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Listening to "Silence": Alternative Modes of Communication in Korean and Korean American Women's Literature

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English

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Abstract

South Korean feminist activity may be relatively unknown to many Western readers; however, a distinct form of feminist activism can be seen when considering alternative modes of communication that are not less than, simply different from “speech” or “voice” as forms of agency celebrated in the West. Alternative modes of communications such as silence, song, touch, and performance also speak important messages which can be heard when understood through local knowledges. In the three cases of South Korean and Korean American women’s fictions used in this dissertation, I unpack these alternative modes of communications used by the female protagonists through a two-fold approach: I first locate and analyze these alternative communications, and second, I read the text alongside women’s historical and contemporary feminist movements in Korea. By reading against “universal” assumptions of feminism, I offer new and decolonizing ways of reading *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* by Nam-Joo Cho (2016, translated to English in 2018); *Comfort Woman* by Nora Okja Keller (1997); and *The Vegetarian* by Kang Han (2007, translated to English in 2015). I ultimately find that even silence can be turned into political action as seen in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, and that alternative modes of communication can also be used to share colonial history as seen in *Comfort Woman*. In *The Vegetarian*, even direct speech can be turned into silence when listeners collectively ignore it. My dissertation contributes to the field an in-depth Korean-specific inquiry and expands on the cultural and historical significance of Korean women’s use of language in relation to feminism. Studying the local culture, history, and phases of women’s movements changes how we view these three celebrated novels.

Keywords

South Korean literature, Korean American literature, South Korean feminism, feminism, epistemic gathering, Cho Nam-Joo, Nora Okja Keller, Han Kang, alternative modes of communication, silence, speech, hierarchy of language, unhear, unlisten

Summary for Lay Audience

When we hear the word “silence,” we often think of the absence of sound, which is considered inaction and inexpressiveness, yet the protagonists of three contemporary South Korean and Korean American novels show us otherwise. In the first chapter of this dissertation, Jiyoung from *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* shows us how a novel with a silent character can lead to political change in the real world. In the second chapter, Soon Hyo from *Comfort Woman* opens our minds to ways of expressing trauma that do not involve spoken testimony. Lastly, in *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye turns her body into a form of communication to express and escape the violence of the world. The various forms of expressions I discuss in this dissertation are grouped together and called “alternative modes of communication”. This includes silence, song, dance, shamanism, performance, and more. Not everyone has the right to learn or access the official language of politics. In the case of Korea, like many other patriarchal societies, women were not officially allowed to learn how to read or write prior to the late 1800s. Even when someone is speaking, if a sufficient number of people choose to ignore that speech, it is no longer speech but “silence”. In the three novels analyzed in this dissertation, each of the central women characters is purposely ignored for her use of alternative modes of communication. However, when the audience learn how to listen, these alternative modes of communications become as significant as speech and can be understood as forms of feminist movements.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my inspiration, my mom, Jasmine Choun Lee.

I now understand what your silence meant.

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Introduction

The common assumption of international readers of contemporary South Korean women's writing is that South Korea has been late to discover feminism. Locally, the view of the older generation of South Korean feminists has been marked by its detached and dispassionate approach, and the "younger generation [of the early 2000s] of feminists have been steadily declining" (Nah 148). While there has been an undeniable increase in interest in feminism especially in the 2010s and beyond, both internationally and domestically, feminism in South Korea continues to be undervalued. Internationally, it is often thought that South Korean women were largely in the dark until the country's economic success at the end of the twentieth century. South Korea's rapid economic development along the lines of Western industrial and corporate capitalism was expected to be accompanied by an equivalent development for women out of the dark ages of patriarchal oppression, poverty, cycles of imperialism, colonialism, and dictatorship that (presumably) ended with the Korean War and Korea's "liberation." Janet Poole observed in 2005 that, "it is commonplace to argue that Western notions of feminism were translated to Korea at the turn of the twentieth century" (187). Very recent contemporary South Korean women's literature, such as *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (2016, translated to English in 2018)¹ and *The Vegetarian* (2007, translated to English in 2015) studied in this dissertation have gained attention internationally and are applauded by critics as

¹ Unlike anglophone names, Korean names begin with the family name as seen in the title of Cho's novel, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*. However, throughout this essay, I follow the anglophone name sequence to be consistent throughout the work and the MLA citation format except when directly quoting others.

signs of South Korean women's writing's supposed entry into feminism defined in Western terms.

But are South Korean feminism and feminist literature simply following the path paved by the Global North? Have South Korean feminists in the past been inactive and passive about women's issues, or have we failed to acknowledge and listen to these women? This dissertation re-examines both past and present South Korean feminist activities to argue that there is, indeed, local agency, will, and "voice" that have and continue to empower women today. With historical, social, political, and cultural context in mind, what comes to surface is that Korean women have used discrete forms of expression that I group as "alternative modes of communication" and action to persevere through times of post/colonial, national, political, and social turmoil. I delineate these alternative modes of communication in three literary case studies; I contextualize my readings in forms of Korean knowledge to decolonize literary scholarship on South Korean women's literature. Despite the continued invasions both to their sense of nationhood and personhood, local women have paved the way for feminism in South Korea today. Korean women passed on their torch in alternative modes of expressions that have survived centuries of patriarchal oppression. The colonial, cultural, social, and political circumstances created a distinct type of feminism in South Korea: one that may appear coded or indirect. This is to say that the feminism spoken and practiced in South Korea when viewed, as postcolonial feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty famously put it, "under Western eyes," is not easy to see or more importantly *hear*. Tracing feminist movements alongside selected South Korean and Korean American women's fictions, I argue that feminism in South Korea is no repetition, imitation, or belated reaction to Western

feminism, but that it is its own local movement evident when we notice and listen to their alternative modes of communication.

Coming to this Work

My inquiry into South Korean feminism and ways of speaking began with an Inuvialuit text, *Fatty Legs* (2010) by Margaret Pokiak-Fenton and Christy Jordan-Fenton, a memoir that narrates the experiences of a residential school survivor. One day, Margaret is expected to read on radio a script expressing gratitude for being in residential school:

I was handed a piece of paper with writing on it. *Hello, Mom! Hello, Dad!* it read. *Merry Christmas! I miss you, but the nuns here treat us like family and school is very fun.* . . . I stood in front of the microphone. *Mother, Father, get me out of here please. Take me home! I'm freezing and my teacher is wicked and mean,* I thought, but I said nothing. Not one word. I never stopped talking at home; my silence will surely tell them that something was wrong. (Pokiak-Fenton and Jordan-Fenton Chapter 5)

Margaret's courageous decision to say nothing in hopes that her parents would understand the meaning of her unusual silence demonstrated how expressive and powerful silence can be when it is *heard*. With these keywords in mind, I repeatedly revisited *Fatty Legs*' opening note: "A Note on the Right to Silence." This note asks readers to respect the silence of those who choose not to speak of their trauma. It also adds that "[residential school survivors] are overwhelmed by the level of inquisitiveness that has replaced a century and a half of horrific secrecy but encourage those who want to know more to seek out sources where knowledge has been shared freely" (Pokiak-Fenton

and Jordan Fenton). *Fatty Legs* and “A Note on the Right to Silence” drew my attention to respecting silence, to how silence can communicate, to the importance of contextual specificity for *hearing* how silence communicates, and to my own reading practices. I could not help but reevaluate my practices in seeking knowledge and narratives. Have I attempted to know at the expense of others and without respect for their experiential specificity? How has my research and reading been guilty of hurtful inquisitiveness? And has it been limited by my Westernized education?

Within the context of my own national (South Korean) background, military sex slaves to Japanese soldiers came to mind. I saw the media reinterview the survivors of military sex slavery under Japanese occupation: now well into their 90s, they were repeatedly asked to speak about how often and how exactly they were raped. These women have already officially testified, and the documents are open to access, yet many people were obsessed with hearing the story first-hand instead of doing their own work to learn. As someone who also regularly saw survivors actively protest, I found that the regurgitation of trauma in public was something I came to expect from the survivors without considering the mentally and emotionally gruelling task of repeating trauma through speech. I took their speech as a natural step into political justice and participation. I had hierarchized speech as a superior form of communication over all else. If you wanted to participate, vote, and be active, you must speak, speak, speak. But does everyone have an equal right to speak and to expect speech? Is everyone given equal attention to be heard? Who has been prohibited from speaking; who has been expected/coerced into speaking; and who has not been listened to even though their silence was expressive?

My dissertation started to take shape with “silence” as a major theme. I attempted to make sense of the definition of silence and to uncover the difference in “speaking” silence across cultures. I settled on three works by South Korean and Korean American authors in which I heard valuable messages spoken—or communicated—in ways that did not privilege or demand “speech”. While some aspects of the novels dealt with silence—as in the absence of speech—some dealt with communication that was ignored by some of the characters or sometimes unnoticed by the readers and critics. It was these alternative modes of communication that I shifted my attention to. I view these alternative modes of communication to be just as important as speech; they are only considered “silent” because of the lack of listeners or the listeners’ choice to not listen or unhear what has been communicated. Upon considering alternative modes of communication and displacing speech from its superiority in a hierarchy of language use, I began, also, to rethink feminism in South Korea, which has been judged for its passivity, misdirection, and tension between different feminist groups which is said to have contributed to the “failure in popularizing feminism” or has been “counterproductive to the proliferation of feminism” (Nah 147; J. Kwon 639).

Decolonizing Feminism

I come to this work both from the inside—as a South Korean—and the outside—as one educated in six different countries, three of which were European and one North American. Although I spent over two decades in Asia, these experiences, too, were Westernized as the majority of my time was spent studying Western texts. Thus, I do not expect to be given the authority to speak about South Korea simply by being South

Korean as I acknowledge my own, albeit fragmented, centrality. This work stems from a desire to decolonize my own mind, fully acknowledging my partially Western upbringing and my current location as someone writing about decolonizing and decentering Western epistemology whilst writing from a Western institution. This desire is demonstrated by my attempt to decolonize the current conversations about South Korean women's literature. To that end, I introduce cultural and historical knowledges specific to Korea and Korean women, which seek to demystify "the East". The East, under Western eyes, has been misshaped or newly shaped as if there was no identity before it was discovered by the Western gaze. Despite the efforts and scholarship produced to combat such narratives, when it comes to East Asia, and particularly South Korean literature, conversations to initiate a decolonizing feminist action remain insufficient.

I begin by looking into Kelly Jeong's *Crisis of Gender and the Nation in Korean Literature and Cinema* (2011) in which she draws on Shu-mei Shih's understanding of "asymmetrical cosmopolitanism":

When applied to Third World intellectuals, "cosmopolitanism" implies that these individuals have an expansive knowledge constituted primarily by their understanding of the world (read: the West), but when applied to metropolitan Western intellectuals there is a conspicuous absence of the demand to know the non-West. This "asymmetrical cosmopolitanism" is another manifestation of a Western-dominated worldview. (xvii)

The non-West other is expected to consult, reach back to, depart from, or conclude with a study based on Western knowledge, theory, and movements. A "demand to know" the West is further imposed onto the non-West to practice and give credit to Western

knowledge (xvii). The West, however, is not necessarily expected to reciprocate. This asymmetrical cosmopolitanism that expects the other to know and consult the West, and the misassumption that the Other can be read through the West, continues to support a form of colonialism. For example, looking at the input of French feminism in an international frame in her 1981 essay by the same name, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes Julia Kristeva's remarks about Chinese women as an example of "colonialism of First World feminism toward the Third" ("French Feminism" 184). Examining Kristeva's study *About Chinese Women* (1977), Spivak comments on the following excerpt:

Here is [Kristeva's] opening description of some women in Huxian Square: "An enormous crowd is sitting in the sun: they wait for us wordlessly, perfectly still. Calm eyes, not even curious, but slightly amused or anxious: in any case, piercing, and certain of belonging to a community with which we will never have anything to do". [Kristeva's] question, in the face of those silent women, is about her own identity rather than theirs: "Who is speaking, then, before the stare of the peasants at Huxian?" ("French Feminism" 158)

The Asian women are mute, empty, and blank. They are naively waiting to be drawn on, identified, and spoken for by the West. As Spivak suggests, this desire to view the Other as a blank canvas is simply the spectator's desire to see their "own identity". Postcolonial

literary scholarship has thoroughly critiqued such use of the Other as a tool to view the white self.²

During the second wave of Western feminism there was a growing realisation that white feminism needed to broaden its horizons to make space for the voices of marginalised women. In 1988, Elizabeth Spelman revisited Adrienne Rich's *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (1979) in her article, "Gender and Race: The Ampersand Problem in Feminist Thought," to discuss how

[m]uch of feminist theory has reflected and contributed to what Adrienne Rich has called "white solipsism": the tendency "to think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world". White solipsism is "not the consciously held belief that one race is inherently superior to all others, but a tunnel-vision which simply does not see nonwhite experience or existence as precious or significant, unless in spasmodic, impotent guilt-reflexes, which have little or no long-term, continuing momentum or political usefulness". (Rich quoted in Spelman 75)

A lot has changed since the second wave of feminism, both through the work of white American feminists like Spelman and Rich but also through the work of BIPOC feminists, perhaps represented most famously in the collection edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981). This "tendency" to think and speak with Western centrism is so deeply ingrained in us that we often unknowingly accept these neo-colonial forms of feminism. In this

² An early and famous fictional example of the continuation of colonialism to be critiqued in postcolonial scholarship is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) in which the people of the Congo are dehumanized in order to awaken white consciousness. An attempt to view the self, even in critical mode, is made at the expense of the Other's existence and identity.

sense, opposing “Western modernity to Third World traditionalism” faces another problem of Western history, modernity, and theory being used to explain and define the Other (Ong 110-11).

Audre Lorde discussed a lack of attempt to know the other as “a particular academic arrogance” as it “assume[s] any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women and lesbians” (106). “Academic arrogance” may lead to an attempt to “give” a voice to the Third world woman using theory and methods that are located in the “center” instead of trying to investigate what is in the center for the Other. As Aihwa Ong suggests, there needs to be an attempt to understand the Other through their own culture and history and to not commit an “irony of feminism” (Ong 108). When using the phrase “irony of feminism” Ong refers to “the intersections between colonial discourse and feminist representation of non-Western women” in which feminist voices are utilized to discuss non-Western women but by “unconsciously echo[ing]” “Western standards and goals—rationality and individualism—. . . to evaluate the cultures and histories of non-Western societies” (108). These are not new findings, yet it is still easy to find scholarship that is produced with the “inherent racism of analyses and practices which assume white experiences to be the norm, use these as the basis from which to generate concepts and theories, and fail to acknowledge the internal differentiation” (Maynard 124) as my dissertation shows in its study of feminist literary scholarship on contemporary South Korean women’s fiction, especially in the third chapter.

In reading South Korean and Korean American women’s literature, I am interested in uncovering Western centric theories that assume sameness or Western liberal feminist

expectations of agency.³ I attempt to find gaps, assumptions, and misunderstandings that are rooted in, or have the effect of, neo-colonial practices and reanalyze the creative works within local, cultural, and historical contexts in hopes of providing a space of solidarity within our differences. Like many other scholars who view Eurocentric assumptions and analysis of Third world women as “colonizing feminist scholarship,” I too use the term “colonial” to describe works that inadvertently bring a colonizing gaze upon South Korean women (Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders* 193; see also Grewal and Kaplan; Martinsson and Mulinari; and Pohlhaus).

Methodology

How does one read against voices that inadvertently partake in colonial practices? This dissertation attempts to conduct a feminist and a decolonizing reading of three novels—*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* by Nam-Joo Cho (2016, translated to English in 2018); *Comfort Woman* by Nora Okja Keller (1997); and *The Vegetarian* by Kang Han (2007, translated to English in 2015)—and their scholarly reception through a two-fold approach: first by analyzing the inaudibility of South Korean women and their alternative modes of communication; second by learning how to read contemporary South Korean women’s fiction by reading Korean women’s local movements and acts of feminism in hope to contribute to what Mohanty calls an “epistemic gathering” (“Toward a Decolonial Feminism” ix).

³ The texts, two South Korean, one Korean American, were selected based on their ability to demonstrate local knowledges about alternative modes of communications rather than on geographical location or the authors’ national position.

As seen in the first part of my approach, “alternative modes of communication” is a term I use to describe the many ways of communicating that do not sound or look like “speaking up,” or “voice” understood through an individualist Western paradigm of public speech or public action. Indeed, an antonym for alternative modes of communication could be public speech; however, speech patterns differ greatly around the world. For example, as Ien Ang observes, the empowered self-defence slogan against sexual violence “No means no” does not translate across different communities because such phrases:

are far from culturally neutral: they belong to a repertoire of rules for social interaction which prizes individualism, conversational explicitness, directness and efficiency—all Western cultural values which may not be available or appeal to ‘other’ women. Asian women, for example, may well deal with male dominance in culturally very different, more circuitous (and not necessarily less effective) ways. In other words, far from being culturally universal, “When a woman says no, she means no!” implies a feminist subject position and style of personal politics that are meaningful chiefly for those women who have the “right” cultural resources. I am not saying that the maxim itself is ethnocentric; what is ethnocentric is the assumption that it represents all women’s experiences and interests in sexual relations. (Ang 398)

“Western cultural values” such as direct speech will not translate the same way in South Korea, for example, where conversational *indirectness* is the norm. This also means that indirectness is less audible or readable by readers who are not familiar with these speech

patterns. Thus, alternative modes of communication such as indirect speech, body language, silence, and others run the risk of becoming “unintelligible”.

Recognizing a need to read and produce knowledge in a decolonizing way, epistemic gathering, or the fight against epistemic violence, informs the second part of my approach. As Mohanty suggests, “[e]pistemic gathering . . . can become a methodology for horizontal dialogue and solidarity in the context of unequal power relations among communities of women” (“Toward a Decolonial Feminism” ix). Thus, alongside close reading for alternative modes of communication, I also introduce cultural and historical contexts and various local movements of South Korean feminism. For example, Korean women’s relation to written and spoken language; relations between organized religion and women’s value; Korea’s colonization by Japan, then by the United States, and women’s experiences therein, are some of the contexts I bring forth to address “localized questions of experience, identity, culture, and history” of the kind that Alexander and Mohanty found missing in feminist genealogies written out of colonial contexts (xvii). In using this methodology, I also take from the words of Edward W. Said that “each humanistic investigation must formulate the nature of that connection in the specific context of the study, the subject matter, and its historical circumstances” (39).

Additionally, like Said whose “study of Orientalism has been an attempt to inventory the traces upon [himself], the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals,” (49) this dissertation attempts to decenter the Westernized scholarship on the three novels. In chapter one, I discuss how silence ultimately led to political change. In chapter two, I explore the many expressive forms of testifying that go beyond emphasis for talk therapy and speaking trauma through political

action. And in chapter three, I actively read against scholarship that fails to consider local knowledge. Simultaneously, this dissertation also attempts to decenter the writer herself and hopes to contribute to an epistemic gathering on the experiences, identities, cultures, and histories of Korean women.

Women in Korea⁴

The history of Korea discussed in this section will focus on the Chosŏn dynasty (1392 – 1910).⁵ Korea has seen a tremendous amount of change since 1910, but the traditional practices of the Chosŏn dynasty are still carried out and remain a great influence and way of life for the people. For this reason, it is important to understand the influence of Neo-Confucius philosophy when studying Korea, its women, and their use of language.

Chosŏn dynasty did not have a state religion; instead, Confucius philosophy became the thought that governed the country. Under Confucius beliefs, the people were strictly divided by class and gender. Women were referred to as an “inside person” (*an saram* 안

⁴ I begin the history of women in South Korea from the 1300s. This may be an odd choice given that the primary texts I have selected are contemporary. Nonetheless, with a Western, English studies audience in mind, I deemed that it would be useful to share this historical knowledge. I also bring in examples of the Chosŏn dynasty to show evidence of how feminism (in strong relationships between women) existed and was practiced in alternative forms of communications since before the introduction to feminist thoughts from the West, through Christianity.

⁵ The history of South Korea began with numerous tribal groups that joined forces more than 2000 years ago under threat from neighbouring countries and formed three kingdoms: Silla, Paekche, and Koguryŏ. By the 4th century, Buddhism was first introduced to the Koguryŏ Kingdom where women were active participants of the religion and allowed to worship in the same temple and become monks. The Kingdoms were later united under Silla rule in the 7th century in which women enjoyed many equal conditions with men such as owning land and ruling the country. In the history of South Korea, there have been three ruling queens and all three were from Silla. After the downfall of the Silla kingdom, Koryŏ was established. Koryŏ (918 – 1392) was known as a time when women continued to enjoy several rights equal to men, such as the right to get a divorce, the right to get remarried, the right to own land, and the right to claim inheritance. This, however, changed with the introduction to Confucius beliefs in the Chosŏn dynasty in which women were no longer allowed such religious, political, and societal freedoms.

사람) because they were expected to stay at home. According to Kumari Jayawardena, there were only “three classes of women [who] still managed to retain some freedom [:] the *shamans*, healers [female patients had to seek help from female doctors] and Kisaeng [female entertainers who danced, sang, wrote poetry, and accompanied men as they drank]” (216). With the exception of these selected groups of women, a woman’s role was to be an obedient daughter, a faithful wife, and a sacrificing mother. Consequently, her life was governed by her father, then her husband, then her son(s), but on a larger scale, a woman’s life was governed by the state. For instance, King Sejong (1397 – 1450) “attributed the downfall of Chinese dynasties to the meddling of overeducated women and boasted that the ignorance of Chosŏn [Korean] women kept them from interfering in government affairs” (Hyun 10-11). This also meant that surveilling the life of a woman both inside and outside the home became a matter of national security. The government not only used restrictions but also rewards to encourage women to settle down into a subservient role. For example, “*yŏl nyŏ* (women of virtue 열녀)” were nominated by the country and received prizes for keeping their fidelity even after the death of a husband or for committing suicide in the face of sexual harassment. What made becoming a “woman of virtue” more enticing was that, if she was from a lower-class, her family could be rewarded with “a rare opportunity to rise a notch to the commoner class” (Kyung-Ai Kim 66). This meant that a woman could not overcome her gendered role, but a family could use her gendered position to overcome class. The obedience of women was, thus, used not only as a tool to flatter and accentuate the hold of male power but also to advance the social standing of families. Another example of a proper woman’s conduct in the Chosŏn dynasty can be seen in “[t]he list of offences for which a wife could be sent away (the

seven evils) . . . disobedience to parents-in-law, bearing no son, adultery, jealousy, hereditary disease, garrulity and larceny” (Jayawardena 214). With excessive talkativeness as one of the seven evils, one can imagine the restrictions on women’s speech for over half a millennium. Unsurprisingly, women were expected to obey in silence and were neither allowed to attend school nor expected to learn privately how to read or write.

The official language used for writing in Korea was *hanmun* (classical Chinese writing 韓文) even though the spoken language was Korean. The barrier between spoken and written language was hard to overcome for uneducated lower-class citizens and women of all classes because Chinese writing is logographic and required years of memorization. Chinese writing was reserved as a political language and as a language for educated men while women and lower-class citizens remained illiterate. This changed in 1443 when King Sejong invented a phonetic language called *han’gŭl* or *hunmin jeongeum* (Korean alphabet 한글; 훈민정음) consisting of 14 consonants and 10 vowels. After three years of trial in the palace, *han’gŭl* was released to the public. *Han’gŭl* is the alphabet that is used today in both Koreas, but for a long time it did not replace the political language of men who considered Chinese writing to be an elite language and Korean writing to be a language for women. While this meant that Chinese writing held its position as a language of power and politics even after the invention of the Korean alphabet, it also meant that despite the class and gender segregation in written language, the invention of the Korean alphabet allowed women to read and write.

With the introduction of the Korean alphabet came another significant change for

women: the work of translation. Upper-class women who learned Chinese writing at home translated texts into vernacular Korean for a larger population of women to access. For example, in 1475, Queen Sohye compiled lessons from four Chinese Confucius texts and translated them into vernacular Korean for Chosŏn women to easily read. Although these texts were heavily patriarchal, Eunkang Koh argues that Queen Sohye's text tried to "secure a position for women in the male-dominated society" (355). For instance, in the preface, Queen Sohye emphasizes her desire to educate women beyond the domestic sphere: "[women] know only the thickness and thinness of thread and do not know the urgency of virtuous action; this is my constant regret" (qtd. in J. Duncan 31). Nevertheless, women's education throughout much of the Chosŏn dynasty was not a state concern until the eighteenth century when modernization became inevitable, and both Korean and Western intellectuals started to bring about change.

Colonial Korea and Postcolonial South Korea

Postcolonial studies have focused primarily on Europe's conquests, and for good reason, given that by 1914, Europe had colonized more than 80 percent of the world. What is, however, often overlooked in postcolonial studies is the study of non-European empires such as Japan or neo-imperial activities by the United States. In the case of South Korea, its "modern history was profoundly influenced by its thirty-five years (1910 to 1945) as a colony of Japan" (Seth 283). Korea has also been forever changed and indefinitely divided by the United States and the Soviet Union, which split a country in half that had been united since the seventh century.

Japan's method of colonization was greatly influenced by European colonization and imitated many of the practices seen in the West as historian Michael J. Seth, among others, has observed. Korean land was utilized as a mass factory to produce supplies for Japan's war, and its people were forced into labour. Many Koreans were uprooted and dislocated to various parts of Asia such as China or Japan. For example, Koreans made up "a quarter of the industrial labor force" in Japan by 1945 (317). Consequently, many Koreans also suffered from war atrocities; with "more than 2 million Koreans working in wartime Japan, at least 10,000 died from the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (314). Approximately 200,000 women were "forcibly enrolled as sex slaves to serve the Japanese troops" (313). Japan used blood science and scientific racism to dehumanize Koreans in the human experiments they conducted on Korean bodies. For example, Japan's Unit 731 tested human limits by freezing and defrosting limbs, amputating and resowing limbs to different parts of the body, flamethrowing onto exposed skin, raping, impregnating, and conducting experiments on fetuses. Through such experiments, the Japanese Empire viewed Koreans as lesser-humans. Ironically, Japan simultaneously promoted the idea of assimilation of Koreans with the Japanese. In an attempt to "assimilate," cultural genocide became the new agenda. All Koreans were to "register at Shinto shrines, even though this was an alien religion to all Koreans" (314). By 1939 the "Name Order" took effect in which Koreans had to abandon their names for Japanese names: "In a society where ancient family lineage was prized, this loss of names was a particular humiliation" (314). Furthermore, Korean language was being erased: "By the early 1940s, the publication of all Korean books ceased . . . [and] by 1943 students could be punished for speaking Korean at school" (314-15). Japan further attempted to erase

Korea's historical presence by building over palaces or killing the royal family and filling the palace with animals to create a zoo. The first half of the twentieth century for Koreans was indeed a traumatizing time that remains ingrained in the postmemory of its people. When Korea finally gained independence from Japan in 1945, the people were eager to take control. "Communists and non-Communist leftists" joined forces and declared the Korean People's Republic in which several reforms were made such as controlled rent, set working hours, and minimum wage (Seth 329). Understandably, there was a considerable amount of confusion when only two days after Korea's independence American forces landed in Korea and with little knowledge started governing it: "[t]he jubilation that had greeted liberation in the summer of 1945 had quickly faded into a somber realization that freedom from Japan did not mean freedom from foreign rule" (Hwang 161). Within a month of liberation from Japanese colonial rule, the Soviet Union occupied the North of Korea and the United States the South. Although Koreans had a strong desire for immediate independence, the United States, Soviet Union, China, and Britain in the Moscow conference agreed without Korea's participation that the country needed a "trusteeship" in which Korea would be "tutored" into independence. The Koreans responded with mass demonstrations; regardless, the "American-Soviet Joint Commission was created to work out the details of the trusteeship . . . and [b]y early 1946, the outlines of separate occupational zones, with their own administrations, had already appeared" (Seth 333). Korea, which never once spoke of the desire to be split in half, was permanently separated by 1953. A line was drawn on Korea by two middle-ranking American officers, which to this day separates the country with the most heavily

armed border in the world. Dean Rusk, one of the then mid-ranking officers who drew the line across Korea, later commented in his memoir, *As I Saw It* (1990):

I must admit that I was struck by this ironic turn of events—that such a tentative decision regarding the selection of the thirty-eighth parallel, made late one evening in 1945 in the Pentagon by myself and another young colonel, working hastily over a map of East Asia, could become the scene of a major act of aggression and the focus of world attention . . . Division along the parallel made no sense economically or geographically as far as Korea itself was concerned.

(167)

This hasty, ill-informed decision divided provinces in half, split families who had no idea that in a matter of a day they would no longer be able to see each other ever again and permanently changed the shape of the now two Koreas. This colonial history of Korea contributes to how feminism is practiced locally. National turmoil and the robbing of the nation's independence meant that, unlike in many Western nations, nationalism was a tool and major agenda used by South Korean feminists as discussed by Hee-Kang Kim among others.

Given the expected position of women in Korean history and culture—"inside," silent, obedient—to practice feminism openly in a formerly colonized Korea would seem to be selfish and unpatriotic. I argue that South Korea's feminism that is indirect and aligned with the national cause is an intentional choice for survival. Postcolonial scholars of Europe's former colonies, such as Partha Chatterjee and Franz Fanon, among others, have observed the gendered terms out of which such postcolonial national identities as India and francophone Africa emerge. The colonizer was the hyper masculine and the

colonized the feminine, a historically embedded structure which does not disappear with independence. In the Korean context, Chungmoo Choi writes:

Women of a postcolonial nation are denied an opportunity to decolonize their split (or multiple hybrid) subjectivity, which is shaped under the colonial oppression . . . The dominant discourse of nationalism in postcolonial Korea strategically chooses to suppress women's equivocality to privilege that masculine subject of the nation. Gendered nationalism thus. . . suspects women's desire for the recognition of multiple female subjectivities as a kind of whoring, while valorizing multiple male subjectivities as nationalistic and therefore heroic. ("Nationalism" 28)

A postcolonial male can "recover" from his emasculated (colonized) subject position. Those males who do not find this "recovery" are in need of the doubly oppressed position of a woman to valorize their masculinity.⁶ What further catches my attention is how this postcolonial state shapes feminist practice. In Korea, women who showed what were thought to be Western characteristics, such as being outspoken or overly educated, were met with disdain.

Feminism in Korea

Feminism in Korea has not widely been discussed or defined in "waves" as seen in the West. The stages I discuss here are divisions I have made for a clearer understanding of Korean feminism. I have divided the stages of feminism according to important historical

⁶ A similar occurrence has been noted in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (1990) by bell hooks to describe the doubly oppressed Black woman's body in America after the abolition of slavery.

moments that shaped the direction of feminist movements. For example, the first stage is based on Japanese colonial rule and the introduction of Christianity from the West in which feminism focused on the country's independence aided by the education of women. The second stage coincides with post independence South Korea where the country was controlled by dictators and harsh working conditions, and the women's movement shared their efforts in democratizing the nation and improving working conditions. The third stage comes with democracy and the shift to a more "direct" form of feminism that focuses its efforts on fighting against sexual violence.

I locate the origins of the first stage of Korean feminism in the eighteenth century. There are three influences that are key in discussing the beginning of feminist ideology in Korea: the introduction of Christianity; Korean intellectuals who studied abroad; and local movements that rebelled against classism. Chronologically, the entry of Western missionaries into Korea and their introduction to Catholicism in the late eighteenth century was the first influence for Korean feminism as we know it. Christianity was previously known in Korea, but it was known as a Western school of thought or philosophy rather than a religion. It was only after the late eighteenth century that Catholicism was recognized as a religion, and Korean Catholics were persecuted for having abandoned their Confucius duties such as practicing ancestral rites. Christian teaching advocated that humankind was equal under the eyes of God, and this message of equality spoke to lower-class Korean citizens. The fact that worship was permitted to both men and women also encouraged women to convert. As a result, Catholicism was dominated by lower-class citizens and women. Women's resistance, which was seldom seen in the Chosŏn dynasty, showed up in various parts of the country under the name of

this “new” Western religion. Women defied their subordinate role and disrupted the well-maintained Confucian order of class and gender. The popularity of Christianity amongst women and their resentment against the gendered society were confirmed “in the 1839 massacre of Catholics, [in which] two-thirds of the victims were women,” (Jayawardena 219). The martyrdom of Catholic women “marked the beginning of the change in the Korean woman's traditional status—the symbolic beginning of the women's modernization movement” (Yong Oak Park qtd. in Jayawardena 219).

Other Christian denominations began their missions in Korea soon after the introduction of Catholicism. By the late nineteenth century, the presence of female missionaries from the United States, Canada, and England had grown significantly. Female missionaries often made women’s education their priority. One example is Mary Fitch Scranton, an American missionary who started the first women’s school in 1886 and paved the way for many feminists and political activists. Under Confucius philosophy, “[c]laims that women should be educated were revolutionary during this era,” and Western female missionaries served as pioneers in the fight for women’s education (Kyung-Ai Kim 68). The discourse on the importance of women’s education started to grow, and Korean intellectuals who studied abroad also believed that Korea needed drastic reforms to emulate developed countries that they witnessed. Like the missionaries, Korean intellectuals advocated for women’s education. For example, Jae-pil Seo (1864 – 1951) returned to Korea from America with new thoughts to modernize the country and started the first vernacular Korean newspaper, *Tongnip Sinmun* (The Independence Newspaper 독립신문). The newspaper often published articles dealing with sexual discrimination and asserted that “[w]omen's education will let women recover their rights from

discrimination, their children get beloved teachers, their husbands have beautiful friends, and the country be civilized” (26 May 1899 *Tongnip Sinmun* qtd. in Kyung-Ai Kim 67). Months later, the language of the newspaper became much more direct: “Men have oppressed women with power and women have been confined to the home and forced to do only housework . . . Through education, women can be the same human beings as men” (9 August 1899 *Tongnip Sinmun* qtd. in Kyung-Ai Kim 68). In the beginning, there were attempts to convince readers to support women’s education for the purpose of creating better mothers, companions, and citizens, but the discourse soon took a more feminist tone by declaring men as the culprit of women’s oppression. Although women’s emancipation was still largely considered to be a tool for modernization, it was a much-needed step towards discussing gender equality and one that prompted Koreans to found several women’s schools as well.

