

THE KOREAN GIRL DURING THE JAPANESE OCCUPATIONDOI: [10.56177/AUA.PHILOLOGICA.3.26.2025.art.8](https://doi.org/10.56177/AUA.PHILOLOGICA.3.26.2025.art.8)

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Abstract: *Although the Republic of Korea is an economic power at present, in the recent past, it has faced the trauma of Japanese colonization, the division of the peninsula, and the brutal war between North and South Korea. The Japanese occupation has become a cultural focal point since the 1990's for many Korean authors, such as Pak Wan-suh, Kim Soom, and Keum Suk Gendry-Kim, as well as Korean American writers, such as Nora Okja Keller and Mary Lynn Bracht. The research aims to examine the lesser-known experiences of Korean girls during this period in time. The paper will analyze novels that depict the lives of girls who remained on the Korean peninsula, through the works of Linda Sue Park and Sook Nyul Choi, as well as works that portray the trauma of girls sent to "comfort stations" in Manchuria and other parts of the Japanese Empire, as seen in the writings of Chang-rae Lee and Therese Park. By shedding light on these overlooked narratives, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex legacies of occupation.*

Keywords: Korean American literature; Comfort Woman; Korean Trauma; Japanese Empire; Discrimination

1. Historical introduction

While Japan embraced modernization and Westernization following the forced opening of the country by American diplomatic missions between 1852–1853 and 1854–1855, collectively known as the Perry Expedition, Korea remained a traditionally closed society, ultimately becoming a victim of its newly-empowered and awakened neighbor, the Japanese Empire. By 1905, the Japanese Empire had managed to defeat both the Chinese and Russian Empires, which led to the incorporation of Taiwan and southern part of the island of Sakhalin into the Japanese Empire, and the recognition of Japanese hegemony over the Korean peninsula. Moreover, after the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), on 17th November 1905, the Korean state had to sign the Japan-Korean Treaty, transforming the peninsular state into a protectorate of Japan, and ceding its right to represent itself externally. Prince Itō Hirobumi was appointed as Japanese Resident-General, in effect the administrative power that controlled the Korean state.

Prince Itō Hirobumi was assassinated on 26 October 1909 by An Jung-geun, a Korean independence activist. Consequently, on 22 August 1910, Japan forced the Korean officials to sign the Japan-Korean Treaty, through which the Japanese Empire annexed the Korean Empire¹. After the annexation, all Korean organizations were forced to disband, the Japanese military police took over the

¹ Peterson Mark, *A Brief History of Korea*, New York, Facts On File, 2009, p. 140.

task of protecting civilians, the newspapers published in Korean had to close their businesses, some private schools were shut down, all Korean textbooks were censored and Japanese officials conducted a property survey, which led to the seizure of a vast portion of the peninsula by the colonizers, as most of the land had belonged to the kingdom rather than individual owners².

On 1st March 1919, Korean frustration against the Japanese military occupation was at a breaking point and over 2 million Koreans participated in protests throughout the Korean peninsula. The protests began in Seoul, with the reading of a Korean Declaration of Independence signed by a group of 33 Korean representatives that same day, during the funeral procession of King Gojong. The protests expanded to 227 other places, but the Japanese military forces brutally repressed them. Thousands of Koreans were killed or injured, and thousands more were arrested³.

After the March protests, the Japanese colonial authorities had realized that the brutal enforcement of their rule was counterproductive. Thenceforth, the Koreans were allowed “to pursue social, economic, and cultural activities more freely”⁴. Moreover, the “[w]age scales of Korean bureaucrats were readjusted, [the] police reorganized, the gendarmerie system was abolished”⁵, while the “colonial state [...] [continued the] extension of communication and transportation networks, [...] [which] spurred further urbanization and the concentration of wealth, development, and influence in [...] growing population centers”⁶. As the Japanese gave some measure of freedom of expression, Korean cities became an important pole of development. Naturally, Korean girls and women took the example of the Japanese and Chinese city women who tried to define themselves as “New Women” or “Modern Girls” and put an emphasis on going beyond the role of housewife. They mimicked Japanese women writers and expressed, in magazines, the desire for emancipation, for receiving an education and becoming wage workers.⁷

Unfortunately, as time passed, the situation became increasingly worse for Koreans. From the early 1930s onwards, industrial-style factories grew bigger and bigger and needed more workers consistently. Despite this, the Japanese hired Koreans not an equal salary, but on modest wages. Additionally, the Korean farmers had to export steadily rising quantities of rice to the Japanese islands⁸. By the end of the decade, Koreans were forced to become loyal subjects of the Japanese Empire as Japan prepared for war with China. In 1938–1939, the Korean language and identity began to be systematically suppressed. Koreans had to use

² The Association of Korean History Teachers, *A Korean History for International Readers*, Seoul, Humanist Publishing Group, 2007, pp. 237-239.

