Re-thinking the issue of ‘Comfort Women’:
Struggle Against the “Lack of Narratives”

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1. Introduction
In the 1990s, more than 45 years after the Japan’s surrender, finally, the issue of the ‘Comfort Women’ started to be argued as a problem concerning the Japanese responsibility of wartime/post-war. However, an existence of the Sexual Slavery by the Japanese Military, so called ‘Comfort Women’, was known by people from early days after the WWII. For example, in 1970s some Japanese media already reported about Bae Pong-gi who lived in Okinawa from Chungcheund-Namdo in Korea and Shirota Suzuko, one of the Japanese victims of ‘Comfort Women’, who wrote her biography. In 1980s some Korean media also reported about Noh Su-bok who lived in Thailand then and Pae Ok-su as survivors of the Japanese Sexual Slavery (Sakamoto 2007). But a narrative about them was only described as prostitutes who had lived reluctant to undertake their past experiences as their ‘destiny’ or as messages for antiwar.

In the 1990s the ‘Comfort Women’ became to be described as subjects which would charge and demand public apology to the Japanese Government. Behind this, there was the survivor’s agency; they who reached the age to be thinking of their death decided it was finally the time to ‘speak out.’ Also the feminist movement that appeared in 1980s, the collapse of the Cold War structure, the civil consciousness that developed with the demise of Asia’s the autocratic government and democratization, and the revitalization of the civil movement, all played a role. Moreover, with the death of the Emperor Hirohito his responsibility of wartime/ post-war was voiced out loud not only in Japan but also in many Asian countries (Sakamoto 2007).

In 1990 ‘The Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan’ was formed. And in August 1990 a press conference was held, and Kim Hak-soon first revealed her past as a former ‘Comfort Women’. After her coming out, many survivors came to come out, and the number of the women who were declared and authorized as victims of the ‘Comfort Women’ is 234 cases, including a110 women who are still alive, in Korean Government as until 12 November 2007. Of course this number is only a part of the actual number of victims.

In December 1991, some Philippine female activists came to know about the Korean ‘Comfort Women’ by the Japanese Military. They started ‘Task Force on Filipino
Comfort Women’ as soon as they became aware of this issue, because they inferred that there would be survivors of the ‘Comfort Women’ also in the Philippines. In September 1992, just as they thought, Maria Rosa Luna Henson revealed her past as a survivor of the ‘Comfort Women’. About 600 women have come out as victims of the ‘Comfort Women’ via three support groups in the Philippines.

Such movements are seen at each country or area where they suffered damage as the ‘Comfort Women’, and several survivors who had already come out as victims all around the world filed civil suits to search for the public apology and compensation from the Japanese Government, one after another. The Court of Japan kept turning to ‘prescription’ and ‘lack of law’, and the Japanese government has stubbornly maintained a single approach on the matter, which is ‘already solved.’ From the point of view as a crime that a nation, However, the Japanese Military, intervened, the survivors of the ‘Comfort Women’ and their supporters have kept demanding a formal apology and compensation from the Japanese Government. Therefore sometimes this ‘Comfort Women’ issue is apt to be dwarfed as a struggling of ‘Victims and their Supporters versus Japanese Government’, and also tend to be narrated such an issue as if other citizens would not have any relations with this issue and survivors.

Moreover today when Japan has advanced economically after the war, there are some areas in Asia which received economical influence from Japanese Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) or Japanese Business Aggression. The people who live in such areas have difficulty in taking a critical attitude against the Japanese Government. They do not try to discuss about the issue of the ‘Comfort Women’ in such areas. Or they can not mention this issue at all.

In my presentation, I will pay attention to such situations around this issue and would like to discuss about ‘the method of narrating’ and ‘lack of narrative’ about the issue of the ‘Comfort Women’. In this particular time, I will pay attention to imperialism, and summarize the ‘narrative’ of three agencies such as a person concerned victim of the sexual violence by the Japanese Military, a society which surround survivors of the ‘Comfort Women’, a mediator between a survivor and a society in three areas, Japan which invaded before, Korea which was colonized by Japan, the Philippines which was occupied by Japan. And at last I would like to grope about roles of Global and Trans-national Feminists.

2. Politics of ‘the method of narrating’ and ‘lack of narrative’

2.1 Japanese Society which is dominated by the taboo of ‘Narrative’ and the ‘Virtue’ of silence

When people mention about the WWII in Japan, the narrative about victims of the atomic bomb in Nagasaki and Hiroshima is acceptable because people regard such a narrative as emphasizing antiwar and peace. On the other hand, the narrative about the issue of the ‘Comfort Women’ is regarded as taboo or abominable thing because such a narrative prosecutes the Japanese Government (Sakamoto 2005). Furthermore, as a background of the Japanese women as victims of the ‘Comfort Women’, we can guess some cases such as: 1) women who were transferred from prostitutes, 2) women who were adopted by their family for reducing the number of mouths they had to feed because of their poverty, 3) women who was swindled about their work, and so on (Nishino 2000: 70). People in Japan have tended to regard such
women to work as a prostitute, to be in a poverty, and to be swindled as ‘foolish’ or ‘shameful’ women who are enough to be victims of such things, rather than people criticize the wrongdoing and the criminality of the person who got the profit through women’s victims. Furthermore, two ideas dominate in Japan: one is that an attitude that a ‘lady’ mention such a ‘shameful thing’ is a disgraceful behavior itself, the other is that ‘lady’ of course should not mention such a ‘shameful past’. The Japanese Military tried to hide the ‘Comfort Women’ for disposing of them as a disgrace to the Imperial Japanese Army in the past. And today, the Japanese society tries to evade this issue as their disgrace themselves or mistakes.

