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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, and 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 with and perpetuation of hegemonic/monolithic ideologies. Modern-day oppression cousins continue to perpetuate women's subjugation.

Problem/Issue

Today's American woman is bestowed with personal and civil liberties by their nation. However, Asian women especially those who lived before the 21st century could not even dream of privileges 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. The directives from their narratives bear currency that is legal tender even in today's ideological markets just as the lessons of ancient slavery inform present-day American sensibilities. It behooves us to glean the kernels of their wisdom to avoid the duplication of their unfortunate histories. Nevertheless, antiquated oppressions have devolved into sinister modern day cousins that continue to perpetuate women's subjugation.

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:

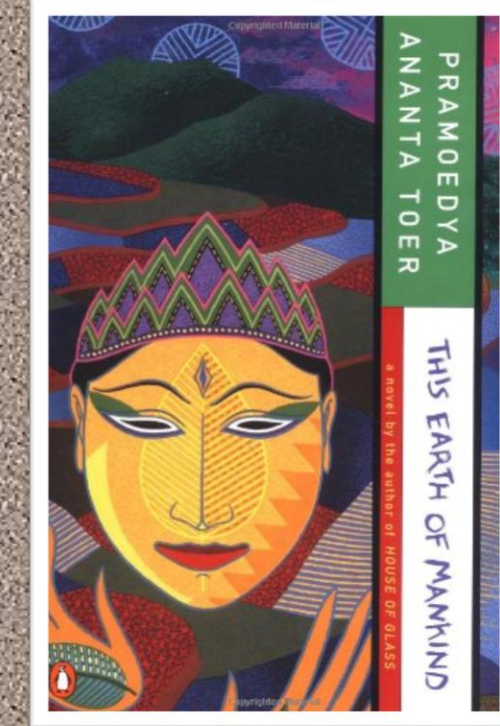
- > the socio-historical method is employed to understand repressive systems;
- > the psychoanalytical process is applied to assess psychological trauma; and
- > the autobiographical approach is used to explore evolving cultural identities.

The investigation reveals "survivor ideologies" of 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 and/or monolithic ideologies. As anachronistic as oppressive systems may be deemed in the 21st century, yet modern cousins of oppression such as pornography, illiteracy, and abject poverty continue to subjugate and marginalize all women.

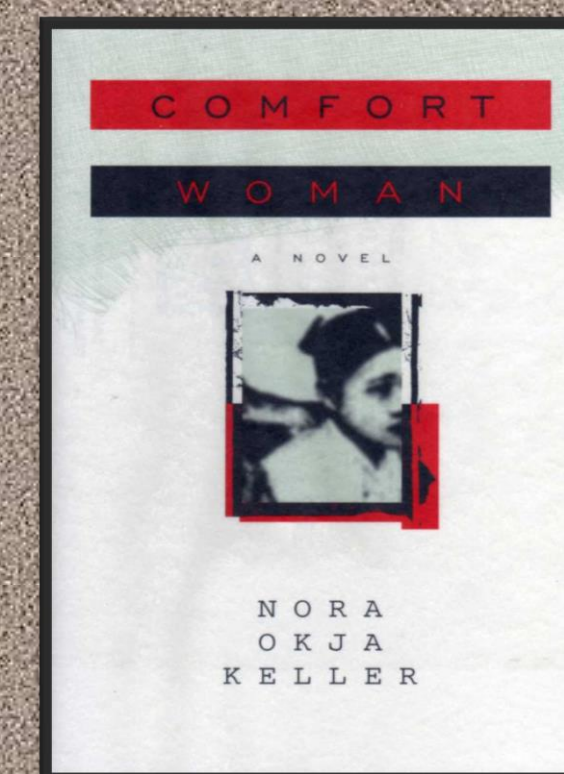
SYNOPSIS



[1] Toer, Pramoedya A. *This Earth of Mankind*. New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1975. Print.

