and stuck to their hearts, and thus from a kind of lump in their spirit. This

5 The *Minjung* are the people who have been politically oppressed, economically exploited, socially alienated, culturally despised, and religiously rejected. They are the people of *Han*.

6 Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 15; Quoted from Tong Hwan Moon, “Korean Minjung Theology,” unpublished paper, 1982.

lump often leads to a physical lump in their body.

Korean *Minjung* theologian Young Hak Hyun has explored the feeling of *Han* further:

Han is a sense of unresolved resentment against injustice suffered, a sense of hopelessness because of the overwhelming odds against, a feeling of total abandonment (“Why had Thou forsaken me?”), a feeling of acute pain and sorrow in one’s guts and bowels making the whole body writhe and wiggle, and an obstinate urge to take “revenge” and to right the wrong all these constitute.⁷

Korean feminist and *Minjung* theologians both agree that the oppressed Korean women’s core experiences in recent Korean history have been *Han*. Oppressed Korean women are the “*Minjung* of the *Minjung*” and the “*Han* of the *Han*.”

What emotions or feelings can be articulated from the main character in the film, who is not only culturally bound with the above description of Korean women’s *Han*, but also doubly burdened by the pressure of adapting herself to an interracial marriage and life in America? I think all the emotions and feelings that she can have are typically associated with the experiences of an extremely marginalized person from every corner of her dominant society: shame, humiliation, rejection, alienation, loneliness, nothingness, and a vision of new life. Before exploring these emotions and feelings, I will revisit the special situation of the main character in the film in terms of the transition of her socio-cultural *Sitz-im-Leben* from Korean to America.

7 Young Hak Hyun, “*Minjung*: The Suffering Servant and Hope,” a lecture given at James Memorial Chapel, Union Theological Seminary, New York(1982).

Because of the long history of Korean people's resistance to the invasion and persecution by foreign countries, a Korean woman married to a foreigner in particular carries the burden of cultural values that result in severe penalties of rejection and isolation for such an "out-marriage." Mere association with American military men brings instant stigma and shame for a young woman and her family. Marriage to such a man means that she can never live in her home country again with any degree of comfort and /or dignity. The only source of comfort for her maybe the circle of her friends who are also associating with other U.S. military men. In her dreaming of marriage to an American man and even after such a marriage, she is likely to have fantasy that her past problems, failures, and difficulties will be filed away and that she can start a new life along with a clean slate of marriage. She is likely to have the dream that marrying a person from a drastically different culture will ensure that the past can be protected from memory and scrutiny, and that earlier insults and deprivations will be magically resolved. Her spouse might have the same dream. In this sense, they seem to be unaware of the limitations of their marriage relationship.

When such a couple comes to the United States, hidden weakness in the marital bond and individual psychological vulnerabilities are revealed, and the outward appearance of their marriage may possibly dissolve. In particular, the wife is overwhelmed by the stress of immigration and the many aspects of acculturation. She must simultaneously deal with the loss of her support system and lifestyle while acquiring the new skills she needs to function in a foreign country with a vastly different culture and language. For a Korean wife with limited education, the everyday tasks of managing a home, child

care, possibly even working, which she could have done successfully in her home country, are rendered difficult or impossible by her limited proficiency in English and her inability to negotiate the systems governing American daily life. Further cultural differences coupled with the lack of supportive systems have profoundly negative implications for both her participation in the mainstream American life and her crisis management.

Yang Hyang Kim, the main character in the film, does not talk much about her life or material relationship with Todd, her American husband in America. So the above description of all the difficulties expected from such an interracial marriage could not apply to her case, but it is most likely to have happened to her marriage, and she is possibly struggling for survival right now, dealing with all the potential difficulties. What emotions and feelings does she have in this situation? Listening to the fragments of her whole story of *Han*, I think she is expressing her version of the depth of Korean women's *Han* accumulated from their sufferings of all kinds of marginalization and oppression in Korean society. If it can, this Korean woman's *Han* is analyzed into such emotions and feelings as shame, humiliation, rejection, alienation, loneliness, nothingness, yet also a vision of new life. She expressed her deep feeling of shame after her first experience, in bodily terms, "I felt like dirty woman," "Physically I am not a virgin."⁸ She must have felt that her dignity as a human being was humiliated by not just the American G.I. who exploited her body, but also the Korean people including her family who did not accept her as a daughter or a sister but rejected and alienated her as a dirty woman associating with a foreigner. Another emotion is her loneliness,

8 The Press Release of *The Women Outside*.

which comes from total alienation. Her experience of loneliness is the result of double alienation from the people. She is thus twice marginalized. She is in-between two worlds. To be in-between means to be lonely. With all of these devastating emotions and feelings, she finally confronts the nothingness of her life. Nothingness is an extreme form of the marginal experience. The experiences of shame, humiliation, rejection, alienation, and loneliness do not deny the existential reality of a marginalized life. But the experience of nothingness denies it. She must have reached the point in which all she could do was to extinguish herself, to become nothing, or to be pulled out of this world. She tried to commit suicide, but another woman stopped her. Eventually, she met an American military man, and they marry. Now being pregnant, she begins the difficult process of adapting herself to life in America. As she says, "My hope is to see my baby... I want to educate myself more. So I can become independent. So I can get a better job so I can afford my baby, my son. And raise him proudly," she shows her will to realize the vision of new life.⁹ Although the marriage provided her with an objective opportunity for her to realize the vision of new life, I believe, it was an actual expression of her long journey she had through a kind of leap of faith from nothingness to affirmation of her whole being as it is. In this experience of total conversion, her nothingness from a perspective of the center paradoxically becomes her fullness from a marginal perspective. She finds all in nothing that remained to her. She, as a marginalized person, can now affirm her place in the world, wherever she is. She finally uses the word "hope" for a new life in her testimony.¹⁰

9 The Press Release of *The Women Outside*.

10 I borrowed these emotional motifs from Jung Young Lee, a Korean American theologian: Jung

3. Theological Analysis

I have found Korean *Minjung* and feminist theology most illuminating in exploring the core experiences of the oppressed Korean women like the one in this case from a theological perspective, because they have emerged from oppressed Korean women's cries and screams, from the extreme sufferings in their everyday lives, responded to their burning desire for liberation and wholeness, and articulated the way to empower these oppressed victims to stand again as precious children of God.¹¹ The importance lies in their liberating power, which frees oppressed Korean women from the many layers of oppression. Its transforming power heals Korean women to wholeness and enables them to celebrate their lives with other oppressed people in their communities.