³ Hwang Kyung Moon, *A Korean History of Korea*, London, Red Globe Press, 2021, pp. 134-135.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 136.

⁵ Devine Richard, *Japanese Rule in Korea after the March First Uprising. Governor General Hasegawa's Recommendations*, in *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 52, no.4, 1997, p. 527.

⁶ Hwang Kyung Moon, *op.cit.*, p.136.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp.137-138.

⁸ The Association of Korean History Teachers, *op.cit.*, pp.251-252.

Japanese in public spaces. Moreover, they were forced to adopt Japanese names or face discrimination and poverty⁹.

After the war started in 1937, many Korean men were sent to Japan and other Asian colonies to fill the lack of manpower in factories and farms. In 1944, the Japanese authorities passed a law that allowed them to relocate all Korean men, of ages between 12 and 50, to any places that needed workers. Moreover, loyal young Korean men and students were mobilized to serve in the army. In effect, approximately 210,000 Korean men were forced to serve in the Japanese army as cannon fodder in the ongoing war¹⁰.

Although the Japanese occupation provided Korean girls with access to formal education, it also entailed significant cultural and linguistic repression. Educational institutions across the Korean peninsula were staffed primarily by Japanese teachers who taught exclusively in Japanese, and the use of the Korean language within schools was strictly forbidden and subject to punishment¹¹. After 1939, many Korean female students were recruited from schools in order to help the Japanese army. In effect, the Korean girls, alongside other Asian girls taken from their own houses and Asian women hired through Japanese recruitment agencies, were sent to military bases to work in so-called “comfort” stations, where they had to offer their body for the pleasure of the Japanese officers and soldiers¹².

As those that benefited from the services of these “comfort” women were Japanese officers and soldiers, the women had to adopt Japanese names for easy identification by the me. These Japanese men received, as a bonification for their service, a ticket that could be exchanged for sexual service within the station. Even though the women had to use a form of condom, maintain good hygiene practices, and go to medical checkups, these measures could not be always maintained as the soldiers refused to use condoms, or did not leave the women time to wash between encounters. Many soldiers were also brutal towards the women and inflicted physical and psychological trauma upon them. Additionally, the “comfort” women endured forced abortions and were often left without treatment for sexually transmitted infections¹³.

After World War II ended, the surviving “comfort” women and Korean soldiers returned home suffering from post-traumatic stress, but they had to suppress their suffering and keep it a secret because they had suffered either rape or humiliation. The Korean society at that time was deeply patriarchal and did not accept extramarital relations or weak man humiliated by “strong” Japanese soldiers. Therefore, the “comfort” women and the surviving soldiers were

⁹ Kim Jinwung, *A History of Korea. From “Land of the Morning Calm” to States in Conflict*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2012, p.351.

¹⁰ Pyong Min Gap, *Korean “Comfort Women”. Military Brothels, Brutality, and the Redress Movement*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2021, p.25.

¹¹ Buja Elena, *An Image of Korean Women during the Japanese Occupation of the Peninsula, as It Emerges from Literary Masterpieces*, in *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae Philologica*, vol. 13, no.1, 2021, pp. 78-79.

¹² Pyong Min Gap, *op.cit.*, pp. 92-96.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 125-140.

considered Japanese collaborators and not victims of the colonial period. Another reason for the general silence regarding that period is that, between 1963 and 1979, it was considered more important for the Republic of Korea to build and keep the economic relations with Japan rather than resolving the issue of the “comfort” women. The Japanese avoided to officially apologize for their crimes until 1995, when Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi apologized for the dishonor committed by Japanese soldiers when visiting “comfort” women, and the government established a special fund to protect women’s rights¹⁴.