The story of Nyai Ontosoroh, deals with her acquisition by a Dutchman to be his concubine. Such a procurement subsequently caused her rejection by her own sexist society, as well as her disenfranchisement by the same racist colonizers that abused them. Native men seem to be complicit in subjugating their own countrywomen.

- What larger implication does Toer's "nyai" invoke by her rebellion against both her colonial Dutch masters, as well as her own native countrymen?
- How is patriarchy implicated in Dutch colonialism?
- Do native men abet the sexual exchange of their women as part of their trading transactions?
- What survivor ideology sustained the protagonist?

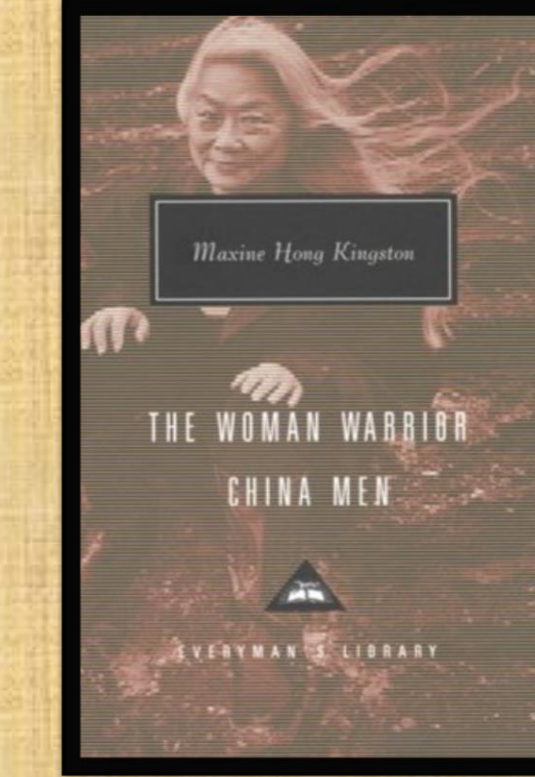


[2] Keller, Nora O. *Comfort Woman*. New York: Penguin Books, 1997. Print.

In Japanese-occupied Korea, during World War II, the racist Japanese Imperial Army took young Korean virgins such as Soon Hyo (Akiko) to be "comfort women." These incarcerated women became sex slaves and were raped several times a day in "comfort stations" designed for the benefit of Japanese soldiers.

- How did hSoon Hyo's madness" help her cope with the post-trauma of her abuse?
- How is Japanese patriarchy implicated in engendering her psychological displacement and dissolution?
- Did her own sexist cultural ideology facilitate her enslavement?
- What is her survivor ideology?

[3] Hong Kingston, Maxine. *The Woman Warrior, China Men*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975. Print.



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. The Chinese immigrants may have left China, but they continued to perpetuate their chauvinistic way of life.

- Why is the *Woman Warrior's* defiance of ancient and traditional Chinese ideology significant in the subjective psyche of a woman's self-representation?
- How did her memoirs help her achieve selfhood?
- What informs her survivor ideology?

Conclusions

Clearly, these intersections of racism and sexism illuminate the oppression of Asian women from Indonesia, Korea, and China. Monolithic, dominant ideologies create a climate of fear and subjugation, endemic to the existing populace at the time. However, the path to such clear identification is often fraught with uncertain outcomes as repressive ideologies thrive on society's collusion and perpetuation. Therefore, whenever women succeed in confronting overbearing ideologies that shackle and demean them, oppressors and abusers are exposed revealing their surreptitious agenda of subjugation. By exploring these anti-establishment ideologies of these women, society becomes keenly cognizant and better prepared to thwart the machinations of the next ideological tyrant.

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References

- [1] Toer, Pramoedya A. *This Earth of Mankind*. New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1975. Print.
[2] Keller, Nora O. *Comfort Woman*. New York: Penguin Books, 1997. Print.
[3] Hong Kingston, Maxine. *The Woman Warrior, China Men*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975. Print.



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