The Handmaidens’ Plight: An Investigation of Survivor Ideologies of Marginalized Asian Women

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Abstract. Despite the traumatic ordeals experienced by marginalized Asian women, many have emerged triumphant despite inconceivable odds to proclaim their tragic narratives. Such desperate struggles beg the question: “What sustainable ideologies helped them to transcend their perpetrators’ inhumane treatment?” This study investigates the oppressive experiences of a concubine, a comfort woman, and a woman warrior. This two-fold investigation of oppressive systems and women survivor ideologies employs three methodologies: the socio-historical, to understand repressive systems, the psychoanalytical, to assess psychological trauma, lastly, the autobiographical, to explore evolving identities. The investigation reveals the concubine’s accomplishments, the comfort woman’s inter-subjectivity, and the woman warrior’s selfhood. The study implicates societies’ collusion and perpetuation of hegemonic/monolithic ideologies. However, modern-day cousins continue to perpetuate women’s subjugation.

1. Introduction
Asian women especially those who lived before the 21st century could not dream of liberties commonly enjoyed by contemporary American women. Despite their trials and suffering, these Asian women overcame their struggles to claim their dignity, their sanity and their selfhood. Their ancient narratives resonate even today just as the tragedies of slavery inform present-day American sensibilities. It behooves modern society to glean wisdom from past repressions to avoid replication of their unfortunate histories.

2. Investigation
This study investigates the nature of women oppression represented by three respective Asian protagonists, and their corresponding narratives: Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s concubine, in This Earth of Mankind, Nora Okja Keller’s sex slave in Comfort Woman, and Maxine Hong Kingston’s depreciated daughter in The Woman Warrior. Two factors inform this investigation: oppressive systems and women’s survivor ideologies. The following methodologies are undertaken: the socio-historical method to understand repressive systems, the psychoanalytical process to assess psychological trauma, and the autobiographical approach to explore evolving cultural identities.

3. Findings
The study implicates societies’ collusion and perpetuation of hegemonic and/or monolithic ideologies. The investigation reveals survivor ideologies of the concubine’s accomplishments, the comfort woman’s inter-subjectivity, and the woman warrior’s selfhood. As anachronistic as oppressive systems may be deemed in the 21st century, modern cousins of oppression such as pornography, illiteracy, and abject poverty continue to marginalize women today.

[1] The story of Nyai Ontosoroh, the handmaiden-concubine of this narrative took place on the island of Java, Indonesia, in the throes of Dutch colonialism. The Dutch colonists not only colonized the islands’ residents, but procured native women as concubines. Ontosoroh’s procurement subsequently caused her rejection by her own traditional society, as well as her disenfranchisement by the same racist colonizers who abused her.

- What larger implication does Toer’s concubine protagonist invoke by her rebellion against her colonial Dutch masters?
  Through her rebellion against her Dutch masters, the concubine exposes the machination of Dutch patriarchy.

- How is patriarchy implicated of oppression?
Patriarchy is implicated of oppression through their systemic execution of a rigid caste system that determined language, categorized racial classes, and legalized social codes affecting legitimacy and representation.

- Do native men abet the sexual exchange of their women as part of their trading transactions?
  Native men were complicit in coercing their own countrywomen to consort with Dutch men and foreigners visiting the region.

- What survivor ideology sustained the protagonist?
The concubine’s resolute ambition drives her to confront and overcome illiteracy, poverty, and gender subjugation, to be educated, to be a successful entrepreneur, and to speak out against her abusers.
[2] In Japanese-occupied Korea, during WWII, the racist Japanese Imperial Army (JIA) incarcerated young Korean virgins such as Soon Hyo (Akiko) to be “comfort women,” in “comfort stations” where they are raped several times a day. The women contracted venereal diseases, sustained unwanted pregnancies, underwent abortions, and traumatized into insanity. In addition, Korean women’s subjugation was facilitated by their own sexist Confucian culture.

- How did Keller’s sex-slave protagonist’s “madness” help her cope with the post-trauma of her abuse? The soldiers’ bestiality reduces her into a sexualized object, strips her of her humanity, and plunges her into insanity. However, her “madness” sought expression in shamanism through her ability to consort with spirits, empowering her to wield supernatural power over others.

- How is Japanese patriarchy implicated in engendering her psychological displacement and dissolution? Since the Meiji Imperial era, the emperor institutionalized military sexual slavery where a woman’s ability to produce future soldiers was exploited. When Japan invaded Korea, the JIA perpetuated the patriarchal institution of military brothels, disregarding the toll on Korean women’s damaged physique and psyche.

- Did her own sexist cultural ideology facilitate her enslavement? The predominant Confucian ideology in Korea at the time subordinated women through societal imposed notions of feminine chastity and morality, making women subservient to their fathers, husbands and sons. Soon Hyo’s servility facilitates her enslavement.

- What is her survivor ideology? Her ability to consort with spirits as a shaman helps her become financially independent, while motherhood fosters her inter-subjectivity, restoring her humanity.

[3] Despite their immigration to America, Chinese immigrants in the 1940s continued to promote Chinese sexist, patriarchal mores and traditional customs that devalue the cultural and emotional worth of their wives and daughters, subduing their voices and subjugating their wills.

- Why is the The Woman Warrior’s defiance of ancient Chinese ideology significant in the subjective psyche of a woman’s self-representation? Ancient Chinese ideology relegates a woman to a subservient role. The defiance of such a traditional ideology transforms the psyche of a woman’s self-representation empowering her to mediate opposing claims and appropriate new overtures for selfhood.

- How did her memoirs help her achieve selfhood? By using multiple dialogic voices of enquiry, subversion, and transformation in her memoirs, Kingston informs her liberating evolution in the face of a sexist and oppressive ancestral canon.

- What informs her survivor ideology? She defiantly employs the misprision of the Chinese folk tale of “Hua Mulan” to wrestle selfhood, and inscribes a liberated, hybridized identity as a Chinese-American in the New World.

4. Conclusion
Clearly, these intersections of racism and sexism illuminate the oppression of Asian women. Dominant ideologies create a climate of fear and subjugation, and thrive on society’s systemic collusion and perpetuation. Therefore, these women’s anti-establishment ideologies become crucial in their ability to empower society with cognizance and boldness to frustrate the machinations of tyrants.

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References