2. The image of the Korean girls that remain in the peninsula

Although there are some Korean and Korean American authors that wrote about the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula, only a few managed to present the unique image of the Korean girl during this period. Among them is Korean writer Pak Wan-suh (1931-2011), who depicts her life as a child during the occupation of Korea in the novel *Who ate up all the Shinga?* (1992). Overall, it was a tragic experience, as she had to follow her mother to Seoul, where they lived on the outskirts of the city with other poor people. She had to attend a school where she was taught in Japanese and was banded from using Korean. For a month, the children were taught outside in order to learn all the words in Japanese that defined the school building and its premises. This activity may look innocent to a child, but it portrays the harsh reality of colonial rule to an adult¹⁵.

Unlike Pak Wan-suh, Korean American writer Sook Nyul Choi (1937-), in her autobiographical novel *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*, encompasses both the han, the suffering, they had to endure due to the Japanese aggression and discrimination, and the hung, the excitement, generated by the small things that had made her as a happy as a little child, like learning of the Korean alphabet from her grandfather.

In the beginning of the novel, Sookan is shown as living a happy childhood in her home, where her grandfather was teaching her Han’gŭl, the history of the Korean kingdom and she was enjoying “reading ancient Chinese poetry and practicing brush writing”¹⁶. She also enjoyed helping out her mother, who was running a socks factory in their home, which offered work to many Korean girls from the neighborhood. Sookan was often helping with cleaning up after the frugal breakfast served to the workers, and in the factory proper by packing the socks.

The hŭng or happiness of the home was disturbed often by the appearance of Captain Narita, who was checking if the girls were doing their jobs properly. When the Japanese officer appeared, everyone was afraid something bad would happen, as he would usually complain about the quality or quantity of products. One time, Sookan’s mother was scolded by him because she was not frequently visiting the

¹⁴ Jonsson Gabriel, *Can the Japan-Korea Dispute on “Comfort Women” be Resolved*, in *Korea Observer*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2015, pp. 1-14.

¹⁵ Eaves C. Gregory, *Book review: ‘Who Ate Up All the Shinga?’ by Park Wan-suh*, in *Korea.net*, published on February 26th 2016, available on

<https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=133094>, consulted on June 6th 2025.

¹⁶ Choi Sook Nyul, *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*, New York, Random House, 1993, p. 5.

“Shinto temple”¹⁷. Another time, when they were celebrating Haiwon’s birthday, the Japanese entered their home and scolded them for using metal vessels, which he then ordered them to send the vessels to be melted and used in the war effort. During another visit, Captain Narita decided to shut down the factory, take all the machines bought by Sookan’s mother and force the girls to go as volunteers to help the Japanese army. Even during these harsh times of suffering, or han, the main character’s mother emphasized that “childhood [...] should be [...] a time to play that is free from worry, when children focus on play and adults shield them from the realities of the world”¹⁸ by saying that “[y]ou are a little girl, and there is nothing for you to worry about. Just do as you are told. Soon all will be well. God is watching over us”¹⁹.

Although the mother tried to shield her daughter, the decision made by one of Captain Narita’s lieutenants that Sookan must go to school in order to become “a loyal and obedient subject and work to bring victory in the war”²⁰ is impossible to disobey. Therefore, Sookan had to attend the Japanese school. Before going to school, she was advised by Little Inchun “not to speak one word of Korean and don’t ask any questions”²¹ because, by 1942, the use of Korean in public spaces was prohibited and use of Japanese was mandatory, and those caught speaking Korean risked being fined²².

The trauma of being forced to disown one’s own identity extended beyond the prohibition of using one’s mother tongue while in school, which was enforced by a senior colleague as well. Before the start of the class schedule, Sookan was required to sing not a Korean song, but the “Japanese national anthem, the “Kimigayo,” [that] came blaring over the loudspeaker”²³. However, she could not refuse to sing because she was afraid of the frightening Narita Sensei (i.e. teacher Narita), the wife of Captain Narita. Subsequently, the process of assimilation into a Japanese subject continued in the classroom, as the teacher took attendance, and the girl was required to respond when she was called by her Japanese name, Aoki Shizue, rather than by the Korean. Afterwards, she had to sing the Japanese anthem once more, and “pledge our undying devotion to the Emperor”²⁴, an important gesture Sookan “was relieved [...] [she] had learned [...], for Narita Sensei was watching [...] carefully”²⁵.