In 1860, other local agents began to change the social system of the Chosŏn dynasty. The Tonghak⁷ academic movement (Eastern Learning 동학) rejected *Sŏhak* (Western Learning 서학), Japanese aggression, and Confucius philosophy and advocated that God can be found in everybody regardless of class, gender, or age. The founder and followers of Eastern Learning directly worked to recognize human rights of both children and women. Children, like women, were considered incomplete human beings under the Chosŏn Dynasty, but Che-u Ch’oe, the founder of *Tonghak*, argued that women were “the very actors to initiate the new beginning in the new era” (Choon Sung Kim 179).

⁷ Tonghak was popular amongst the lower-class citizens evident in its role in the Peasant Revolution (also well known as the Tonghak Peasant Revolution) in 1894. The founder of Tonghak “focused on teaching a religious awakening that sought to end social discrimination against the oppressed” (Moon 1148).

Furthermore, Si-hyeong Choi, a teacher of *Tonghak*, “[did] not merely call for the liberation of women; he [sought] a rediscovery about women and a creation of ‘femininity’ as the character of a new civilization” (Choon Sung Kim 180). Both Eastern and Western thought were influencing change in Korea at the turn of the century. By the early twentieth century, female education was becoming normalized and “[t]he need for female education was increasingly accepted in the 1920s,” as indicated by the hundredfold increase in female enrollments in elementary schools between 1910 and 1930 (Jayawardena 224).⁸

Students and graduates of women’s schools participated in diverse social and political actions especially due to the increasing threat by Japan who eventually colonized Korea from 1910 to 1945. This national threat united aristocratic women and educated women from different classes in the fight against external and internal threats. Internally, women’s organizations worked to fight for the abolition of child marriage, freedom of the press, freedom to divorce, and to increase women’s education. Externally, women “encouraged women to participate in the war” or participate in the movement to repay Korea’s national debt to Japan (Kyung-Ai Kim 69). It was anticipated that military and monetary participation would contribute to the liberation of the country and its women: “[w]hen we repay the national debt, we will not only recover national sovereignty but also achieve equal rights between men and women through revealing women’s power” (23 April 1907 *Jekuk Newspaper* qtd. in Kyung-Ai Kim 69). The fruits of women’s education were clearly demonstrated in the March 1st Movement of 1919 when female

⁸ “The numbers of girls in elementary schools increased from 1,146 in 1910 to 105,000 in 1930” (Jayawardena 224).

students actively participated and led the protest for Korea's independence. Gwansun Yu (1902 – 1920), an Ewha women's school student who eventually died after being captured and tortured by Japanese police, became the symbol of the March 1st Movement and an impetus for women's direct political involvement in the nationalist movement. By this point, nationalism and feminism went hand in hand and empowered each other as movements. Accordingly, the initial stage of Korean feminism was marked by women's education and its second stage by nationalism.

Heisook Kim defines feminist nationalism in Korea as “a kind of feminism that makes use of nationalism as a means to raise women's consciousness” (248). Nationalism was crucial to the development of feminism in Korea as it gave women the opportunity to become active citizens. Variations of feminist nationalism reappeared in South Korea in the fight against dictatorship, the military regime, and in the fight for democracy. In this sense, feminism in Korea “has successfully fought against patriarchal aspects of nationalism while continuing to embrace nationalist agendas” (Hee-Kang Kim 109).

Generally, and particularly in the West, nationalism has been discussed as a hindrance to feminist goals, but “[t]he initial experience of Korean women in politics evolved from the national liberation movement, not from a suffrage movement as in most Western countries” (Jung 263). In many ways, Korean women united by contributing to the independence of the nation.

Another defining feature of second stage feminism in South Korea is the labour movement in the 1970s and 1980s such as the *minjung* (the people's 민중) movement.

After liberation from Japan in 1945 and the end of the Korean war in 1953, South Korea experienced unprecedented economic growth. This growth was partly powered by the

government's plan to maximize cheap labour for rapid development. As second-class citizens, women were considered the best fit for this type of underappreciated and underpaid labour and were put to work in horrible conditions. The country was busy focusing on rebuilding and defeminizing the nation (after its emasculation by Imperial Japan) and collectively chose to forget the efforts of women towards the country's independence. "[M]ost Korean men, including nationalist[s] . . . wanted women to remain old mothers, submissive daughters, and obedient daughters-in-law," only this time, they wanted them to be the invisible economic backbone of the country as well (Hei Sook Kim 249). This mistreatment ignited the labour movement and, once again, united women under a mutual concern. What is interesting in South Korea's second stage of feminism is that, despite the growing number of women's organizations (such as Korean Women Worker's Association and the Korean Women's Trade Union), most groups met in solidarity over a political concern and not a specifically feminist concern: "Rather than emphasising its autonomy and independence, the women's movement gave priority to the issues of democracy and nationalism" (Jung 266). Even in instances where sexual violence became a national debate, the discourse was predominantly framed as a breach in democracy and not of the woman's body. When a labour movement activist was raped by a police officer, "[e]ven women's movement activists thought that women's problems should be solved within the macro-master framework of the Korean Social Movement" (Jung 270). The victim herself testified that her rape was a case of the state "oppressing the labour movement" (Insook Kwon qtd. in Jung 269). Women's rights in the second stage were not prioritized or accentuated in South Korea's feminism. Instead, women met in solidarity over mutual sociopolitical causes such as labour rights and democracy.

If the second stage of feminism in South Korea can be described as “indirect,” the third stage of feminism can be characterized by its direct mobilization of feminist agendas. Beginning in the 1980s, the discourse of rape changed from rape as a violation of political rights to rape as a violation of the woman’s body: rape was a result of deep-seated patriarchal discrimination against and misconceptions of women as objects. Accordingly, “the anti-sexual violence movement in Korea has been claimed as the kernel of the women’s movement” and resulted in the establishment of women’s hot line and sexual violence counseling centres in the 1980s and 1990s (Jung 262). Centres such as the Korean Sexual Violence Relief Centre (KSVRC) began their work by “challeng[ing] dominant discourses such as Confucian ideology . . . [and] naming the unspeakable experience” (Jung 275). The “unspeakable experience” here refers to rape and sexual assault; terms that were not founded or used in South Korea until the late 1980s. Rape, sexual violence, or sexual assault were referred to as simply “assault,” “family breaker,” and other terms to avoid any directly spoken sense of sexuality or gender related crimes. By refusing to call rape what it was, and deciding to displace or undermine sexual trauma, society made women’s experiences unspeakable and relied on their silence. Rape was “expressed in the form of silence, an ellipsis” until it was given a name (Jung 276). It was only in the 1990s that WWII sex slaves to the Japanese soldiers felt that they could testify, and although the fight for their justice was still framed as an attack on nationhood more than on these individual women’s bodies, it was the beginning of normalizing terms such as “rape,” “sexual violence,” and “sexual assault” and the speaking of them in public.

The fight against sexual violence remains the core of feminist activity in South Korea

today. Most notably, the 2016 Gangnam station femicide ignited more women to spread the awareness of sexual crimes rampant in South Korean society. Two years later, the #MeToo movement encouraged more women to name their trauma, to not only support victims but also speak their own victimhood. The #MeToo movement in South Korea was also a momentous time for feminism because it “provided historical ‘momentum’ for the feminist camp to promote its ‘separation’ (or ‘split’) from the male-centered progressive camp” (Hyun Mee Kim 251)⁹ and other progressive groups who have been slow to help feminist agendas (Hyun Mee Kim 255). Scholars such as Hyun Mee Kim locate the #MeToo movement as a time when “[d]irect activism reached its peak,” but feminism in South Korea still has a long way to go (258). One issue to consider is how unspeakable the term “feminism” is in South Korea. Women who identify as “feminist” face harsher backlash than women in the Global North, and while activism against sexual violence is fairly acceptable, activism against day-to-day injustices must deal with unfounded counterarguments about “man hating” and “reverse sexism”. South Korean feminism, in many ways, is still struggling with the issue of the unspeakable.

Why Write about Alternative Modes of Communication in Korea?

In the section on “Women in Korea,” I briefly discussed the invention of the Korean alphabet in 1443 and that Chinese writing was still preferred by aristocratic men and educated men. In fact, the use of Chinese writing only came to an end in 1894 when King

⁹ The group is named “progressive” in the sense that it has worked for the “democratization movement against military dictatorship and authoritarianism or has been carried out in the manner of adding women’s agenda to the universal human rights movement” (Hyun Mee Kim 251).

Kojong declared that “either han’gŭl [Korean alphabet] or a mixed Sino-Korean script [a combination of Korean and Chinese writing]” should be used in official documents (Hyun 19). Even though some 450 years had passed since the invention of the Korean alphabet, the decision was met with backlash from aristocratic men such as the Minister of Education, who in 1896 wrote the following memorandum to the King: “To cut the hair and wear Western clothes is to become savages and using the Korean Alphabet instead of Chinese character is not desirable. That is equivalent to making men beasts and destroying Confucian society. Under these circumstances, I plead to be relieved of my duty” (qtd. in Jayawardena 221). To use the Korean Alphabet—the written language of women—is to become an undesirable “beast”. To Westernize one’s appearance is to abandon one’s culture and to use the Korean alphabet is to dismantle the gender hierarchy. Despite its slow acceptance by aristocratic men, Korean writing is now the only written language used in both Koreas.

What is interesting in the invention of the Korean alphabet and its usage by women is that although women’s speech was severely restricted to the point of labeling it as one of the seven evils, written language, specifically writing using Korean alphabet, was dominated by women. Women became readers, writers, and translators and developed excellent command of the written Korean language while aristocratic men rejected Korean writing for almost half a millennium. The fact that written Korean was ignored by aristocratic men is a crucial element in the development of female writers because it allowed them space to write freely in a nation that did not want to hear or read women’s opinions. Women were often expected to exist in silence, and vernacular Korean was in effect “silent” because it was unimportant to aristocratic men. For instance, between 1795 and

1805 Lady Hyegyong wrote four memoirs entitled *Hanjungrok* (한중록) which translates to “Records Written in Silence [or] Memoirs Written in Silence” (Kim Haboush 122). In her four-part memoir, she narrates not only her life but also political affairs such as the death of her husband, Prince Sado, at the command of his own father, King Yeongjo. Writing about royal filicide in favour of the dead Prince Sado was a dangerous thing to do. To suggest an alternative narrative to the official record was to challenge the long-standing custom of history writing,¹⁰ and yet, Lady Hyegyong’s memoirs survived the political tensions of the time. Ja Hyun Kim Haboush attributes acceptance and survival of Lady Hyegyong’s memoir to her use of vernacular Korean: “testimonial narratives written in vernacular Korean . . . were not subjected to the same constraints [as] their classical Chinese counterparts [because] they were not legal documents” in the eyes of the male-run government (Kim Haboush 126). Women’s voices were suppressed, they could not learn to read or write in schools, and when they learned in secret, their writing carried no weight. Despite these obstacles to women speaking their opinion, they found ways to leave a mark through alternative forms of communication.

The diglossic history of Korea is noteworthy due to its gendered division:

diglossia describes a situation where two linguistic systems coexist in a functional distribution within the same speech community. One system is assigned the status of high variety (H), while the other receives the status of low variety (L). The H variety is used in more formal domains while the L variety is typically limited to oral informal communication. (Sayahi 1)

¹⁰ For example, *The Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty* and the *Journal of the Royal Secretariat*.

As the definition of diglossia suggests, there is usually a division between a high/formal variety and a low/oral variety, yet in Korea, this division was quite peculiar in that Chinese was not spoken by the people, only written, and only by male citizens of a higher class. Contrastingly, Korean was spoken by all but utilized mostly by those who could not learn Chinese writing. Thus, while the Chosŏn dynasty practiced a rigid control of silencing women, it also inadvertently developed the female literary genre through vernacular Korean writing. Theresa Hyun divides the “[v]ernacular writing styles [of women] in late Choson . . . into at least two main categories: *naeganch'e* and *kasach'e*. *Naeganch'e* refers to correspondence and was related to other types of prose writing by women” such as memoirs and diaries as seen in the example of Lady Hyegyong’s four-part memoir (13). *Kasach'e* (가사체) “developed as a lively and rich style to express the sorrows and joys of the lives of women in the inner rooms of Choson households” such as poetry, lyrics, novels, and moral tales (13). More specifically referred to as *Kyubang kasa* (“songs of the inner chambers” 규방가사), the long lyric poem genre was only for women, written in vernacular Korean with a set rhythmic pattern and passed down from mother to daughter in the form of a scroll (Häußler 142). This, however, does not mean that women only wrote literature belonging to these female genres or wrote only using the Korean alphabet. Women such as Nanseolheon Heo (1563 – 1589) wrote poetry in classical Chinese although “women of marked intelligence and artistic talent were thought to be ‘ill-fated’” (Ki Chung Kim 80). Expectedly, there are few surviving records of women’s *sijo* (Korean verse consisting of three lines 시조) but “an overwhelming quantity of *kyubang kasa*,” demonstrating the freedom to write in the female domain using the Korean alphabet (Häußler 143). Women were able to find other ways to speak

such as Korean vernacular writing despite the watchful eyes of patriarchal rule. Although *Han'gŭl* is now the official language of Korea, this is, on a larger scale, a relatively new part of Korea's history. For a long time, written *Han'gŭl* was "alternative". To investigate such alternative modes of languages which once used to be dominated and practiced by women precisely because their speech was not officially recorded, permitted, preserved, or studied, is a way of trying to learn through the cracks in patriarchal history and ways of speaking. It is in alternative modes of expression—and this dissertation will further introduce various other alternative forms of communications—that Korean women spoke and conversed with other women. The patriarchal foundation that shaped Korean women's indirect and "lesser" language has influenced the nature of feminist practice as well, making the task of listening to women's silence and alternative modes of communication still a relevant project.

Scholars often note how feminist agendas were not prioritized in many women's groups until the late 1980s or early 1990s. Kyungja Jung suggests that "[i]t is debatable whether the women's movement in the [19]80s truly represented women's voices" (270).

Similarly, Young-Hee Shim notes that "[t]hough there had been many active women's movements . . . there had been no feminist movement in the genuine sense until such [women's] organizations as the Women's Hot Line (1982–), Korean Womenlink (1983–), Korean Women's Associations United (1987–), and the Sexual Violence Counseling Center (1991–) were formed" (144). By claiming that local women's movements were active but not truly feminist, these criticisms conclude on the movements' lack of direct speech on feminist causes. But how does one judge if a feminist movement has succeeded or failed, was sufficient or insufficient? As Amrita Basu suggests, "[t]he

question of whether a women's movement has been successful is extremely complex. . . . Instead of focusing on the tangible gains that women have achieved, we might explore the more subtle ways in which women's movements have shaped popular consciousness” (13). We may need to ask what “tangible gains” we are asking these women to show. Indeed, feminism in South Korea until the 1990s was framed as a human rights movement rather than a women’s rights movement. Consequently, much of South Korean feminism is prone to being viewed as comparatively passive. The perception of an accidental feminism appropriately describes feminist agendas that intersected with but were overshadowed by nationalist, democratic, and other political agendas, but it inappropriately assumes that such feminism is not “genuine”. Currently, the standard for measuring “genuine” feminism relies on a comparison with Western feminism. Based on such a comparison, the local movements I gather to share in the following chapters may be deemed “insufficient”. Korean feminism until the twentieth and even the twenty-first century will appear to be lacking. But if we cease to think of Western feminism as the be-all and end-all, we can start to acknowledge Korea’s feminism as a movement that utilized alternative modes of communication in order to survive through the country’s patriarchal restriction, colonial aggression, and militant oppression.

In *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women’s Movements in Global Perspectives*

(1995) Basu suggests that

[w]hat initially motivates many women to organize is not necessarily a belief in the distinctive nature of their problems but rather a sense of shared oppression with other groups that have been denied their rights. Patriarchal domination is no more apt in and of itself to provide a catalyst to women's activism than class

exploitation is likely in and of itself to stimulate class struggle. (10)

What if Korean women's indirect feminist voice was a purposeful decision and a language used to survive political turmoil? To decolonize the country, recover from war, come to terms with the separation of the country into North Korea and South Korea, and escape military dictatorship, the citizens needed to unite under a common goal. As Basu asserts, "women's movements [in the third world] have endured because they have turned to new arenas and forms of activism" (15). Surviving separately from such causes would not have been an easy task at the time, yet Korea's feminism survived through these changes. For example, the *hoju* (호주) system which dictates that only men can legally be the head of a household was abolished in 2005, but it was a result of a "forty-year struggle," which proves that a feminist agenda was always at work even when it appeared to be hidden (Hyun Mee Kim 259). It is in this "hidden" language that feminism carried on its work to abolish the *hoju* (호주) system, just as it carried on its work during the Chosŏn Dynasty using Korean vernacular writing.

Feminist practice in South Korea continues to use alternative modes of communication. For example, after the Gangnam station femicide in 2016, women started "posting sticky notes bearing hand-written messages on surfaces in public spaces and uploading and sharing images of them through digital media" (Jinsook Kim 42). The public space of the station and digital space were flooded with images of activism, which prompted the government to take action. As Hyun Mee Kim notes, "[t]he feminist movement in Korea is [now] led by a generation of digital natives: autogenous online feminist groups called the 'netfemi'" (256). The purpose and prominence of feminist activity in the third stage is

clearer than in the second stage, but women are active online and in writing where their identities can be hidden. Openly identifying as a feminist is still largely socially unaccepted, so women have found creative ways to express their feminist values through other means. For example, Bul Lee, “one of South Korea’s leading contemporary artists,” creates paintings, sculptures, and installations that have grabbed international attention since the late 1980s (Nayeri). In her debut performance art in 1989 entitled *Abortion*, Lee protested South Korea’s anti-abortion law by hanging herself naked and upside down tied around with ropes. Following *Abortion*, Lee once again used her body as a tool to communicate the message of violence and oppression against the female body in *Cravings* (1989) and *Sorry for Suffering—You think I’m a puppy on a picnic?* (1990). In these two works, Lee dresses up in grotesque, monstrous costumes and wanders the streets of Tokyo and various parts of South Korea to expose “the distorted representation of women’s bodies and attacks false stereotypes about Asian women and false traditions that have been artificially created by an Orientalism based on racial, cultural, and othering presumptions” (Jeon 33). Despite such works that appear to contain feminist messages, Lee has repeatedly denied the label “feminist,” but as Keira McCarthy observes, “[t]his is consistent with many other East Asian woman artists of Lee Bul’s generation, who express discomfort with the feminist label and an emphasis on female identity” (McCarthy). In fact, Chi-suk Paek, “the director of the 1999 exhibition ‘Women’s Art Festival 99: The March of Patzzis’ noted that many of the young artists included in the feminist festival (a group which included Lee) personally rejected the title of feminist”. On an artistic level, this may be a strategic choice to avoid restricting artistic freedom. On a personal level, in the case of Lee, she shares that her upbringing as a

daughter of left-wing parents under dictator Park's regime "taught [her] certain strategies of survival. [She] learned that you can't be a revolutionary and hope to survive, but that you can remain elusive, iconoclastic, alert to the fissures that you can penetrate in order to destabilize a rigid, oppressive system" (Lee qtd. in McCarthy). Without naming or saying feminism, Lee articulates a feminist message through an alternative mode of communication: her body.

Another example of alternative forms of communication can be found in the paratexts written by translators of feminist literature in South Korea. Sang-Bin Lee notes how South Korean feminist translators have used paratexts—such as the title, preface, and footnotes—as an opportunity to “express a sense of transnational solidarity, . . . reveal their own feminist identity . . . [and] advise female readers to act together” (90). In his study, he found that titles were translated liberally in order to make the text more approachable, and the translators' prefaces shared their own feminist views, a conversation that is difficult to have in public in Korea. Much like Queen Sohye's translation of Confucius texts in 1475 that began with a preface advocating for women's education, South Korean women continue to find ways to communicate and express themselves in a society that is ill-prepared to listen. If we take into consideration only public speech, it would be hard to notice a presence of feminism in South Korea or to hear the many voices of women who have chosen to speak in alternative modes of communication. Taking into consideration the long history of women's uses of language in South Korea, how might we re-evaluate the diverse modes of communication by women that have been used and that continue to be used? I use the word “silence” to describe these diverse modes of speech because, regardless of the actual audibility of

sounds or noises, the words and non-words of Third world women are often ignored. In this sense, it is important to investigate further the multidimensional possibilities of understanding “silence” as the not-heard, non-dominant forms of expression rendered “silent”.

Alternative Communication as “Silence”

“There will never be silence” John Cage concluded after visiting the anechoic chamber at Harvard University (qtd. in MoMA). In a chamber empty of sound, Cage heard two things: his blood pulsing through his body and the sound of his nervous system. For those with hearing, sound, then, is inescapable as long as we are alive. According to Cage, silence, known as the absence of sound, is impossible, and silence—or what one perceives as silence—is a result of a purposeful choice. One decides that something or someone is silent by choosing to disengage with the sound that is present. Cage’s three movement composition, 4’33”, where the performer is not to play a single note for four minutes and thirty-three seconds demonstrates the impossibility of silence when unintended sounds—such as coughs, sniffles, and taps—fill the concert hall, and the pianist’s performance of turning the empty sheet music makes the listeners imagine the presence of music. In Cage’s piece, the *intent to listen* becomes a crucial element that turns silence into sound. Silence “is free of *our* [the listener’s] activity,” and when we choose to engage and actively listen, silence becomes sound (Cage and Kostelanetz 121).

With Cage’s understanding that silence “will never be,” defining silence becomes a challenging task. Dictionary definitions of silence as the “abstaining or refraining from speaking” (“Silence” *OED*); “a period without any sound” (“Silence” *Cambridge*); or a

“forbearance from speech or noise” (“Silence” *Merriam-Webster*) are not definitions that I propose in this dissertation. Here, silence focuses on the absence of a listener or the failure to listen, not the absence of sound. I use the term “silence” to indicate the listener’s decision to unhear, unlisten, and ignore the speechlessness, or other forms of communication, even speech, of a woman. In this sense, the production of sound is not the key in differentiating silence and speech because with an active listener, silence speaks volumes.

Our perception of silence throughout history has been a complicated one. For instance, it is easy to find contradictory statements on silence within the same religion, culture, or speech community. Muriel Saville-Troike notes that “[t]he relative value of speech versus silence in different speech communities may also be found in their proverbs” (10). For example, proverbs can suggest that silence is a wise, purposeful decision: “Unspoken words are the flowers of silence” (Japanese), “Speech is often repented, silence never” (Danish), and “Silence is a fence around wisdom” (Hebrew). Proverbs from the same speech community also indicate, however, that silence is a sign of oppression and submission: “Silence makes irritation grow” (Japanese), “Silence is a wonderful jewel for a woman, but she seldom wears it” (Danish), and “Silence is a woman’s best garment” (Hebrew) (Schipper). Throughout time, the role of silence has been ambivalent, and this contradictory treatment of silence continues to this day where, on the one hand, silence is revered as a healing agent, and, on the other hand, is likened to weakness and marginalization. These differing notions on silence let us know that silence is not singular in its meaning.

Silence has been studied more methodically in recent years. In *Perspectives on Silence* (1985), Saville-Troike examines silence by “differentiating the dimensions of code and channel” with the understanding that “silence is not a simple unit of communication but is composed of complex dimensions and structures” (5, 4).

		CHANNEL	
		Vocal	Nonvocal
CODE	Verbal	Spoken language	Written language, . . . Sign language, Whistle/drum languages, Morse code
	Nonverbal	Paralinguistic and prosodic features	Kinesics, Proxemics, Eye behaviour, Pictures, and Cartoons

(Saville-Troike 5)

In Saville-Troike’s figure, silence is divided into two channels: vocal and nonvocal, and two codes: verbal and nonverbal. What Saville-Troike demonstrates with the taxonomy of silence is that silence is not just nonverbal and/or nonvocal but that it can also be vocal and/or verbal. Saville-Troike’s study implies that silence speaks a message and can be heard or seen with the right intention and attention.

Women and “Silence”

The negative and oppressive effects of silence have long been a central discussion in women’s studies. In Christianity, as Bernard Dauenhauer and Søren Kierkegaard have separately discussed, silence of God and man is viewed as a divine conversation;

however, silence for women in Christianity has been forceful and oppressive. The *Bible* advises that “woman learn in silence with all subjection” because “Adam was first formed, then Eve,” and “Adam was not deceived [by the serpent], but the woman being deceived was in the transgression” (“Timothy Book One” 2:11; “Timothy Book One” 2:12-14). Women’s silence, then, is a consequence of being created after man and a punishment for committing the original sin. Accordingly, since the time of Eve, women are inescapably born into the fate of silence. While men were to govern the family, the nation, and the world, “women have long been expected to govern their tongue,” and if they did not, their tongue would be governed by men (Brox 173). On the one hand, when a woman spoke, she was a person who overstepped the construction of men=speech and women=silence. On the other hand, when a woman was silent, it was out of punishment or knowing her inferior social standing.

In order to escape such oppressive silences prescribed by patriarchal society, feminist scholars—such as Audre Lorde (1984), Adrienne Rich (1978), and bell hooks (1989)—have worked to establish a space for women to speak and to be heard. Lorde, in *Sister Outsider*, describes silence as “tyrannies [women] swallow day by day” (41). From a Black, lesbian woman’s perspective, Lorde discusses the dangers of staying silent and marginalized. She urges women to speak up and “[respond] to anger; the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence” (124). This “anger . . . of silence” encompasses the swallowed tyrannies of being a gendered, racialized minority whose silence has been forced and demanded by others (124). Breaking such a silence is to actualize “the transformation of silence into language and action . . . [into] self-revelation” (42).

Rich, a white, Jewish American lesbian, similarly discusses the importance of women's self-definition in "Taking Women Students Seriously," a talk she gave in 1978. Rich talks of the importance of breaking silences in "naming ourselves, uncovering the hidden, making ourselves present, [in order to] begin to define a reality which resonates to us" (*On Lies* 245). Instead of conforming to a reality that is defined by others, Rich urges women to create their own reality—a reality that responds to their lived experience—through speaking up. Of the many ways to break silence, Rich suggests that women speak with one another. She describes women-to-women speech as "[o]ne of the most powerful social and political catalysts of the past decade," i.e., the decade in which women's consciousness raising became key to the United States feminist movement (*On Lies* 259). But Rich urges the audience to not just speak but also to hear what the women are saying as they come out from under silence: "I begin tonight by urging each of you to take responsibility for the voicing of her experience, to take seriously the work of listening to each other and the work of speaking, whether in private dialogue or in larger groups" (*On Lies* 260). For Rich, to be silent in order to candidly listen is to give rise to another woman's voice and, thus, listening can be an impetus for change. The importance of listening is also found in Rich's poem "Cartographies of Silence" (*The Dream of a Common Language* 16).

The scream
of an illegitimate voice

It has ceased to hear itself, therefore

it asks itself

How do I exist?

This is the silence I wanted to break in you

I had questions but you would not answer

I had answers but you could not use them

This is useless to you and perhaps to others (18)

In line five, the acknowledgement of a voice/scream and the act of listening is likened to existence. To be unheard is to cease to exist; to be heard is to make an “illegitimate voice” legitimate (line 2). Moreover, the “silence [the speaker] wanted to break” refers to the “scream/ of an illegitimate voice,” indicating that silence is not an absence of sound but a failure to listen (lines 6, 1-2). Hence, Rich urges women to listen to each other as a method for turning unrecognizable screams into words.

Correspondingly, bell hooks in *Talking Back* examines the importance of “woman talk” or “woman speech” (5, 6). Remembering at her childhood, hooks recalls listening to the language of Black women “so rich [and] so poetic,” and she notes the difference between white women’s silence and Black women’s silence (5):

Within feminist circles, silence is often seen as the sexist “right speech of womanhood”—the sign of woman's submission to patriarchal authority. This emphasis on woman’s silence may be an accurate remembering of what has taken place in the household of women from WASP [White Anglo-Saxon Protestant]

backgrounds in the United States, but in black communities (and diverse ethnic communities), women have not been silent. Their voices can be heard. Certainly, for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard. (6)

hooks locates white women's silence in close relation to the patriarchy and its hold on women's speech as previously examined in this paper; opposingly, Black women's silence is described as a struggle to be heard, to "compe[l] listeners," even when sound/speech is present. hooks points out that women's silence is not a universal oppression. In certain ethnic communities, women (e.g., African American women as discussed by hooks) are not forced into silence by their people, or silence is not solely recommended to women as it is a desirable feature for both men and women (e.g., Taoism). For hooks, a marginalized group's silence in a Western world is an attempt to be heard in a place that does not allow space for intersectional voices. In some instances, silence was never a problem to be solved, and in other instances, silence was never an issue of voice, but an issue of audibility.

In a similar vein, Ann Russo (2013) reflects on white feminists' accountability to speech and silence. Coming to the understanding that her ease with speech and taking up of space originates from having been given an audience and space, Russo turns to the importance of active listening:

One of the simplest, most profound, and yet consistently difficult practices that disrupts the automatic entitlement to hegemonic speech is active listening.

Stepping back from speaking and stepping up to active listening is one method of

undermining the presumed entitlement to be at the center of the conversation, to speak in universals, and to determine the direction of the conversation and agenda. (36)

As a solution to disrupting the hierarchical structure of speech based on gender and race, Russo, like hooks, suggests a change in “the direction of the conversation” or the “direction of our speech” (Russo 36; hooks, “*Talking Back*” 6). To change the direction of speech, one must listen for communication from directions considered unimportant. Like Rich, Russo establishes active listening as an act of solidarity.

In an edited collection, *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound* (2013), Sheena Malhotra and Aimée Carrillo Rowe re-examine silence “as a space of possibility” by attempting to unlearn communication practices heavily influenced by Western teachings wherein “voice has traditionally been elevated as a privileged object of study” (2, 3). It has commonly been understood that to speak is to participate politically, engage socially, compete academically, and testify one’s experience actively.

Opposingly, to keep silent has been understood as powerlessness, incapability, and political and social inactivity. Such an “equation presumes a political imperative: for an individual or group who is silenced to gain power, they must activate voice in order to resist and transform the conditions of their oppression. Sometimes an intermediary (a more powerful representative) can ‘speak for’ the subaltern or marginalized classes” (Malhotra and Rowe 1). The political imagination is satisfied by making a silent subaltern subject speak or by speaking for a marginalized person/group. It allows the person of authority to feel more powerful and civilized as they speak for the subaltern who, presumably, cannot speak.

In 1988, Gayatri Spivak famously concluded that the subaltern “cannot be heard or read” and that “[t]he subaltern cannot speak” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 104), but in 2010, Spivak revisited this statement which has often been taken out of context and misunderstood: “My point was not to say that they [the subaltern] couldn’t speak, but that, when someone did try to do something different, it could not be acknowledged because there was no institutional validation” (“In Response” 228). As Spivak emphasizes, it is “validation,” or lack thereof, that silenced Bhubaneswari, not her suicide (“In Response” 228). What is of greater significance in Spivak’s conclusion is not that the “subaltern cannot speak,” but that they “cannot be heard” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 104). The listening that these feminist scholars speak of amounts to learning to “read silence” (Malhotra and Rowe 14).

Against Stereotypes and Epistemic Violence

Like Malhorta and Rowe, in her study of *Articulate Silences* (1993) King-Kok Cheung criticizes the Eurocentric preference for speech over silence and the “Anglo-American feminists who valorize voice and speech indiscriminately” (1). Focusing on Asian American authors’ use of silence, King-Kok Cheung hopes to correct the misconception of “Asian quietness” as a negative trait. Cheung takes issue with “revisionist Asian American literary male critics who refute stereotypes by renouncing silence entirely” (1). In an attempt to fit into the white majority and to go against the model minority stereotype of being quiet and “lovable for being a race of sissies,” many East Asian North Americans feel the pressure to break out of their shell, or perhaps their skin, through

speech (Chin qtd. in Cheung 171). This pressure creates “rifts . . . among marginalized groups themselves” (Cheung 168).

The Western world imagined an orient that was pleasing to them based on little knowledge. The construction of the “Orient” by the West is studied in depth by Edward W. Said in *Orientalism* (1978). Even though he is concerned primarily with what is called “the Middle East” as viewed by Europe, Said also talks of America’s involvement that the “recent Japanese, Korean, and Indochinese adventures ought now to be creating a more sober, more realistic 'Oriental' awareness” (25). Asians were preferred when represented by the small, quiet, and efficient people who did not stray from what is now referred to as the model minority stereotype. In one of the earliest publications of Asian American literary anthologies, *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974), editors Frank Chin, Jeffery Chan, Lawson Inada, and Shawn Wong advocated for the “whole voice” to firmly represent Asian American authors and their literary works (xii). In the preface, the editors rejected “the stereotypical image of the effeminate Asian male” and silence as one of the reasons why “Asian Americans [have] bolstered racism and perpetuated cultural invisibility” (Song and Srikanth 9; Cheung 7). As recently as 2016, we find a certain kind of repetition of the handling of silence in Timothy Yu’s *100 Chinese Silences* (2016). Yu took on the challenge of writing 100 parodies of poems by Western poets such as Billy Collins and Ezra Pound for their use of oriental tropes. He was first inspired in 2011 when he heard Collins recite “Grave” which romanticizes “the one hundred kinds of silence/ according to the Chinese belief” (Collins, lines 7 – 8). When Collins was done reciting “Grave,” he shared that he had “just made up” the existence of one hundred Chinese silences (qtd. in Yu, “Chinese Silence, Asian American

Critique” 614). Silence as a stereotyped characteristic, an oppressive tool, and a key factor for preferring Asians over other minoritized groups is mocked in *100 Chinese Silences*. Silence is likened to a “job” and a contract to abide by if one wishes to remain in the West (“Chinese Silence No. 14” line 2). In “Chinese Silence No. 22”, which is a parody of Collins’ “Monday”, Yu dismisses “the Silence of the Well-Adjusted Minority, / the Girlish Silence of Reluctant Acquiescence, / [and] the Silence that by No Means Should Be Mistaken for Bitterness” (lines 24-26). Here, Yu criticizes the representation of Asians as coy people but also feminizes Asian silence as “Girlish” and compliant (line 25). Yu correlates speech with a masculinity that should be strived for, and silence with a femininity that should be avoided. Yu goes on to criticize Collins’ cultural appropriation that desires to see the Chinese people as silent:

Just think—

before I invented the 100 Chinese silences,
 the Chinese would have had to stay indoors
 and gabble about civil war and revolution
 or go outside and build a really loud wall.

