# What Comes Next After the Subalterns Spoke?

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**Abstract**

This research questions how experiences and memories of the subalterns are spoken, reconstructed, and heard. The subalterns are those whose memories are scarcely ever spoken and whose voices are hardly heard because they are muffled by multilayered political, economic, and ideological frames. In this context, so-called "comfort women" were subalterns for about 50 years, whose voices could not be heard in Korean society. Since 1991, however, as the first public testimony of "comfort women" emerged and social efforts were made to listen their voices, their stories have been recorded and published in series of books. So, if subaltern voices are recorded and written, and multiple books recounting their stories are read, can we say that their voices are being fully heard? I analyze how the complicated and traumatic memories and voice of Kim Soon-ak, a "comfort woman" survivor, were reconstructed into articulate and sharable images and reflect on what is left unheard. I do this by reviewing the voice records of Kim Soon-ak's interviews, multiple edited versions of transcripts, and the published books and analyzing how the full life story and personal identities of Kim Soon-ak elude from the typical representations of "comfort women." This research is an attempt to find a way how to minimize the inequality of language by analyzing the process by which Korean society has been represented by a subaltern's memories.

## I. Introduction

### *The first outcry from silence*

Along with the first public testimony of a former "comfort woman" (Ianfu), Kim Hak-soon, who was systematically trafficked and victimized under the sexual slavery system of the Japanese military during World War II, the "comfort women" issue has been one of the fiercest battlefields of national memory-making. Yet it cannot be said that the issue had not been recognized in Korea or Japan before Kim Hak-soon's testimony. Before that first public testimony, under a South Korean nationalist narrative based on the

rumors of the colonial period, the "comfort women" had been simplified as pitiful girls of a helpless country who had lost their chastity to inhumane Japanese soldiers. On the other hand, the Japanese nationalist narrative rendered them invisible or depicted them as just like other Japanese victims such as student soldiers and young soldiers who had been mobilized by the Japanese military during wartime. Neither the "masculinist myth of [a] uniformly victimized Korea" nor the militarist myth of the sacrificed victim had a place for women within the multilayered structural inequality that existed (Yoshimi 1995, 5). In this context, the first appeal of a "comfort women' survivor was a significant incident not just because it shed more light on the issue of sexual assault in the war and colonial period, but because it enabled an individual voice, which could not be heard in the dominant history so far, to matter.

After the first public testimony of Kim Hak-soon in 1991, 78 stories of South Korean "comfort women" have been written and collected into books and their testimonies widely reproduced in research and as cultural content. Nonetheless, the question "Who is/were the comfort women?" still seems to be a disputatious issue on the battlefield of the collective memory of these women. Although there are written testimonies of former "comfort women" self-representing and identifying themselves, the selections or interpretations of their testimonies have crucially differentiated the images of "comfort women" into various types. Additionally, the gap between these distinctive representations was often pointed out as evidence of untruths that lowered the credibility of the women's stories, negating their suffering. For instance, while some Korean nationalist movies or museums dramatize the issue by illustrating the women as naïve Korean girls who were dragged off by violent Japanese soldiers, some negate the victimhood of "comfort women" by representing them as voluntary prostitutes or loyal subjects of the Japanese empire. It is not only the past of the former "comfort women" that is variously represented. Their present characteristics as survivors are also differentially represented as human rights activists, nationalists, or heroic sufferers.

Needless to say, the characteristics of the victims do not nullify the perpetuators' violence. Whether the former "comfort women" "voluntarily" went to the comfort stations or whether they were loyal to the Japanese Empire does not make any difference in the fact that there was a violation of human rights. Therefore, it is absurd to deny the victimhood of "comfort women" based on their characteristics. Nevertheless, in the battlefield of public memory, whether the representation of the victims truly shows victimhood is what always becomes the important dispute in any potential case of collective trauma, and this seems to not be exceptional in the case of the public memory of "comfort women" (Lim 2019).