During the same day, the traumatic experiences continued, as Sookan, alongside other children, were made to repeat various phrases in Japanese for an

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

¹⁸ Halko Gabrielle Atwood, *Casualties of War: The Japanese Occupation of Korea and Its Impact on Mothers and Daughters in Yoko Kawashima Watkins’ So Far from the Bamboo Grove and Sook Nyul Choi’s Year of Impossible Goodbyes*, in *Southeast Asian Review of English*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2018, p. 110.

¹⁹ Choi Sook Nyul, *op.cit.*, p. 32.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 64.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

²² Kim-Rivera E.G., *English Language Education in Korea Under Japanese Colonial Rule*, in *Language Policy*, no.1, 2002, p. 266.

²³ Choi Sook Nyul, *op.cit.*, p. 70.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p.71.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

extended period of time, mainly about the beauty of Japanese planes and how the Western planes were losing the war. After being forced to remain seated for extended periods, some required the restroom but did not dare ask for permission. Consequently, a few allowed themselves to urinate in their seats, resulting in small puddles forming beneath them. When one girl that could not resist the urge to go to the bathroom was called up front to repeat Narita Sensei dictated, she was too ashamed to move, and the teacher realized what they had done. The Japanese teacher felt “disgust and asked the whole class to take out their cleaning bags”²⁶ and they had to clean up the urine with old scraps of textile material and wax.

As the children were not able to ask to go to the bathroom, we might affirm that Narita Sensei imposes herself as an authoritarian figure that would not be questioned. This strong figure routinely punished the Korean children for their perceived status as second-class citizens. Moreover, by making the children clean up after themselves, she reinforces humiliation and shows her superiority.

As it the events occurred during wartime, the children were taught to prepare for war: the older boys had to prepare spears, and the younger boys filled defensive sandbags. The older girls had to prepare pieces of glass, and younger girls, like Sookan, had to sharpen the pieces that were meant to be used as projectiles. Although the work was grueling in the intense heat, most children worked diligently to avoid punishment. However, one boy began shouting that he would assist the Americans in destroying the Japanese, a rebellious outburst that reflected the deep frustration and anger of the children. In response, Sookan impulsively clapped her hands in support, a spontaneous gesture that revealed her own desire to fight against the Japanese, rather than for them. Consequently, Sookan was struck by Narita Sensei, and her mother was summoned to the school to be scolded.

One day, the Koreans found out that the Japanese had lost the war, but their happiness was short lived, as Sookan would soon discover that their neighborhood fell under Russian control, and the new forces imposed their communist ideology. Sookan’s family realized that they were not free and escaped to South Korea. Along the way, the family got split and the mother remained far behind, while Sookan took the lead and had to guide her small brother to escape the socialist country and find their father in Seoul.

Similarly to Sook Nyul Choi’s novel, Linda Sue Park’s (1960-) *When my name was Keoko* (2002) explores the difficulties that Koreans, in general, and Korean girls, in particular, had to endure during the Japanese occupation of Korea. From the first pages, the author describes how the Japanese imposed laws that restricted the reach of Koreans: “no Korean could be the boss of anything”²⁷ and the children had to study “Japanese language, culture, and history. Schools weren’t allowed to teach Korean history or language. Hardly any books or newspapers were published in Korean”²⁸. Although Korean was banned, they “still spoke

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 75.

²⁷ Park Linda Sue, *When my name was Keoko*, New York, Clarion Books, 2002, p. 3.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

Korean at home, but on the streets [...] [they] always had to speak Japanese”²⁹. Despite the ban on their mother tongue, they still used the language in safe spaces, because “[w]hen loss is converted into [...] absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning”³⁰. The melancholy of good times made the characters use Korean to speak of the better times in the safety of their own home, but they were also aware of the danger of using this melancholic language outside this safe space. The Uncle taught the children to draw the Korean flag and explained its meaning, despite the fact that this could have got him in trouble again. He taught these things in the hope that “someday this will be our own country once more”³¹ and they would escape the alienation.