And when I say a wall, [. . .]

I mean a noisy wall of language (“Chinese Silence No. 22” lines 31 – 39)

Imaged as a border-like “noisy wall of language,” Chinese speech is effectively separated from white speech (line 39). Silence is described as a condition that allows Asians to

freely roam the streets of North America and a restriction that excludes them from political participation (line 33, 34). To speak is to build up a “noisy wall,” thereby prohibiting the Asian bodies’ entry into North America (line 39). Keeping silent is to comply with the Asian stereotype. In Yu’s book of poetry, there are witty parodies and sharp criticisms of the stereotype of Asians as silent; nonetheless, there is also an effeminizing of Asian silence. Asian silence has been rejected partly due to the Western ear, yet in an attempt to “dispel stereotypes by repudiating silence entirely,” Asian silence is defined negatively through “femininity and inscrutability” (Cheung 7, 169). By figuring Asians as noisily responding to the stereotypes, Yu assumes that silence cannot be powerful.

In *Articulate Silences* (1993), Cheung emphasizes that her work “to unfix mindsets and retool the critical apparatus” is not an attempt to “reify silence as an Asian trait but [a] wish to explore its myriad guises and senses, . . . to demystify the stereotype” (168, 18). Studying the works of three Asian North American women authors, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa, and Hisaye Yamamoto, Cheung investigates the use of silence that is nuanced and meaningful. Ultimately, Cheung urges that “[w]e must allow works by diverse authors to re-form our deep-seated assumptions and even pedagogies—particularly about who can speak and what is not heard . . . [N]ot just prohibition against speech but also coercion to speak can block articulation” (168-69). I similarly hope to work against both external stereotypes, a coercion to speak, and internal pressure to prove oneself to the Western world against such stereotypes. Instead, I try to read and value what is being said, and value the forms of expression offered without assuming that speech or silence is the more valuable form of expression.

This dissertation begins with a chapter on Nam-Joo Cho's 2016 novel translated in 2018, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, which sparked a new wave of feminist movement in South Korea. Instead of creating a character who is clearly articulating a feminist cause, Cho finds ways to speak of gendered injustices through alternative modes of communications such as silence, howls, psychotic breaks, and footnotes. Jiyoung's modes of expression externalize what is thought and felt by many South Korean women but is unsaid. The novel ultimately asks readers to hear the unsaid, react to Jiyoung's experienced injustices, and turn what Jiyoung struggled to articulate into a collective act of solidarity, voice, and feminist action.

The next chapter moves onto Nora Okja Keller's 1997 novel, *Comfort Woman*. Here, I study alternative modes of communication which have been disregarded or considered to be less important than public and political speech. I specifically investigate the private speech of song, shamanism, and touch used by the protagonist, Soon Hyo, and argue that her alternative language refuses to fit into the mold of dominant, male, colonial speech. Using the alternative language of song, shamanism, and touch, Soon Hyo communicates feminist and postcolonial messages that emphasize female solidarity, transcultural connections, and remembrance and healing of war atrocities committed against South Korean women.

The third chapter discusses Kang Han's *The Vegetarian*, originally published in South Korea in 2007 and later in English in 2015. In this chapter, I consider cultural, historical, and local feminism to illuminate how the protagonist is not passive or silent but an active agent who is not only a victim but also a culprit riddled with guilt. I trace traditional tropes and connect this modern novel, *The Vegetarian*, to its cultural and historical

background. I argue against the reading of Yeong-hye as a voiceless rebel and analyse *The Vegetarian* using a local perspective. I move beyond defining Yeong-hye and her choices symbolically and listen to her voice and bodily performance as alternative forms of communication. Alongside the novel, I also introduce local feminism and feminists who similarly have been unheard.

1 Transforming the Unsaid into Action

in Nam-Joo Cho's *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*

On January 26, 2018, South Korean prosecutor Ji-Hyun Seo called out fellow prosecutor Tae-Geun Ahn for sexually assaulting her in 2010 and subsequently demoting and relocating her. Seo posted a testimony on the company intranet entitled “Confession” (“고백”) that aimed to formally lay out the facts. The post described her sense of powerlessness in the fight against Ahn and the male-dominated institution which protected him. She also expressed her disappointment with family and colleagues who advised her to remain silent. What is interesting about her post, for my purposes in this first chapter, is that after “Confession,” Seo included a short story told from a third-person point of view about a protagonist who is simply referred to as “Woman”. Seo’s short story mentions Nam-Joo Cho’s 2016 novel, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* multiple times and resembles the novel in style and message in that it speaks of a woman who could not find the support to voice her hardships. Although Seo’s story is specific to her experience and speaks of a working woman in an occupation often considered an upper-middle class job, Woman’s anonymity functions as a blank space for every woman to insert themselves into. There is an evident difference between Seo’s testimony that lays out the facts about her specific workplace injustice and the short story with an imaginary Woman who is gendered but anonymous. Through her intranet post’s non-fiction and fiction accounts, Seo achieves a better understanding of her individual experience which occurred in a secluded institution. Her non-fictional account is of her individual experience in a profession that may feel remote from many readers’ experiences, but in her fictional account, regardless of Woman’s profession, her experience of sexual

harassment and gendered injustice is all too familiar and acts as a representative case for people who have experienced similar power dynamics.

In Seo's short story, *Woman* is a working mother who frequently bites her lips to keep her silence after being sexually assaulted. Although she knows she was wronged, she ultimately ends up blaming herself. *Woman* desperately needs someone to stand by her and let her know that it is not her fault: "The story of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* still passed through *Woman*'s mind. If someone had told me 'It is not your fault. Not your fault.' like the anonymous woman from '*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*,' would I have been able to endure a bit better?" (Seo). As a once silent and silenced woman, Seo repeats the message from *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* and affirms the importance of solidarity. Seo became the key figure in the #MeToo movement in South Korea four months after the term first went viral in the United States and two years after the publication of Cho's novel.

While the #MeToo movement was about breaking silence and articulating trauma, the development of the South Korean #MeToo movement also captured the message of what I view as "silent solidarity". How can a movement known for breaking silence also be active in a silent way? Silent solidarity is expressed in the translation of North America's #MeToo movement into the #WithYou movement which was active in South Korea and Japan. While #MeToo required a survivor to speak publicly, #WithYou did not require one to speak openly about a sexual assault. In comparison, the United States branched out to movements such as "WhyIDidntReport," "ChurchToo," "WhyIStayed," "UsToo," and "Time's Up". The distinct directions taken in the United States in comparison to South Korea also show the different ways of "speaking" feminism. While the follow up movement seen in the United States created more spaces for survivors to speak,

#WithYou gave room for those who did not feel comfortable speaking of trauma to still join the movement and show that they were listening to and believing those who did break their silence. Although the “silence breakers” played a crucial role in South Korea, the silent supporters also played a major and, I argue, active role.¹¹ The phrase #WithYou made the movement more approachable in a conservative country where talk of sexual harassment and abuse could be “disgraceful” (“Interview with Prosecutor Seo”). This kind of identification is what I categorize as “collective silence,” a form of solidarity that is not centered around individual testimonial speech but that enables the extent of the unspeakable to become public and supports individual speech. With growing support, and the encouragement that she was taken seriously, Seo agreed to appear on camera three days after her intranet post. She began and ended the interview with this message:

I came here because there was something that I must say. Even though I have been a victim of sexual violence, for almost eight years, I wondered if this happened because I did something wrong. I thought that something very disgraceful had happened to me, and I suffered a lot from guilt. I came here to tell victims that “it is not your fault”. It took me eight years to realize that.

(“Interview with Prosecutor Seo,” 03:14-03:48)

The January 29, 2018, interview with JTBC News made Seo’s story a nationwide debate: her eight years of silence, a silence spoken through her post on her company’s intranet, became a silence publicly told. Through Seo’s testimony, short story, and Cho’s novel, the public *heard* the silence experienced by women violated by patriarchy and

¹¹ In 2017, Time magazine named “Silence Breakers” the “Person of the Year” in light of the #MeToo movement (Zacharek et al).

participated in the #WithYou movement. With the growing support of listeners of such silence, more unspoken injustices were turned into speech. In this chapter, I trace how silence, an alternative mode of communication, could play a crucial role in speech and collective feminist actions by analyzing the omissions and gaps in the protagonist's speech and argue that the unsaid is a form of communication in Cho's novel, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*. This chapter will begin by addressing the meaning of silence then analyze how the novel brought about change in public policy. Cho's novel will also be read with a focus on the erasure of women from South Korean society and the capitalist system.

1.1 The Unsaid and the Unheard

When *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (translated from Korean to English in 2018) is approached through Western eyes, the protagonist's narrative may sound like a belated repetition of feminist struggles that have already been discussed in the second wave of feminism. The protagonist and other women in the novel appear to be discovering how patriarchy works and doing so in ways that look like consciousness-raising practices in white liberal feminism's second wave. Jiyoung is also diagnosed as "mad" for her divergence from the roles expected of her under Neo-Confucian patriarchy and the effects on women of the hyper-development of capitalism in South Korea under the neoliberal globalization of capital. Women's writing and feminist scholarship in the West had already analyzed women's unpaid labour under patriarchy (see, e.g., Gayle Rubin's "Traffic in Women" [1975]) as well as the intersection of women's madness and oppression under patriarchy. Most notably, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra

Gilbert and Susan Gubar demonstrated that “despite the obstacles” of the only roles reserved for (middle-class) women, “those twin images of angel and monster . . . women were not only writing, they were conceiving fictional worlds in which patriarchal images and conventions were severely, radically revised . . . [and] the old silent dance of death becomes a dance of triumph, a dance into speech, a dance of authority” (44).

Almost 30 years after *The Madwoman in the Attic*, this 2016 South Korean novel speaks of silence broken by a “madwoman”. While *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* employs similar tropes to other feminist fictions of madwomen, Cho’s novel deals with silence and breaking silence in its own form because South Korean women have experienced culturally and historically different hardships and different stages of feminism than women in the West. Rather than a belated repetition of Western feminism of the past, Cho’s novel is timely in its own local feminist trajectory. For example, a lack of terminology until the 1980s to call “rape” or “sexual assault” for what it is meant that victims/survivors had to find other means of expressing their trauma. In instances like these, it is crucial to listen beyond the words that are spoken because the “male template of speech” cannot be the only way to listen (Jackson 999). It is important to notice the silence of the unsaid and the silence of the unheard.

In *Qualitative Studies of Silence*, scholars use the term “unsaid” (Murray and Lambert 89; Zerubavel 59) and “unheard” (Frosh 254; Coles and Glenn 148) to acknowledge that there are important messages we frequently fail to notice. The silence of the unsaid and the silence of the unheard are two types of alternative modes of communication that I discuss in this chapter— “alternative” in that we live in a world where communication through speech is the norm. The unsaid refers to omissions, gaps, and absences. For

example, Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* shares how upon researching women, she noticed in the unnamed library the absence of books about women written by women.

¹² Noticing this absence is to notice what is institutionally unsaid. For Woolf, women's voices were signalled through their absence, or through what Zerubavel has more recently referred to as the "presence of non-speech" rather than an "absence of speech" ("Listening" 60).¹³

In South Korea, there has been a "semiotic superfluity" around male experiences and a "culturally silent" attitude towards the experiences of South Korean women and sexual minorities (a "lexical gap" or silence of my own in this dissertation, to which I will return in my Conclusion). Such gaps and cultural silences, when properly noted, articulate a message even when direct speech is not made (Zerubavel, "Listening" 65). For the purposes of my dissertation, what matters is that we notice the unsaid just as much as we focus on what is directly spoken. In Cho's novel, Jiyoung may frustrate many readers who may think "say something!" or "do something!". Nonetheless, what is not spoken by Jiyoung guides readers to look at the gaps in society and to converse about the unsaid. As Murray and Lambert emphasize, "[n]oticing what is missing is the first step to understanding what those absences accomplish" (92). In utilizing gaps, omissions, and absences, Cho's novel prompts readers to take "the first step" in voicing the unsaid and ultimately transform silence into speech.

A number of feminist scholars provide helpful models for studying Cho's novel. For

¹² Woolf does not name a specific university or a university library. Instead she uses "Oxbridge" and "Fernham" to allude to certain locations (10).

¹³ See also Zerubavel's *The Elephant in the Room* (2006).

example, Patti Duncan argues in *Tell This Silence, Asian American Writers and the Politics of Speech* (2004): that silence in Asian American authors' writings functions as a way to "protest their exclusion" and "produce counter narratives of resistance" (217). In the silence of the unsaid, the portion of speech that the "speaker" intends to say or wishes to communicate is not verbalized. Conversely, the silence of the unheard is an audible expression which despite its audibility is either unnoticed or ignored by the listener and therefore rendered silent. The modes of communications used in Cho's novel could be considered "silent"—as in non-speech—in that they may not be articulated through words or the mouth of a "sane" person. In *Articulate Silences*, King Kok Cheung has examined the various ways in which Asian North American women writers use silence "both as a theme and as a method" (4). Cheung gives various examples of "[t]he art of silence . . . [which] covers various 'strategies of reticence' (Janis Stout's term)—irony, hedging, coded language, muted plots—used by women writers to tell the forbidden and name the unspeakable" (4). In this sense, alternative modes of communications purposely serve as both demonstrating the gaps in language to express women's experiences and also the exclusion of the speakers themselves.

Writing from an Australian feminist's context with the understanding that language, in many cultures, is a phallogocentric tradition, Dale Spender in *Man Made Language* (1985) notes that, "[o]ur foremothers may have generated similar meanings¹⁴ to our own but as a muted group without access to the production of legitimated language their meanings may also have remained invisible" or unheard (144). Contrary to previous notions of

¹⁴ These are "meanings which are at variance with the patriarchal order and patriarchal tradition" (Spender 144).

silence as inferior to speech, silence has also been interpreted as a healing agent (Picard), a form of resistance (P. Duncan), and a language of the soul (Corbin). In *Organizing Silence: A World of Possibilities* (1998) Robin Clair asks how “silenced voices can be organized in ways to be heard” and uses the formulation “silence \wedge language” to indicate that the two are in an interconnected relationship in a shared space (xiii, 10). Silence, then, is not the opposite of speech—as in passivity and non-expression—but instead an “expressive activity” (xiv).

1.2 From a Novel to Policy and Law

Jiyoung is a common name in South Korea: “Anyone [Any South Korean] would know someone whose name is Jiyoung. In fact, Jiyoung is the most common name given to [South Korean] women in 1982” (“누구나 주위에 지영이라는 이름을 지닌 이가 있었을 것이다. 실제로 1982년에 태어난 여성들의 이름 중 가장 많은 것이 김지영 이란다.” G. Kim 179; my trans.). Although the novel follows the life of a middle-class woman, Cho’s decision to create a character who is rather colourless with the most common name in South Korea demonstrates her intention to make Jiyoung represent South Korean woman in a similar generation. *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* is a story about a mother in her thirties, framed by the account of a male psychiatrist. The novel first introduces Jiyoung as an apparently mentally unstable character because she occasionally speaks in the voices of other women. Then, the plot goes back to Jiyoung’s childhood to narrate her life as a daughter, an employee in a marketing firm, a wife, a daughter-in-law, and a mother. This chronological plot line moves through representative roles for South Korean women, which ultimately culminate in Jiyoung’s mental breakdown as she

attempts to resist these roles. The novel places the protagonist in the present day where the country is said to have progressed according to globalized capitalism's standards. Despite economic advancements, however, as Prosecutor Seo's and Cho's stories indicate, the country is still buried under the traditions of patriarchy.

The reception of the novel has been polarized in South Korea where openly being a feminist has been controversial. For example, when a small number of female South Korean celebrities posted a picture of their copy of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* on social media, articles were published about these women.¹⁵ Male fans threatened to stop supporting these celebrities and posted videos of themselves burning pictures of these women. *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* caused a flurry of rage for different reasons. On the one hand, many readers identified with Jiyoung, and the book quickly became a bestseller in South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and China ("Overview of International Response"). On the other hand, the mere publication of such a book was criticized. Publicly mocking the novel soon became a source of entertainment that some companies used as a marketing tactic. For example, in an advertisement for an ice cream called "Piggie Bar [돼지바]," a woman is reading a book entitled "Piggie Bar, Born 1983 [83년생 돼지바]". The title is followed by the phrase "People say I am an attention freak," ("사람들이 나한테 '관중' 이 래" Y. Park; my trans.), which mocks the phrase included on the back cover of the South Korean novel: "People call me 'mum-roach'" ("사람들이 나보고 맘충이 래" Cho

¹⁵ See, for example, Soon Ji Lee's article, "The things that happened to Irene when she confessed to reading *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*" ("'82년생 김지영'을 읽었다고 밝힌 아이린에게 생긴 일"; my trans.) and Eun Soo Han's article, "*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, Yumi Kim, feminist controversy...Irene, Seol-hyun, Sooyoung also suffer from hateful comments" ("'82년생 김지영' 정유미, 페미니스트 논란...아이린·설현·수영도 악플 시달려"; my trans.)

back cover). Counter-novels such as Sang-Yun Lee's *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982 and Yoo Simin, Born 1974* narrate the struggles of a male protagonist's life. Crowdfunding efforts supported books such as *A Book for Male Rights in a World of Male Discrimination, Kim Jihoon, Born 1990* and reached over three times its target fund in a week (남성차별 시대 남성 인권을 위한책, 90년생 김지훈. D. Park; my trans.). The project promised supporters a book written by an outsourced author with illustrations and a "feminist stone," i.e., a stone with the word "feminism [페미니즘]" written on it "as a satire on the commercialization of feminism" and feminism itself ("페미니즘 스톤은 페미니즘을 상품화하는 것에 대한 풍자성 아이템입니다." qtd. in "*A Book for Male Rights*"; my trans.). Although this product was never delivered, the title and concept were used by Sang-Yun Lee, again, to publish another counter (male) narrative: *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982 and Kim Jihoon, Born 1990*. In these male responses to Cho's novel, Cho's message is reduced to a complaint. The narration of women's daily injustices is misinterpreted as initiating a gender war when Cho's novel is simply introducing a narrative that has been "culturally silen[ced]" in a pool of "semiotic superfluity" of male bildungsroman (Zerubavel, "Listening" 65). Cho's novel ignited public debates on feminism and amplified the untold stories of gender inequalities in twenty-first-century South Korea—stories that were considered not important enough to voice, or if voiced, not important enough or hear. The novel ultimately speaks for many women whose stories are as "ordinary" as Jiyoung's and her generation.

Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982 questions the "natural" role of women in South Korea. In an interview, Cho shared: "I think that people who could not figure out what was wrong, or

people who did not think to voice out why something felt unpleasant or threatening saw that the novel wrote about these issues as serious problems and realized that ‘I went through the same situation too’ and started to talk or express their opinions” (“I wrote”). Slowly, the absence of female bildungsroman that had been ignored and the voices of Jiyongs from all around the country were beginning to be heard in a public debate as worthy of discussion.

A year after the novel’s publication in South Korea, copies of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* were gifted to 300 members of the National Assembly by Taesup Keum, a former lawmaker (“Keum”). Politician Hoe-Chan Roh also gave a copy to President Moon (2017-2022) with the message “Please embrace Kim Jiyoung, born in 1982” (“82년생 김지영을 안아 주십시오.”qtd. in W. Park; my trans.). The #MeToo Movement in South Korea prompted “concrete legislative proposals and partial legal reform” (Hasunuma and Shin 98), but even more indicative of the power of Cho’s novel in the movement is that in 2020, the Justice Party of South Korea stated that “as of 2018, there were 1.85 million Kim Jiyongs who were forced to put an end to their careers” and announced a list of ten commitments to reform women’s policies under the title “Responding to *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* and #MeToo for a Transition into a Gender Equal Society” (“수많은 김지영들, 고용단절 여성은 2018년 기준 약 185만명입니다” W. Park; my trans.; “82년 김지영, 미투 응답으로 성평등 사회로의 전환” “Responding”; my trans.). Various parties introduced the “Kim Jiyoung Law” in 2017 that aimed to lessen the gap in gendered pay and to reform laws such as parental leave and childcare. The injustices that Jiyoung faces such as the setback in her career and workplace sexual harassment are

some of the issues that have been addressed in the “Kim Jiyoung Law”. I turn to the novel itself below.

1.3 Noticing the Unsaid and the Unheard

Jiyoung’s life is lived in Neo-Confucius, patriarchal institutions. The novel begins and ends with the male psychiatrist’s voice that frames Jiyoung’s narrative as a psychiatric case study. The book is divided into six parts: “Autumn, 2015,” “Childhood, 1982-1994,” “Adolescence, 1995-2000,” “Early Adulthood, 2001-2011,” “Marriage, 2012-2015,” and “2016” (Cho Contents). Each chapter is strictly placed within the boundaries of the home, school, family, and hospital. Analogous to Michel Foucault’s investigation of normalized power in France that begins with the “carceral archipelago” and expands to the “society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, [and] the education-judge,” Jiyoung’s identity as a woman is formed through her relationship with teacher-judges, doctor-judges, employer-judges, and patriarchal-judges of society (“Discipline and Punish” 1412, 1418). In effect, her life represents the punishing position of women born into South Korean society in her generation. In her relationship with authority figures, Jiyoung’s “psychotic” bursts of speech are regulated on the road to recovery through the patriarchal system that has created and perpetuated her condition. Her life begins a new chapter with every new institution where she is normalized to her inferior position.

Instead of the term “patriarchy,” Gayle Rubin in “The Traffic in Women” uses the term “sex/gender system,” stating that “the use of the term [patriarchy] ought to be confined to the ecclesiastical offices and authorities to which the term initially referred” because “patriarchy” is not the most accurate term to note gender inequalities and its systems

(40). It is true that “patriarchy” as a term has been broadened and perhaps overused in the West. While the term stems from the Greek word “*πατριαρχία* [patriarkhēs],” (patriarchy) in using this term, I refer to patriarchy in Korean: ga-bu-jang-je (가부장제). Ga-bu-jang-je has a deep-seated relationship with Confucius belief, which advocates for a strict division of labour according to gender. This division gives men unquestioned power and dominance in state and family affairs: “[t]he traditional Korean family was a typical patriarch[y]” (K.K. Lee 256). Neo-Confucianism was adopted “as the state religion of Korea” during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), and although the Joseon dynasty is already over a century behind us, “[t]he behaviour patterns of the Korean family are still predominantly determined by Confucianism” (K.K. Lee 249; Rhi 285).

Like most of the female characters in the novel, Jiyoung appears to submit to the rules of patriarchy until she begins to speak in the voices of other women. However, even when she is not speaking through the voices of other women, her disagreement with patriarchy can be found in her expressions that are often overlooked. Howls, for example, break Jiyoung’s silence but are sounds that do not fully cross over to speech. Cho finds ways to strengthen the female character while criticizing patriarchal boundaries by using what Zerubavel would call the “presence of non speech” (60). Instead of portraying a protagonist who fights with her words, Cho uses silence, the wordless howls of a mother, and footnotes to narrate and contextualize the thoughts of the protagonist. For example, while most of the female characters are given inferior social positions to those of the male characters, female characters continuously have meaningful and supportive discussions. Furthermore, even minor female characters are given names when only one male character, Jiyoung’s husband, Daehyun, is named. Cho shared that, “[t]o

symbolically show how the world erased women's names, [she] wanted the novel to fail the Bechdel test if it were applied to men" (Cho qtd. in J-H. Han). The Bechdel test is a test "to determine a film's feminist credentials" and must satisfy "three basic requirements; the film has at least two female characters; these two female characters within the film talk to each other; and what the two female characters in the film talk about has nothing to do with a man. In some versions of the rule, the two female characters must have names" ("Bechdel Test").¹⁶ Indeed, when reading the novel, one can easily notice that the male characters are nameless and do not converse. The novel also deals with the issue of omitted names through the hoju system that made it "compulsory for a newborn to take the patriarch's last name" until 2008 when the law was finally abolished (Cho footnote, 119). Cho tests gendered conventions in South Korea through the omission of male characters' names and meaningful interactions amongst female characters that shine light on the exclusion of women as a societal "norm".

Cho uses Jiyoung's focalization as a way into the private speech of women, making her both a witness of and a participant in female acts of solidarity and speech. For instance, in elementary school, lunch is served to the boys first, then the girls. "Naturally," thinks Jiyoung, who eats slowly, "the students who were routinely told off for eating slowly were mostly girls" (33). Disturbed by the unfair order, several girls "arranged a meeting by exchanging gestures, glances and short phrases" (34). And although Jiyoung has "a hard time voicing her complaints", she is made part of the group where she comes to

¹⁶ The Bechdel test first appeared in a comic strip, "Dykes to Watch Out For" which covered lesbians in popular culture and feminism, by Alison Bechdel in 1985. The Bechdel test was, however, popularized in the 2000s (Selisker 505). The test predominantly focuses on binary gender roles and pronouns. In South Korea, at the moment, there are no gendered pronouns used beyond he/him (그) and she/her (그녀).

understand why she is feeling so frustrated (34): “Number one on the roster was a boy, everything began with the boys, and that felt like the right, natural thing . . . Just as we never question why men’s national registry numbers begin with a ‘1’ and women’s begin with a ‘2’” (36). The repeated use of the word “natural” throughout the novel highlights the *unnaturalness*, or arbitrariness, of the hierarchies of patriarchal society. The word “natural” comes to sound ironic, signaling awareness of the gap between what is said to be the “natural” order and what is actually the patriarchally-made order.

Women’s frustration with this patriarchally-made order in the novel is rarely expressed in speech; rather, it is expressed through alternative modes of communication that are unheard, unnoticed, or ignored. When Jiyoung’s mother, Misook, is pregnant with a daughter for the third time in a patriarchy that does not value daughters or mothers who produce only daughters, she goes to the clinic alone to abort the child. After the abortion, she does not speak to her husband or her mother-in-law about it; instead, “she howled like an animal that had lost its young to a beast” (19). Only Misook cries for the unborn child, and she finds an alternative language to voice her sadness. Misook speaks to her gynecologist through animalistic sounds. Behind her wordless cry is the voice of her husband telling her that thoughts of another daughter are “ideas from the devil” and the voice of a mother-in-law who repeatedly says, “You should have a son. You must have a son. You must have at least two sons” (18, 17). Pressure to have a son is also passed on to Jiyoung when she conceives a daughter; her mother tells her, “It’s okay, the next one will be a boy” (128). Even before entering the world, boys are celebrated, and daughters are condemned. To satisfy patriarchal expectations, the female body is “erased,” and the mother is left with no words (19). Instead of giving Misook the same language as

husband and mother-in-law—the language in which she is worthless if she cannot produce a son—Cho gives her a voice before patriarchal culture, as it were: the voice of animal instinct for her dead offspring.

1.4 Speaking from the Margins of the Page

Cho takes the unusual step of introducing footnotes with authorial notes that cite non-fictional facts. For example, using *Statistical Family*, an article from *Sisa In Magazine*, and data from *Statistics Korea*, footnotes 1, 2, and 6 speak of the reality in which women like Misook felt or continue to feel compelled to abort their unborn daughters because having a daughter was considered a “medical problem” and reason enough for an abortion (Cho 19, 41). Cho continues to break the fictional wall by inserting numerous footnotes with evidence from the real world to remind readers that Jiyoung’s story may take the form of a novel, but her story is also statistically relevant and representative of women in South Korea. Standing against the psychiatrist’s authority and narration, footnotes are another way of communicating what Jiyoung does not voice. Furthermore, by using footnotes instead of Misook’s speech, Misook’s and her daughter’s powerlessness in society become starkly apparent, yet they are heard from the margins of the page. The lack of verbal response from Misook to the judgemental words of husband and mother-in-law, her lonely steps to the clinic, and her animalistic wails solidify Misook’s inferior position. Misook exists as quietly as possible, aware of how undesirable her daughter would be, and how “useless” she is until she bears a son. Misook’s audible howl goes unheard by her family but nevertheless articulates women’s lonely exclusion in a patriarchal society.

Much of the novel portrays silence as a private thought that is unsaid and a private cry that is unheard. When the private silences of multiple women meet, however, it brings about a collective silence in which the silence of the unsaid is noticed and even discussed amongst women but not in public. In an Icelandic context, for example, Freyja Haraldsdottir notes how the members of Tabú, the feminist disability group she co-founded, “made a conscious decision as a group that staying silent [during the #MeToo movement] was more powerful for [them] than speaking out or making a public statement. . . [A]lthough [they] did not break silences publicly, [they] did so amongst [them]selves” (225). The lack of publicly spoken responses by Tabú is an example of collective silence: “For us, breaking silences in our safe spaces but staying silent to the outside world, was our way of creating a disturbance” (226). With Cho’s novel, in speaking through the pre-language embodied gestures of her own infant daughter and the voices of her alter egos—other women who had experienced patriarchal oppression, Jiyoung becomes the voice that speaks on behalf of the collective silences of women.

1.5 Speaking in the Voices of Other Women

In a reading of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* as a “precariat feminist” text, Set-Byul Shin responds to critics who have expressed their disappointment in the novel’s generalization of women’s lives by arguing that the rather short and “shallow” exploration of Jiyoung’s experience serves as an invitation that prompts the readers to “read more and write more” (Set-Byul Shin). Shin argues that Jiyoung’s identity as an individual is minimized or even generalized for readers to easily become Jiyoung. Following a similar thought, Go-Yeon-Joo Kim states in the commentary published at the end of the Korean version of the

novel, “by this point, it is confusing to tell if I am Kim Jiyoung, or if Kim Jiyoung is me” (“이쯤되면 내가 김지영인지, 김지영이 나인지 헷갈릴 정도다” 189; my trans.).

What is left unsaid by Jiyoung has also been left unsaid by many readers until Cho’s novel. Likewise, when Jiyoung speaks in the voices of other women through her “psychotic” outbursts, there is a cathartic release. For example, when Jiyoung’s mother speaks through Jiyoung’s body at *Chuseok*:¹⁷ “I must say my piece . . . As you know, the holidays are a time for families to gather. But they’re not just for your family. They’re for my family too” (10). The voices of Jiyoung’s alter egos contribute to acts of solidarity that help her reveal the unsaid for every time that Jiyoung “couldn’t say a word in her defence” (29, 90, 125), “held her tongue” (80, 105, 121, 136), “closed her eyes” (88), and “held it in” (126, 136). Using the third person narrative, found in both Seo’s short story and in the voices of Jiyoung’s alter egos, is a way of getting out of the self to articulate what has gone unsaid.

The readers are introduced to two of Jiyoung’s alter egos: her mother and Seungyeon, her friend who died in childbirth. During the thanksgiving gathering at her husband’s parents’ home, Jiyoung, like every year, cooks and cleans for her husband’s family. When Daehyun’s mother insists that “[i]t isn’t work when you’re feeding your own family” and asks Jiyoung if it is too much for her, instead of silently agreeing, Jiyoung speaks in her mother’s voice to say, “Oh, Mrs. Jung. To tell you the truth, my poor Jiyoung gets sick

¹⁷ *Chuseok* is a Korean traditional holiday to celebrate harvesting in the Fall. It is commonly compared to a Thanksgiving holiday. In South Korea, *Chuseok* is predominantly spent in the father’s/husband’s side of the family and the mother/wife along with other women of the household are expected to prepare meals for the family and the patriarch’s ancestral rite. These days are considered to be extremely laborious for women that there is a term in South Korea known as “Holiday Syndrome (명절 증후군)” to explain the mental and physical stress that occur from public holidays.

from exhaustion every holiday!” (9). The room is filled with silence, then rage, but Jiyoung continues to speak through her mother’s voice: “Mr. Jung, with all due respect, I must say my piece” (10). Even when Daehyun’s father yells at her “nonsense,” Jiyoung goes on in a “cool tone, pushing Daehyun aside” (10). Jiyoung physically claims space to speak not just as her mother and herself but also as many other South Korean women. The evident shock that Jiyoung’s speech causes is noteworthy in that it is not her alter ego’s voice that causes such reactions; it is her speaking her mind and “tell[ing] . . . the truth” that comes off as utterly preposterous (9). Jiyoung only stops when Daehyun physically shuts her mouth: “In the end, Daehyun had to cup his hand over Jiyoung’s mouth and drag her out. ‘She’s not well, Father. You’ve got to believe me, Mum, Father’” (11). Previously, and in the privacy of their own home, when Jiyoung spoke as other women, Daehyun never stopped her from speaking; “Daehyun laughed at his wife, who was talking like a much older woman” (2). However, in the presence of other family members, when Jiyoung speaks of gendered injustices he “drags her out” of his family home (11). Jiyoung is now spoken for by her husband who immediately concludes that she is “not well” and in need of help (11). It is the content of her speech—a speech of disapproval against the patriarchal system—rather than her “insanity” that Daehyun sees fit to end.

1.6 Women’s Erasure and Capitalism

Women of Jiyoung’s generation grew up in a time of drastic political and economic change, but lived experience has to be contained in silence so as not to hinder the country’s economic development or tarnish its reputation. Although South Korea has

passed many economic milestones, its gender gap has been slow to close. The actual experiences of women between Neo-Confucianism and Western-style capitalism must be ignored to celebrate the success of the country because speaking otherwise would devalue South Korea's hard-earned achievements and disapprove the formula that led the country to financial success. This silence to highlight national achievements erases women's contributions to that achievement and becomes a norm passed down from one generation to another. However, as seen in Cho's novel, "the silence surrounding what is considered normal is even more remarkable when there are no words to even allude to it. The very lack of such vocabulary thus helps reveal culture-wide silences" (Zerubavel 64).