Focusing on the oppressed Korean women's core experiences in the form of *Han*, Korean feminist theologians have devoted much of their energy and time to rediscovering women's survival resources in their own tradition of dealing with *Han*. There are two modes of dealing with *Han*, expressed in traditional Korean songs, proverbs, folktales, dances, and myths. One is accepting it, and the other is rejecting it. The passive acceptance of *Han* can be defined as resignation. It is accepting suffering as their fate. The teaching of fate makes people think

Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 162-170.

11 Being critical of the male dominance of Korean *Minjung* theology, Chung makes a provocative claim that it is some Asian men, not Asian women, who have internalized Western colonization and learned how to despise their own people of color, especially women, by imitating the values of their white masters. However, there have been some constructive efforts to form bridges between *Minjung* theology and Korean feminist theology. Male *Minjung* theologians now feel deep solidarity with women's struggle in Korea, and thus agree that oppressed Korean women's core experiences exist in recent Korean history.

that what happens in their lives is something they deserve. Since their lives are predestined, nothing can be done to change things. The only option is accept the status quo and live out a dutiful life for the reward of better fate in the next life. Korean women expressed the sadness of their fate through their songs, stories, and dances. The passive acceptance of *Han*, however, is not the full story of Korean women's lives. They are also fighters who refuse to accept their *Han*-ridden lives. They are angry about their unjust situation and seek revenge and revolutionary change. Through their history Korean women have untangled their complex webs of *Han* through their survival wisdom. In the Korean tradition, the untangling of *Han* is called *han-pu-ri*. Gentle ways of *han-pu-ri* have been through songs, dances, and rituals; and militant ways of *han-pu-ri* have been developed by farmers, workers, slum dwellers, and women's organized political movements.¹²

In her analysis of Korean women's wisdom, Oo Chung lee, a Korean feminist New Testament scholar, identifies three precious motifs she calls "present-centered optimism," "the conviction in one's work," and "the love for neighbors." Lee finds Korean folklore, myth, and songs free of the heroic despair found in those of the West. Korean women believe that they will eventually win their victory in this world if they endure and fight together. It is this belief Lee calls present-centered optimism. She also emphasizes the joy of work and deep conviction in one's work as found in traditional Korean labor songs, which enabled Korean *Minjung* women to celebrate life in harmony with nature. For them nature is the ground of life and the breast of the Mother Nature; being in touch with and working with nature is both

12 Hyun Kyung Chung, *Structure To Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 42-43.

precious and joyful. Another important resource for women's survival is their love for neighbors. Lee contends that in Korean folklore and myth, Korean women overcome evil not by violence but by a wisdom based on love of neighbors.¹³

While recognizing the importance of militant ways of *han-pu-ri* for the liberation of oppressed women, I think the above motifs of Korean women's resistance of *Han* in gentle ways should and could be developed into a contextualized practical theology to explore the realistic approach to the case of oppressed Korean women like the one in the film. It is time for Korean feminist theologians to turn to the practical side of concern for many of those women who are still struggling for survival in their everyday lives in America as well as Korea. If the storytelling and listening to women's stories give Korean feminist theologians the inspirational source for revolutionary change in the militant form of organized political women's movement, they should dedicate the energy of that inspiration to take care of their everyday.

I think a narrative paradigm can provide a relevant practical orientation for Korean feminist theology to engage in care for those Korean women. In the book, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Andrew D. Lester suggests narrative theory as the paradigm that explains how our selfhood comes into being: when we construct our identity and understand the world in which we live, we are conscious of time past, time present, and time future. According to the paradigm, our identity

13 Chung, *Structure To Be the Sun Again*, 43-44; Quoted from Oo Chung Lee, "Korean Traditional Culture and Feminist Theology," in *The Task of Korean Feminist Theology* (Seoul: Korean Association of Women Theologians, 1993), 77. I think the motif of "present-centered optimism" can be translated as "hope for the future existence in this world" rather than literally as optimism in the temporal dimension of present.

is not only grounded in past stories that affect present stories; future stories also make a significant contribution to their identity. “Although it places appropriate emphasis on past and present dimensions of time-consciousness, narrative theory stresses that all core narratives focus significant energy on the future.”¹⁴ Lester thus suggests that the caregiver must attend to person’s future stories in order to fully understand and effectively take care of them. Since the future dimension of time-consciousness provides the content and the energy for hope, a minister who identifies the nurture of hope as a primary function of care must attend the future arena of human experience.

IV. Conclusion

I believe Korean *Minjung* and feminist theology play an important role in illuminating and exploring the core experiences of the exploited Korean women, and one of the significant tasks for us is to liberate power, which frees oppressed Korean women from the many layers of cruelty and it helps them to let go of *Han*. Accordingly, its transforming power heals Korean women to wholeness and enables them to rejoice their lives with other oppressed people.

14 Andrew D. Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 40.

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