A breaking point comes when a new law was passed, and “all Koreans are to be graciously allowed to take Japanese names”³². The majority of Koreans felt that they should not take foreign names but knew that they would face discrimination and poverty if they refused this edict. The method used by the Japanese in this case, forcing the peoples in their colonies to adopt different names, can be seen as part of the broader assimilation efforts within the Japanese Empire, as “[a]ssimilation is the process through which a person forsakes his or her own cultural tradition to become a part of a different culture”³³. However, for those compelled to take these names, the experience often leads to feelings of alienation. Adopting a name outside their own cultural tradition can feel like a betrayal of their identity, prompting internal struggles over whether they can maintain their cultural heritage while being pressured to assimilate—and whether changing their names means losing a part of themselves.

As the children who are the main characters of the novel *When my name was Keoko* wanted to survive, they were compelled to accept the Japanese names given to them by their parents. Sun-hee became Kaneyama Keoko, while Tae—yul became Kaneyama Nobuo.

Although they were forced to take new names, the Korean population was frustrated, which can be seen during the presentation of the Korean athlete who had won at the Olympics, as “[h]e was wearing the Japanese flag on his uniform. [...]. No one will know he’s Korean – they’ll all think he’s Japanese ...”³⁴. Although Koreans were proud of him, they were also mad that they could not be represented as Koreans, rather than Japanese citizens.

When Keoko went to school after her name change, she had to use the Japanese name and call all her colleagues by their Japanese name as well. One day, when the Korean teacher was inspected by the Japanese director, she called a colleague by her Korean name, for which she received a physical punishment. This

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

³⁰ La Capra Dominick, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2014, p. 46.

³¹ Park Linda Sue, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 5.

³³ Sahu Padmini, *From Alienation to Assimilation: Exploring Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake*, in *The Creative launcher*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2021, p. 142.

³⁴ Park Linda Sue, *op.cit.*, p. 10.

transgression usually would have been corrected, had there been no Japanese audience. This incident made her more aware of the consequences of using Korean, even though she knew it was unfair to be beaten for using one's own language. As Keoko was a smart girl, she managed to learn the Japanese syllabaries (Hiragana and Katakana) and memorize each of the two thousand common Kanji characters. This ability to learn Japanese made her become the class representative and win an additional distinction for Japanese proficiency. It also brought envy and her colleagues started calling her "Chin-il-pa [which] meant "lover of Japan." [...] Chin-pa-il were people who got rich because they cooperated with the Japanese government"³⁵. This frustrated Keoko, as she was punished for both speaking her language and for trying to learn Japanese, i.e. become assimilated. Her father explained that she should not be ashamed of her accomplishments as both Korean Hanja characters and Japanese Kanji came from the Chinese characters, and knowing these characters was a sign of wisdom.

The two narrators of *When my name was Keoko* are different, as Keoko was comfortable with learning Japanese and becoming a cultivated person, but Nobuo disliked school, was more inclined to learn about things that had mechanisms than about Kanji and preferred to help his father at the printing shop in his free time. Although they are different, they both "reveal the conditions of injustice and wartime atrocities that the adults in the novel have learned to tolerate as part of their everyday routine"³⁶. Keoko revealed the injustice of being punished for not speaking Japanese, when she was punished for calling her colleague by her Korean name, and when she witnessed their neighbor being punished for not knowing how to count in the colonial language. Nobuo was frustrated by how easily a Japanese soldier could confiscate his improvised bike.

It is also important to note that Keoko was also disconsidered by her own family, as even her cousin Nobuo withheld the truth about what was happening in the world, because he said "it is none of my business"³⁷. Despite all the modernizations made by the Japanese throughout their empire, many East Asians still believed that the role of a woman was to follow her father a girl, obey her husband during adulthood and listen to their first-born son in her old age.

The climate in which Keoko lived as a girl during the last years of the Japanese occupation of Korea was difficult, as most of the Koreans did not have enough food and the Japanese requisitioned everything from them. Moreover, while the early years of school focused on learning Japanese and becoming loyal subjects of the Empire, during the final years of war, the curriculum shifted to piling rocks, training to defend the Japanese colony, and watching films that depicted Americans as evil and praised the strength of the Japanese army. Girls over the age of sixteen were lined up and told they would be sent to work in textile factories somewhere in the Empire. In reality, they were sent to the so-called

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p.22.