The gendered construction of the workforce is reminiscent of the patriarchal household, and although women also worked, they dominated the field with lesser pay, became the source of supplementary income, and simultaneously supported the family in other ways through unpaid care work or factory labour. In a study of capitalism in South Korea, Seok-Choon Lew and others positively view Confucianism and its emphasis on filial piety as the reason for South Korea's economic achievements. Although Lew and others acknowledge that "[s]elf-sacrificing female factory workers supported their entire families, including brothers studying at college" and that the "[m]odernization of Korea would have been impossible if not for the high emphasis placed on economic success, with self-sacrificing, or sometimes self-exploiting, input of labor," they praise these "self-exploiting" and disappearing women for their quiet roles in the capitalist machine (184). In Cho's novel, Misook and her sister become part of this "self-exploiting" labour. Misook is only fifteen when she starts working at a textile factory with "unbelievably meagre wages from working day and night, popping caffeine pills and turning jaundiced"

to send her brothers to school (25). When her eldest brother becomes a doctor and her second brother becomes a police chief through the support of the sisters' "self-exploiting" labour, the family praises the brothers for their hard work and for bringing "honour to the family" (26). The sisters later fend for themselves as they realize that their family "would not be giving them the chance and support to make something of themselves" (26). This system was challenging to dispute because it brought about modernity and economic development. To speak otherwise would be to criticize the previous generation of workers and negate that the country had indeed developed.

Achieving economic success has required the active participation of women and has assumed greater freedom for women's self-definition and opportunities outside the home. This assumption is captured in the translator of the novel Jamie Chang's comment: "I found myself constantly asking Kim Ji-young, 'why don't you speak up?' and 'why don't you say something?' . . . I realised that Kim Ji-young's struggle comes from being told for a very long time that there is gender equality now and women can do what they want to do" (qtd. in H.E. Kim). Silence does not solely occur through negative means such as oppression, it also comes from positive reinforcements that restrict women.

The only act that Jiyoung is praised for is her role as a caretaker: "Jiyoung's mother would praise the girls for taking good care of their brother and not competing for her love . . . The more their mother praised, the more impossible it became for Jiyoung to complain" (15). The more Jiyoung's silent conformity to tradition's expectations is reinforced, i.e., as an asset only in traditionally feminine roles, the less she finds ways to escape the gendered work division and to voice her true thoughts. This same bind is also apparent in the case of her mother as she "regrett[ably]" becomes the hailed, sacrificing

mother figure (27).

After becoming a mother, Jiyoung sees how silent her mother was in enduring the role of raising three children, working side jobs, and taking care of an old mother-in-law. “Why didn’t Jiyoung’s mother ever speak up?” This question enters Jiyoung’s mind not just with a new-found understanding of her mother but also with irritation that “[n]o one had shared this [perspective on women’s work] in detail with Jiyoung” (138). Work associated with motherhood is “glorified” to a suffocating extent, and for Jiyoung, the praise she receives for being a stay-at-home mother “[makes] her feel guilty about being exhausted,” and it further silences her (137, 138). Through both negative and positive means, the gendered division of labour is passed on from one generation to another as the formula that works for the household and the economy—from the unregulated industrial economy in which Jiyoung’s mother first worked outside the home to fund her brothers’ education, to the apparently regulated corporate economy in which Jiyoung first enters the workforce.

South Korean feminist movements have changed alongside the country’s change. In the 1970s, when economic development was made the country’s priority, the women’s movement focused on women’s labour and working conditions in the industrial workforce. In the 1980s, South Korean feminists identified “the governing regime with monopoly capitalism, military fascism, and US imperialism” and highlighted democracy as the key to women’s liberation (S-K. Kim 27-8). It was in the mid-1990s that “women’s groups sought to create a ‘woman’s identity’ that transcended class identities and coalesced around ‘women’s issues’” (S-K. Kim 32). Jiyoung is aware of these advancements as society tells women that they can now be whoever they want to be and

simultaneously describes housework as “noble” work (Cho 138). An important context for Jiyoung’s representative story, then, is that although South Korean women are highly educated, “only 29.6 per cent of new employees at 100 companies were women” (Cho 83).¹⁸ On occasion, Jiyoung is complimented for her role as an office worker, and her role as a mother is appreciated, but in the end, her work is supplementary to her husband’s. Consequently, she is the one who must quit her job when things become too difficult to balance with a child: “Daehyun’s job was more stable and brought in more money, but apart from that, it was more common for husbands to work and wives to raise the children and run the home” (130). Here, private economic considerations meet traditionally gendered roles aided by the fact that “[t]he gender pay gap in Korea is the highest among the OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] countries. According to 2014 data, women working in Korea earn only 63 per cent of what men earn” (Cho 112).¹⁹ Given these circumstances, women will likely be chosen as the partner who must leave the workforce, and this decision will have to be justified as a “choice” that logistically makes sense. This “choice” that women are encouraged to take is not only portrayed through Ji-young’s bildungsroman, but also through Cho’s decision to introduce statistical data to prove that these individual “choices” or lack thereof lead to mass issues demonstrated in South Korea’s work environment.

Under this “naturally” accepted social norm and the misinterpretation of women’s silence as agreement to that norm, women become, as Rubin would say, an “extra surplus to a capitalist employer” as an unpaid domestic worker while their careers are cut short (35).

¹⁸ This statistic is from a *Dong-A Ilbo* source found in footnote 9 of the novel (83).

¹⁹ This statistic is from the *OECD* website found in footnote 13 of the novel (113).

Furthermore, once Jiyoung becomes a stay-at-home mother, her household labour is not considered to be work at all. Jiyoung's mother-in-law claims that what Jiyoung does "isn't work" but something that should be gladly done without complaint or rather without speaking (9). When Jiyoung is speaking as Seungyeon, her friend who died in childbirth, she asks Daehyun to "tell her [Jiyoung] every chance you get: You're doing great! You're working so hard!" (4). The importance of work in Jiyoung's life is evident regardless of her position as a paid or unpaid worker. Work becomes "a fortress for her" as Jiyoung faces the hypocrisy of society's glorification of motherhood, exhaustion at having to be both a mom and a worker outside the home, and finally the wider social denigration of stay-at-home mothers as "mum-roach[es]" (132, 153).

"Mum-roach", which only applies to mothers and never to fathers, signifies that mothers—with or without paid work—are parasites to the capitalist system and its working men. The term that appears in the Korean language novel is "mam-ch'ung (맘충)": "mam" meaning "mother" and "ch'ung" meaning "insects such as parasites and other low forms of life" ("Ch'ung, 충"). This term equates women's work inside and outside the home as jobs for "low forms of life;" such work is deemed inferior for its supposed lack of participation in the capitalist world and erases woman as human ("Ch'ung, 충").

The situation is not much different for women like Eunsil as well. Eunsil, Jiyoung's team leader at work, is said to have a "heart of stone," and people pity her husband who must deal with the consequences of having married such a hard-working woman (98). To earn her place in a management position, Eunsil tries to be "accepted as 'one of the guys'"

(100). Although her dedication to work gets her promoted, she realises how “she’d unwittingly set a bad precedent” by volunteering to work longer hours than men and refusing to take maternity leave (100). Eunsil is placed in an impossible position where her success is frowned upon and also sets a bad precedent for future workers, but without such self-sacrificing work, she too would be pushed out of the capitalist world. Eunsil implements some policies that may help the female workers, but she is unable to change the capitalist reality of South Korea in which women are viewed as short-term employees. For example, when the company is preparing an “elite squad,” the head of the company picks only male employees because “he did not think of female employees as prospective long-term colleagues” (109, 111). The company chooses male workers as the most “cost-efficient” choice, and Jiyoung thinks to herself, “[r]evenue drives a businessman . . . [but] [w]ho’ll be the last ones standing in a world with these priorities, and will they be happy?” (111, 112). Jiyoung presents this question to herself, and by leaving the question unanswered, she asks readers to consider the countless women who are erased in order for there to be a “last one standing”.

Like Jiyoung, the psychiatrist’s wife quits her job to take care of her child, and her husband idly watches his wife lose her old self while she obsessively solves her son’s elementary math problems with “[c]ute illustrations” despite having been a “math prodigy” (159-60). The psychiatrist has a righteous tone for supposedly understanding women’s plight that other “men remain unaware [of] unless they encounter special circumstances as [he has],” but he continues to abuse his power as a beneficiary of the capitalist system by making sure to replace his pregnant employee with an unmarried one (157). He comments that “[e]ven the best female employees can cause many problems if

they don't have the childcare issue taken care of" and "[he'll] have to make sure her replacement is unmarried" (163). The novel hauntingly ends with the psychiatrist complaining about women workers who cause problems by leaving work due to pregnancy, disregarding the fact that they leave because the work environment fails to support them during and after pregnancy. Ultimately, the psychiatrist profits from gendered inequalities. In these instances, "progress," when measured in terms of capitalist success, is at the expense of the erasure of women's contributions, their worth, and awareness of the ease with which Neo-Confucian patriarchy colludes with global capitalist "development".

The novel exposes gendered inequalities through statistics and footnotes that break away from the narrative, but the novel also demonstrates possibilities for women to occupy space. As a teenager, Misook starts to work at a factory to help support the education of her brother. After her marriage, she does the same for her husband and children by supporting them with "made-for-housewife jobs" such as "insurance *ajumma* [middle-aged married woman], milk and Yakult *ajumma*, cosmetics *ajumma* and so on" while caring for three children and a mother-in-law (20). The work she does is not considered "real" work and her husband asks her to quit as it is "smelly [and] dusty" (22). Despite having worked all her life and having worked from home while taking care of her children, Misook had wanted to be a teacher. Jiyoung, as a child, "burst into laughter" when she found out her mother's aspiration: she "found the idea outrageous because she'd thought until then that mothers could only be mothers" (26). Even to her children, Misook's work was not considered to be work. Most of Misook's jobs, from assembling cardboard boxes to investing and saving money, are done either as a secret or as an act

that is purposely unseen or unheard to secure her husband's position as the primary breadwinner. Not even the government is aware of her cash earnings; she gets away without "pay[ing] any tax" (23). Misook's position in the family slowly equalizes once her husband is pressured to retire due to his failure to adapt to work environments tailored to technological advancements. It is then that Misook's savings turn from a supplementary source of income to the dominant source of income.

Before the economic roles are switched, Misook is shown passing on her traditional secondariness to her daughters by encouraging supportive roles. However, when her supplementary income becomes the large amount of savings that represent the dominant source of income, the difference in Misook's position in the family becomes apparent. Misook starts to make big decisions and uses her newfound position to redistribute space both physically and symbolically to her daughters by firmly stating that the girls must have a room of their own. "The girls got their own room, as per their mother's plan. Mother had money set aside, without telling Father, to furnish the girls' room . . . On the opposite wall, she hung a large map of the world" (39). Instead of continuing to encourage the girls to be supportive and caring, now Misook helps them think of a bigger world beyond traditional roles. Rather than telling Jiyoung to give up on her dreams, as she had done with Jiyoung's sister in the past, she tells her daughter to pursue her dream and education even if it means her mother will have to sell the house. When Jiyoung's father yells at Jiyoung to "just stay out of trouble and get married," Misook raises her voice and says, "Jiyoung, *don't* stay out of trouble. Run wild! Run wild, you hear me?" (93). Misook's money is used to enlarge her daughter's world, but it also shows the reality of a capitalist world in which money gives a platform for voice.

In the novel, the gendered difference in financial in/security is directly related to the possibility to occupy space as a visible and audible identity. Efforts such as the compilation of the “Voices of the Poor” by the World Bank demonstrate that the poor are often rendered invisible and inaudible in a capitalist society. Consequently, it is difficult to deny that “the dream of women’s emancipation is harnessed to the engine of capitalist accumulation . . . it serves today to intensify capitalism’s valorization of waged labour” (Fraser 110-11). The capitalist structure based on androcentrism traps women in silence and men under the burden that financial security is their “responsibility alone” (Cho 20). While the novel criticizes this capitalist machine, by showing the position that Misook gradually comes to occupy through accumulation of capital it also suggests the need to allow women to easily re-enter the workforce after childbirth and the importance of financial independence for women to be able to help themselves and other women.

1.7 Conclusion

At the 2019 Berkeley #MeToo Conference, Catharine MacKinnon said, “to ask what made #MeToo possible is also to ask what, for the first time, made it harder to keep the sexual abuse inside than to put it out” (03:35-03:44). To this, I would like to add: what, for the first time, made women feel like they would be heard? It is often the act of noticing what has been unsaid and the act of standing together that can transform silence into speech. Prepared listeners can give courage to a silenced subject to end their “testimonial smothering”—a form of “self-silencing” caused by the fear that no one will believe their story (Bailey 96). As Kristie Dotson reminds us, we must consider the “dependence speakers have on audiences” as “the success of a speaker’s attempt to

communicate ultimately depends upon audiences” (236-37). For silence to be heard, it needs readers and listeners. In South Korea, women’s experiences became a topic worth talking about, worth reading about, and worth covering seriously in the media. Linda Hasunuma and Ki-Young Shin pinpointed media coverage as one of the reasons why #MeToo spread in South Korea but fizzled out in Japan: “The nature of the media coverage²⁰ dampened the #MeToo movement in Japan, whereas it amplified women’s voices and the movement in South Korea—inspiring more women to come forward publicly” (Hasunuma and Shin 104). While backlashes such as victim-blaming remain a serious issue, many supported the “silence breakers” and listened to their stories, prompting more and more victims/survivors to speak up (Zacharek et al). What was unsaid by Jiyoung was experienced by prosecutor Seo who, citing *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, brought the unsaid to public attention and encouraged many other South Korean women to say the unsaid.

MacKinnon described the #MeToo Movement as a “butterfly politic” in which “the right small intervention in the structure of an unstable political system can ultimately produce systemic change” (02:51-03:00). Jiyoung’s silence in Cho’s novel functioned in South Korean society as a gentle wing flap that prompted action and change. By intently noticing the alternative modes of communication of the unsaid and the unheard, the readers join their individual silences in a collective form to react with solidarity and speech. Coinciding with the #MeToo movement in South Korea, the novel became a

²⁰ “The nature of the media coverage” in South Korea was centred around “high-profile cases of harassment” (Hasunuma and Shin 98). “In the first half of 2018, the JTBC News had a live broadcast of five victims of sexual harassment in several high-profile cases. Their courage broke the culture of silence on this taboo subject” (Hasunuma and Shin 100-1).

feminist symbol for the unsaid of women's oppression between Neo-Confucianism and capitalism. In the New York Times article by Alexandra Alter, who described the novel as a "cultural call to arms," Cho added: "my novel made people speak out...The novel became more complete thanks to the readers themselves" (qtd. in Alter). What the alternative mode of communication used in the novel ultimately demonstrates is that these relatively "marginal" ways of speaking can indeed create action and sociopolitical change. Jiyoung's speech in alter egos, Misook's howls, the author's footnotes, and the collective silence of women in the novel are alternative forms of "speaking" feminism.

2 Speaking in “Pure Tongue”: The Language of Survival in Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman*

“Forgive her, Father. She knows not what she speaks.”

“I know what I speak, for that is my given name. Soon Hyo, the true voice, the
pure tongue” (Keller 195).

Many studies on “comfort women”²¹ often begin in the following manner: after almost 50 years of silence, military sex slaves to the Japanese—commonly known as “comfort women”—broke their silence and testified. Did most of South Korea and, on a larger scale, the international community, truly not know of military sex slaves until Hak-Sun Kim first testified in 1991? Have the women not, in various ways, expressed their trauma since Japan retreated from Korea in 1945? Historical records show that not just the Korean government but also the international community knew of this wartime atrocity, yet no justice was brought to these Asian “comfort women”. In studying the representations of “comfort women” by “Korean/Americans,”²² Hyun Yi Laura Kang notices two recurring ideas: “silence and suppression” (31). Kang criticizes studies about “comfort women” that imagine them as voiceless subjects and interpret their silence “as a problem to be remedied” (31). In these representations, the victims/survivors are thought of as “voiceless” until the moment they “break their silence” and speak public, political

²¹ Except when citing the novel’s title, I use the term “comfort women” in quotation marks. “Comfort women” is a literal translation from the Japanese word “ianfu,” which is a euphemism for “prostitute”. While the term is commonly used, even in South Korea, the term that the official Korean and United Nations records use is “Japanese military sexual slavery”.

²² “[T]he intervening slash between the ‘South Korea’ and the ‘American’ is explicated as marking the differences and slippages amongst a ‘Korean’ postcoloniality, an ‘American’ nationality, and an ‘Asian American’ racial formation” (Kang 28).

testimony. Too often the moment of testimony becomes the only moment of importance, understood as the powerful escape from suppression, and what happened before or what happens after becomes inconsequential to the listeners.

Similarly, Chungmoo Choi investigates what have become the “highly formulaic testimonies with an intense focus on the repetitive sexual acts and abuses” which are produced for “public consumption”; she notes that “the recording of testimonials is . . . deeply political” in the sense that there exists a “troping of comfort women as a raped nation” as opposed to individuals (“Guest Editor” x). Choi provides the example of Dai Sil Kim-Gibson’s essay “They Are Our Grandmas” in which Kim-Gibson asks a former “comfort woman” to tell her life story and is met with this response: “You want me to begin from the beginning. You mean when I was taken, don’t you?” (qtd. in “Guest Editor” x). This response implies knowledge of formulaic expectations of these survivors of war atrocities—expectations that also have the effect of turning these women into objects of curiosity rather than subjects of their own forms of expression.

The audience, viewers, and readers of the studies of “comfort women” pick which stories they want to engage with; consequently, they decide if someone is silent or not depending on the fulfillment of speech that satisfies their curiosity—a curiosity satiated with the formulaic. The “silence” that Kang points to, then, refers to the absence of public, political speech and not a state of voicelessness. Almost a decade later, Kim-Gibson revisited her works and revised her understanding of silence:

When I first started to make films, I used to say, “I am trying to give voices to the voiceless.” After a decade of making films, writing, giving speeches and answering questions across the United States and abroad, one day it hit me, hit me

hard, how self-righteous it was of me to say I am the one who is giving voices to the voiceless. It was not I who gave voices to the voiceless; it was the other way around. *The voiceless gave me voices to speak out.* (45)

The “comfort women” are not silent. They speak in various modes of communication such as song, wail, chant, touch, dance, and storytelling as seen in Nora Okja Keller’s 1997 novel, *Comfort Woman*, and it is up to the listeners to listen and value other non-dominant modes of expressing their lives. In this chapter, I reevaluate the significance of testimony and offer deeper understandings of the different modes of communications which have been disregarded or considered to be less important than public and political speech. I specifically investigate the private speech of song, shamanism, and touch used by the protagonist, Soon Hyo, and argue that her alternative language refuses to fit into the mold of dominant, male, colonial speech. Using the alternative language of song, shamanism, and touch, Soon Hyo communicates feminist and postcolonial messages that emphasize female solidarity, transcultural connections, and remembrance of war atrocities committed against women.

2.1 Using Testimony

In the public’s constant probing to hear the story first-hand, “comfort women” have been flown to various conferences, universities, and museums all over the world to testify to their war-time experience. Hee-Jung Serenity Joo in her inquiry into the “comfort women” human rights discourse and the fetishization of testimonies asks why “comfort women” are flown “halfway across the world . . . to serve as spokesperson for the

advertising of a new museum” (167).²³ Joo argues that this obsession to hear “the ‘truth’ directly and unfiltered from the survivors’ mouths. . . assumes that the public will not believe, or does not care to believe, things that are not directly from the mouths of the victims/survivors” (167). Likewise, in an interview quoted in Maki Kimura’s book *Unfolding the ‘Comfort Women’ Debates* (2016), a former “comfort woman,” Shin-Do Song, tells the interviewer: “I got sick of being persistently asked questions . . . Please don't ask any more questions, please” (158). With only ten South Korean former “comfort women” surviving as of 2022, the burden to publicly speak increases.

What is also concerning is that, in some cases, the women’s testimonies are taken advantage of to make profit. In 2020, certain non-profit organizations that claimed to work for the former “comfort women” in South Korea were exposed for using the women and their testimonies to raise funds to fill their personal pockets. For example, the volunteers and staff of the House of Sharing (나눔의 집), a non-profit organization that housed the former “comfort women,” revealed that despite having accumulated close to 7,900,000 USD (8,880,000,000won) in donations alone from 2015 to 2019, the grandmothers’²⁴ meals consisted of plain rice with water, the women were not provided proper medical care, and outings only happened a couple of times per year (Kwon and Jung). However, the grandmothers were obligated to join all “comfort women” related events hosted by the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism who owned the House of Sharing.

²³ In 2013, in partnership with the Winnipeg Chinese Cultural and Community Centre, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) invited a former “comfort woman” from the Philippines to present her testimony for the museum’s opening after another former Korean “comfort woman” felt too ill to travel the distance (Joo 167).

²⁴ It is customary in South Korea to call any elderly person “grandmother” or “grandfather”. Accordingly, the former “comfort women” in South Korea are most commonly referred to simply as “grandmother”.

An anonymous volunteer of the House of Sharing also stated that a grandmother told him, “I feel like I have become a geisha. I have to go and receive guests everyday” (J.S. Shin 1:33-1:37). In this instance, the repetition of testimonies has become a forced performance at the hands of capitalistic greed, making it an act of reliving pain for others’ profit.

The “comfort women” and their testimonies have also been used to reconstruct a postcolonial Korea, a Korea that saw itself damaged and “feminized” by the Japanese colonizers. When Hak-Soon Kim first testified as a “comfort woman” in 1991, anticolonial efforts focused on the symbolic meaning of the “comfort women’s” bodies as the raped nation and desired to remasculinize the nation “exclusively at the metaphoric level, which separate[d] women's bodies from their experiences,” thus, creating a “collective amnesia about the pain of these women” (C. Choi, “Politics of War” 398). Instead of focusing on justice for the individual victims/survivors, the political effort uses them as a single bodily symbol of a raped nation in need of rebuilding the masculinity robbed by the colonizers. As Nira Yuval-Davis reminds us, “[a] history of colonisation is a history of feminisation. . . . Again, . . . feminisation and disempowerment are being equated” (11). The postcolonial nation subjects the women’s bodies and experiences all over again and represents women as passive objects in need of protecting. bell hooks discusses a similar phenomenon in which the “discourse of black resistance has almost always equated freedom with manhood” (*Yearning* 58). When freedom is achieved through appeals to manhood, the postcolonial efforts of the nation only colonize the women again instead of liberating them.

The public's invasive curiosity, the institutions' capitalistic greed, and the patriarchal nationalistic agenda separate the "comfort women's" bodies from their experiences and put their speech to uses that do not serve the women. The former "comfort women's" testimony, at times, becomes a tool and a performance that is repeated in front of a crowd and repeatedly published in short segments that highlight the specific acts of rape. Often the media intensely focus on the "comfort women's" virginity and subsequent loss of virginity, and the "public[s] desire to encounter a shocking picture of atrocity" is satisfied with "the mass media's tendency to meet such a demand" (Kimura 162). More than three decades after Hak-Sun Kim's courageous testimony, the women are still represented as symbols of colonial pain. Public speech assumes legitimacy and importance; political speech identifies the stakes involved in naming the oppressors; patriarchal speech ties women's bodies and women's voices to ideological and actual battles between empires and nation. But what about the forms of expression that are outside these boundaries?

2.2 Understanding the Complexities of Testimony

More recently there have been efforts to understand the complexities of "comfort women's" testimonies at a deeper level. For example, Hyunah Yang (2008) describes the narrative style of the survivors' interviews as a "mixed silence, in which silence and verbal expression alternate" ("Finding the Map" 89). Describing her observation after listening to Oksun Han's testimony, Yang noted that "[i]n between the incomplete sentences and underneath the language, unexpressed and inexpressible feeling and memory permeated. . . In the language we [the interview team] listened to the sound of silence, and in the silence we heard the unspoken story" (89). Similarly, Kimura (2016)

emphasizes the importance of recognizing that the “move between silence and speaking is not a one-time-only, permanent, and single direction move” because victim/survivors will return to silence or speech even after giving testimonies (157). Silence does not cease to exist where speech begins because speech is not a “cure” for silence. In a similar vein, this chapter investigates alternative languages in Keller’s novel to uncover how private, “feminine” language is different from voicelessness.

As Joshua Pilzer points out, “most of us are the products of cultures, masculinities, and modernities . . . that value assertion over comprehension, language and meaning over voices and sounds, and sound-making over listening” (9). The preference for public speech, which many have learned to deem a more sophisticated, educated, and meaningful language, denies the value in alternative modes of communication. To unlearn this culture of “nonlistening” would be to acknowledge that testimony is not just about political speech, and that testimony, speech, and communication can happen in various forms. We must also take into consideration that “[o]ne of the main causes of these [‘comfort’] women’s wounds is not simply their lack of a subversive language but an absolute lack of language itself” in that Korea lacked terms such as “rape” and “sexual assault” for the women to testify with (C. Choi, “Politics of War” 400).

Furthermore, some victim/survivors may never testify, but that does not mean that they are “silent,” passive, or weak. It is up to the consumers of the studies of “comfort women” to register these alternative languages and listen to the private speech of “comfort women”. Alternative modes of communication, as used in this chapter, is an overarching phrase that encompasses voices that have been marginalized in the sense of the unheard. While one’s position in society may marginalize their voice, the methods of

majoritized expression can also contribute to the shutting of ears—both intentionally and unintentionally. These methods of communication are “alternative” in the sense that they go against many of our expectations of how to express trauma and seek justice. The protagonist, Soon Hyo, never officially speaks or tells her trauma; instead, she uses song and shamanic language to represent and reconcile her trauma. In introducing various alternative modes of communication, the novel asks readers to consider the “space of incommensurability between legal idioms and the victim’s experience” and understand the “‘unshareability’ of physical pain (H. Yang, “Finding the Map” 90, 102). In writing about Keller’s novel, Kodai Abe directly addresses the role of readers and listeners by altering the term “responsibility” to “*response-ability*” since “what is expected from us is less responsibility as *legal duty* than that as *ethical ability*, ability to respond” (127). The difference between the legal and the ethical parallels the difference between public speech and private methods of communication. Responding to representations of trauma in an ethical manner calls for the listeners to pay attention to more than the repetition of violent acts.

2.3 *Comfort Woman*, the Novel

Comfort Woman is a story set in Korea and Hawai‘i about a Korean immigrant mother, Soon Hyo, and her Korean American daughter, Beccah, whose narratives alternate throughout the novel in varying timelines both past and present. As a child, Soon Hyo is sold by her older sister to Japanese soldiers and becomes a sex slave in a military camp. In the camps, she is renamed Akiko 41 because she replaces Akiko 40 whose true name is Induk, another Korean sex slave. Soon Hyo escapes the camps near the end of WWII

and is found by American missionaries, one of whom marries the underaged Soon Hyo and brings her to the United States. The American missionary, Richard, continues to sexually exploit Soon Hyo. Richard also tries to stop Soon Hyo from reaching back to her past and speaking to former “comfort women” like Induk through shamanism. After his death, Soon Hyo carries on her role as a shaman and a mother. Beccah, who does not yet know her mother’s history, writes obituaries for the local newspaper and must now write an obituary for her mother whom she did not know well. Although both women work to speak for the dead, Beccah and her mother have lived what Abe calls a “relationship of discommunication” (136). Lacking fluency in the Korean language and largely assimilated to American culture, Beccah resists listening to alternative modes of communication which Soon Hyo uses to guide her daughter with “pure tongue” (Keller 195). I argue that this “pure tongue,” a language that Soon Hyo cherished and trusted, is not political speech, testimony, or a national language, but that it is a private speech between mother and daughter. Through her “pure tongue,” Soon Hyo sings, wails, chants, dances, and touches. Pure tongue to Soon Hyo is a cultural language, a language of solidarity, and a language of survival. This private, alternative speech of Soon Hyo urges Beccah to continue remembering and comforting the “forgotten”²⁵ women. Ultimately Soon Hyo attempts to bridge the cultural gap between herself and her daughter and Keller, the gap between the predominantly Asian history of “comfort women” and her American readers.

²⁵ I use the term “forgotten” here in reference to how the United States commonly refers to the Korean War as “The Forgotten War”.

2.4 Language and Trauma

Face to face with the Japanese colonizer's rule and language that restricted the mother tongue, stripped the people of their culture, literature, and name, Soon Hyo witnesses in embodied ways the process in which language is weaponized. For example, the protagonist whose Korean name is Soon Hyo, a name revealed only near the end of the novel, is instead referred to as Akiko 41, or simply Akiko, by the Japanese soldiers and Mary or Akiko by the American missionaries. During Japan's colonial rule in Korea, there were various attempts to erase Korean culture and identity. One such attempt included changing Korean last names into Japanese last names. Koreans who had long worshipped their ancestors one day found themselves having to abandon their family name. While the name change was "voluntary," without a Japanese name newborns were denied registry, children were not allowed to attend school or were expelled from school, and workers were denied work. Anyone without a Japanese last name in Korea was labelled a "non-citizen (비국민)" and surveilled by the police as a suspicious person (D. Kim). Many revolutionaries fought to reject the name change policy and were met with brutal consequences. Soon Hyo, who reveals that she goes by Akiko because she feels undeserving of her real name, is not referred to as Akiko in this paper, as she and many other Koreans who felt shame and despair for forcefully changing their names deserve to retrieve their true names. Before forcefully becoming Akiko 41, Soon Hyo lived a peaceful life with memories filled with her mother's songs by the riverside. In this world, she was "Soon Hyo".

Opposed to the melodic language of her mother, the river, and her true name is the language that killed Induk. Induk, Akiko 40, whose death and memory will be especially

important to Soon Hyo's later survival, resists her Japanese captor/rapists in the camp where abducted Korean women are exploited by the Japanese soldiers for "comfort". One day, Induk starts protesting by yelling while being raped: "'I am Korea, I am a woman, I am alive. I am seventeen, I had a family just like you do, I am a daughter, I am a sister' . . . All through the night she talked, reclaiming her Korean name" (20). Using words "as her dagger"²⁶ and "taunt[ing] them with the language," she provokes the Japanese soldiers to free her by putting her to death (20, 144). Tired and terrified of listening to the "mad" sex slave, the soldiers eventually "brought her back skewered from her vagina to her mouth, like a pig ready for roasting" (20-21). The reference to words as a "dagger" is culturally and historically specific: a *Jangdo* is a small, adorned dagger worn by upper-class women as a symbol of chastity and a weapon of "self-defence" (Sun Hee Oh). Without a physical dagger/*Jangdo*, Induk chooses public speech as her weapon that will put her own life to an end. With Induk's death, Soon Hyo becomes Akiko 41 and is forever haunted by her death. Soon Hyo, however, is haunted not so much by the gruesome execution, but by the fact that she was not allowed to properly grieve for Induk or perform funeral rites for her. As a result, Soon Hyo begins to speak to the dead.

The sounds of the Japanese men who exploited the Korean women continue to traumatize Soon Hyo even when she escapes the "comfort" station. When Soon Hyo is at the American missionary camp, apparently saved, she hears "shouts that sounded too much like the shouts of the men at the camps" (146). Note how Soon Hyo experiences the speech of Richard, whose role as an American missionary implies America is the

²⁶ In the novel, the women at the camp talk about a dagger (*Jangdo*) that one of the girl's family had and says that "the rest of us were envious, not of the rich things she indicated having, not of her aristocracy, but of her right to kill herself" (144).

“saviour” of Korea from the Japanese empire: “during his speech, each time [she] saw him slap the pulpit for emphasis, [she] heard the sounds of women's naked buttocks being slapped as they were paraded in front of a new arrival of troops” (70). The Japanese imperial language is echoed in American neocolonial speech and makes Soon Hyo cautious of the sounds and words that harm her. Instead of using neo-colonial speech that Richard tries to make her use, Soon Hyo continues to communicate and connect with the dead “comfort women” using her own language of survival that reaches back to the women’s language based in Korean shamanism. Laurel Kendall, in her book on the ritual life of Korean women, observes that “the appearance of the woman's natal ancestors and gods in shaman ritual [is] a survival from an earlier, more matriarchal stage of Korean society” (162). Soon Hyo returns to the methods of shamanic communication to cope with her trauma, comfort the dead “comfort women” from her past, and protect her daughter—growing up in Hawai‘i as a child of an American father and Korean mother—by teaching her a language that she knew to be unchanging and safe from erasure.

2.5 Song

The “true”, non-dominant language through which Soon Hyo chooses to communicate is largely the Korean shamanic method of communication, part of which is song. Song becomes a language of survival in the camps where speech between women is forbidden: Soon Hyo remembers how in the “comfort” camps “the women used [her] to pass messages. [She] would sing to the women as [she] braided their hair or walked by their compartments to check their pots. When [she] hummed certain sections, the women knew to take those unsung words for their message” (20). Song escapes colonial surveillance

and allows the women to connect without the use of what they recognized as violent language and traumatic sounds. For example, when Induk is killed by the soldiers and the women are not allowed to mourn her death, it is the frogs singing that “opened their throats for [them and] swallowed [their] tears” (21). When Induk’s spirit starts to take on Soon Hyo’s body, it is song that guides her (36). When Soon Hyo wants to remember her mother, it is the River Song that brings her closer to her dead mother (71). When Beccah wants answers, Soon Hyo responds with the River Song (48). Songs not only allow memories to continue but they also help distance the women from their own stories yet enable them to share their experiences. Pilzer suggests that the “survivors [of the ‘comfort’ camps] sang because song escaped certain kinds of surveillance and therefore allowed them a relative freedom when compared with speech and other kinds of expression” (8). This rings especially true when considering how the “very act of telling can itself be traumatizing, when the price of speaking is not relieving but reliving” (Kimura 161). Soon Hyo returns to the language she found comforting: the signals she sends her mother through creating ripples in the lake, the caring touch of her mother, the braiding of the women’s hair in the camps, the singsong murmurs between the stalls, and the mourning song of the frogs. These alternative languages are further enhanced by Soon Hyo as she begins to actively speak through shamanic methods.

The folktale of “Princess Pari,” which is originally an “epical shamanistic song,” is a story that Soon Hyo tells her daughter repeatedly (K.J. Lee 434). From this story, Beccah gains knowledge of Korean women’s history and the knowledge necessary to “comfort” her mother on her journey after death. Traditionally, “Princess Pari” is performed in rituals to guide the dead as the shaman dances and sings the story of “Princess Pari”.