As Yoshimi Yoshiaki (1995) reasonably argued, the problem of "comfort women" is "a grave violation of

human rights that combined sexual violence against women, racial discrimination, and discrimination against the impoverished." This implies that the battlefield of "comfort women" memory is under such multiple structural contexts as colonialism, militarism, nationalism, modernism, paternalism, and the like. In the center of these ideological layers is the existence of the "comfort women." Therefore, it seems crucial to continuously reflect on who the "comfort women" are nowadays, here, for us. After the abundant testimonies of the survivors, what have we heard and what haven't we? After the persistent hearings, interpretations, and representations of the "comfort women" following the first testimony of Kim Hak-soon, who have the "comfort women"' become to us?

***A single voice into the collective rumbling***

With these inquiries, I started to read the six collections of "comfort women" survivors' testimonies. Although there were a few variations in each series, each collection shared a format that serially described between 9 and 19 testimonies of different survivors. This seems inevitably derived from methodological and strategic considerations. To minimize the interviewer's interference in delivering the survivors' voices, the interviewers had to write down the voices as a group project and review one another's works. In addition, the memories of survivors could garner more attention and be better recounted as significant history if their voices were collected into an integrated shout of "comfort women" survivors. However, to a reader, a continuously prolonged series of repetitive shortened testimonies of different survivors hampered the full understanding of each survivor's life. When different voices of survivors are collected into a single book, cultural representations of the different survivors often seem to intertwine the different testimonies into a generalized story of a "comfort woman." Although a few documentaries or exhibitions have started to concentrate on a single survivor nowadays, movies and novels regarding the "comfort women" have usually extracted parts from different narratives and combined them into a single story. Of course, it is the multiple subsequent confessions of the survivors that empowered the first public testimony of Kim Hak-soon, and by the memories of individuals gathered together, as-yet unheard voices in the dominant history could be heard and the space to write down their stories in history could be opened up. Moreover, it is undeniable that the identical sufferings of different survivors have caused us to consider the individual pains of survivors as "collective trauma" and recognize the structural problems and systemic violence that led women from different backgrounds to similar painful life paths. Park applauded Kim Soom's novel *One Person* in which Kim stitched the different survivors' testimonies like a patchwork quilt to make a single narrative of the last survivor, and made the reasonable comment that "when one meets another, an individual truly become

‘individuals‘; when one individual becomes ‘individuals‘, memory becomes history” (Park 2018, 284). Nevertheless, I would like to insist that what is also required nowadays in Korean society is to restore the survivors to “a space of difference,” regarding them as heterogeneous and ideologically elusive group (Spivak 1999; Beverly 1999).

It has been 28 years since Kim Hak-soon‘s first testimony was heard, and many other survivors‘ stories are today recognized, written about, and sympathized with in Korean society. Although there are still a few extreme opponents of the “comfort women” issue who negate the very existence of “comfort women,” insisting that all of their testimonies are deceptive lies, it can be said that, at least in Korean society, “comfort women” are hardly unknown, because their voices are, albeit superficially, heard through diverse media. In this circumstance, the opponents are more likely to reject the importance of recording the “comfort women” issue as a significant part of history by highlighting the aspects of some survivors‘ experiences that seem far from victimhood or the typical representations of “comfort women” survivors. However, the group of “comfort women”‘ cannot be made up of identical individuals, and neither can the representation of them. What should come after enlarging the voices of the survivors by collecting their stories, I think, is to hear the details of each distinctive voice and bring concordance to the differences. Hence, in this article, I try to reflect on various representations of “comfort women.” Further, by focusing on the testimonies of a former “comfort woman,” Kim Soon-ak, I try to describe the experience and words of an individual who had to suffer from the trauma of being a “comfort woman” and show that the lives of survivors cannot be easily captured in the dominant representations or classifications. As a step forward from the diverse images that frame the survivors, I would like to argue that the group of “comfort women” survivors should be regarded as occupying a space of difference in which continuous criticism of the space of domination becomes possible.