³⁶ Vandana Saxena, Suman Sigiroha, *The ordinary and the extreme: Second World War in young adult fiction set in Asia*, in *History of Education & Children's Literature*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2019, p. 708.

³⁷ Park Linda Sue, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

“comfort” stations. Keoko was fortunate to be young enough to avoid being chosen.

Although the girl was frustrated due to the injustices throughout the Japanese Empire, she endured all the humiliations and never collaborated with the Japanese but simply tried to show that she was a loyal citizen by learning Japanese and respecting the rules. In fact, Keoko survived colonial rule in a similar way to her parents who, although they wanted to be Korean, had never conspired or taken action. After the war ended, Keoko started learning Korean, as the little girl truly believed she was a Korean citizen.

Both novels present the cruel realities of the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula. The two main girl characters were forced to attend school and speak only Japanese, learn the Empire’s anthem by heart, as the consequence of not being fluent in the colonizer’s language was physical punishment. Moreover, both girls suffered through humiliations, and had to carefully navigate their desire to speak and be Korean, which could entail terrible punishment. The narrators also underlined that, although they had little food, with the food grown in their gardens being taken by the Japanese, the colonizers were not satisfied with just the food, and took all their possessions in order to support the war effort.

3. The image of the Korean “comfort” woman

The renowned Korean American author Chang-rae Lee (1965-), in his novel *A Gesture Life* (1999), portrays both the life of an Asian American that had sold his business and was enjoying his life and the memories of the same Asian American from the time when he had been taking care of Korean “comfort” women in a military camp. He was a Korean adopted by a Japanese family and he had been a paramedical officer in the Japanese army. The novel focuses more on the character’s current life, with Doc. Hata having to deal with his adopted daughter’s teenager tantrums and the pressure from Liv Crawford, a real estate agent who wants to sell his house to a family very deeply want to own this house. From time to time, the narration focuses on Doc. Hata’s life during World War II and his traumatic experiences with “comfort” women.

Lieutenant Jiro Kurohata had been adopted by a Japanese family, “a well-to-do childless couple, a gear factory owner and his wife, who treated me as well as a son, providing me with every material need and advantage”³⁸. He had received a Japanese name and a good education, but the story shows that Kurohata “never fully completed [his transformation into a Japanese man] and partly [succeeded in his] self-sabotaging attempt to erase his connections to K and Koreanness”³⁹. Kurohata had a “double-edge relation to racism, colonialism, and sexual slavery”⁴⁰: on one hand, he had to be Japanese, disrespect second-hand citizens, such as Koreans, and profit from the so-called “volunteer” Korean women that offered

³⁸ Lee Chang-rae, *A Gesture Life*, London, Granata Books, 2001, p. 72.

³⁹ Kong Belinda, *Beyond K’s Specter: Chang-rae Lee’s A Gesture Life, Comfort Women Testimonies, and Asian American Transnational Aesthetics*, in *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, vol. 3, no.1, 2011 p.4, available on <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0p22m4tb>, consulted on June 10th 2025.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

their bodies to the Japanese soldiers; on the other hand, he felt pity for the Korean people, as he himself had Korean blood.

Taking care of the “comfort” women was an additional assignment for the Lieutenant, but as he was a “paramedical officer- field trained but not formally educated-it would be more than appropriate [...]. [T]hey were quite valuable, after all, to the wellbeing and morale of the camp”⁴¹. Kurohata had to consult each of the women and record everything in their personal file, as he had to ensure that they could perform their duties, and they would not get venereal infections. As he examined them, the Lieutenant observed the terrible condition of their bodies after the commander had taken some of the “comfort” girls to his house, but he could not do anything as the girls were scared, and his superior entered the room saying there was no need for an examination. Later on, Corporal Endo took one of the “comfort” girls and brutally killed her, which made the Japanese leadership sentence him to be executed - not for murdering the girl, but for removing her from the station.