While there are over “forty-seven versions of the Princess Pari” story that have been recorded (K.J. Lee 434), Keller’s version of the story goes like this: once upon a time, a king and queen had six daughters and no sons. When the queen was pregnant for the seventh time and gave birth to another daughter, the couple decided to offer the girl to the Birth Grandmother spirit who was the protector of children. Years later, when Pari’s parents died, the Death Messenger carried them off to the underworld. Feeling sorry for her birth parents, Pari decides to dive into the underworld to save them. Pari fools the Death Messenger by distracting him with a feast and searches for her parents through a swarm of human souls. At that moment, she hears a familiar song; “a song she recognized as the song her mother had sung when she was still in the womb” (Keller 49). Guided by her mother’s song, Pari saves her parents, and they enter Lotus Paradise together.

The widely accepted original version is quite different from Keller’s version. Instead of being offered to a Birth Grandmother, in the original tale the princess is thrown away into the sea after being given the name Pari, which means “to be thrown away” (T. Lee 53). Luckily, Buddha and his disciples find her at sea, save her, and give her to a poor old couple. When Pari later hears that her birth parents are fatally ill, she goes on a journey to find medicinal water to fulfil her filial duty. On her journey, she must do tasks that are commanded by the gods such as ploughing the fields, harvesting crops, and washing clothes. When she reaches the gates of the heavenly kingdom, she is forced to marry an ugly giant, the Guardian Armed God, and give birth to seven sons—as if to make up for her mother’s “sin” for having seven daughters and no sons. Years later, Pari saves her parents, but she returns to the underworld and becomes the first shaman.

Keller's reinterpretation of "Princess Pari" has been studied by Kun Jong Lee and Sung-Ae Lee as a feminist rereading of a traditionally patriarchal, Confucius tale. Kun Jong Lee suggests that Keller "appropriates the Korean shamanistic myth ultimately to endow her main characters . . . with a psychological anchor and cultural agency in their struggles against American [as well as Korean and Japanese] patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia" (433). Kun Jong Lee especially emphasizes how Keller's narrative moves away from the male-to-female relationship to the female-to-female connection which is later mirrored in Soon Hyo's relationship with her daughter. Similarly, upon investigating the use of folktales by Mia Yun and Keller, Sung Ae Lee argues that "retelling [folktales] is an interpretation" and a "form of cultural memory" (131). Such retellings in the novel "challenge the inherited cultural and literary tradition and suggest ways in which history and tradition can be reread" (131). Sung Ae Lee applies Marcia Lieberman's argument on Western fairy tale as a male-dominated genre "that reinforced patriarchal constructions of femininity" to the Confucius folktales of Korea and in "Princess Pari" (132). By retelling such fairy tales, Sung Ae Lee argues, Keller rewrites traditional tales for a feminist and transnational audience. In their comparative studies of the original folktales and Keller's version, both scholars emphasize the defiant feminist retelling of the traditional Korean patriarchal narrative and focus on the changes, omissions, and reimagined female relations between the original tale and Keller's interpretation.

What is key in both the traditional story and Keller's reinterpretation is ritual communication. In the original tale, the singing story of "Princess Pari" becomes a language shared between the living and the dead, and in *Comfort Woman*, song becomes a private language shared by a mother and daughter. The story itself, then, becomes a

mode of communication that connects the living and the dead and a source of comfort to the living. Complementing K.J. Lee's and S.A. Lee's feminist readings, I would like to focus specifically on the significance of song in "Princess Pari" as a feminist and postcolonial mode of communication.

To understand the significance of a singing story such as "Princess Pari" in relation to women's speech, it is important to study the history of singing stories as distinct from public storytelling in Korea. Public storytelling (Jŏn'gisu 전기수) in Korea was traditionally a profession for men dating back to the eighteenth century when novels increased in popularity ("Storyteller"). A storyteller would wander around the city, recite a novel in the street, and stop in silence near the climax until the crowd paid.²⁷ It is also recorded that some storytellers dressed up as women to enter homes and read novels to noblewomen (G.S. Park). Unlike the gendered restrictions of public storytelling, once stories were accompanied by song, the gendered boundary became much more fluid. Women were deeply involved in the history of singing stories and were crucial to the development of such folk art. P'ansori (판소리, singing story), for example, is said to have originated from shamans²⁸, a role predominantly reserved for women in Korea where according to a 1986 study by Covell, "[n]inety-five percent of shamans in the Seoul area are female" (16). Throughout the history of Korea, shamans played important roles as political consultants, folk faith leaders, and healers; however, with the introduction of Confucius beliefs, shamanistic practices were regulated, then ultimately

²⁷ Such details are recorded in poet Soo Sam Cho's (1762-1849) *Choo Jae Jip* (추재집) (G.S. Park).

²⁸ There is no established theory on the origins of p'ansori; however, according to South Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), one major hypothesis suggests that it originates from shamans ("History of P'ansori").

banned (Heo). Shamanism allowed women to cry, sing aloud, and cathartically release pent up pain that otherwise had to remain hidden. Although much of Korea's history shows preference for silent and submissive women, many women found ways to speak through shamanic rituals.

Listening to the "Princess Pari" story that Soon Hyo tells, Beccah asks, "What was the song? . . . The one that Princess Pari recognized" and Soon Hyo answers, "'You know it.' My mother laughed, and sang . . . I sang the last part with her. 'The river song. I'll never forget it, okay, Mom? You sing that song, and no matter what, I'll find you okay? I'll be like Princess Pari, and I'll rescue you'" (49, 50). The River Song and the song of "Princess Pari" become a mode of communication that allows women to find each other. This is an element not found in the original tale but created in Soon Hyo's version to teach Beccah the importance of listening and recognizing the voice of song. Although after her mother's death, Beccah has a tough time remembering the exact ways in which her mother comforted the souls of former "comfort women", she remembers the "Princess Pari" story and the River Song. The language of song returns to Beccah as she prepares to scatter her mother's ashes on the river near their American home: Beccah "heard the song of the river. The music had always seemed faint to me, but now it drummed in my ears" (212). There are many communicative barriers between Beccah and Soon Hyo, but even with the little Korean that Beccah speaks and the little understanding she had of her mother during her lifetime, Beccah is able to reconnect with her mother using the language Soon Hyo passed on to her. As Beccah awkwardly attempts to perform the death ceremonies her mother performed for other women, Beccah sings the River Song: the song that contains the sadness and stories of mothers and

“comfort women”. That Beccah remembers this song when it becomes necessary in her life suggests that memory from the past as well as memory to be carried forward into her future is important to the ritual.

Keller adds to her version of “Princess Pari” a song called “Nodle River” which has an explicit political component as well. This song was composed in the 1930s during the Japanese colonial rule; thematically, it laments the uncertainty of life. At the time, this song, however, meant much more to Koreans as it alluded to the Korean revolutionaries who were captured by Japanese police and shipped away on ferryboats on the river (K.J. Lee 439). By the 1940s, “Korean language publications were banned altogether” by the Japanese imperial rule, and while publication of Korean language newspapers and literature could be controlled, the passing down of songs could not (H. Park 94). Pilzer suggests that the “survivors [of the ‘comfort’ camps] sang because song escaped certain kinds of surveillance and therefore allowed them a relative freedom when compared with speech and other kinds of expression” (8).

Like the “Nodle River” song that escaped censorship and was passed on from one person to another, Soon Hyo’s songs and stories can be passed down and remembered for generations. Initially, song to Soon Hyo is something that is merely in the background until she increasingly finds it difficult to make sense and put to words the violence around her. Soon Hyo remembers how, after she was abandoned by Manshin Ajimma and left with the American missionaries, she had become deaf to all sound, but what gives back her hearing is the song of women:

What I heard after my ears cracked opened was a single song . . . And in that song
I heard things that I had almost forgotten: the enduring whisper of women who

continued to pass messages under the ears of the soldiers; a defiant Induk bellowing the Korean national anthem even after the soldiers had knocked her teeth out; the symphony of ten thousand frogs; the lullabies my mother hummed as she put her daughters to sleep; the song the river sings when she finds her freedom in the ocean. (70-71)

In the moment Soon Hyo's ears are "cracked opened," she begins to hear the voices that seemed faint, and she begins to realize that these murmurings, songs, whispers, lullabies, and gentle voices were, in fact, loudly singing the message of freedom. The women's individual and collective voices never cease to speak even in apparent speechlessness. Hearing the songs and wails of the women along with the river is essential to Soon Hyo's survival: they are modes of communication that allow her to feel connected to the women, a language that gives her purpose and a tool to remember and pass down the history of "comfort women" to her daughter. Beccah, too, though apparently deaf to all her mother's teachings, hears and remembers the song and language for mourning and ferrying her mother after Soon Hyo dies.

2.6 Shamanism

Given that shamanism in Korea is a largely female profession and that a number of former "comfort women" have become shamans, Chungmoo Choi speaks of "[t]he Korean notion of han, the pent-up resentment [which] stems from a situation where repressed emotion is not allowed to emerge". To express "pent-up resentment," shamanistic ritual is used as a "culturally constructed religious language with which to articulate the problems" ("Politics of War" 404). According to C. Choi, "[a]s a seer and

healer, the shaman facilitates a forum where women can share their experience of suffering” (“Politics of War” 405). C. Choi views the shamanic practices performed by the former “comfort women” as using “religious language” to process difficult experiences, to heal and to understand. This analysis is valid in the case of Soon Hyo as well; however, what stands out in Soon Hyo’s shamanic practices is that the message carried by “religious language” becomes a language used to connect with the dead “comfort women”. Although shamanism is a key element in the novel, the focus is on the language that shamanism permits women to speak and its role in grieving women rather than on the folk faith itself.

Throughout the novel, Induk appears in many different forms, as if to model the possibility that a woman and her many experiences can be represented in multiple ways: a Birth Grandmother, Soon Hyo herself, Soon Hyo’s mother, her spiritual companion, her lover, and her god. Soon Hyo rejects Christianity, her American husband’s religion, and substitutes Induk in place of god as she refers to Induk as one who “offered [her] salvation” (96): “Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name, I would say, while thinking of Induk, her body bathed in a river of light” (107). Soon Hyo, who embodies Induk’s spirit, becomes her own saviour.

Soon Hyo also removes religious elements from the story of “Princess Pari” and diverts the attention to the relationship between mother and daughter. In the original tale, Pari refuses to live with her parents after saving them; instead, she returns to the underworld and the husband she was forced to marry and becomes the first shaman. In Keller’s version, rather than returning to the underworld or her birth parent’s kingdom, Pari and her parents go “through the earth, through the skies, and into the Lotus Paradise, where

they [are] reborn as angels” (49). The origin story of Korea’s shamanism is rewritten: Keller’s story is newly imagined as a tale of a brave daughter who saves and reunites with her lost mother through song. Additionally, while the original story mixes several different religions—“Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism”—in correspondence to Korea’s religious pluralism, many of these religious elements are omitted in Keller’s version (K.J. Lee 435). Rather than Buddha and his disciples saving baby Pari from the sea, Keller’s Pari is offered directly to the Birth Grandmother spirit, who is also Induk. In Keller’s version, when Pari is on her journey to find medicinal water, she does not need to fulfil traditionally “feminine” roles such as washing clothes or giving birth to sons as commanded by the gods. Instead, Keller’s Pari dives straight into the underworld herself, with no help from the gods, and finds her mother guided only by the sound of her song. In Keller’s version, in place of gods, the Birth Grandmother/Induk becomes the saviour of women who have been traumatized by the politics of patriarchy and Empire. Such a shifted emphasis from a religious origin story to an intergenerational story in which Beccah becomes Princess Pari highlights the importance of supportive connection through alternative modes of communication. The transformation of the original folk faith story becomes the vehicle—the language—through which Keller unites daughter and mother and discloses for subsequent generations the stories of “comfort women”.

Soon Hyo’s language speaks for the women whose departure from life went unmourned and for those who have been forgotten, including Soon Hyo herself. While Richard, and then Reno (self-made business agent for Soon Hyo’s trance states) claim to have saved Soon Hyo, Soon Hyo actually saves herself using a personalized shamanic language and practice. Like Princess Pari, Soon Hyo actively retrieves herself and the lost women

using shamanic language. When she keeps diving into the river during her trances, she tells Beccah that “it’s not a matter of leaving [her], but of retrieving something that [she] lost” (48). Her ritual acts repeatedly reach backwards to the dead women and forwards to their remembrance. Soon Hyo’s trances are sung in a “singsong voice” with each step “accompanied by the music of the river, a white noise . . . dancing and singing a song with no words” (47, 190). Although Reno may stage the ritual as a paid performance for others, Soon Hyo’s dance and song are not a performance for the customers to contact their dead; Soon Hyo’s ritual dance and song are attempts to heal her wounds and to comfort women like Induk whose deaths could not be openly mourned at the time.

While Beccah struggled to understand her mother, upon Soon Hyo’s death Beccah begins to realize two things: firstly, that her mother performed for herself as much as for the “forgotten” women; secondly, that her mother performed the shamanic rituals in front of her to teach her how to listen, learn, and continue in her place just as Soon Hyo takes Induk’s place. Beccah remarks: “Never would I have thought that my mother performed the ceremony for herself. Never, as a child, did I think about whom my mother had had to leave behind, and whom she cried for” (172). Soon Hyo’s shamanic performance that is largely viewed by the American neighbours as a crazed act is purposeful in that it purges her pain and attempts to resolve unresolved sadness and begin a process of healing. Soon Hyo does not find the key for healing in others or in legal justice but through her role as a shaman who could console the unspeakable trauma experienced by fellow former “comfort women”. Once Beccah understands this, she is able to make sense of all the “senseless wails” her mother made and to continue in her place when she follows her mother’s shamanic performances during her private funeral (191): “‘I remember,’ I sang

without knowing the words. ‘Omoni [mother], I remember the care. Of the living and the dead’” (208). The words may not be exact, but they merge with the language of water as Beccah caressingly bathes Soon Hyo’s body and lovingly sings for her mother hoping that she is finally free from pain and suffering. As Pilzer notes in his interview with former “comfort women,” “[i]n song [the ‘comfort women’] could forget, remember, express their experiences, and form identities and solidarities without giving themselves away” (7). Through this language of survival, Soon Hyo and Beccah console their pain and loss.

In an article on the “response-ability” of Beccah as a Korean American daughter, Abe notes that “the novel begins with Akiko’s confession and Beccah’s silencing gesture . . . It is only after the mother’s death that Beccah appreciates that she herself has reiterated the postwar American attitude of silencing, unlistening” (135-36). Beccah’s “unlistening” or “nonlistening” response to her mother obstructs their relationship (Abe 136; Pilzer 11). While Beccah makes efforts, it is difficult for her to listen to her language, as she is yet to accept the communicative significance of her mother’s songs and shamanism. Beccah experiences second-generation immigrant rejection of her mother’s Korean-ness as well as simply undergoing “growing pains” towards an identity separate from mother in the transition from girlhood to womanhood. Many others have also unlistened to Soon Hyo: the Japanese soldiers “never knew what [the women] were saying” (16), and the American missionaries describe her as a “wild child raised by tigers . . . [p]hysically human but able to speak only in the language of animals” (16). Soon Hyo is aware that the people around her will only understand or listen to a certain type of speech. As a

result, Soon Hyo “only told them something they could understand” instead of talking to them with “pure tongue” (189, 195).

Contrastingly, Soon Hyo never stops talking to Beccah using the language she knows to be true even though Beccah would cover her ears: “‘I can’t hear you, I can’t hear you,’ I sang over and over again. ‘I can’t hear you, I can’t hear you,’ I chanted each time she opened her mouth to add something else” (28). Beccah fills her mother’s songs and shamanic language with words that make sense to her to try and block the “meaningless” sounds her mother makes. Beccah speaks colonial language over Soon Hyo’s “senseless wails” and decides to speak for her rather than learn to listen (191). It is interesting to note that while Beccah attempts to enforce language over wails, she does so in the form that she unknowingly absorbed from her mother: through song and chant. Despite Beccah’s interjections and “nonlistening” practices, Soon Hyo continues to perform, sing, dance, and wail in front of Beccah. After Soon Hyo’s death, Beccah learns that “while I had felt invisible, unimportant, while my mother consorted with her spirits, I now understood that she knew I watched her. That in her way, she had always carried me with her” (197). Soon Hyo asks Beccah to listen to alternative language: “[l]et the river speak to you. Listen to what it has to say, to what you have to hear” (190). Soon Hyo’s language and performance teaches Beccah how to listen to the river, to the song, to the women so that one day she could “[l]ead the ch’ulssang”²⁹ and “bathe [them] with [her] song” using the alternative mode of communication Soon Hyo has passed onto her daughter (190, 197).

²⁹ “Ch’ulssang (절상)” is a table of food prepared for ancestors during “Jesa/Chesa (제사),” an ancestral rite. Chesa is said to have originated from shamanism and later became a tradition that most Koreans still participate in to pray to the ancestors for protection and good fortune (Nam).

2.7 Touch

Another essential part of Soon Hyo's alternative language is based in sight and touch. By showing Beccah her dances and rituals that she expresses with her body rather than with words, Soon Hyo hopes to pass down a mode of communication that she learned from her own mother. Touch was a cherished form of communication between Soon Hyo and her mother, and it becomes an essential form of communication for Soon Hyo when her relationship with language is further complicated in the Japanese "comfort" camps where the women are "forbidden to speak any language at all" (16). When Soon Hyo is taken to the camp as a child, she is first given the role as a caretaker of the "comfort women". There, Soon Hyo recounts: "We taught ourselves to communicate through eye movements, body posture, tilt of the head . . . through rhythmic rustling between our stalls; in this way we could speak, in this way we kept our sanity" (16). Non-dominant forms of communication that escape the colonial force, such as body language, take place when words-as-speech are forcefully taken away from the women. Body language becomes more important to Soon Hyo than the language of words because she realizes "the inability of traditional uses of language to make sense of her experiences" as seen in her inability to understand the words that appear in her vision of a storybook that narrates her own life (Bellamy 119). Not only is Soon Hyo distrustful of both Japanese and English languages but she has also learned to be careful of the Korean language, preferring to sing, dance, wail, and touch over using her natal tongue. Betrayals acted out in Soon Hyo's own mother tongue abandon her without language. It was her own sister who sold her to the Japanese soldiers as her dowry, and when Soon Hyo overhears this transaction, she experiences how words betray her. Later when Soon Hyo escapes the

camp and follows Manshin Ahjima to the missionary camps, she is betrayed by her too as Manshin Ahjima hands Soon Hyo over to the American missionaries and Soon Hyo temporarily loses her ability to hear words. As Manshin Ahjima leaves, Soon Hyo “yelled after her in words that did not sound like words” because Manshin Ahjima, with her betrayal, “took [Soon Hyo’s] hearing with her” (62, 63). With her distrust in language/words and her metaphorical loss of hearing, Soon Hyo begins to rely more heavily on alternative modes of communication.

For Soon Hyo, words are neither concrete nor constant. Her experience tells her that the meaning of language is prone to change and tends to deceive. Soon Hyo thinks to herself that Richard is “[a] scholar who spends his life with the Bible, [who] thinks he is safe, that the words he reads, the meaning he gathers, will remain the same. Concrete. He is wrong” (21). Such caution for language also permeates Soon Hyo’s reinterpretation of traditional stories such as the tale of the “Heavenly Toad”. In Soon Hyo’s “Heavenly Toad,” the original story about obedience is changed into a story of “deception and separation” (157). The original tale’s moral focuses on repaying one’s parents through obedience to illustrate a lesson of filial piety, but the tale that Soon Hyo tells Beccah adds a sense of horror. Soon Hyo’s version focuses on the pain that everyone goes through to help the Toad deceive others. The Toad’s adoptive father is beaten, and a young girl is forced to marry a giant toad then “rewarded” by being carried off to a different world, which separates her permanently from her own family. The Toad symbolizes language that presents itself as one thing but is in fact another.

Instead of trying to make sense of her experiences and her life through language, Soon Hyo often defines herself without the utterance of words. It does not matter to Soon Hyo

that her daughter is named by her husband or that she cannot pronounce “Rebecca”. To Soon Hyo, Beccah will mean “Bek-hap, the lily, purest white” (116). And even though Soon Hyo never calls Beccah “Bek-hap” and lives her own life as “Akiko,” she knows in her heart that she is Soon Hyo, and her daughter is Bek-hap. Instead of focusing on the words and what the words symbolize, Soon Hyo teaches Beccah to name what is hers through touch and to know the meaning by embodied love: “And each night, I touch each part of her body, waiting until I see recognition in her eyes. I wait until I see that she knows that all of what I touch is her and hers to name in her own mind, before language dissects her into pieces that can be swallowed and digested by others not herself” (22). Before anyone can scrutinize, define, or trick her with words, Soon Hyo centers Beccah’s body as a site that only Beccah alone can control. Soon Hyo’s touch lets Beccah know that she is attentively watching and that she will always be there even “before she cries, before she has to give voice to her pain” (21).

Like Beccah, Soon Hyo is unaware of her own mother’s name. After marriage, Soon Hyo’s mother lost her name and became someone’s wife and someone’s mother as is customary in Korea: “[Soon Hyo’s] mother never heard her name again . . . Only when the time came to bury her did [Soon Hyo and her sisters] even wonder what name [their] mother was born with. In the end, [they] merely carved Omoni, mother, into the sixth plank of her coffin” (180).³⁰ Although Soon Hyo did not know her mother’s name, it never hinders her confidence that their relationship was complete. In like manner, Soon

³⁰ It is customary in South Korea to call a married woman not by her name but by her relationship to her husband or children (e.g. Bekhap Umma, Bekhap Omoni, Bekhap Mother).

Hyo tries to share with Beccah the modes of communication that let her know her family, love, and in turn herself:

I will tell my daughter these things, and about the box³¹ that kept my mother's past and future, and though she will never know her grandmother's name, she will know who her grandmother is. Later, perhaps, when she is older, she will sift through her own memories, and through the box that I will leave for her, and come to know her own mother—and then herself as well. (183)

Touch allows three generations of women to communicate their connectedness, and while it may take time, Soon Hyo patiently paves the way for Beccah so that whenever she is ready, she will feel the generations of love and come to know herself through it. Just as Soon Hyo realizes through touching Beccah that her mother must have loved her more than “heaven” or “God;” Soon Hyo speaks through her body and shares the language of touch in hopes that Beccah too will have a similar realization (117).

When Richard is still alive, Soon Hyo is seen trying to counterbalance the speech that he pours into the ears of Beccah:

[Richard] shares all his languages [German, English, Korean, Japanese, Polish, Chinese] with our daughter, though she is not even a year old. She will absorb the sounds, he tells me. But I worry that the different sounds for the same object will

³¹ “In the box I hold for my daughter, I keep the treasures of my present life: my daughter’s one-hundred-day dress which we will also use for her first birthday; a lock of her reddish-brown hair; the dried stump of her umbilical cord. And a thin black cassette tape that will, eventually, preserve a few of the pieces, the secrets, of our lives” (183).

confuse her. To compensate, I try to balance her with language I know is true. I watch her with a mother's eye, trying to see what she needs. (21)

Here, not only are colonial languages such as English and Japanese considered to be languages of confusion but also Soon Hyo's own mother tongue. Soon Hyo's postcolonial recovery of language does not try to retrieve the national language; instead, it focuses on a feminist postcolonial recovery of the connection between liberated women and not on the connection between woman and nation. The "true" language that precedes and exceeds speech is passed down from mother to daughter like a family heirloom and ensures that even when everything, including language, is taken away, the feeling of comfort permeates generations of women with the physical memory of touch. Just like her mother, Soon Hyo repeats the true language to Beccah: "I touch my child in the same way now [as her mother touched her]; this is the language she understands . . . This, not the senseless murmurings of useless words, is what quiets her, tells her she is precious" (18).

The language of touch is later repeated by Beccah, demonstrating that the language and connection to her matrilineal family and the Korean "comfort women" are not lost with Soon Hyo's death. Through the universal language of touch, the role of comforting and remembering the pain of the Korean "comfort women" is successfully passed on to the Korean American daughter despite generational and cultural differences: "I touched my mother's eyelids and her cheeks, dipping her in blessed water . . . and blotted her lips. 'This is for your name, Omoni, so you can speak it true: Soon Hyo. Soon Hyo. Soon Hyo'" (209). Just as Soon Hyo did for her mother's funeral, Beccah prepares her mother's death by bathing, dressing, crying, and calling out her name both as "omoni

[mother]” and “Soon Hyo”. The repetition of Soon Hyo’s name that is spoken like a chant shows Beccah’s attempt at the shamanic language. The recovery of Soon Hyo’s true name sheds “Akiko 41” and assures Soon Hyo that Beccah understands, remembers, and will continue to call out the true names of “comfort women”. As Beccah is finally able to listen and understand the languages that her mother spoke, Beccah becomes one with her, connected “palm to palm, fingertip to fingertip, mirror images” (209).

2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I investigated the significance of alternative languages and the importance of listening to the voices that continue to speak firmly despite the lack of testimony or public speech. I argued that the novel also questions the hierarchy of language by paying attention to the murmurs of the river, the whispers of the women, the song and dance of a shaman, and the touch of a mother instead of the languages of the father or of public speech.

The reversed hierarchy of language in *Comfort Woman* reconnects the women’s bodies and their experiences which have been separated for national and political agendas. The “comfort women” were often fitted into a mold and grouped as a single colonial victim to symbolize the “feminized” and raped nation. Instead of focusing on the nation’s agenda or direct speech to explain the “comfort women,” the novel focuses on the alternative languages of women who have been deemed “silent”. In addition, *Comfort Woman* exposes how public speech can be a source of pain that “pin[s],” “split[s],” “skewer[s],” and “shatter[s]” (120, 94, 20, 70). Conversely, the language that saves Soon Hyo is one that is spoken with “the true voice [and] the pure tongue”; it is the alternative language

that is spoken by the “silent,” “crazy” women and a language that connects them across cultural and generational differences (195).

As an example of alternative language, I began with the analysis of “Princess Pari” as a song rather than a fairy tale. I located song as a postcolonial recovery of female speech that did not reach for a national goal, but for a return to female solidarity. The shamanic song that Soon Hyo speaks of is a postcolonial reimagining of a pre-colonial and pre-Confucius time. Rather than specifying the setting as strictly Korean, Soon Hyo’s version of the story is transnational and speaks to her Korean American daughter. I argued that the story of “Princess Pari” confirms song as a form of language, as it is a communication method that locates and identifies the lost mother. Song in *Comfort Woman* is a language that connects the living and the dead, the mother and the daughter, the Korean and the Korean American.

Furthermore, I demonstrated Soon Hyo’s shamanic language to be a language that saves herself, and, like Princess Pari, song connects her to the lost souls that have been uncared for even until the moment of their deaths. What is unique about Soon Hyo’s shamanic language is that her songs, dances, wails, and stories are focused entirely on the women and not on a religious deity. Shamanism, in this sense, becomes a language between women rather than a tool for speaking with gods. The lack of religious representation in Soon Hyo’s shamanism redirects the focal point onto women’s alternative language.

Accompanying song and shamanic language is the language of touch. I analyzed touch as a non-verbal alternative language that linked matrilineal relations. Surpassing cultural barriers between the Korean mother and the Korean American daughter, touch allowed Soon Hyo and Beccah to recognize the self and define oneself without the use of words.

Soon Hyo believed that her loving touch would let Beccah know that generations of love pass through a mother's loving touch. Moreover, Soon Hyo expands this loving touch beyond a matrilineal kinship and urges Beccah to carry on her work of comforting the souls of the former "comfort women". When Soon Hyo escapes from the Japanese "comfort" camps and lets the river wash her away, it is the thought of Induk that forces her to live:

No one performed the proper rites of the dead. For me. For you. Who was there to cry for us in kok, announcing our death? Or to fulfill the duties of yom: bathing and dressing our bodies, combing our hair, trimming our nails, laying us out? Who was there to write our names, to even know our names and to remember us?
(38)

Giving Soon Hyo purpose to live is her role to "kok (곡)": sing and cry for the women and "yom (염, 殮)": prepare the dead bodies with gentle touch. In Korean, "kok (곡)," which takes after the Chinese character "哭," means to wail during a funeral in a uniform cry; however, "kok (곡)," which takes after the Chinese character "曲," means music. The alternative languages of song and touch save Soon Hyo and console the dead "comfort women," ensuring them that they will never be forgotten. Similarly, Keller's insertion here of Korean diction and Korean rituals, writes over the English language of colonization to restore "pure tongue" to Beccah (Keller 195). Despite "comfort women" being a problematic term, the novel is titled *Comfort Woman*, but the title uses the singular case, suggesting that Soon Hyo, and later Beccah, is a woman who comforts the women who were alone in life and death. And unlike Beccah's interjections in the past,

yelling that she “can’t hear,” by the end of the novel Beccah “added [her] own voice” to her mother’s cassette tape to confirm that she will continue remembering the women (28, 193).

The majority of the 200,000 Japanese military sexual slaves have been Korean, and although the first Korean “comfort woman” testified in 1991 and made the topic an international discussion, the “comfort women” were not, by any means, a new discovery. Japan, Korea, the United States, and many of their Western allies were aware of the women who were kidnapped and forced into sexual slavery. In fact, not only did the United States have “full knowledge” of the existence of Japan’s “comfort” camps, but they also “permitted” their existence and later extended the “comfort women” camps for their own troops “until the spring of 1946, when Gen. Douglas MacArthur shut the brothels³² down” (Talmadge). Many countries chose to turn a blind eye to these women so that they could “keep good trade relationships with Japan” or avoid facing their own complicity (Kim-Gibson 47). For the betterment of the nation and for its fast recovery from the damages of the colonial rule, South Korea, for a long time, decided to forget collectively and selectively. Colonial damages were often referred to as “matters of the past (과거사)” and people hoped to forget and move on from war atrocities (H. Yang, “Re-membering” 123). Unlike the Asian “comfort women,” whom I have referred to as “forgotten” in this chapter, some women did manage to get legal justice in 1948 when

thirteen Japanese soldiers were punished (three were executed) by the Batavia

Court for mobilizing Dutch women in Indonesia for sexual service. However, no

³² The term “brothel” is used to imply that the women were prostitutes, but internal reports reveal that the women were coerced or forced into working in these “brothels” (Talmadge).

charge was every brought to the Tokyo War Crimes Trials for the sexual enslavement of Asian women. In other words, under the assumptions of Western humanism, which was the philosophical basis of the Nuremberg and Batavia Trials, Asians did not belong to the category of humanity. (C. Choi, “Guest Editor” vi)

Hundreds and thousands of Asian women have been ignored and rendered invisible and inaudible. How have our listening practices, thus far, failed these women? And how have the women been speaking to us all this time?

For a long time in South Korea, “comfort women’s” victimhood equated the nation’s victimhood. “Comfort women” stood as living symbols of war crimes by both Japan and the United States. When these women spoke out in testimony and continued the Wednesday Demonstrations for over 30 years, the public started getting used to the victims/survivors speaking their trauma publicly and fighting for redress.³³ Public speech, however, is not the only way to represent, remember, or come to terms with that violent past; accordingly, testimony is not the only form of speech we should care for. Ji-Hyang Yoon, the president of The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, states that

[t]he grandmothers love to sing. When they gather, they sing and dance, but when someone else is there they keep their mouths shut. As a woman and as an

³³ The Wednesday Demonstration is an ongoing weekly protest that began on the 8th of January 1992. The survivors and supporters meet in front of the Japanese embassy and stand in solidarity to ask the Japanese government for a sincere apology and an acknowledgement that the women were forcefully taken or taken under false pretenses. Japan’s apology has not been accepted by the survivors because, although they admit that comfort camps existed, they continue to argue that the women volunteered themselves to become sex slaves.

individual with a painful past, there was a time when to sing and dance brought up gossip and prejudice. So even when the senior citizen home went on picnics, the grandmothers could not go. (“할머니들이 노래 부르시는 걸 참 좋아한다.

모이시면 노래도 뽐내고 춤도 추시는데 다른 사람들과 있을 땐 입을 다무셨다. 여성으로서 그리고 아픈 과거를 가진 개인으로서 노래를 잘 하고 춤사위를 잘 하는 것 만으로도 수근덕거리며 편견을 가지고 보던 시절이 있었기 때문이다. 그래서 피해자 할머니들은 노인정에서 야유회를 갈 때도 갈 수가 없었다.”qtd. in Oh; my trans.)

What the public chooses to listen to matters greatly. Our fixation on the women’s traumas and obsession to hear first-hand renditions of rape restrict the representation of the women to victims, but the women are also survivors with their own modes of expression, here in song and dance, but also in other forms. Some may choose words to fight against injustice and others may choose not to, yet both forms are equally valid. For example, in an art exhibit by the victims/survivors, Choun-Hee Bae draws a series of lotus flowers:

Lotus flowers bloom from muddy water but they also do not burn and keep their bloom no matter how much gasoline you pour on them...I thought of how amazing their patience and vigour was. I worked on my patience thinking of lotus flowers. Whenever I have a difficult time, I think of this. (“연꽃은 흙탕물 속에서 피기도 하지만 그 위에 아무리 석유를 부어도 연꽃이 타지 않고 그래도 피어 있다고. 그 인내심과 생존력을 대단하다고 생각했지. 나도 연꽃을 생각하면서 인내심을 길렀어. 힘들 때마다 그 생각을 하면서 이겨 냈지.” qtd in S. Park; my trans.)

Without mentioning any keywords or painting specific acts of violence, Bae expresses herself through a series of lotus flower paintings. In the same art exhibition, Oak-Sun Lee chose to paint her testimony in Japanese calligraphy:

When I was in the “comfort” camp I was tortured a lot. My flesh was ripped open by knives and the Japanese stomped over my body. But when I testified, I don’t know if the translator translated the details of my experience well. So, I want to testify myself by learning Japanese. I want to get a heartfelt apology by Japan before I die. I will make it happen. (“위안부에 있을 때, 고문을 많이 받았어. 칼로 생살을 찢기고 일본놈들이 내 몸을 짓 밟았지. 하지만 증언을 할 때, 통역하는 사람들이 내가 겪은 일들을 자세하게 전달하는지는 모르겠어. 그래서 내가 직접 배워서 당한 일을 써서 증언하고 싶어. 죽기 전에 일본에게 진심 어린 사과를 받고 싶어. 꼭 그렇게 하게 만들거야.”qtd in S. Park; my trans.)