## II. **“Comfort women” as *a space of difference***

In Korea, the public attention toward the “comfort women” issue was academically fruitful in that it criticized the previous writing of “History” with a capital “H” and prompted a discussion about the relationship between public history and private memory (Lee 2010). Especially since the first public voice of the former “comfort women” heard in about 50 years was regarded as an outcry that painstakingly broke out from the multiple barriers that had forced them to be silent, the term “subaltern” has started to be accepted as a suitable word with which to capture the voice and silence of the former “comfort women.” Subaltern, the term actively deployed by postcolonialist Indian historians, is used to criticize those other Indian historians

who tried to overcome the Orientalist viewpoint simply by overturning Europeanized codes and positioning Indian resistance as the active subject of modernization. According to Rahajit Guha, however, the subaltern group can be understood neither through the lens of nationalist identity nor with class consciousness; rather, historians should find the subjectivity of the subaltern in the cracks of the dominant history from where the subalterns' unique identity and worldview emerged, even though they belonged to an inferior rank and their voices were mostly muffled in the dominant discourses (Guha 1982; Kim 1999). In this context, the field of the "comfort women" issue became a space where the hitherto unheard story of the subaltern has started to be written in history (Yang 2001, 2006).

The first collection of the testimonies, *True Stories of Comfort Women* (Vol. 1), was published in 1993 with the purpose of serving as academic data that could complement or provide an alternative to the dominant history and also serve as "living proof" that could overcome the shortage of military documents. Therefore, when the survivors' voices are written into a collection as a book, the consistency of different survivors' narratives, their congruency with military documents, and the clarity of the survivors' memory were regarded as a demonstration of the way in which recording the self-illustrating stories of former "comfort women" can be another way of writing history. The preface of the book says the 19 stories of survivors among 70 interviewers were selected based on the criteria of clarity of memory and the comparability of their testimony with military or governmental documents. This implies that, in the first instance, the testimony of former "comfort women" has been treated as alternative historical data or evidence.

Nevertheless, as the testimonies were continuously collected, what were previously regarded as their limitations—that is, inconsistency, blurriness, incompleteness, and confusion of chronology—started to be viewed as genuine characteristics of oral history that should be preserved. As a result, unlike the first collection of testimonies, the second and third books of testimony tried to maintain the old words, dialect, or colloquial languages the survivor had used. Additionally, as an endeavor to include the circumstances at the time the survivors made oral statements and the ways they were edited into written formats, the interviewers started to put their own memoirs into the books also.

As a more radical attempt to transparently reflect the memory and self-representation of the survivors, the fourth to sixth collections of testimonies started to select and attach oral testimonies without rewriting them into a more understandable format. Moreover, to minimize the inequality of the power of knowledge between the interviewer versus the interviewee and oral statements versus written analysis, interviewers tried to fully record every nonverbal circumstance: hesitation, evasion of answering, physical symptoms,

emotional state, or the social situation the survivors relied on. As an interviewer from the fourth collection of testimonies, Kim (2013) defines her work as a turn "from questioning to listening" and argues it can be one answer to Spivak's famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?" According to Spivak (1999), the subaltern's voice is inherently unheard because it cannot be heard without any arbitrary interpretations and representations by the intellectuals. However, according to Kim, the first step toward making the subaltern's voice heard is to let survivors lead their narratives and transparently reveal what survivors said.

In that case, if interviewers reflect the survivors' voices without any distortion, can the subaltern's voice be fully heard? If people read the unedited transcripts of testimony or listen to what survivors present in front of the public, can we say "comfort women" survivors have fully spoken out and have now overcome their painful "subalternness"? Kim (2006) again points out that the experience of "comfort women" cannot be described without particular frames of understanding. Following Spivak's argument, she comments that the memory of "comfort women" is inevitably understood through a particular representation by intellectuals, even when it is based on survivors' own voices. Therefore, more crucial than an endeavor to clearly convey the self-representation of "comfort women" is the effort to achieve "empathetic listeners" who try to perceive "comfort women" based on the women's backgrounds and understand them against violent frames that remain in place and have disabled the subaltern's ability to speak (Kim, 2006). She criticizes the fact that our society is still in a position of passive listeners, who rely on the survivors' self-illustration. Therefore, she requests an "empathic listening public" to enlarge the network of meaning, overcome the oppressive representational frames, and stop requiring from survivors painful repetition of giving speech about their traumatic memory.