The “comfort” women lived in terrible conditions. Their rooms were “windowless [...], no more than the space of one and a half tatami mats, not even wide enough for a tall man to lie across without bending his knees”⁴². The rooms served as their torture cells and sleeping rooms. These women faced the risk of venereal infections, unwanted pregnancies, violent assaults at the hands the Japanese military, and even the chance of being killed by manic soldiers suffering from post-traumatic syndrome, such as Corporal Endo.

Lieutenant Jiro Kurohata cared about the “comfort” women and saw them as more than just objects. An important part of his “identity is embodied in the alterity of Kkutaeh’s vulnerability and Korean heritage, yet he has to repudiate and suppress these parts of himself in the construction of his patriarchal identity”⁴³. As time passed, the Lieutenant fell in love with Kkutaeh, as she was the only one to tell him that he was a true Korean. The love story ends in tragedy, as Kkutaeh killed Captain Ono when he attempted to rape her. Upon discovery, the Japanese officers and soldiers sexually torture the poor Korean woman to her death. This episode scarred the Lieutenant deeply, despite trying to repress his feelings. As the novel progresses, the reader is made aware of the depth of his suffering when his adopted daughter goes against his will, and his post-traumatic syndrome flares back again.

While *A Gesture Life* presents “comfort” women from the aggressor’s perspective, *A Gift of the Emperor* (1997), written by lesser-known Korean American writer Therese Park (1941), portrays “comfort” women from the victim’s perspective. The novel introduces Soon-ah, a Korean girl that had just turned seventeen who strove to survive the harsh Japanese educational system. Although she had lost her father, she still had a decent life that changed abruptly when the

⁴¹ Lee Chang-rae, *op.cit.*, p. 166.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 179.

⁴³ Gieni Justine, ‘A Contagion Within’: Male Hysteria and Survivor Guilt in Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture of Life*, in *Monsters and the Monstrous*, vol. 2, no.1, 2012, p. 49.

emperor's messengers asked Korean girls to become volunteers in the Japanese army. Despite her mother's efforts to hide her, Japanese soldiers come in their house and take her away by force. As she was being shipped by boat to a remote "comfort" house in the South Pacific, she was first raped by a soldier and the captain of the transport ship. In order to prevent the novel from becoming a pornographic text, the author avoids describing the rape scenes through the "character loses consciousness" device. However, to underline the horrors of the act of rape, the aftermath is vividly described, as the character wakes in "a huge blood stain on [...] [the] mat"⁴⁴.

Upon arriving to the final destination, the Palau island base camp, she had to serve in a "comfort" house as a prostitute that satisfied the officers' and soldiers' sexual needs, as well as their needs to vent their frustrations, which often resulted in physical violence. Soon-ah remembered how one evil soldier "gave [...] [her] a purple bruise on [...] [the] face and turned [...] [the] room upside down"⁴⁵. Moreover, the soldiers were undisciplined and refused to use the Japanese condom, which led to the transmission of venereal diseases and unwanted pregnancies.

Another important perspective underlined in *A Gift of the Emperor* is that "comfort" women were not subjected only to from physical and sexual aggression, but they were also psychologically traumatized, as they had to witness how other girls were being raped while serving in the role of hostess and welcoming the Japanese soldiers. Additionally, some could not accept that they had lost their purity, such as the Korean girl from the journey to the island, who, after being sexually assaulted, had chosen to commit suicide by throwing herself overboard.

It can be said, that although the "comfort" women received food and a place to live, they were treated worse than slaves, as they were made to surrender agency over their bodies in exchange for being allowed to live and had to endure violence and psychological trauma. What kept Soon-ah alive in that hellish prison for "comfort" women was the thought that, one day, she would see her mother again. Fortunately for Soon-ah, she attracted the attention of Japanese reporter Sadamu Izumi, who helped her escape from the main-base island and survive on a small deserted island near-by until an American ship saved them both.

In conclusion, we can say that, in their novels, Korean American writers recreated, in a realistic manner, the lives of the younger girls that survived numerous humiliations on the Korean peninsula and the terrifying experience of the older girls that were forced to serve as "comfort" women throughout the Japanese empire. These Korean American writers chose to focus on this period not only to remind to the world about the atrocities committed by the Japanese soldiers, but also to commemorate the victims that had not been able to tell their story.

⁴⁴ Park Therese, *A Gift of the Emperor*, New York, Open Road Distribution, 2005, p. 17.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

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