Contrasting Bae’s artwork and description, Lee wishes to speak in the colonizer’s language directly. Who is to say that Bae’s or Lee’s form of speaking is more or less expressive and communicative than the other? In another instance, survivor Won-Oak Gil holds music concerts in which she fulfills her dream of becoming a singer. Pilzer recognizes the power of song in the communication of “comfort women”. Like Soon Hyo who searched and utilized alternative modes of communication not just to connect with other women but to save herself, Pilzer notes in his book *Hearts of Pine: Songs in the Lives of Three Korean Survivors of the Japanese “Comfort Women”* that “when [the ‘comfort women’] sing for us, they invite us into a public yet intimate sphere of

alternative understanding. They invite us to enter their worlds of song” (12). As similarly seen in the alternative modes of communication used by the survivors mentioned above, Soon Hyo invites the readers to her world of song with her alternative mode of communication.

On a statue of “comfort women” in San Francisco there is an engraving of a quote by a survivor, which reads: “What we fear the most is that this painful history will be forgotten” (“San Francisco”). Similarly, Hak-Sun Kim, a former “comfort woman,” states: “Once I am dead and gone, I wonder whether the Korean or Japanese government will pay attention to the miserable life of a woman like me” (qtd. in H. Yang, “Remembering” 135). In turn, what the perpetrators fear the most would be that the “comfort women” will be remembered, even when there are no more living survivors left. In hopes that the story of “comfort women” will never be forgotten, Nora Okja Keller represents through Soon Hyo’s story the alternative language that will pass down orally, physically, and transnationally from generation to generation. In the cassette tape Soon Hyo leaves for her daughter, she urges Beccah to continue dancing, singing, and calling out the names of the dead in her place. Soon Hyo chants:

I sing the names by which I have known you, all of you, so that you will remember. So that I will remember. So that those who come after me will know. Induk. Miyoko. Kimiko. Hanako. Akiko. Soon Hi. Soon Mi. Soon Ja. Soon Hyo. So many true names unknown, dead in the heart. So many bodies left unprepared, lost in the river. (192)

Soon Hyo remembers the women’s original names, speaks a postcolonial recovery from the Japanese, and bequeaths to her daughter a feminist Korean American identity.

Ultimately, the novel's language successfully remembers the past, speaks the present, and guides the future.

3 Assumed Silence in Kang Han's *The Vegetarian*

In *The Vegetarian* (2007) by Kang Han, the protagonist, Yeong-hye, desires to turn into a tree and actively performs this transformation by standing upside-down with her hands rooted in earth and legs spread wide open like tree branches. The novel comprises three novellas, each narrated by a character close to Yeong-hye: her husband, her brother-in-law, and her older sister. These three narrators speak of their encounters with Yeong-hye as she crosses the border between “normal” and “abnormal,” subject and object, human and animal, and human and plant. As the story progresses across three years, Yeong-hye “retreat[s] from herself” ever since she has grotesque dreams of blood (Han 134, 17). Her recurring violent dreams deter her from consuming meat, animal products, and ultimately any form of food because she believes she can survive on water and sunlight. In a mental hospital, Yeong-hye’s wilful metamorphosis into a tree continues as her body slowly eats away at itself. Yeong-hye’s sudden transition into vegetarianism, veganism, anorexia, then near death opens numerous discussions on how to interpret her eerie story. Although studies focus on different topics—for example, patriarchy, vegetarianism, woman and nature, or woman and madness—overall, there is a consensus that Yeong-hye’s choice alerts the readers of the androcentric and anthropocentric world. Many critics have particularly hailed Yeong-hye’s willful metamorphosis as a feminist symbol criticizing South Korea’s patriarchal society. Moreover, in several critical responses, Yeong-hye’s transformation is romanticized as a return to nature. Dominated largely by an ecofeminist reading of the novel, “Han’s critics argue that Yeong-hye’s ascetic withdrawal [is] a kind of bodily negation of carnism and patriarchy, [that] becomes propositional and liberatory” (O’Key 9). Yeong-hye’s suicidal attempts at becoming a tree are often

translated as a transformation symbolizing her empathy for animals and solidifying her identity as one attuned to—or returning to—nature. Readers and critics have further assumed for Yeong-hye the role of a silent rebel against patriarchy. Hence, “Han’s academic critics have sought to *rescue* Yeong-hye’s ‘great refusal’ through an affirmative counter-reading” by romanticizing her “death-drive” (O’Key 3, emphasis added).

The dominant theme discussed by critics of *The Vegetarian*, however, is “ecofeminism”. The term “ecofeminism” first appears in Françoise d’Eaubonne’s 1974 book *Le féminisme ou la mort (Feminism or Death: How the Women’s Movement Can Save the Planet)* in which she discusses the need to overthrow the system of power that oppresses women and nature alike. Ecofeminist thought raises “awareness about [the] interconnections between women’s oppression and nature’s domination in an attempt to liberate women and nature from unjust subordinations” (K. Yang 3). And although “there is not one ecofeminism, . . . what makes ecofeminism distinct is its insistence that nonhuman nature and naturism are feminist issues” (Warren and Erkal 4). The connection between women and nature is highlighted in ecofeminist thought not just positively whereby women are reproducers and mothers but also negatively whereby women are the dominated in a world of “the dominion of Man over feminine and natural fragility” (Valera 10).

Accordingly, an ecofeminist reading of the novel argues that Yeong-hye’s decision to abstain from eating meat or animal products demonstrates her resistance to the patriarchal society. Meat is interpreted as a symbol of the phallogentric society, as argued in Carol J. Adams’ *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990). Adams argues that meat-eating—and related activities such as hunting or grilling—have been associated with men. Society has ingrained in us the gendered dichotomy of food by assimilating meat with (male) activity

and vegetable with (female) passivity: “[t]he literal evocation of male power is found in the concept of meat” (57). Using a similar formulation of meat as a representation of male power, scholars such as Won-Chung Kim, Soo Jeong Shin, and Devita Kakkat and Sulagna Mohanty have argued that Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism is a rebellious ecofeminist choice against South Korea’s patriarchal society. Vegetarianism is interpreted as “a challenge to patriarchal percepts” and a “resistance and redefinition of identity” (W-C. Kim 9; Kakkat and Mohanty 221). Yeong-hye’s transformation is, thus, analysed as a political statement for a new social order that is life-affirming. In what seems a lone voice in the scholarship, Margarita Carretero-Gonzalez alerts readers that “the beautiful prose [of the novel] almost runs the risk of romanticizing the mental illness” of Yeong-hye (8-9). Carretero-Gonzalez argues that while the novel claims autonomy of the female body, it also narrates the destruction of the protagonist, demonstrating that the novel is not a story about vegetarianism or veganism: “Yeong-hye’s body [is] that of a martyr, but not that of a vegan” because “[v]eganism is actually about affirming life” and not desiring death (9). Carretero-Gonzalez’s reading nevertheless supports the ecofeminist notion that Yeong-hye’s dietary change functions to “destabilize important pillars of Korean culture” such as patriarchy (2).

In another ecofeminist reading of the novel, Caitlin Stobie examines the connection of women to nature and animals. As a marginalised character, Yeong-hye’s plight is likened to the suffering of animals caused by humans: Yeong-hye refuses to eat meat “because of an empathetic realisation of the similarities between how animals’ and women’s bodily autonomies are restricted” (794). Accordingly, Yeong-hye’s desire to become a tree is interpreted as a willingness to stop the reproduction of violent human beings and to return

to nature. Similarly, Alix Beeston considers the connections between women, nature, and animals in the novel but also asks whether “a woman’s (re)turn to nature offer[s] a meaningful route for defying the natural order of masculinist and anthropocentric society” (681). For Beeston, the connection of women and nature found in the novel serves the purpose of uncovering the violence acted upon women and animals alike, but Yeong-hye’s transformation into a tree is a nightmare to wake up from. Borrowing Roman Bartosch’s phrase on becoming animal, Beeston asks, “what good does it do to ‘become-animal’ if the result is extinction?” and, like Carretero-Gonzalez, she warns the readers about the consequences of romanticising Yeong-hye’s implied death (Beeston 682). Contrary to this view is Yo-Han Yoo’s consideration of Yeong-hye’s transformation as a hopeful return to nature and a desire for rebirth in an “ideal state of the mythic beginning” (157). Yu-Chen Tai more specifically interprets Yeong-hye’s metamorphosis as a deconstruction of “her body to form a new identity” and create an “alternative space and time even though its full materialization is not a guarantee” (642, 649).

By and large, then, many scholars assert that Yeong-hye is a rebellious woman who resists South Korea’s patriarchal society through her “vegetarianism”. Her “metamorphosis” is often viewed as a return to nature or an escape from patriarchy. Her refusal to eat meat is interpreted as a symbolic gesture of noncompliance to male control that simultaneously demonstrates an empathy for the violence acted upon animals. Yeong-hye’s actions and vegetarianism are given symbolic value in such analyses, and in the process, Yeong-hye is described as a “virtually voiceless protagonist” (Carretero-Gonzalez 1). But is Yeong-hye truly a “voiceless” rebel or are we assuming silence and a

stereotyped passivity? In current studies of the novel, Yeong-hye is analysed in a primarily Western feminist framework. Under a Western viewpoint, the East Asian protagonist's apparently passive and silent characteristics are confirmed without challenge. With Yeong-hye's assumed silence, critics instead focus on what her vegetarianism represents and arrive at a conclusion that hers is a "quiet rebellion" (MacSiniuc 103). But can different conclusions be drawn if we examine beyond Yeong-hye's gendered position in a "universal" framework? Yeong-hye's main and perhaps sole identity is assumed to be that of an oppressed woman under patriarchal traditions. Subsequently, readers attempt to resolve the situation by inputting a Western framework to interpret the oppressed East Asian woman. They assume that her vegetarianism symbolically rejects men, that her willed arboreality is a return to mother nature, and that her bloody dreams are an empathetic realisation that women and animals equally suffer from man-made violence. What are some problems that arise from symbolically interpreting Yeong-hye's decisions without cultural and historical specificity or local knowledge? In symbolically interpreting the protagonist's motivations and vegetarianism, readers assume "universal" values and apply them to the "other".

Chandra Mohanty, in her seminal work, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," (1988) uses the phrase "third world women" with full awareness that the label connotes a problematic hierarchy in referring to an essentialist understanding of non-white or non-Western women. While "third world" used to signify division between nations based on a nation's development, it no longer refers to an industrial or geographical divide; instead, an ideological divide based largely on stereotypes newly places women of the "third world" in a category lower than that of

Western women. Mohanty posits that “[i]n the postindustrial world, systemic socioeconomic and ideological processes position the peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, as well as ‘minority’ populations (people of color) in the United States and Europe, in similar relationships to the state” (“Cartographies of Struggle” 2). According to this “postindustrial world” understanding of the third-world woman, the majority of the world’s female population belongs to this group and are essentially viewed without differentiation. Like Mohanty, I nonetheless choose to use this category in a strategic manner: to criticize not only the “production of . . . a singular monolithic subject” but also the continued reproduction of the assumed third-world woman and to deconstruct the term (“Under Western Eyes” 49). It is with this awareness that I locate Korean women in the category of “third-world women” despite South Korea’s capitalist success since the end of the Korean War.

What is the danger of this continued reproduction of third world women interpreted as a monolithic group? Mohanty similarly asks and responds: “What happens when this assumption of ‘women as an oppressed group’ is situated in the context of Western feminist writing about third-world women? It is here that I locate the colonialist move” (“Under Western Eyes” 67). Mohanty’s criticism about the methodologies of Western feminist writing about third-world women is that,

“women” as a group, as a stable category of analysis . . . assumes an ahistorical, universal unity among women based on a generalized notion of their subordination. Instead of analytically *demonstrating* the production of women as socio-economic political groups within particular local contexts, this analytical move—and the presuppositions it is based on—limits the definition of the female

subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities.
 (“Under Western Eyes” 60)

The risk of universalizing “women” or “third-world women” as its own category without studying their cultural, historical, sociopolitical, and/or economic diversities, not only leads to an incomplete understanding but an unreliable understanding. It is crucial that women be considered for more than their gendered position, especially if that gendered position begins from a universal assumption in which Western women, culture, and history are set as the norm.

Mohanty discusses three methodological flaws in Western feminist writing. The first flaw is “proof of universalism . . . through the use of an arithmetic method” (“Under Western Eyes” 62). The second flaw is to draw conclusions about third-world women “without their specification in local cultural and historical contexts” even though “[s]uperficially similar situations may have radically different, historically specific explanation and cannot be treated as identical” (“Under Western Eyes” 63, 64). The third flaw is that “empirical studies of gender differences are confused with the analytical organization of cross-cultural work” and “construe the universality of this equation” (“Under Western Eyes” 64,65). I intend to examine all three flawed methodologies listed by Mohanty to discuss *The Vegetarian*. To date, by and large the scholarship on this novel (1) uses statistics about vegetarianism to interpret its significance to the novel’s background and protagonist; (2) assumes voicelessness without cultural context; and (3) assumes a

universal view that women are inherently closer to nature or that Yeong-hye's desire to become a tree is to desire a return to the arms of "mother nature".³⁴

The pronounced connection between women, vegetarianism, and ecofeminism that dominates the critical reading of the novel is not as easily drawn in a Korean context as it is in the West. As Dominic O'Key observes, "[t]he novel's loosely feminist and vegetarian disposition is . . . ostensibly made for Anglophone reading publics; indeed, these two aspects gain in translation, especially so for vegetarianism as an emergent phenomenon within Anglophone cultures" (19). In a reading that focuses on the Anglophone public and a Western feminist interpretation, we inevitably miss the nuances of Yeong-hye's language and the novel's message. What a consideration of local, cultural, historical, and postcolonial feminism uncovers is not a passive or silent protagonist but an active agent who is a culprit as much as a victim. For example, Yeong-hye's obsessive desire to turn into a tree, which she enacts by performing hand stands, has been interpreted as a return to mother nature or a creation of a safe space. However, the folk etymology of the Korean term for hand stand "물구나무 (mulgunamu)" has its roots in an execution method "물고 (mulgo)" in which an offender is hung upside down until death. This Korean etymology significantly changes how we might interpret Yeong-hye's action. In like manner, Yeong-hye's assumed passivity and assumed silence leads to misinterpretations and limits our ability to distinguish the moment in which Yeong-hye is speaking and when she purposely chooses silent communication such as her expressive bodily performance.

³⁴ Nature is not a gendered concept in South Korea; hence, "mother nature" does not carry the same significance as it does in a Western framework.

Joori Joyce Lee notes how “studies [of *The Vegetarian*] have commonly employed a method of symptomatic reading—a mode of reading that seeks hidden meanings underneath a visible surface”—and instead “calls for [a] surface reading, which focuses on what is evident and perceptible on the surface level of the text” (329). While a symptomatic reading of the novel could uncover a meaning that is “hidden, repressed, deep and in need of detection,” (Best and Marcus 1) on the surface, the novel clearly demonstrates a protagonist who speaks with her voice and body despite the unhearing and unseeing habits practiced towards her. Reconsidering the novel with Lee’s call for a surface reading and O’Key’s “caution against projecting radical political possibilities” (21) in mind, I argue against the reading of Yeong-hye as a voiceless rebel and analyse Yeong-hye’s use of language, including the use of her body as a form of expression that speaks a desire to escape the self as both a victim and a violent predator. Engaging with Yeong-hye’s verbal and corporeal language, I complicate the current discussions of the novel that liken Yeong-hye’s transformation and veganorexia to victimhood under patriarchy. Instead, I suggest that Yeong-hye fears her own violent predatorial nature and her ability to reproduce such violence that stems from within. Yeong-hye communicates with direct speech—contrary to the usual speech norm of South Korea—but she is ignored, undervalued, or simply not recognized by the characters and several critics. I then liken Yeong-hye’s inaudibility accompanied by her hypervisibility to the New Women feminist movement of Korea in the 1920s that was similarly misunderstood and ignored due to the use of direct speech.

3.1 Considering the Cultural Context of Vegetarianism

Given the plot, narrative style, and title, there are many assumptions in which the novel, perhaps intentionally, traps the readers. The first assumption is that the book is about vegetarianism. Not only is the title *The Vegetarian* but the first novella under the same title focuses on Yeong-hye's sudden decision, because of a nightmare, to throw away all the meat in the house. The series of events that follow are subsequently related to her decision to become a vegetarian. In the middle of the night, Mr. Cheong, Yeong-hye's husband, finds Yeong-hye "standing motionless, in front of the fridge. . . wearing her usual white ankle-length nightdress;" like a ghost "[h]er profile swam toward [him] out of the darkness" and her lips parted to say, "I had a dream" (13, 14). From this moment on, Yeong-hye is unable to eat or cook meat. Such a dramatic emphasis on vegetarianism so early in the book has not surprisingly resulted in a predominantly ecofeminist interpretation. Cornelia Macsiniuc interprets the vegetarianism "as precisely a form of dissidence from the patriarchal script" (111). Kakkat and S. Mohanty argue that Han "demonstrates how the 'unconventional' food practice of Yeong-hye brings out the culture of the society that is predominantly patriarchal in nature" (222). The intersection between women's oppression and vegetarianism results in keywords such as "vegetarian ecofeminism" specifically in Western readings of the novel.³⁵ O'Key argues that the problematic translation of the novel "reconstruct[ed] the novel into a story of resistance"

³⁵ Here, when I use the term "Western" ecofeminist readings, I do not refer to an exclusively Western feminist group's reading of the novel but a reading heavily centred around Western feminist thought. In fact, since the book's Man Booker International Prize win in 2017, critics from varying backgrounds including those from South Korea have applied concepts more familiar in the West to interpret the novel. Like Chandra Mohanty's "critiques" that "also pertain to identical analytical principles employed by third-world scholars writing about their own cultures," I want to note that the criticism of the scholarship on the novel in this chapter about a Western feminist reading of the novel does not pertain solely to Western writers (50).

(17).³⁶ Furthermore, the growing popularity from its global literary achievements invited a reading that was more appealing to the anglophone public such as a “recuperative interpretation” of Yeong-hye’s “*regenerative* death-drive” with a focus on “carnophallogocentrism” (O’Key 3). O’Key emphasizes the need to read “against world literary prestige” that invited many critics from diverse backgrounds into a specifically Western “universal” reading of the novel (1). It can be said that both the English translation that catered to a Western audience and the readings that failed to examine local contexts and knowledge created an “irony of feminism” (Ong 108).

An “irony of feminism” of the kind Ong speaks to, is present in the readings of *The Vegetarian* that desire to make meaning of Yeong-hye’s actions through Western reasoning with little consideration for the novel’s background. Speaking for Yeong-hye, a Western reading has evaluated the culture, history, and voice of the novel.

Unintentionally, when “[Western] feminist[s] look overseas, they frequently seek to establish *their* authority on the backs of non-Western women, determining for them the meanings and goals of their lives” and “unconsciously echo th[e] masculinist will to power in its relation to non-Western societies” (Ong 108). I question whether the keywords “women” and “vegetarianism” would create the same intersection under a Korean cultural context. How are the ideas of hunting and the consumption of meat

³⁶ The mistranslation of the novel is a heated debate. While the translator, Deborah Smith, who contributed to the success of the novel in the English-speaking world has been praised, there are also “(1) vocabulary errors, (2) homonymy errors, (3) undertranslation and overtranslation, (4) errors made on the syntactic level, and (5) words or phrases charged with culturally specific features” (W-D Kim 67). The translator herself practices a form of silencing by omitting several paragraphs. Moreover, certain words were intentionally or unintentionally altered to paint the characters in a different light. For example, Yeong-hye who is described as “‘passable,’ ‘tolerable,’ or ‘fairly good’” in Korean is translated into “passive” in the novel’s English version (W-D Kim 68).

different in South Korea? And what are some new understandings of the novel that we can gain from considering these cultural and historical specificities?

Thus far, the focus on vegetarianism in the critical reception of the novel has been inadequate, mostly explained through statistics such as the current number of vegetarians in South Korea or even the number of vegetarian restaurants in South Korea: “The picture for vegans and vegetarians seems to have changed in Korea in the decade passed since *The Vegetarian* was published . . . According to the Korean Vegetarian Union, there are about fifty vegetarian restaurants in Seoul, and over eighty eateries that offer vegetarian dishes” (Carretero-Gonzalez 1). These statistics assume and suggest that the novel supposedly popularized and educated the Korean public about vegetarianism, as if vegetarianism was previously unknown or unfamiliar to the people. As discussed earlier, an “analytic leap” made with the use of statistics to interpret “an assertion of [a phenomenon’s] general significance” risks a hasty generalization of how to read third-world women’s relations to a statistical phenomenon (Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes” 63). Furthermore, the studies are limited because the topic is approached as a personal identity, as seen in the West, rather than a practice, as seen in South Korea. “Vegetarian” when used as an adjective—a vegetarian diet (ch’aesik 채식), vegetarian meal (soch’an 소찬), or simply “not eating meat”—is no new concept in South Korea and dates to the first introduction to Buddhism in the country.³⁷ Even when Confucius philosophy took the place of Buddhism as the state religion in 1392, vegetarian diets continued to play a

³⁷ Buddhist dietary restrictions practiced in South Korea forbid the consumption of meat. They also restrict the consumption of five pungent vegetables such as garlic and chives

symbolic role on an individual and national level throughout the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910).

One major compliance to a vegetarian diet was for the purpose of mourning. When a father, mother, or king died, one could not eat meat for three years because meat was thought to be impure. According to *The Veritable Record of the Chosŏn Dynasty*, to serve the three-year filial mourning rite was a duty of the entire country regardless of class or gender.³⁸ During this period of ritual mourning, a special white garment was worn and if anyone were to offer the mourner meat, the mourner was to reject it. For example, King Taejong is seen refusing meat for this reason during a Chinese envoy's visit to Korea. When Hwang Um, the Chinese envoy, insists that the King eat meat, he responds:

“A three-year filial mourning ritual is a commonality shared from emperor to commoner. The reason why I [King Taejong] am not wearing light-coloured clothes is because you [the envoy] are here. In the palace, I wear funeral clothes and do not eat meat.” Hwang Um insisted meat to the King again and the King firmly rejected. (“3년의 상은 천자로부터 서인에 이르기까지 통하는 것이요. 지금 내가 담복을 입은 것은 다만 사신 때문이요. 궁중에 있을 때에는 최질을 입으니 고기를 먹을 수 없소.”; *The Veritable Records of King Taejong, Book 16*; my trans.)

³⁸ *The Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty* is a daily record kept for 472 years from 1392 to 1863. Record keepers were to always follow the king and write what they had seen and heard. To protect the credibility of the records, the diary was not accessible even by the king himself. Once the king died, the daily records were revised into books now known as *The Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty*. The record keepers' names were erased in the final revision. These records, which were written in Chinese characters, have been translated into *han'gŭl* (Korean alphabet) and digitized by the National Institute of Korean History. Citations from these records are documented herein by individual books in the collection.

The act of refusing meat is found in the *Veritable Records* throughout the centuries. For example, when King Sejong announced that council members who are over 70 should be allowed to eat meat, the council responded, “even if your majesty offers, how dare shall anyone eat meat while your majesty is in the period of eating vegetarian meals?”

(“주상께서 소찬을 드시는 동안에는 대신에게 비록 고기 먹기를 권고하더라도 누가 감히 이를 먹겠습니까.”; *The Veritable Records of King Sejong, Book 111*; my

trans.). Eating a vegetarian meal for a prolonged period was a common act of filial mourning and an act of respect and companionship through sharing the pain of close ones. As a result, the act of eating meat during a time of mourning was a crime punishable by law as seen through the decision to exile a government official in 1406 for eating meat during the filial mourning period for his mother (*The Veritable Records of King Taejong, Book 11*). In other words, there were no instances and no law to punish or condemn the act of eating vegetarian meals, but there were several recorded instances and laws to punish those who ate meat. This goes against suggestions by critics such as Carretero-Gonzalez who implies that the novel educated the Korean public about the “new” concept of vegetarianism, or Macsiniuc who argues that Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism is a “dissidence from the patriarchal script” (111). Vegetarianism in Korea has historically been part of the patriarchal script as an expression of mourning. Likewise, Yeong-Hye’s vegetarianism is closely related to the act of mourning.

Yeong-hye’s dreams continuously imply that a part of Yeong-hye died. She repeatedly thinks to herself, “[m]urderer or murdered,” unsure not just of her death but also her role as the killer, indicating her complicity in violence acted towards herself and others (33, 34). In another dream, Yeong-hye sees her own hands “around someone’s throat

throttling them, grabbing the swinging ends of their long hair and hacking it all off” (38). Soon after strangling this presumably female figure, Yeong-hye “become[s] a different person, a different person rises up inside [her], devours [her]” signifying that the unknown woman she strangled could be herself (38). As if to mourn her own death, and after having bloody nightmares, Yeong-hye immediately switches to a vegetarian diet. The dreams that directly lead Yeong-hye to vegetarianism are closely related to grotesque images of blood and meat but also to the violence that Yeong-hye is guilty of and the death of herself. In this sense, Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism is closely related to mourning a death.

Vegetarianism in Korea was not only associated with sadness and filial duties. At times, to eat a vegetarian meal was an act of good luck, hope, and an act of national solidarity. Because meat was considered by the general public to be dirty, impure, and a source of indulgence of the sinful human world, to eat a vegetarian meal prepared an individual and the nation for a new beginning. For example, in 1408, when a number of government officials went up a mountain and saw a sublime scenery with cranes dancing, they came back and asked that the people eat vegetarian meals and to not kill any animals to keep this good omen (*The Veritable Records of King Taejong, Book 15*). In 1628 during a nationwide drought, the government announced that the officials eat vegetarian meals and asked the people not kill any animals in preparation for a rain ceremony (*The Veritable Records of King Injo, Book 36*). In 1821, all government officials were advised to eat vegetarian meals at times of national difficulties (*The Veritable Records of King Soonjo, Book 24*). As these examples demonstrate, for centuries vegetarianism remained a symbol and act of solidarity, national unification, and a cleansing activity. This was a common

rule and practice for people of any class and/or gender. In short, although one would not identify as a “vegetarian,” there were social norms and traditions to keep a strictly vegetarian diet for a prolonged period because meat was thought to taint the body.

Accordingly, the act of killing an animal, even by butchers³⁹, was stigmatized.

Rather than an “empathetic realisation of the similarities between the treatment of animal bodies and women’s bodies,” (Stobie 794) Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism can be read as a desire to cleanse the body of impurities. She uncovers the self who is a “perpetra[tor],” a “predator,” and a “murderer” and attempts to correct her violent desires by purging the body of pollutants through vegetarianism (Han 33, 58, 34). The cleanse seems to work as temporarily witnessed by Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law who “saw that her expression was as serene as that of a Buddhist monk” (82). However, Yeong-hye expresses how she has wrongfully assumed meat to be the source of her pain, hinting that vegetarianism is not the novel’s central motif: “‘I thought [the nightmare] was all because of eating meat’ she said. ‘I thought all I had to do was to stop eating meat and then the faces wouldn’t come back. But it didn’t work. . . now I know. The face is inside my stomach’” (120).

Becoming a vegetarian was Yeong-hye’s attempt to cleanse the body and stop the nightmares, but she accepts the fact that her nightmare has little to do with meat and more

³⁹ Butchers belonged to an untouchable social class called “Paekchǒng”. Paekchǒng were originally nomadic people from the north whose livelihood depended on the hunting of horses and cows, the production of leather goods, and the constant relocation of their homes. The rule of the Chosǒn dynasty which forbade the hunting of horses and cows by law attempted for centuries to legally enforce an agricultural way of life for the Paekchǒng to no avail. Paekchǒng, which soon became “synonymous with a class of people that butchers belonged to” were looked down upon as a vulgar and lawless group of people who killed animals for a living (“백정은 주로 도축업에 종사하던 계층을 가리키는 명칭이 되었다” Hee Geun Lee 162; my trans). Consequently, “the term Paekchǒng was used as an insult or a reference to something evil or lowly” and commoners often forbade these butchers to live amongst them (“백정이란 용어는 모욕적인 표현으로 사용되거나 악독하고 천한 것을 비유하는 말로도 사용되었다” Hee Geun Lee 173; my trans). This preference is not only an issue of the past but also a debate that has persisted. A 2021 article informs that a change in social awareness about butchers is a priority: “The reality is that abattoirs are considered an unwanted facility and by simply working in such a facility, workers are stigmatized” (H. Lee et al.).

to do with her own violent desires—desires “[that] rose up from inside [her] stomach” (120).

Research on a Korean vegetarian identity has traced the history back to the 1990s instead of a vegetarian diet that was practiced for over a millennium. Likewise, research based on statistics of South Korean vegetarians or vegetarian restaurants will result in a sparse number of people identifying as vegetarians and will fail to show the historical significance of vegetarianism. In the excitement to recognize vegetarianism as an indicator of a Western feminist idea spreading to parts of Asia, there is a misrecognition of the local histories and little consideration of local feminist practices. In *Scattered Hegemonies* (1994), Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan problematize feminist theory that “seems unable to deal with alterity” and instead attempt to “do feminist work across cultural divides:” “critiques of certain forms of feminism emerge from their willing participation in modernity with all its colonial discourses and hegemonic First World formations that wittingly or unwittingly lead to the oppression and exploitation of many women. In supporting the agendas of modernity, therefore, feminists misrecognize and fail to resist Western hegemonies” (2). Vegetarian ecofeminist readings, assume this trajectory for the South Korean woman and celebrate her modernity. In this process, there is another form of “oppression and exploitation” that happens to the third-world woman (Grewal and Kaplan 2). Critics of the novel have argued that Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism is a symbol of “resistance to custom and tradition,” “a response to the collective suffering of women under patriarchy,” “a sympathetic approach towards animals,” but also a form of “madness” (MacSiniuc 105; Wright 132; Kakkat and Mohanty 222; Taylor 223). However, the novel does not demonstrate how the act of not eating meat is a form of

madness but rather how the act of not following the commands of her husband and father is madness. For example, when Mr. Cheong calls Yeong-hye's mother to tell her that she stopped eating meat, she simply suggests: "Surely you can always just tell her not to follow this diet" to which Mr. Cheong replies: "Oh, I've told her, all right, but she still goes ahead and defies me" (32). It is only then that Yeong-hye's mother furiously responds, "How can that child be so defiant?" (32). Vegetarianism is not the main concern especially for characters such as Mr. Cheong who can care less about the health and survival of Yeong-hye.

Criticism of patriarchy is evident in the novel, but I would like to question the current critical focus and its rather singular interpretation of vegetarianism. What a consideration of the cultural context uncovers is that vegetarianism in Korea is closely related to custom, tradition, and patriarchy and has less to do with madness or a sympathy towards animals. In fact, to keep a vegetarian diet was an act in compliance with the patriarchal traditions and norms of society. This is not to say that the novel is then upholding patriarchal traditions but that different conclusions about the novel can be drawn given the cultural context of the novel's setting. It is important to reconsider the assumptions made about the novel. Moving beyond defining Yeong-hye and her choices, we must also listen to her voices and bodily performance.

3.2 The "Voiceless" Protagonist

In *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective* (1995), Amrita Basu characterises three Western tendencies in scholarship on women's movements: "It ignores women's movements in the postcolonial world, considers

women's movements products of modernization or development, and assumes a sameness in the forms of women's oppression and women's movements cross-nationally"

- (1). Assuming that "feminism is the outcome of a linear process of socioeconomic change," such scholarship fails to understand the complexities of local feminism (Basu
- 2). Assuming that South Korea's economic "development" following the Korean War means the development of feminism along Western lines, Yeong-hye will look like an ecofeminist. When Western speech norms are used to read Kang Han's novel, i.e., when critics assume sameness in women's communication—with the West as a standard—Yeong-hye is rendered stereotypically voiceless.

Take the translation of *The Vegetarian* for example. In the process of translating the novel from Korean to English, translator Deborah Smith mistranslated "10.9 percent of the first section of the book" (W-D. Kim 65). O'Key points out how the mistranslation emphasises a message that would be more popular among Anglophone readers. Similarly,

[Charse] Yun notes that Smith 'ratchets up' the tone and style, adding superlatives and emphatic turns of phrase which reconstruct the novel into a story of resistance. Smith characterises Mr. Cheong, Yeong-hye's husband, as an actively hateful misogynist, rather than as "a bland, bumbling kind of guy unaware of his own sexism or biases" as he appears in Han's original. (Yun qtd. in O'Key 17)

Stereotypical views of Asian men and women are also incorporated into the translation of the novel, and with this, readers imagine the protagonist's actions as a quiet "vegetarian rebellion" (MacSiniuc 104). Smith's translation nudges the readers into a hopeful reading of the Asian woman whose sole source of oppression is patriarchy, and an Asian woman who single-handedly fights against "misogynistic Asian men". This recalls Gayatri

Spivak's examination of "white men saving brown women from brown men" and using this redemption narrative as their justification to intervene in a larger scale of violence or simply to feel better about themselves ("Subaltern" 93). What we see in certain interpretations of *The Vegetarian* is a projection of white desire and knowledge onto the Asian woman to save her from the Asian man. When the response is centred around saving this silent Asian woman, the protagonist is not or cannot be heard.

Smith, the translator of the novel, openly shares in an interview with BBC News: "I had no connection with Korean culture—I don't think I had even met a Korean person" (qtd. in W-D Kim 67). In another interview, she discusses how she found Korean literature to be an "untapped niche that [she] could exploit for [her] advantage" (qtd. in O'Key 16). In this instance, the translator identifies South Korean women's literature as a new market. "Niche" literature should not serve to be exploited intentionally or unintentionally. One way to ensure that the novel is not exploited is to purposely make oneself aware of the knowledge we use to read the novel, or of knowledge that we do not have but need to learn through research and self-education. Furthermore, we must consider the very tool that transfers such knowledge: voice. There are two ways in which Yeong-hye is assumed to be silent: the first is through readers and critics whose Western comprehension of speech leads them to assume that Yeong-hye is silent and passive; the second is through the novel's characters who conveniently unhear Yeong-hye's speech.