As a reply to Kim's request, I would like to show one way to empathetically reread the voice of a former "comfort woman," and thereby break the ideological frames that have cut out some of the survivors' voices and that have exploitatively represented them. Unlike previous research that focused on drawing a "collective picture" of former "comfort women" and revealing ideological barriers that disabled survivors' power to speak of their painful experiences (Lee 1997; Sim 2000; Yang 2006, 2001), this research attempts to draw a detailed painting of a "single" survivor, Kim Soon-ak, and digs up what we could not hear in the collective voices of former "comfort women." By doing so, I hope the current aporia, in which different representations of the "comfort women" conflict with each other and some testimonies are consumptively deployed to deny other representations, are overcome. In the center of this aporia is ignorance of the conception that a group of "comfort women" exists in a "space of difference." For understanding the

unique subjectivity of the subaltern, the few categories that have been used to define subjects of dominant history cannot be enough of a tool.

## III. Public Testimonies of Kim Soon-ak

### *A courageous speaker or a sacrifice of trauma?*

After the "comfort women" survivors made testimonies and insisted that they are indisputable evidence of the war crimes of the Japanese Empire, the representations of the survivors who publicly reveal themselves to the world as older women became another fierce battlefield of memory. Many films represent them as human rights activists who courageously reveal their pain to society, speak about their stories of trauma, and endure or overcome the pain through community support of their will to realize justice. On the other hand, there are some concerns about the pain of making testimonies and criticisms about the social movement's dependency on the survivors. Under these concerns, the survivors of sexual slavery are represented as traumatic victims who are unable to speak for themselves. How could they give testimonies? How have the survivors been living after their public revelations? The case of Kim Soon-ak shows that the testimonies are revealed from the pendulum between silence and words.

### *Tension in between silence and words*

Kim Soon-ak, born in 1928, officially registered as a "comfort woman" victim in 2001 when she was 74. In 2004, her story was written and collected into the sixth and last collection of testimonies, and her biography was reorganized and published into a book, No one knows my heart. Things started when the other well-known "comfort woman" Hun halmuni (a familial term of address applied to elderly women in Korean) from China moved into her apartment building. Kim reported that "until that time I had spent my life mentally hiding." With tears, Kim remembered that she "did not know how to write nor where to talk, and thought it's what should not be talked about ... so even though I tried hard to talk, I couldn't." However, when she saw Hun halmuni publicly talking about her experience and appearing on TV, her mind was "overwhelmed." About that time, her son anonymously reported her experience of being a "comfort woman" to the Daegu Citizens' Forum for Halmuni, and when an activist of the organization, Lee Jung-Sun, frequently visited her, she started to speak.

At a glance, a survivor's testimony seems to naturally pour out when the social circumstances to talk are

prepared. However, Kim‘s testimony shows that it comes out from the tension between the unstoppable desire to speak and the resignation to stay silent. The following statements reveal that while Kim desires to talk about the experience, there has always been hesitation and pessimism in sharing the memory:

*Anyhow, whether I am compensated or not, whether I die tomorrow or the day after, I just want to find, reveal and throw away everything inside me.*

*When someone puts a microphone in front of me, things get dark, and I feel like I know nothing. ... What is inside myself?* [pointing her chest] *This people* [residents of her apartment complex] *do not know anything. ... No one knows my heart.*

Unlike the other survivors, Kim proudly hung in her house the governmental document that proves her to be a “comfort woman” survivor and who, without hesitation, revealed herself to the world as a “comfort women” survivor. Nevertheless, there seems to be always some hesitation and reluctance to talk. The testimony seems not to be poured out from a sudden social receptivity to her story nor from the desire of a heroic individual who willingly confesses her suffering in a drive to realize justice. Although Kim was firmly determined to disclose her painful memories, her statement that “it is a blemish on the Korean people” implies that the obstacles that have been disabling her power to talk still remain in Korean society. In between this reluctance and openness is Kim Soon-ak‘s testimony.

***Words of the subaltern***

What was revealed after the prolonged silence was the entangled memories of a person. Far from the well-organized dominant history, Kim‘s words were chronologically muddled and seemingly insignificant experiences were emphasized. Her words show that the subaltern‘s words are slides from ideological, chronological and spatial frames. In some part, this is derived from the fact that she kept her story to herself in silence for a long time.