3.3 Readers' and critics' assumption of silence

Western communication norms value direct speech over indirect speech. However, this is not the case in South Korea. In a study of conversational indirectness across cultures,

Thomas Holtgraves found that “Koreans were more likely to speak indirectly and to look for indirect meanings than were Americans” (624). In Korea “an important interactional requirement is to ‘read’ the other’s mind and to know what the other is thinking or feeling . . . [rather than] to ‘say what’s on one’s mind’” because it is a “collective culture” as opposed to an “individualistic culture” which typifies the West (Holtgraves 625). To directly “say what’s on one’s mind” is relatively uncommon in Korean culture: indeed, it is a sign of bad manners. Yeong-hye’s communication style is noteworthy because it is direct, brutally honest, and thus goes against the conversational norm in South Korea; however, under Western standards, Yeong-hye’s manner of speech is not out of the ordinary and consequently fails to be recognised for its unique significance. Instead of recognizing how bold her speech would be in South Korea, Beeston, for example, describes Yeong-hye as “a mute symbol of absence,” and Stobie emphasises Yeong-hye’s “attempt to silently abandon her (hum)animality” (98; 798). They conclude that Yeong-hye is a “mute,” “absen[t],” and “silent” woman (Beeston 98; Stobie 798). Such conclusions are based on a dominantly Western acceptance of speech where the baseline of volume, directness, and quantity of speech begins at a different place than in South Korea. Yeong-hye is, thus, misanalysed as “silent”. Contrary to such descriptions, Yeong-hye’s speech is consistently “clear and distinct,” and she “enunciates clearly” throughout all three novellas (Han 43, 177).

3.4 Characters who Unhear Yeong-hye

The (translated) novel also carefully hides and frames Yeong-hye under the guise of voicelessness to add to the sense of her eerie isolation. For example, though the three

novellas all tell the story of Yeong-hye, none of the novellas is narrated by her. In the first novella, Yeong-hye's voice is contained within the narration of Mr. Cheong or confined to italicized blocks of text that visually demonstrate her trapped state of mind. When she speaks, it is filtered through the voice of Mr. Cheong, who ignores Yeong-hye's speech. Are the dreams and inner thoughts that appear in italics spoken but not listened to by Mr. Cheong? Or are they withheld by Yeong-hye who is aware that he will not listen? In either case, she is rendered "silent," though the words to be read represent her focalization. Beyond the italicized text, she is an outspoken character. The sources of narration (in other characters) isolate Yeong-hye, and she is indeed a character of few words; however, she directly speaks her mind through direct speech, animalistic language, and bodily communication.

Yeong-hye's husband, Mr. Cheong, describes her as a "passive," "most run-of-the-mill . . . woman of few words," while Yeong-hye's sister, In-hye, remembers her as a "docile and naïve" child (10, 161). Unsurprisingly, the rest of Yeong-hye's family members are shocked to see her disobey her father and husband. Obedient, quiet, and "completely unremarkable" are words that are used to describe Yeong-hye; however, much of what Yeong-hye says and does is outspoken and thus atypical (9). To anybody who asks, Yeong-hye willingly gives her explanation as to why she can no longer eat meat and animal products: it is because she "had a dream" (16). Her directness strikes her listeners who can neither process nor believe the information that she gives them.

When a multi-course meal with meat is served at a company dinner with Mr. Cheong's bosses and their wives, Yeong-hye says "I won't eat it.' She'd spoken very quietly, but the other guests all instantly stopped what they were doing" (28). Yeong-hye does not use

indirect speech which would be the polite way of refusing in South Korea: what shocks the dinner guests is this impolite direct speech. Indifferently, Yeong-hye repeats: “‘I don’t eat meat,’ she said, slightly louder this time” (28). The content of her response—her vegetarianism—is a simple source of gossip, but her “cool reply” is what raises the tension at the dinner table (29). Unaccustomed to such a blunt response, the guests suggest excuses to nudge her towards a more acceptable response. Perhaps she is on a diet, or she has a religious reason not to eat meat, but Yeong-hye confirms again that her choice not to eat meat is because she “had a dream” (23). Mr. Cheong stops her from speaking by “hurriedly [speaking] over her” (29). He corrects Yeong-hye’s direct speech with a more acceptable excuse of “suffer[ing] from gastroenteritis” and a recommendation to change her diet by a dietitian; “[o]nly then did the others nod in understanding” (29-30).

Similarly, during the much earlier family dinner in which Yeong-hye’s family forces her to eat meat, she directly says, “‘I won’t eat it’” (43). It is this direct speech that immediately angers both Yeong-hye’s brother and father who resort to violently grabbing her and force feeding her a piece of meat. Mr. Cheong “expect[s] an answer from [his] wife along the lines of ‘I’m sorry, Father, but I just can’t eat it,’ but all she said was ‘I do not eat meat’—clearly enunciated, and seemingly not the least bit apologetic” (43).

Again, going against the indirect speech norms, Yeong-hye speaks in an unacceptable, unapologetic, direct way. Despite having “enunciated” a “clear” and “distinct” response, Yeong-hye is not listened to by her family members because her response is not a response they were hoping to hear (43). Language not only fails the speaker but is also met with the listeners’ refusal to engage with a now “repulsive being one should not be

around”: “to speak in ways that are adequate to suffering is always a challenge—the danger is that one’s words, no matter how eloquent, will always seem to fall short of what is undergone, to be incapable of meeting the needs of the one who suffers” (Malpas and Lickiss qtd. in Won-Chung Kim 3). When Mr. Cheong speaks to Yeong-hye and she speaks of her dream, he shuts his ears and reacts with aversion: “I would ask what the matter was only to hear ‘I had a dream.’ I never inquired as to the nature of this dream” (23). Even though Yeong-hye is willing to explain her plight, no one is listening, just like the bosses and their wives at the company dinner who “[g]radually . . . learned to ignore her presence” and her husband who “had no desire to go and find out what [Yeong-hye] was up to” (30, 53).

In the first novella, Yeong-hye, who was “sub-contracted by a comics publisher to work on the words for their speech bubbles” knows the importance of speech and communication (10). Most of her attempts to explain herself and her dreams through speech happen in the first novella, yet Yeong-hye is not heard and her attempt to reach out is not reciprocated. “[Mr. Cheong] didn’t even want to reach out to her with words,” directly showing how he decides not to care for Yeong-hye (15). As more and more people cut ties with her and disengage with her speech, Yeong-hye also begins to actively cut ties with the people around her. Just like her job as a speech bubble editor, Yeong-hye edits her words and simultaneously her relationships, keeping only the essential. By the end of the first novella, Yeong-hye successfully severs her relationship with her parents and husband, relieving herself of her duty as a daughter, wife, and potential mother—the three pillars of a woman’s role in a Confucius society.

Han shares that “*The Vegetarian* begins with the question . . . ‘Is it possible to truly understand and communicate with anyone else?’” (Han qtd. in Mijeong Kim 332).

Yeong-hye more than anyone is aware that her words are not being heard or understood.

By the second novella, she drastically cuts back her spoken language to one-word responses such as “No” and “Stop” (111, 119). Although it appears as though Yeong-hye

changes in a matter of a single day through her sudden vegetarianism and that she has almost given up on her earthly existence, the three novellas show her desperate struggle

to communicate. In the first and second novella, Yeong-hye tells everyone about her

dreams and fears, but by the third novella, Yeong-hye realises that “[n]o one can

understand [her]” (160). Her gradual silence is, then, a result of others’ unhearing

practices. When no one listens to Yeong-hye, she attempts a different type of speech.

Placed in between her direct speech and intentional silence is her animalistic language.

Instead of speech, Yeong-hye opts for a more primitive language. After everyone has

ignored her speech during the family dinner and forced pork into her mouth, Yeong-hye

switches from direct speech to animalistic language, as her husband says: “my wife

growled and spat out the meat. An animal cry of distress burst from her lips” (46). This

animalistic language is enough to finally get the attention of the family members who

have previously been unresponsive to her speech. Yeong-hye’s decision to switch from

speech to animalistic sounds comes from desperation and urgency. Her recourse to the

language of animals cuts away her humanity and human relationships; she voluntarily

becomes a “mutant animal” (96). The difference between speech that is unheard and

animalistic sounds that cannot be comprehended is that speech attempts to connect and

reach out to the people around her whereas animalistic language signifies a departure

from such attempts. Yeong-hye's decision to switch from spoken language to animal cries shows how she will stop trying to be understood but will go on attempting to let her will be known.

Yeong-hye's animalistic language also serves to demonstrate that she is not just a victim but also a violent predator. Her metamorphosis truly takes form with her "mangled, inaudible, [and] distorted animal sound" (131). Yeong-hye starts acting out the thoughts that have been plaguing her mind. Like an animal, she undresses herself and licks her wound (57). Crushed in the grip of her hand is a bird with "tooth marks that looked to have been caused by a predator's bite, vivid red bloodstains were spreading" and her lips are "stained with blood" (58, 57). In between her human existence and becoming-plant, the predator in Yeong-hye emerges. This in between stage demonstrates how her vegetarianism does not stem from a sympathy towards animals or a feeling of mutual victimhood experienced by women and animals. Instead, we find a Yeong-hye who is a predatorial animal filled with urges to kill. Yeong Hye is, however, also an actor of violence as she creates and desires violence.

In Han's novel *Greek Lessons* (2011), the protagonist suddenly loses her ability to speak but Yeong-hye, even in her attempts to become a plant, holds on to her direct communication. In Han's short story, "The Fruit of My Woman," (2000) the wife turns into a plant but Yeong-hye's wilful metamorphosis is never fulfilled. Despite the eerie and mystical tone of the novel, *The Vegetarian* is very much rooted in reality. The novel shows the desperate communications of a woman who is not heard. Attempting to become a plant by performing handstands is in its own way a communication; Yeong-hye does not actually turn into a plant. And while the novel is often compared to Franz

Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, it is, in many ways, more like "The Hunger Artist" in which fantastical elements are not present. The human body, no matter what, continues to engage in conversation. The relentless actions of standing upside down and revealing the body are unavoidable and impactful. "According to Han, readers cannot avoid hearing the wretched voice of the 'silently screaming woman'" (Mijeong Kim 338). Yeong-hye's body urgently demonstrates and communicates her strong determination for death: her ultimate act of violence.

How has women's direct speech gone unacknowledged in South Korea? The words and actions of South Korean feminist women have been misrepresented both internally and externally: internally through the people who rejected direct speech because it strayed uncomfortably from the norm, and externally through Western readers who fail to consider that local women's movements might be inaudible or simply unknown to them.

3.5 New Women

Similar to Yeong-hye's style of speech, there have been women in Korea who opted to speak directly despite society shutting their ears at them. The "New Women" were one of the most direct women's groups in Korea. I use the term "direct" in describing the New Women's movement to emphasize how, unlike other Korean feminist movements, the group focused solely on women's rights. As discussed in Hyaeweol Choi's *New Women in Colonial Korea* (2013), in the early 1900s "[t]hree distinctive groups of women emerged, each with significantly different priorities: 1. liberal feminist groups, 2. Christian faith-centered groups, and 3. socialist groups" (7). The Christian faith-centred group focused their attention on the education of women for the country's advancement.

Converging with the beliefs of the Christian faith-centred feminist group which advocated for the empowerment of women, the socialist group located the key to emancipation from Japanese rule in the economic development of the people. This, they argued, could be possible by making half of the population—the women—a working population. With the wealth that could be accumulated, the hope was that the national debt could be repaid and the nation liberated. This is to say that both the Christian centred group and the socialist group, on a large scale, were working towards the advancement of the nation in which women would play a part. The liberal feminist group, to which the New Women belonged, also believed in the empowerment of women but simply for the sake of empowering women and not for the sake of nationalism or independence from the Japanese rule. They were, instead, devoted to redefining women by rejecting patriarchal traditions and norms. The New Women focused on women's rights such as the right to "pursue their own happiness," which may be why they were often viewed as selfish and "a brash imitation of Western and Japanese trends and irrelevant to the majority of Korean women" (H. Choi 7). The New Women were heavily criticized by both male and female intellectuals as well as the public: their personal lives and their choice to love freely were often a source of gossip. Despite the fact that the New Women also fought for women's education, dignity, and rights in the workplace, albeit from a different starting point than the Christian faith and socialist groups, the New Women's movement never positively caught on and was short-lived.

The reasons that critics suggest as an explanation for the "failure" of the New Women's Movement are that: 1) it was met with harsh conflict due to the movement coinciding with a historically difficult time of transition between old and new; 2) it was too radical for the

time and 3) there were no middle-class women to support the movement. To these reasons, I would like to add that direct speech of the New Women was not a culturally suitable form of communication and was consequently ignored. The three leading feminists of the movement, Myungsoon Kim, Wŏnju Kim, and Hyesŏk Na, were outspoken and direct in conveying their messages in the newly established *New Woman* magazine. The *New Woman* magazine was founded and edited by an all-female staff and only accepted texts such as essays and poems by women at a time when women were not expected to read or write. The New Women “declared [them]selves New Women in front of society” in the 1920s, a surprising statement given that a declaration of a feminist identity is not even fully accepted in 2023 (Iryŏp/Wŏnju Kim qtd. in I. Kwon 383). Each of the three women were pioneers in their own right: “Haesuk La [Na] was the first Western-style woman painter in Korea . . . Myungsoon Kim was Korea’s first woman novelist and Wŏnju Kim was a publisher—unusual positions for women at the time” (I. Kwon 393). Being smart, outspoken, sexually active feminists did not bode well for the three women. All three women who championed the New Women’s fight and spoke out against their time and tradition were met with the harsh criticism of the world. Na “died lonely in a clinic” early in her 50s, Wŏnju Kim “cut off every connection with worldly life” and became a Buddhist nun, and as for Myungsoon Kim, “[h]er suffering and conflicts allegedly drove her crazy [and she] died in a lunatic asylum in Tokyo around 1951” (I. Kwon 397). Even after her death, she was “[p]erhaps more than any other single *New Woman* . . . made the target of harsh ridicule by contemporary male intellectuals

and the media” (I. Kwon 397). Myungsoon Kim’s pain and exhaustion at receiving criticism are clearly expressed in her 1925 poem, “Will”:⁴⁰

Chosŏn, when I finally part from you,

Whether fallen in a brook or bloody in a field,

Continue to abuse my dead body.

And if that is not enough,

If someone like me is born again,

Abuse it as you can.

Then we who hate each other will finally part.

Oh, wretched place, wretched place. (“조선아 내가 너를 영결할 때/ 개천가에
고꾸라졌던지 들에 피 뿔었던지/ 죽은 시체에게라도 더 학대해다오./
그래도 부족하거든/ 이 다음에 나 같은 사람이 나더라도/ 할 수만 있는
대로 또 학대해보아라/ 그러면 서로 미워하는 우리는 영영 작별된다/ 이
사나운 곳아 사나운 곳아.”; my trans.)

Why did the public torment these women so, and what made the public view the New Women as selfish, promiscuous, westernized and therefore irrelevant to the plight of Korean women? Let us consider some of the texts by New Women alongside other feminist (women’s groups’) texts of the time. First, here is a Christian centred feminist text by Ch’ŏngang An in 1907: “Women are weak by nature and should be treated with

⁴⁰ “Will (유언)” as in a death will.

generosity rather than oppression. . . It is truly deplorable that men do not have any pity toward women, who are less powerful; instead, they oppress women” (23). The position of a woman is lowered, and while the text is entitled “It is not right to look down upon women,” what is wrong is that the “weak” nature of women should be pitied, not considered inferior. In this 1907 essay, the author argues for abolishing the concubine system, developing women’s education, and seeing women as subjects and not objects, but the text is wrapped around a digestible framework of women’s “nature” as “weak”—a framework that asks for the generosity of men who are the literate public most likely to read the article.

The New Women have an entirely unique way of articulating a similar message: “In order to reform society, we must first reform the family, society’s most basic and fundamental unit. In order to reform the family, we have to liberate women, who are the masters (*chuin*) of the house” (“Inaugural Editorial” 30). This inaugural editorial of the *New Woman* magazine in 1920 declares women as “masters” and yells out “Reform! Reform!” (“Inaugural Editorial” 30). This is a significant shift in position from the label of women as an “inside” person,⁴¹ which many women likened to the position of slaves. From slave to master, the New Women’s writing does not concern itself with the backlash of the neo-Confucius patriarchal society. While *Ch’öngang An* in 1907 repeatedly emphasizes the “weak” nature of women, in 1914, *New Woman Hyesök Na* points to those who fear change as “weak-minded [and] without any notion of an ideal in their minds” (“The Ideal Woman” 28). According to the New Women, it is not women

⁴¹ “Inside” person (안사람) is still a term used by husbands to refer to their wives. It implies that she is a person who stays in the home.

who are weak but those who fail to reform that are weak. In 1920, Wŏnju Kim publishes in *New Woman* magazine that, “[m]en are considered physically and mentally superior; women are thought to be inferior. Based on these *false beliefs*, all social institutions and customs have placed men over women and have been organized to satisfy the interest of men” (“Women’s Demands” 198; emphasis added). Kim dismisses the common belief of the time that women are “physically and mentally” inferior and contends that such an ideological norm is a “false belief”. She makes no attempt to use indirect speech to gently introduce feminist ideas. Instead, she enters with full force and calls out the traditional society that oppressed women with falsehoods.

A leading reason for the severe criticism and source of gossip surrounding the *New Women* was for their opinion regarding chastity. Hyesŏk Na, for example, wrote in “Starting a New Life” (1935) that chastity is “merely taste. Just as we eat rice when we want to eat rice, and we eat rice cake when we want to eat rice cake,⁴² chastity depends on our will and practice. We shouldn't be constrained” (147). Similarly, Wŏnju Kim in “My View on Chastity” (1927) argues that “chastity is fluid and fresh”. It is “the ultimate expression of her emotions and passion for her lover” (141). Both Na and Kim describe sexual freedom as a choice and not something that can be “broken”. Kim especially attempts to redefine what purity is by suggesting that one’s virtue is not something that can be lost through sex. She instead argues that one could continuously recreate purity and stay “fresh forever, as human is unlimited” (Wŏnju Kim, “My View” 141). As long as one is alive, one can make oneself “fresh” again. Kim goes as far as to say: “Even if a

⁴² “To make rice cake” is a double entendre for intercourse. “Rice cake” also refers to something that is easy; it is comparable to the English phrase “a piece of cake”.

woman has had loving relationships with *several partners*, we can say that she has true chastity as long as she has a healthy spirit to create new life, washes away past memories, and is ready to devote her new and pure self to a new lover” (Wŏnju Kim, “My View” 141; emphasis added). Kim removes the cultural obsession over the term “chastity” and completely redefines the word. According to Kim’s idea of “chastity,” it is not an issue of being “tainted” but an issue of a woman’s determination. She places the agency on women as the owners of their own lives.

Let us look at a text from a similar time by a socialist feminist member, Sindŏk Hwang. In an interview with *Samchollŏ* in 1930, Hwang is noticeably uncomfortable at the reporter’s request to reveal her direct support for sex before marriage:

Reporter: Do you think “love” and “chastity” are the same thing? . . .

Hwang Sindŏk: I think that there are many cases in which “love” and “chastity” should be treated as distinct things . . .

R: Are you saying that love can't be compromised, but “chastity” can sometimes be flexible?

H: You're asking me a difficult question that makes me uncomfortable. Look, there are so many different situations in the world. Let’s imagine that a chaste woman was raped . . .

R: In the case of rape that you just mentioned, do you suggest that the woman should not give up her life in the way old womanhood prescribed, that instead she should endure this temporary hardship?

H: Certainly (116-17)

At the reporter's insistence to declare or deny chastity as "flexible," Hwang expresses her discomfort and answers in an indirect way. Although she supports the idea that sex before marriage is not a sin, she gives the case of a raped woman and a woman whose husband who has long been absent. She then clarifies that "it would be ideal if love and chastity went hand in hand," ending her indirect response with an assurance that she is not too far gone in her views. The New Women's speech in comparison to the speech of the two other feminist groups—religious and socialist—stands out as direct, straightforward, and blunt. There is no attempt to save face in a society that is already mocking and ridiculing them. There is no attempt to neatly wrap the argument with a different agenda; instead, they insist on women's liberation rather than the country's liberation. The New Women were revolutionary feminists who were rarely heard.

The *New Woman* magazine was shut down by colonial censorship in the year of its publication in 1920 unlike other feminist, nationalist, and socialist publications of the time whose publication ended round the mid-1930s to early 1940s.⁴³ Many religious and socialist feminist women went on to play a significant role in establishing and running women's schools in various parts of the country. The ambitions of the New Women, however, were silenced.

⁴³ It is important, however, to note that other feminist, nationalist, and socialist publications were also negatively impacted by Japanese colonial censorship which began in 1910 (H. Choi 10). The *New Woman* magazine also suffered from financial issues and lack of readership due to the public's resistance to accept ideas and writings by New Women authors.

3.6 Two Decades of Silence

The life of Wŏnju Kim is particularly interesting. Kim is arguably the most well-known figure in the New Women group perhaps because of her role in the creation and publication of the *New Woman* magazine. Wŏnju Kim, however, is no longer remembered by this name. Instead, she is known as Iryŏp Kim, the Buddhist nun.⁴⁴ Kim was raised a Christian under her father who was a priest. At the time, Christians led many feminist movements and were pioneers in promoting women's education, and Kim herself was educated in Christian schools. However, after two decades of unrelenting feminist activism and publication, Kim made a sudden turn in her late thirties to abandon her public secular life for a monastic life. "In an essay she wrote soon after [becoming a Buddhist nun], she said that she became a nun 'to abandon all attachments,' to 'break off all relationships,'" and claimed that she was "ashamed of all the writings [she has] done in the past" (Hwansoo Kim 58; J. Park 19). It is no surprise then that feminists such as Sanggyŏng Yi viewed "Iryŏp's tonsure as her way of escaping from her failure to realize her feminist agenda" (J. Park 242). Under the leadership of Master Man'gong who "told Iryŏp not to read or write," she stopped publishing or speaking of feminism for two decades (J. Park 19).

It takes over two decades of silence for Kim to finally reappear with her book, *Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun* (1960) which becomes a best seller. By this time, Kim is a respected nun who "drew on the Buddhist teaching of nonself, in which the 'big I' is beyond gender" (Hwansoo Kim 51). Through reaching the "big I" which is genderless,

⁴⁴ I continue to use the name Wŏnju Kim because of this chapter's focus on her early life as a New Woman rather than her life as a Buddhist nun.

she achieves a form of philosophical equality that was not attainable through her feminist activity. Her motives, however, are no longer founded in gender equality. Far from it, she contradicts her early activism:

The price of ultimate freedom is not material or quantifiable. It is rather devotion to the goal of no-self, the self after annihilation of the material self. When even one's consciousness is extinguished, one finally attains the universalized self. All tender feelings and sensual desires, the strongest among human desires, must be extinguished. With respect to sensual desire, the Buddha observed that if human beings had two such powerful sorts of desire, they would not be able to attain Buddhahood . . . A young monk allowing himself to fall for a woman's sweet charms faces graver danger than a child attracted to a leper offering candy. Leprosy damages only the body, not the mind. The object of sensual desire is an ogre that devours one's true life [both body and mind], an effect that survives for lives to come. (Kim Iryöp/Wönju 93)

Kim devotes herself to over thirty years of training to achieve the “goal of no-self” in which all feelings and desires cannot be found (93). Kim who felt so strongly about gender equality in economic, political, and cultural aspects and desired the nation's women to be free to love and explore their sexuality now likens “sensual desire” to something that is worse than leprosy. Unlike her feminist essays that defined purity and chastity as an ideological myth, Kim now clearly distinguishes the pure from the impure. While her feminist essays were largely ignored, misunderstood, or read to mock and ridicule, her Zen Buddhist reflections are read with respect and praise.

It is not just her message that is changed but also the delivery: “In *Reflections* Iryöp characterizes her writings as like ‘sugar-coated medicine for little children,’ in which she mixes Buddhist teachings with ‘the dreams of my old days’” (J. Park 18). Unlike her feminist works which were direct and brutally honest, her writing as a Buddhist nun is indirect in conformation with expectations of women’s speech in Korean society. In an attempt to get her message across, whether that message is about Buddhism or her life, the message is presented in a more palatable manner. Indirection is evident in the organization of her book *Reflection of a Zen Buddhist Nun* (1960). She begins the book with a declaration that the main objective of the book is to proselytize, and she follows this declaration with two chapters which contain “a highly philosophical and theoretical discussion of Buddhism” (J. Park 22). Jin Y. Park, the translator of the book, notes that “[t]he style of these two chapters is unusual for Iryöp's [Wönju Kim's] writing, which typically employs a confessional style, in that they contain nothing of her life story” (22). In complete contrast to her usual writing style, Kim dedicates three chapters to take out the self. These chapters signal to the readers that this book will adhere to the norms of society. Following these chapters, she starts to slowly place the self back into the text through her opinions regarding the politics of Buddhism in Korea such as the purification movement that advocates for clerical celibacy. Then from chapters eight to eleven, Kim returns to her confessional writing style. These chapters are directed to different individuals, with two of whom she had an affair. In these chapters, which are letters and memories from the past, Kim returns to her feminist ideas such as the “new theory of chastity” that intended to liberate Korean women from sexually oppressive standards (Iryöp/Wönju Kim 144). These chapters do not edit out her desperate yearning towards

her lovers even as a married woman or a nun, and her sadness at being abandoned by her lovers is laid bare for the world to read. These chapters located in the middle of the book show Wŏnju Kim more so than the Buddhist nun, Iryŏp, and yet these works are read with praise as opposed to the reception for her feminist works which were similar in colour to these middle chapters. Kim ends the book with a letter by her primary disciple, Wolsong Yi, who confirms that her teacher's intention in writing the book was "in the effort to spread the Buddhist teachings" (206). Beginning and ending the book with an overarching motive that reassures the readers, as promised, Kim "sugar-coat[s]" not just Buddhist teachings but also the story of her life and time as a New Woman.

Hwansoo Kim in his article, "Two Incarnations, One Person: The Complexity of Kim Iryŏp's Life" (2021) suggests that unlike her ill-fated New Women colleagues "Iryŏp survived and thrived because she left secular life at age thirty-eight to become a Buddhist nun" (52). In contrast to the lives of other New Women who committed suicide, died young, or ended up in a mental institution, Kim was respected and celebrated nationally even after her death in 1971. After her transition from Wŏnju Kim, the New Woman, to Iryŏp, the Buddhist nun, Kim to some of her former colleagues became a quitter who abandoned the New Women's feminist agenda and a once-feminist who contradicted many of her earlier works. Kim's sudden career change was indeed dramatic and could be seen as an act of running away from the heavily criticized New Women group and cutting all ties with the world that so feverishly ridiculed and mocked these women. But did Kim truly disassociate herself from all things feminist? Kim is now more commonly known as Iryŏp; however, "Iryŏp," was Kim's pen name following the footsteps of a

Japanese feminist writer, Ichiyo.⁴⁵ While she did comply with the advice from her mentor to stop reading and writing, Kim used these two decades to achieve the genderless “I” which, “[a]ccording to her teachings on Buddhist philosophy, once one obtains a true, great, and wholesome ‘I,’ existing gender disparities and inequalities become irrelevant” (Hwansoo Kim 62). When she finally published for the first time as Iryŏp, Kim strategically organized the collection of essays and letters to include her personal experiences of when she practiced free love, a concept that caused much anger and hatred in the past. What if Kim was retreating from her direct speech that was not being heard by the public and moved on to a different way of fulfilling some of her feminist dreams? Could Kim’s shift in identity be interpreted as her way of finding an alternative way to be heard? Unlike her magazine that was censored and shut down, unlike her works that were labelled vulgar and inappropriate, unlike her actions that were deemed “senseless,” Kim’s new work became read and praised by the public. Kim became a respected figure, one whose words can no longer be taken lightly. Kim through her transition from public life as an activist to her withdrawal into monastic Buddhism, found a way to shift the public’s attention on her sexualized womanhood to her personhood.

I have spent so much time on Wŏnju Kim’s writing and life because I see the New Women as an important Korean-specific context in which to understand Yeong-hye’s life in *The Vegetarian*. Returning to Han’s novel, while Yeong-hye is no New Woman, she is a woman seeking out new ways of understanding her existence. As previously discussed in this chapter, the first and third novellas represent Yeong-hye’s attempt at figuring out

⁴⁵ Ichiyo is the pen name of Natsuko Higuchi’s (1872–96). The Korean pronunciation of the Chinese characters for Ichiyo is Iryŏp (一葉; 일엽).

this new, albeit violent, discovery of the self. In the first novella, Yeong-hye drastically changes her diet, then cuts out filial relationships and her ties to filial duties of being a daughter, wife, and mother. In the third novella, she ultimately loses the desire to exist as a human being and expresses the self as a tree by performing naked handstands. Missing from this description of Yeong-hye's path from vegetarianism to arboreal metamorphosis is the second novella in which she explores her sexuality in an extra-marital relationship with her brother-in-law. In between what appears to be "sanity" and "insanity" is the story of Yeong-hye and her brother-in-law, the painter and video artist. Yeong-hye's desire and concerns parallel the artist's desire and concerns in certain ways. Similar to Yeong-hye, the artist questions whether he is "a normal human being? More than that, a moral human being" (67). He, too, had an obsession with nature and had been preoccupied with the thought of representing nature's carnality blooming in his paintings. He was the first to listen to Yeong-hye's dreams and to see Yeong-hye as someone who "radiated energy, like a tree that grows in the wilderness, denuded and solitary" (69). Desperate to see his own creative imagination renewed at a time when filial relationships no longer inspired him, the artist suggests Yeong-hye to become his subject to paint on, and Yeong-hye who is struggling to find ways to free herself from her nightmares, agrees and momentarily finds freedom in seeing herself as the plant the her brother-in-law paints on her body. In this relationship, what immediately comes to mind is the male artist taking advantage of the female body as an empty canvas. However, in the case of Yeong-hye, the video artist is a mere tool, a paintbrush, that can coat onto her a new identity that gives her a sense of being "armored by the power of her own renunciation" of being human to becoming plant (92). Paralleling Wŏnju Kim's desire to reinvent the self,

Yeong-hye reinvents herself in the moment she is painted and has sex with the artist. Once she openly explores the possibility of escaping her nightmares through performance and sex, she comes to the realization that she needed something more extreme than temporary body paintings, but she was “not scared anymore. There’s nothing to be scared of now” (120). Infidelity, the body as an art work, and public display of her nakedness are what forcefully put Yeong-hye inside a mental institute, as her sister calls for help at the sight of her husband’s and her sister’s naked bodies. While the male artist desperately flees the scene, Yeong-hye is, at this point, a new woman. Turning her naked self away from her brother-in-law and her sister, Yeong-hye steps out into the veranda and “thrust her glittering golden breasts over the veranda railing. Her legs were covered with scattered orange petals, and she spread them wide as though she wanted to make love to the sunlight, to the wind” (123). While the sound of a siren approaches the apartment, Yeong-hye is at peace with her acceptance that “[t]he face [of violence and nightmares are] inside her stomach. It rose up from inside [her] stomach” (120).

3.7 “If I could say one thing, this novel isn’t a singular indictment of the Korean patriarchy”.

In an interview with Sarah Shin, Han disclosed that a line scribbled by poet Yi Sang (1920-1937), “I believe that humans should be plants” motivated her to write *The Vegetarian* (“Interview with Han”). Born during the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), Yi entered a world of violence and faced death after being incarcerated in a Japanese prison for being “a person with resentment against Japanese Imperial rule”. Yi experienced first-hand the inescapability of violence and briefly imagined a life where

humans were plants; if humans were plants violence would not be a possibility. Given that one would still be able to feel pain and be violated as a plant but would not be able to act violently, Yi and Han both seem to focus on violence that is present in each and every one of us and the will to stop such violence from harming others. In an interview with Literary Hub in which Han was asked if there was “any reader or critic reactions [that] surprised [her]” or if there were any instances where they “fixed on one aspect of the story and missed another,” she responded:

I think this novel has some layers: questioning human violence and the (im)possibility of innocence; defining sanity and madness; the (im)possibility of understanding others, body as the last refuge or the last determination, and some more. It will be inevitable that different aspects are more focused on by different readers and cultural backgrounds. If I could say one thing, this novel isn't a singular indictment of the Korean patriarchy. I wanted to deal with my long-lasting questions about the possibility/impossibility of innocence in this world, which is mingled with such violence and beauty. These were universal questions that occupied me as I wrote it. (“Han Kang on Violence”)

While the reception of the novel in the West has fixated on Yeong-hye's rebellion against patriarchy and an ecofeminist focus on her decision to become a vegetarian, Han clarifies that the novel is not “a singular indictment of the Korean patriarchy”. Instead, she shares an overarching question that encompasses many of her works: is it possible to be innocent in a world of violence when the act of existing as a human being is intrinsically tied to violence? Is it possible to fully understand the other? How does language fail us and what do we resort to when it does? Han's works such as *The Vegetarian*, *Human*

Acts, and *Greek Lessons* circulate back to the question of being human rather than being woman. This is not to deny the fact that *The Vegetarian* carries feminist messages. Indeed, there is a rejection of patriarchy. However, unlike the current discussion about vegetarianism as the form that critique of patriarchy takes, I view Yeong-hye cutting of relationships as her form of rejecting patriarchy. For example, Yeong-hye ceases to perform all patriarchal expectations of a wife and a daughter, two important roles given to a woman in a neo-Confucius society. Furthermore, by refusing to have sex with her husband, she also stops any possibility of fulfilling her role as a mother, thereby rejecting all three roles expected of a woman in a neo-Confucius society. Nevertheless, Yeong-hye still suffers from violent dreams and realizes that these patriarchal relationships were not the only cause of her pain: in other words, her feminist practice cannot be separated from other “movements” as we have seen in history of women’s movements gathered in this dissertation. Conversations surrounding the novel do not fully hear Yeong-hye’s despair in humanity when they locate that despair in the strand of the story that seeks to redeem a woman from oppression by Korean patriarchy.

3.8 Conclusion

Read through Western theories of vegetarianism and ecofeminism, the novel has been praised for spreading general knowledge about ecofeminism and vegetarianism in Korea without careful analysis of whether these were concepts that existed prior to Western engagement. I have argued that these Western centred readings the novel created a situation in which Western oriented feminist thought dictated for the non-Western woman “the meanings and goals of their lives,” thereby unintentionally participating in a

colonial epistemic violence (Ong 108). Like Ong who criticized the lack of attempt to understand the subject beyond Western norms, Gaile Pohlhaus looks to Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes" to criticize

theorists [who]. . . regard large and diverse groups of women together, do not engage with the ways in which the women studied understand themselves, do not acknowledge that contextual information might matter in order to understand the various details concerning the women studied, and do not consider the material and discursive effects of how they frame the details they relay in the work they produce. (Pohlhaus 42)

To decolonize such a way of knowing, I introduced how we could understand the novel's characters and context in a manner that does not have to be rooted in the West. I started by tackling a major keyword: vegetarianism.

Unlike the Western gendered theory of meat, in Korea prolonging a vegetarian diet was a common custom that involved all genders and classes. Most notably, it was a way of mourning the death of a close one. With this local knowledge, I reviewed Yeong-hye's vegetarianism as a way of mourning her own death that appeared in her dreams. Another symbol of vegetarianism in Korea was its significance as something impure. As vegetarianism is intricately linked to religion in Korea, a vegetarian diet was used to cleanse the body and prepare the self and state for an important event. Yeong-hye who cannot stop seeing impurities and violence seemingly cleanses the body through a change in her diet in hopes to stop her nightmares. Vegetarianism does not lead her to be free from these violent images. She attempts to mourn and cleanse her inner self from violence but realizes that it is not something that is achievable as long as she is a human.

I emphasized the importance of listening to Yeong-hye by focusing on her direct speech and pointing out how she has been silenced by characters and critics alike, albeit in different ways. Yeong-hye has been described as a silent, “run-of-the-mill” character, but when considering the speech norms of Korea, Yeong-hye is neither silent nor unremarkable. Yeong-hye never indirectly speaks her mind. Even though people around her treat her like she is mad or decide to completely ignore her, she continues to speak directly about her violent dreams. When no one listens to her language, Yeong-hye’s direct speech turns to desperate animal cries and performative body language. An understanding of different speech patterns across borders allows Yeong-hye to be reconsidered as the most outspoken character in the novel. Through a consideration of local history and culture, and by decentring the theory founded on Western grounds and imposed on South Korea, I hope to open the discussion of the novel beyond a Western framework.

In an attempt to contribute to epistemic gathering that could further develop the reading of the novel, I examined a local feminist movement that resembled the treatment of speech and women’s sexuality found in *The Vegetarian*. The New Women in 1920s Korea did not hold their tongues nor endeavour to ease the discomfort of the readers and listeners with indirect speech. Their agenda was clear: women’s liberation both in the public and private sphere. Pioneers of the New Women Movement were isolated from society who turned their backs on them, yet they continued to create art and write poetries and essays. That is, with the exception of the founding member, Wŏnju Kim, who retreated into two decades of silence then returned with an indirect publication in the 1960s. From castigating her for her “promiscuity” and extra-marital relationships to

accepting her as a celibate nun and a master in her own right, the Korean public showed what kind of woman they were willing to listen to. Her new work was different from her previous method of direct communication. Although a plausible explanation could be that she was no longer concerned with feminism, I argue that Kim found an alternative way of getting her message across, she “packaged” her New Woman self in a book about Buddhism, thereby re-circulating it. Her achievements as a nun cannot be ignored and neither can her identity as a feminist be forgotten. Kim inserts her direct writing within her essays of Buddhist reflections to enable her former life to be read and accepted by the public.

This chapter has filled gaps in current scholarship on *The Vegetarian* with cultural and historical considerations not *heard* in Westernized approaches to the novel. Through this chapter, I hoped to share local insights to decentralize such discussions and to contribute to epistemic gathering for practicing feminism across borders.

4 Conclusion

This dissertation began with a curiosity on different kinds of silences and developed into a research question that asked: What are the distinct modes of speaking in East Asian and East Asian American authors' fictional works, and what are these characters saying? Reading a selection of novels within this category, I began to notice several forms of speaking that deviated from direct speech and saw purposeful uses of alternative forms of communicating. With a more focused scope on Korean and Korean American authors, I once again narrowed the scope by highlighting communication methods written by female authors and expressed through their female characters. Beyond their use of various forms of communication, increasingly I noticed the struggle the characters faced in their relationship with language. There was indeed a form of speaking through silence, and alternative modes of communication, but there was also an evident ignorance in the scholarship towards these forms of "speaking". There seemed to exist a hierarchy of language in which direct speech was on the top, silence on the bottom, and other comparatively indirect forms of speaking in the middle.⁴⁶ If we accepted this hierarchy of language to be a fact, it was more beneficial and influential to speak in direct speech, and yet these women were speaking either voluntarily or involuntarily through other methods. Why?

Throughout the dissertation, I have shared examples of both voluntary and involuntary uses of alternative modes of communications. It is important, however, to note that voluntary and involuntary uses of alternative modes of communication are not

⁴⁶ Note that, in this dissertation, I have not separated silence from other indirect/alternative forms of speaking.

necessarily separate but rather work in conjunction with each other. In *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, there are moments in which Jiyoung voluntarily chooses silence and internalizes a response, but Jiyoung's silence—and later her madness as language—is a result of patriarchal silencing. In *Comfort Woman*, Soon Hyo chooses shamanism as a way to heal and song and touch as a way of communicating with her daughter, but this is the effect of language that was uprooted from her by colonial forces, first Japanese, then American. In the final section of *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye chooses silence and bodily transformation as a way of self-expression, but her silence comes after her countless attempts at direct speech were not listened to. While there is purposeful intention in Jiyoung's, Soon Hyo's, and Yeong-hye's various modes of communications, there is also a lack of space that allowed these women to speak and a lack of listeners who truly listened. The alternative modes of communication used by these women, then, can be described as both voluntary and involuntary. Given the varied forms of speaking and wide array of messages expressed, how can we learn to break the habit of unlistening and acknowledge alternative modes of communications?

In this dissertation, the principal methods used were twofold: first, to decentre universal expectations of speech as agency, and second, to introduce culturally and historically specific context that could help explain and read the messages spoken in alternative modes of communications. Accordingly, in chapter one I introduced the cultural silence of women and the local feminist movement that developed the North American #MeToo Movement into a culturally more approachable #WithYou movement. Through these local contexts, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* can be understood as a call for feminist solidarity that utilized silence and gaps for readers to fill and act out on.

In the next chapter, I brought the historical and local contexts about “comfort women,” colonialism, shamanism, and song, which uncovered the alternative language used by women. In the final chapter, I shared the historical and local context of vegetarianism to introduce a new viewpoint that goes beyond analysing vegetarianism as a symbol of patriarchal resistance. Given Yeong-hye’s direct speech, her extra-marital relations, and the freedoms she takes with her body, I returned to Korea’s New Women to understand local precedents for her resistance and her fate.

The three protagonists each “speak” a distinct message. As seen in the first chapter, Jiyoung’s silence acted as an impetus for feminist activity in South Korea as it encouraged women to share that Jiyoung’s abstaining from voicing the injustices she experienced was a silence that was all too familiar in the readers’ lives. What was unsaid by Jiyoung was shouted out by readers and effectively led to political, legislative change. Importantly, it gave rise to an awareness in South Korea about the everyday injustices that were in dire need of being acknowledged and discussed. Jiyoung’s silence spoke a message of feminist solidarity.

In the second chapter, Soon Hyo from *Comfort Woman* chose to “speak” through song and shamanism. Her language was audible yet largely unheard except as a form of madness. Soon Hyo’s “mad” language was directed at the self and extended out to her daughter as well as the former “comfort women”. In crying for the former “comfort women” in song and ritual, Soon Hyo lulled the trauma within herself. Furthermore, in passing down her role to comfort the “comfort women” to her daughter, Soon Hyo ensured another generation of remembrance for the “forgotten” women. While many readers may be more familiar with testimony and speaking trauma in order to heal

trauma, *Comfort Woman* demonstrates the possibility of expressing trauma and pain in other verbal forms.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, Yeong-hye uses direct speech and other alternative modes of communication to grapple with her own complicity in the world's violence as well as the violence she experienced and witnessed. What Yeong-hye's use of speech and alternative modes of communication exposes is how the way one expresses themselves and the message they speak largely contribute to the non/listeners' disengagement. Inquiring into the messages and expressions that are ignored allows us to uncover the sociopolitical commentary made because turning alternative modes of communication into silence is a purposeful decision made by the listener. Overall, what this dissertation is examining is not limited to what the protagonists are "saying" but also to asking: What is the listener choosing to unhear? Why are they choosing not to listen? What are the cultural specificities by which hearing might be possible?

Returning to the three novels, it became evident that we often normalize the equation of speech with power and alternative forms of communication as less or inaudible and therefore powerless. I aimed to disrupt such a hierarchy in language in order to listen to non-dominant forms of expressions just as carefully as we do speech. I ultimately conclude that alternative modes of communication are significant forms of expressing the self and attempting to converse with the other and are a key mode of contemporary South Korean feminist work; these forms of expression cannot be placed beneath speech. Even silence can be turned into political action as seen in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*; song, shamanism, and touch can pass down a history of remembrance and colonial pain as seen in *Comfort Woman*; and even direct speech can be treated as silence without listeners as

seen in *The Vegetarian*. The three chapters demonstrate how alternative modes of communications are used to heal and express the self in socio-politically and culturally active and powerful ways.

4.1 Contribution to the Field

My research began with “silence” as my guiding keyword. The study of silence is abundant and varied: silence has been examined as positive, negative, religious, philosophical, gendered, marginalized, powerful, disempowering, and the list continues. As evident in this short list, silence has no singular definition and is often analyzed in terms of extreme opposites. For example, in *Fear and Trembling* (1843), Søren Kierkegaard praises silence for its ability to allow one to seek inwards, but he also considers how such inward contemplation could lead to both the “divine” and the “demoniac” (162). Kierkegaard considers the silence of Abraham in response to God’s order to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Throughout the three-day journey to the land of Moriah, Abraham turns to inward silence to think of his position between the word of God and the murder of his son. For Kierkegaard, “[s]ilence is the snare of the demon, and the more one keeps silent, the more terrifying the demon becomes; but silence is also the mutual understanding between the Deity and the individual” (162). The deep silence of Abraham is a conversation and a “mutual understanding” between him and God (Kierkegaard 162). Deep silence fills the space between God and Abraham from the moment Abraham is given the word to sacrifice his son to the moment he is stopped by an angel. Abraham’s silence is intimate and liturgic, and although God was testing Abraham’s faith, Abraham also tests the words of God by silently carrying out his

demand through what Bernard Dauenhauer calls “the silence of the to-be-said” (19).

Abraham awaits a response with abiding silence, a silence that tests the validity of God’s utterance.

Women’s views of silence have been studied with a more nuanced consideration of language and gender. The important question of why one would, or is forced to choose, silence extends the gendered argument to intersectional and marginalized perspectives. What I found interesting in the existing conversations about silence was in the research conducted by Black women such as bell hooks in *Talking Back* in which she intervenes in feminist politics by pointing out that Black women have been left out of political conversations and regarded as “voiceless,” but African American women have a history of encouraging female solidarity through both speech and action. So why then were they politically “voiceless”? hooks points out that the voices of Black women have been ignored, hence rendered silent. In the initial stages of this dissertation, hooks’ works were eye opening in broadening my understanding of “silence” as not necessarily wordless or voiceless.

Like hooks, along the lines of viewing “silence” as *not* silent, firstly, what I add to the field is how I group and define “alternative modes of communication”. Instead of using “silence” which denotatively means “a period without any sound,” (“Silence” *Cambridge*) yet is used by many scholars to mean something that produces sound, I clarify the conversation by acknowledging not just silence but other forms of communication as expressions that have been unheard and unseen. The phrase “alternative modes of communication” can help avoid the confusion that arises when

using the term “silence” because the phrase can contain speech that has been ignored, such as song, madness, and more.

What I further contribute to the field is a more focused study of alternative modes of communication in South Korean literature. From my research, I found that the works that specifically grapple with silence in Asian women’s literature are focused on East Asian North American authors such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Joy Kogawa. King-Kok Cheung and Patti Duncan are excellent examples when looking into the purposeful and powerful use of silence by East Asian North American female authors. Adding to these works, my dissertation contributes to the field a Korean-specific inquiry that is in-depth. This allows for a more detailed analysis of the topic of East Asian women’s “silences” as well as space to expand on the cultural and historical significance of Korean women’s use of language. In the case of this dissertation, studying the culture, history, and phases of women’s movements as necessary local knowledge for understanding contemporary South Korean women’s literature changes how we view the three celebrated novels that have been my cases here.

There is a limited number of engagements with South Korean literature that have been translated into English. *The Vegetarian* and *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, despite their large readership in the Eastern part of the world, are scarcely discussed in the West. While there is a bit more engagement with *The Vegetarian*, perhaps due to its International Man Booker Prize, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* has not been critically analyzed in the English-

speaking world. This dissertation introduces newer texts such as Cho's 2018 work and attempts to start a new conversation in the English-speaking world.⁴⁷

4.2 Directions for Further Research:

4.2.1 Gendered Minorities

While I endeavoured to present a variety of alternative communication styles within the scope of my three cases here, there are shortcomings to this dissertation that I would like to turn to. First and foremost is that this dissertation examines the relationship of gender in a largely binary manner in which all three chapters revolve around the male, female divide and heterosexuality. This is not to purposely disregard gendered minorities in South Korea, rather it was an organic occurrence as the research question developed from Korean women's use of language in a neo-Confucius, patriarchal society. Nevertheless, the lack of discussions about gendered minority no doubt brings to question the role of the binary structure in my study. Although it is true that the gendered debate in North America is vastly different from that of South Korea, a local perspective about the more accommodating gendered view on language should not be ignored and is the first topic I suggest for further research.

Queer silence is a topic that is emerging in the discussion about silence which was once largely centred in philosophy and religion. Logan Smilges' *Queer Silence: On Disability and Rhetorical Absence* (2022), looks into the significance of silence as used by gendered

⁴⁷ A version of the first chapter can be found in a forthcoming publication with *University Toronto Quarterly (UTQ)* under the title "Silent Feminism: Turning Private Silence into Public Debate in Nam-Joo Cho's *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*," and a version of the second chapter can be found in a forthcoming publication in *Routledge Literary Studies in Social Justice* on "Reading Violence and Trauma in Asia and the World" under the title "Speaking the Unspeakable in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*".

minorities. Beginning with a significant moment in North American queer history in which the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) awareness movement was largely active through the “SILENCE=DEATH” slogan in the 1980s, Smilges notices how “[t]o resist silence and thus to speak became an imperative for gay people in particular” (14). Additionally, the slogan took on a literal significance: “[s]ilence took on connotations of cowardice, shame, internalized hatred, and unimaginable privilege that afforded some people access to life saving drugs while allowing others to go without. For most people, to remain silent was to accept death” (14). One was to speak to be active or express solidarity. However, Smilges mentions how silence should not be placed in such a negative binary framework. Smilges attempts to reset this preference for speech and instead examines the use of silence by queer people to “harness and wield their rhetorical energy” in a world where silence is often simply an “unwillingness to engage” (27, 43). For the purpose of this dissertation, it would be intriguing to consider how queer silence may have to consider both the “invisibility and hypervisibility” of the queer body “where their voices are ignored even as their bodies are more intensely scrutinized” (Smilges 8).

Queer identity in South Korea, in comparison to North America where Smilges is speaking from, is relatively new to terms such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. “[D]escriptions for non-normative gender orientations and sexuality” only started to be used in the 1990s (Y.R. Kim 48). Understandably, queer history in South Korea is harder to trace, and although we could speculate that silence and alternative modes of communication were used to shield the self from a strict neo-Confucian, patriarchal society, the topic is difficult to study due to the scarcity of existing material. Artists such as Siren Eun Young Jung have made various attempts to revive such a queer history of

alternative modes of communication. Recently, jung “excavate[d] queer pasts from yeosung gukgeuk, a genre of all-female Korean opera extremely popular in the 1950s and 1960s” (Y.R. Kim 47-48). The new “yeosung gukgeuk” consists of a variety of artistic expressions such as “media installations, performance artworks, and stage plays” as well as a new genre of P’ansori⁴⁸ mixed with features from Western theatre (Y.R. Kim 48). While jung archives and performs Korean queer history, “jung avoids framing yeosung gukgeuk actors as LGBTQ+ subjects, despite the fact that some actors in the troupe were in relationships with one another, and despite the fact that some of them lived as (trans) men” (Y.R. Kim 55). Attesting to the silencing of queerness in South Korea, jung and others prefer to be cautious about queer identification. A similar decision was also seen in the introduction of this dissertation in which artists such as Bul Lee preferred not to identify as a feminist artist despite the direct expression of feminist issues especially in her earlier works. Although there are groups that openly identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community as seen in “Project L the first exhibition organized by self-proclaimed lesbian artists and curators in Korea in 2005,” queer Korea is largely spoken through artistic and creative alternative modes of communications (D-Y. Koh 378). These aspects make the topic of queer silence a worthwhile avenue of further research. For example, one could consider Soon-Hyo’s sexual and spiritual relationship with Induk/ “Akiko 40” and their performative language.

⁴⁸ Korean musical storytelling also seen in chapter two of this dissertation.

4.2.2 Model Minorities

Another area of interest that I wished to have pursued is the myth of the model minority for East Asian North Americans and how this contributes to speech or the lack thereof. The model minority myth is a term that was first coined by sociologist William Petersen in 1966 regarding Japanese immigrants in America. Asian stereotypes were formed on racial prejudices that attempted to place people of colour on a hierarchy of preference—determined in relation to the white population at the top, Asians’ “preferred” location in this hierarchy is—based on an assumed social malleability and quiet integration into the white majority. For some Asians, it was preferable to be seen through the model minority stereotype in order to be tolerated by the white majority, even if that was marginally so. Practicing the model minority stereotype was to blend in by intentionally choosing invisibility as a method of survival. In his *New York Times* article, Petersen argues that Japanese Americans are “[c]onscious of their minority status” and, thus, knew their place (40). He claims that they have climbed “out of the slums” unlike “‘nonwhites’ [such] as Negroes, Indians, Mexicans, Chinese and Filipinos” (Petersen 40). Petersen praises the quiet compliance of the Japanese Americans and argues that people of other ethnicities have been lacking by comparison.

Similar identifications are given to Chinese Americans in an article by *U.S. News and World Report*, also in 1966. In this article, the author sees a ray of hope in coloured people during a time of “worry over the plight of racial minorities” (“Success Story” 6). The author praises Chinese Americans for believing in succeeding without a welfare cheque: “There’s a strong incentive for young [Chinese American] people to *behave*” (“Success Story” 6; emphasis added). The article praises “Chinese willingness to work

long hours for low pay” and their willingness to “work at anything. [Noting that the author] know[s] of some who were scholars in China and are now working as waiters in restaurants . . . the point is that they’re willing to do something—they don’t sit around moaning” (“Success Story” 6, 7).

In both the *New York Times* article and the *U.S News and World Report* article, the model minority myth, in essence, is not used to applaud Asian American success, but to encourage docile behaviours in Asian Americans and to further negate other racial minorities. This myth pitted coloured minorities against one another. Suggesting that other ethnic minorities are “moan[ers],” dependent on welfare, and too lazy to work, both articles stress that while all people of colour face prejudice, East Asians are well integrated because they are “thrifty, law-abiding and industrious people—ambitious to make progress on their own” without using white citizens’ tax (“Success Story” 9). In other words, the model minority applied to Asian Americans, in these articles, is “model” on a scale of how Asian Americans have managed not to irritate white citizens and to exist as quietly as possible. Valuing Asian immigrants only as quiet, controlled, hard-workers who will not voice their complaints and be grateful even when faced with racial prejudices are expectations of Asians that have persisted for decades. The model minority remains a major stereotype used to imagine the Asian American Other.⁴⁹

These are the stereotypes that many Asian Americans worked to thwart in the 1970s. In *Aiiieeee*, the Asian American writers’ anthology, the editors specifically addressed the model minority issue and its effect on silence/speech. The title of the anthology itself was

⁴⁹ See, for example, Cathy Park Hong’s *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (2020).

counter to the “quiet Asian” with its expressive cry. In this anthology, several key Asian American authors “were rejecting ‘seven generations of suppression under legislative racism and euphemized white racist love’” (qtd. in Song and Srikanth 6). As briefly discussed in the introduction, the stereotypical image of the quiet East Asian was associated with traditionally feminine characteristics and consequently effeminized East Asian men. These were images that the all-male editorial group strived to purge on the basis that quiet characteristics were a form of surrendering to “racist love” in which the other dictated aspects they wanted to see in minority groups that ultimately benefited themselves. Preferring one race over the other because one was perceived as nonthreatening, tame, and barely visible was indeed a newer form of racism.

This twisted “love” further silenced the East Asian minority. For example, the Japanese North American community coming out of the internment camps of World War II practiced a form of self-silencing in hopes that they could live amongst people who used to view them as a national threat. Roy Miki, a Japanese Canadian poet and scholar who was raised in an internment camp in Manitoba, recalls that when the Japanese Canadians were released, the largely Issei (first generation) community wanted the Nisei (second generation) community “to conform, to study dentistry, law or medicine. These were the favoured professions because a Japanese-Canadian could clearly serve the public while being ‘invisible’” (qtd. in “Miki Roy”). Japanese Canadians, like Japanese Americans, felt the need to overtly demonstrate their patriotic affiliation or to perform in a highly functioning role of society so as to display their worthiness and reason to belong. Many Asians who went through similar waves of hatred for varying reasons—whether that be a national threat, political disagreeability, the Covid 19 pandemic, etc.—feel that the only

way they can belong is to be an “essential” member of society and to be so silently. Miki’s parents’ response to his career path in literature was that of disappointment; “[l]iterature was taboo because it was expressive. It might make you stand out...[when] [y]ou were supposed to blend in” (qtd. in “Miki Roy”). To be accepted as an Asian American or Asian Canadian was a peculiar situation because it called for an existence that denied and neglected one’s identity. To make the self “invisible” and quiet was precisely the formula for “model” behaviour that merited the approval and “love” from the white majority. Given these reasons, it is unsurprising that the *Aiiieeeee* editors yelled out for fellow Asian Americans to express themselves loudly and clearly.

Cheung notes that silence as used in Asian North American texts “is a theme still often subject to reductive interpretations” (20). For the purpose of developing this dissertation, what makes the topic of silence/speech by the “model minority” interesting is the counterargument to the call for speech in Asian Americans. Against the call to break silence, is the argument that one need not prove to the white majority that Asians are capable of voicing their opinions and being expressive. To be forced into speech in order to escape the model minority stereotype is arguably also a form of being moulded by the other. Cheung’s scholarship is a great example of interrogating the use of silence by Asian North Americans with the “coercion to speak” in mind (168). According to Cheung, “[l]anguage can liberate, but it can also coerce, distort, and regulate” (20). When Asian North American authors utilize silence, it can be a “unique bicultural idiom” rather than a stereotypical surrendering of voice for the white approval (Cheung 21). Cheung further argues that there is a tendency among Asian North Americans to dismiss “anything associated with the country of origin as a form of Orientalism” in order to

become a “proper” American or Canadian (17). This points to the problem of self-denial and the self-hating Asian. Warning of the dangers of internalizing the stereotype, Cheung argues that “[h]ypersensitivity to the white gaze—whether it results in the internalization or the deliberate reversal of imposed definition—could shrivel the self” (18-19).

There is a sense of ambivalence and even confusion about silence/speech in the portrayal of Asian American identities in their literature. For example, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* narrates the author’s experience in an American school in which she resorted to silence when faced with the sudden change in language between home and school. Here, the narrator’s mother cuts part of her daughter’s tongue in hopes that she will “be able to pronounce anything” (Kingston 164). Whether this was metaphorical or literal, tongue-cutting plays a significant role in the narrator’s life. It demonstrates the family’s desperation in wanting their daughter to blend in, but it also symbolizes the struggles of the immigrant child (in much the same way that Beccah as a second-generation immigrant struggles in school with Soon Hyo’s reputation for “craziness” in *Comfort Woman*). Language is clearly racialized in Kingston’s case, but furthermore, the act of voicing any sound becomes a necessity forced onto the child. The narrator shares that in the beginning, she “enjoyed the silence” but “when [she] found out that [she] had to talk . . . school became a misery, . . . silence became a misery. [She] did not speak and felt bad each time that [she] did not speak” (Kingston 165-66). Silence is an act of protection and comfort to the narrator until speech—more specifically English—is forced onto her. To talk in English is to “have a personality and a brain”; conversely, to resort to silence rather than speak English is to make others believe that one does not have a personality or intelligence

(Kingston 180). This story from *The Woman Warrior* shows both instances of forced speech and the conversion of silence from comfort to pain. Through these portrayals, Kingston reveals linguistic anxieties of the Asian American immigrant child and the (in)accessibility of not just language and voice but also silence.

In a more recent account by a Korean American poet, Cathy Park Hong shares her experience as an immigrant in America. In her memoir, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (2020), Hong describes the life of an Asian American as living “under a softer panopticon, so subtle that it’s internalized, in that we [Asian Americans] monitor ourselves, which characterizes our conditional existence” (202). Hong implies that Asian Americans are “fortunate not to live under hard surveillance” in comparison to other marginalized groups; nonetheless, she still equates the model minority standard to a panopticon that is not only on the outside but now well within the Asian American mentality, self-regulating their speech and moves. What is interesting in Hong’s memoir, is that she not only grapples with her “bad English” but also her parents’ “bad English” that made her Asian American existence smaller (97). A foreign language leaves the immigrant parent often powerless and in need of being spoken for. Hong remarks that “[o]ne characteristic of racism is that children are treated like adults and adults are treated like children. Watching a parent being debased like a child is the deepest shame. I cannot count the number of times I have seen my parents condescended to or mocked by white adults . . . To grow up Asian in America is to witness the humiliation of authority figures like your parents” (77). As the parent silently depends on the child to be their language, or as the parent relies on “broken” English, the immigrant child retreats further and further into shame and quietly attempts to fit into the model minority. Hong now

associates “bad English” with a proud heritage that belongs to the immigrant community, but while growing up, it was a first-hand experience of the pains of speech and of silence she needed to fill.

4.2.3 Madness and Language

All of the women protagonists from the three fictional case studies in this dissertation are viewed as “insane” in the novels. Jiyoung from *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* and Yeong-hye from *The Vegetarian* are clinically diagnosed, and Soon Hyo from *Comfort Woman* is deemed to be “crazy” by everyone around her. What largely contributes to these women’s perceived “madness” is the modes of communication they use. When asked a question, Jiyoung responds with silence or borrows the voices of other women to tell the truth; Soon Hyo responds with song, chants, and dance; and Yeong-hye responds with direct speech that is ignored or viewed just as insanely as her wilful metamorphosis into a tree. In discussing the “madness” of these women, I do not want to reduce the women to their clinical state of madness but instead want to look at other avenues that lead to their perceived madness. Accordingly, the actuality of their condition is of little importance; instead, I would like to encourage a development of thought with regards to how language separates them from the “normal” members of society.

It is difficult to avoid Michel Foucault and his works when reflecting on the function of madness in literature and society. In “Literature and Madness,” Foucault considers the “enormous crisis in the European consciousness of madness [which] happened around 1820-30 when madness without language, without delirium, was discovered” (244). Foucault called this “new” madness “the mute madness of language and gestures”

(“Literature and Madness” 244). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europe mostly resorted to containing the mad in a facility with no care or by “whipp[ing] [them] out of town” while the “[h]armless lunatics were permitted to roam the streets and the roads” (Rosen 221). Because “the hospital from the sixteenth into the nineteenth century was intended chiefly to help maintain social order” madness could also be used to firmly solidify what the powers of society wanted the norm and guiding ideology to be (Rosen 228). Similar to the witch trials, “care” in the wrong hands could vividly demonstrate to the members of society where the line of tolerance would be drawn.

In the case of South Korea, madness is colloquially referred to in a gendered form as a “woman with a flower on her head” (머리에 꽃을 꽂은 여자). Madness in this sense is physically visible and easily classifiable even from afar. Predictably, South Korean movies and literature symbolically portray mad women with a flower on their head to culturally speak women’s madness to the audience and the readers. As Adam Phillips in “Round and About Madness” remarks, “[e]very culture has its own ways of taking people seriously and of telling what is serious about people. And western cultures in the modern era have had institutions to train people in the forms of recognition the culture wants to promote”: this observation of Western culture promoting a particular image of madness translates to the case of South Korea as well (Phillips 34-35). But when there is no visible flower on the “mad” woman’s head, where is the distinction between sanity and insanity drawn?

Here I turn back to Foucault, who writes that “[w]hat hides beneath the disorders of conduct is always a disorder of expression . . . [L]anguage, in a society, is a site of privileged and specific prohibitions, a domain where specific divisions are established”

(“Literature and Madness” 245). For readers to register madness, they must depend on an idea of normalized speech that they have culturally learned. Consequently, to be whispered to be “mad” could be as easy as calling a woman a “witch,” and one could lead to such a conclusion solely based on their reaction to the individual rather than the state of the individual themselves.

In “From Madwomen to Whistleblowers,” Hae Yeon Choo studies the #MeToo movement in South Korea and notes how “Seo⁵⁰ was labelled within the KPS [Korean Prosecution Service] as a ‘madwoman,’ or to be precise, a ‘crazy bitch’ (미친년)” (263). Seo, however, was not the first “crazy bitch” in KPS. A Senior prosecutor, Eun-Jông Im has been an outspoken member of the KPS and was also well known in the circle as a “madwoman”: “Seo recalled meeting with Im afterwards, where Im jokingly said, ‘Thank you so much. I was the number one madwoman (제 1 미친년) in the KPS, but now that you have come forward, the title goes to you’ (Choo 264). Here, the line between sanity and insanity is arbitrarily drawn by the institution in charge of the women’s career and livelihood. When Seo and Im spoke out about social and gendered injustices, they were ostracized from the institution, but, as Choo points out, they have later been converted from “crazy bitch[es]” to whistleblowers. Seo was praised for her bravery as a whistleblower, and she was credited for popularizing the #MeToo Movement in South Korea and making it a locally practicable movement. I believe that this switch in identification happened partly thanks to the listeners: “[p]eople are not called mad when sufficiently influential people agree with what they are saying,” as Phillips would say (36). With listeners and believers, these “madwomen” cease to be “mad”.

⁵⁰ Here, Seo refers to Jihyun Seo as discussed in the first chapter.

The language used by “madwomen” is often ignored under the expectation that their speech can be of no value, and, therefore, is as empty and hollow as silence. Their actions are also ignored as meaningless expressions of a “woman with a flower on her head”. Madness, however, presented in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982, Comfort Woman, and The Vegetarian* is an alternative mode of communication. In many ways “[m]adness becomes a way of talking about what is wrong with ways we describe what is wrong with us” (Phillips 35). Jiyoung’s madness is a way for her to communicate the gendered injustice she experienced since childhood and persisted throughout her lifetime. Soon Hyo’s madness is a deeply cultural ritual way for her to express her pain and begin to come to terms with her trauma as well as consoling those who died with haunted memories never released, but in a secular society where death and remembrance are sealed into obituary columns in a newspaper, Soon Hyo’s whirling dances and chants are the actions of a crazy woman. Yeong-hye’s madness is her grappling with the violence of the world and the violence within herself. These three novels represent through madness the widely unspoken and undervalued subjects especially those surrounding women. Like Yeong-hye’s sister, who in the final book of *The Vegetarian*, kept feeling that Yeong-hye was not mad after all and that it was the world around her that was mad, the “madness” presented in these three novels makes us reconsider not only the protagonists’ states of mind but also the message in their alternative modes of communication. This is not to glamorize madness but to consider how we do not hear what is being communicated when its form is not normative. To listen to these alternative modes of communication could put an end to metaphorically “whipp[ing] [‘madwomen’] out of town” (Rosen 221).

In one way or another, Jiyoung, Soon Hyo, and Yeong-hye have all been “whipped out of town” for their language and madness. This raises the question of whether or not the situation would have been different if anyone cared to sincerely listen. This dissertation has studied alternative forms of communications but by way of various forms of unlistening and reasons to unlisten to the other.

This work also calls for the destruction of a language hierarchy that contributes to the listeners’ ignorance of alternative modes of communications. This dissertation stems from the realization that there are not only marginalized speakers but also marginalized forms of communicating largely based in patriarchal histories. To unlearn the hierarchy of language and to practice listening to various alternative forms of communications would be to believe the everyday injustices felt by Jiyoung, participate in comforting the souls of “comfort women” like Soon Hyo, and empathize with the concern for inescapable violence as felt by Yeong-hye.

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6 Curriculum Vitae

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Bae, Judy Joo-Ae. "Speaking the Unspeakable in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*." *Routledge Literary Studies in Social Justice: Reading Violence and Trauma in Asia and the World*. ed. Lim Yiru and Lye Kit Ying, [accepted and forthcoming].

Web-Based Publication

McCarthy, Harry, M.J. Kidnie, and Judy Joo-Ae Bae. "Shakespeare's Stages." *Cambridge Shakespeare*, Cambridge Core, [accepted and forthcoming].

Bae, Judy Joo-Ae. "Listen to my 'Silence'." *Inspiring Minds – A Digital Collection of Western's Graduate Research, Scholarship and Creative Activity*. 293, 2022.
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RELATED WORK EXPERIENCE:

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Fanshawe College, London ON, Canada: “Reason and Writing”

Translator

2022 Translator for the synopsis and director’s notes on the animated film, *Pearl*

2015 Simultaneous interpreter for the engineering crew of Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit to South Korea regarding bilateral trade

2011 Interpreter for the American International Education Fair

2011 Translator for Unione Communications company manual, Seoul, South Korea

2010 Interpreter for the tourist department during the G20 Seoul Summit

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