*Using my body, I could make money. A few years after that, the Korean War happened. I did not know what the red commie was or what the other was. Everything got out of order and Seoul was messed up. Whether I lived somehow okay, whether did I live alone or not, when I got old, or what was I like whenever it was, nobody knew. I never told my parents that I had been dragged to a place like that, no one in my village even knew...*

In the words of Kim Soon-ak, the memory of her war experience was mixed up with the memory of her ignorant neighbors. The spaces of memory are confused between Seoul and her hometown. The suffering coming from her belief that she should have stayed silent seems to be piled up on the memory of other experiences. Moreover, being illiterate, Kim seems to experience and understand the world without words, and remember what she has been experienced without any written records.

*I didn't know how to read, so I couldn't tell what it was. Nevertheless, I saw with my own eyes and I heard with my own ears and felt with my own body. That is how I know the world.*

Kim has been so isolated from the power of knowledge that she could not read the platform name or the documents that informed her of where was she drafted to and why, nor could she acknowledge the structures that kept her life dragged down. However, this does not mean that she has been unaware of history. With her "own body," she understood the world and struggled to live in her way.

## IV. Identities of Kim Soon-ak

### *Imaginations of nation-states*

The representations of "comfort women" become a more sensitive issue as they are intertwined with how Korean and Japanese societies remember the colonial period. Since the public testimonies were made, Korean society started to integrate the "comfort women" story into the national narrative by representing them as innocent victims who wear hanbok, the traditional Korean dress, and had the will to resist the Japanese Empire. In the permanent exhibition at the Independence Hall of Korea, the story of "comfort women" is positioned right after Empress Myeongseung, who was assassinated by a Japanese agent. How, then, are "comfort women" represented in Japanese national narratives? Although most nationalistic narratives of Japan are oblivious of the story of "comfort women," in their representations, they are positioned with other war victims of the Japanese Empire, such as the student soldiers or conscripted workers, and depicted as second citizens of the Japanese Empire who possessed Japanese identities and dedicated themselves to the Japanese Empire. A picture of the *karayuki-san*, the Japanese women in the late 19th century who were trafficked abroad as prostitutes, is often deployed by right-wing Japanese, which points to the patriarchal prostitution system the Japanese society possessed but erases the unique colonial situation faced by the "comfort women." The "comfort women" survivors undoubtedly identify as Korean. However, how they identified themselves in the colonial country of the past is ambiguous, resulting in

conflicts between nationalistic narratives. Concerning Kim Soon-ak's testimonies, it seems clear that the national identity of a colonial country cannot be simplified to the national imagination of modern nation-states. Especially for Kim, as a woman in an impoverished, socially isolated situation, national identities seem to be what Kim should select and hide under to survive and return to her hometown rather than evoking patriotic emotions.

***Colonial identity and the position of intersectional minority***

Like mentioned above, the images of "comfort women" are often covered with a national identity and included in the national narrative. However, neither the "Korean identity" nor the "Japanese identity" seems to capture the identity of Kim Soon-ak. Although it is hard to speculate, the identity of a woman of Chosun during the Japanese colonial dynasty seems to slip from the frame of national identity. According to the testimony, the clothes that Kim Soon-Ak was required to wear were frequently changed and, at a glance, it seems to imply Kim Soon-Ak's identity kept changing according to the circumstances. However, a deep reading of her testimony shows that any clothes that superficially symbolized her national identity never reflected her own self-identity. When Kim left her hometown, she used to wear hanbok (traditional Korean clothes). However, after she arrived at the comfort station, she seemed to wear Japanese clothes without any repulsion:

*When I worked* [as a "comfort woman"], *I used to wear geta* [Japanese wooden clogs] *and walked cheerfully.*

However, after the defeat of Japanese imperialism, she was again required to wear hanbok by the army for the Korean national independence movement, which tried to bring their people back to the Korean peninsula from China. Kim seemed to willingly wear hanbok to show her national identity and survive. According to her testimony, she was somehow proud of the fact that she could make hanbok, including the cruel fact that Japanese women who could not make Korean clothes were killed.

*They made a speech that we need to dump anything Japanese-related: photographs with Japanese people, the photographs of oneself wearing Japanese clothes, and Japanese clothes. I did not know where my Korean clothes were. The clothes that we first wore when we were drafted was gone. We had been wearing Japanese attire. However, we tore off the Japanese attire and made Korean attire. Because we are women, we were able to make clothes. ... The Japanese women, of course, couldn't. So they were killed by Chinese people. Even the civilians were killed if they were wearing Japanese attire.*

Given these findings, had she identified herself as "a nationalist girl who has been longing for the independence of Chosun," as the Korean nationalist narrative describes? Looking into her words about independence, Kim's experience of independence was rather different from what the Korean national narrative illustrates:

*Even it was called emancipation, it was more like expulsion for me. We and the Japanese were more likely to be kicked out by Chinese people in a rush.*

For Kim, the experience of independence was not regarded as the experience of freedom. Rather, remembering how cruelly Japanese people were killed, she vividly remembers that whether Japanese or Koreans, soldiers or civilians, people helped each other to make it onto a small train and escape:

*Everyone should have been on that train. Even animals—if they were mine or they are my family, we would want to take them with us. Wouldn't we?*

According to another part of her testimony about the experience of homecoming after the independence of Korea, when facing the national flag, Kim's heart seemed to be full with feeling.

However, what was felt by an impoverished woman who had been drafted for a comfort station at a young age seemed to be something other than patriotism:

*At that moment, they hung the national flag of Korea. Since I lived in a rural area, I had never seen the flag. But, I remembered that I had seen the same pattern in a rich family's house. I did not know if it was called the Korean national flag, but I remembered that I had once seen it in the past. The pattern of the national flag attracted my eyes. I remembered that I saw that pattern in my country... it made me cry.*

The woman who had lived in a rural area in colonial Chosun had never seen the national flag, and it might have been impossible for her to understand the national history it symbolized. So what made her cry facing the national flag? Another piece of her testimony brings a hint that what she associated it with is more likely her hometown than the nation:

*When someone asked me for my house and my hometown, I didn't know if he/she just wanted to recheck my documents, but when owners or officers asked ... I said my address: Kyong-san Gun Nam-chon Myon Gum-gok Village. I automatically recited orally. I still can recite it, I still know it with my mouth, not as letters.*

Kim had been required to change her clothes by others according to the social circumstances, and she has been required to identify herself as a second-class citizen of the Japanese empire or as a member of a nationalist Korean society desiring independence. Nevertheless, neither the rubber shoes which she used to wear in her hometown and had lost on the way when she was drafted to the comfort station nor the geta she wore when she was a "comfort woman" were footwear options on her return journey to her hometown.

*I bought a pair of shoes to wear when I arrived home* [smile]. *And they were too valuable for me to wear on the way home, so I put them in the small bag and walked barefoot all the way home. Even when my feet bled, I refused to wear the shoes. I lost the rubber shoes that I used to wear when I left home and I was not supposed to wear geta* [Japanese wooden sandals]. *What could I wear?*

In between the identities requested of her, there was nothing she could wear on the way home. However, she held a pair of shoes that she bought by herself, dreaming of a new life. What would the new pair of shoes mean?

## V. Victimhood of Kim Soon-ak

### *Apolitical girl or loyal citizen?*

Again, it is not necessary to mention that whether "comfort women" voluntarily went to the comfort station or were forcefully dragged there does not negate the fact that there was structural violence, and the survivors were victims. Nevertheless, the other contentious dispute regarding the "comfort women" is whether they are innocent victims who painfully lost their virginity to Japanese soldiers, or prostitutes who willingly sold sex for money.

### *Complicated context of being a victim*

Nevertheless, both ideological representations judging a woman who had become a "comfort woman" seem to fail at capturing the life of Kim Soon-Ak. Drafted as a "comfort woman" at age 16 by fraud, she seems to have been too young to understand what she had experienced.

*The owner of the comfort station fed me and there were no parents to scold me, so I just acted up in an unruly manner. I had no idea what was happening to me. When they demanded I do arduous work or wash, I just accepted it. ...Vaguely, there was a feeling that I became like this without even being able to get*

*married. ... but I did not know I should be ashamed of it. I was joyous and the other people of the comfort station liked it.*

Further, it seems that she did not have the desire to accumulate money nor a chance to spend it. As a young girl from a rural area in a colonial country, Kim was positioned on the bottom rung of the system of the comfort station.

*When the owner showed us the account book and said, "You spent this much, and you spent that much," I did not care about it. ... We were never paid and we were never had a chance to spend money. ... I just wanted to eat rice cakes, so I secretly bought some and was caught by the owner. That is all there is to say about money. At that time, we did not know about money.*

Far from the typical representations of the experience of the comfort station, in which "comfort women" endlessly endured the everyday sufferings of assault by soldiers, the real pain of Kim seems more complicated than the temporal and substantial pain of being assaulted in a comfort station. Since she accepted and obeyed what the system of the comfort station mandated her to do and she did not collapse with misery, her life as a "comfort woman" was not described only with pain. Nevertheless, the memory of being a sexual victim reconstructed the rest of her life in the context of the norms of chastity. Even after she came back to Korea, her memory of the comfort station became an important factor that determined the aftermath, according to the following testimony:

*After I came back to Korea, one thing was carved in my mind—that I am not a fresh woman with my virginity anymore.*

Another point that I would like to emphasize is that the victimhood of self is not constructed instantly when the violence is conducted. Rather, it is the overlapping later experiences that expand the victimhood and make one identify oneself as a victim. Interestingly, for Kim Soon-ak, it is the experience of being closer to an assailant in the mechanism of prostitution that enabled her to understand the systemic violence and identify herself as a victim. By illustrating the time when she had operated a brothel for the US army by herself, Kim recalled that that was the time she realized what she had experienced in the past:

*After I came back to Korea, I finally understood. Observing the YangSekSi* [a denigrating word indicating prostitutes for Americans] *mobilized from Busan or elsewhere, I realized. As I lived in Dongduchun* [a town

where U.S army base and brothels used to be located] *and I demanded an employment agency to bring a prostitute, I realized that I had been sold from here to there in ignorance like them. Those women said they owed debts of about a million won because they had to spend much money to get to this brothel. I would be the same, I continuously realized."*

Kim Soon-ak is far from what patriarchal views represent as a pure victim, in that she became a prostitute after she came back to Korea and even became a perpetrator who brought impoverished women to the sex industry and did not regret what she did. Nevertheless, this does not mean her experience should be reframed into perpetrator or prostitute. Kim's traumatic experience at a comfort station at a young age stigmatized and restricted what she could do for a living, which led her to "voluntarily" become a prostitute even after emancipation from the comfort station. Moreover, ironically, it was the experience of being a brothel operator that enabled Kim to fully understand the system of prostitution and give her testimony, recognizing who and what victimized her. Therefore, instead of morally glorifying or condemning someone's life, to truly understand Kim Soon-ak's life, it seems necessary to have a new analytic viewpoint from which to truly understand a woman who has struggled and maintained her unique subjectivity in repressive circumstances.

**VI. Conclusion**

"Comfort women" were kept in silence for 50 years. However, since the first testimony and the subsequent endeavors of activists and researchers, survivors have overcome the oppressive barriers that had muffled them and finally started to talk. So, what comes next after the subaltern spoke? It has been about 30 years since the former "comfort women" started to publicly talk, and how to interpret and represent these women has become a more complicated problem. Although the subaltern has started to talk, the frames that used to block them from speaking remain, and what they have spoken keeps getting reframed in diverse ways. Given that reframing, how can we truly understand what "comfort women" have said? How can we understand the experience of an impoverished woman of a rural area in a colonial country and a woman who is stigmatized as one who lost her chastity? The nationalistic frame, the patriarchal frame, or the frame of victim/perpetrator seem not to be a proper tool with which to truly understand what they have experienced. To ensure that subalterns to not remain as subalterns even after they speak, continuous reflection on ways to understand their subjectivity, without relying on the persistent frames from which their beings slide, is required.

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