Therefore, in such a Japanese society, it should be a virtue that the survivors of the ‘Comfort Women’ do ‘not narrate’, and most of people regard the survivors in Asia who have come out and described their victimhood as the women who do not have such a virtue and who came out for getting money named of a compensation from the Japanese Government. Such a narrative in Japan has brought an effect to keep a silence of the Japanese women who were victimized as the ‘Comfort Women’ through romanticizing such silent Japanese ‘Comfort Women’. At the same time this narrative denies another narrative by the Asian Women of the ‘Comfort Women’ and even their personality. In this way, a wrongdoer side of the Japanese Military and the painfulness of the victims have been still in a dark of silence.

2.2 ‘Comfort Women’ in the Context of the Nation History: Struggle Against ‘the Method of narrating’ in Korea

The military government in Korea which lasted for 30 years was related closely with a strained relation with RPDK and also with ODA and economical effects by a business aggression from Japan. In the 1980s, under the military regime, there appeared a group of women’s organizations who launched protest movements against sexual violence committed by the regime and sex tours by Japanese male. Such voices from these women’s movements were linked with that of the Japanese military ‘Comfort Women’ issue.

However, in the process of developing the issue of the ‘Comfort Women’ into a social issue in Korea, the issue was narrated as a ‘disgrace of nation’ and described survivors as a ‘mother of nation.’ By replacing ‘damage to Women’ with ‘damage to nation,’ it might mean that the ‘civil rights’ issue of the Japanese military ‘Comfort Women’ was recognized in Korea.

However, there is still the possibility that the issue of ‘Comfort Women’ might not have become an important social issue if this was addressed as a problem for women only, instead of a problem for nations. That is, there is still a big pile of problems to be solved in relation to the ‘methods of narrating’ the ‘damage to Women.’ In the public ‘Narrative’ such as a national discourse about this issue, the painfulness of the survivors of the sexual violence or the feeling alienated have been still blocked.

2.3 Issue of Japanese Military ‘Comfort Women’ in the Context of Poverty: Struggle Against the ‘Lack of Narrative’ in the Philippines

The year of 2006 was an important year because it commemorated the 50th year anniversary the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the
Philippine and Japanese governments. As an annual event, the Japanese Embassy sponsored on August 15 of this year the Japanese War Dead Memorial Rite in Caliraya, Laguna. During the ceremony, a message from President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was introduced and read as emphasizing that both nations have been able to overcome their past history in order to establish a cooperative relationship with each other, and mentioning that she ‘celebrates’ it. The Japanese Ambassador Ryuichiro Yamazaki further gave a speech saying that he understood and was moved at how Filipino people demonstrated their future-oriented perspective while at the same time, challenging themselves to overcome our past history and put up a peaceful future. He further stated that the Philippines and Japan had established a solid friendship which has not been seen in other Asian countries. But I could not help doubting the meaning of their speech. What came to my mind was the disregard given to those dead Filipinos and survivors still suffering from their past. In fact, on the same day, Filipino comfort women survivors conducted a protest rally in front of the Japanese embassy seeking a formal apology and individual compensations from the Japanese government. These two high officials should have been aware of this activity.

At present, Japan is the top donor nation to the Philippine government. According to statistics, Japan was the top donor with shares amounting to 30% of the total volume of bilateral assistance received by the Philippines (2004) and only to be followed by the USA (18%). The accumulated total amount of Japanese assistance reached 2,457 trillion yen in 2005. Out of the total, the amount of 83% was executed under yen loan packages, 10% were under grant, and the remaining 7% was under technical assistance packages (including acceptance of trainees, dispatch of professionals and Overseas Cooperative Volunteers, feasible studies and so on).

Many of the assistance in the country are categorized as yen loans and almost all of them are for infrastructure projects in connection with the advancement of Japanese companies in the Philippines. Assuming that such economic power relations and assistance-oriented foreign policy between these two countries affected the message of the President, we can see that in such relations, there exists a chain of power like economy → foreign policy → internal politics → citizen. We should recognize the utilization of this assistance as a form of modern invasion and as a means for forcibly ‘shutting off the mouth of the small countries.’ When we consider the influence this global power relation has towards local residents especially Japanese military comfort women victims, how can we cut this kind of chain of relations?

In the Philippines, on the one hand, having failed to keep up with the newly industrializing economies of other Asian countries, NIES, there are full of those unemployed, those laborers forced to work overtime, or those who get low wages in a city, mothers and daughters have to broaden their working spaces. Many opt to go overseas for the sake of their children and brothers. This causes the progress of the feminization of migration.

On the other hand, in towns, cars made in Japan are belching exhaust fumes into the air while the youth are enjoying animations from Japan. University students are fond of enrolling in Information Technology (IT) courses more than in humanities courses like history since the former is more advantageous in getting them jobs in the future. In the process of the globalization of labor and consumption between Japan and Philippines, the youth cannot help but pay attention to the chance of participating in
consumption and the labor market. The youth has never cut off ties with the
generation of their grandmothers. It is simply that for generation living under a global
consumption society, it seems as if they have stronger desires to consume than to
share the narrative of history.
In this way, the survivors of the ‘Comfort Women’ in the Philippines have to struggle
not only with the national power relationship between Japan and the Philippines but
also with the differences of generations or classes in the domestic. And those
survivors have stayed in the ‘lack of the narrative’.
When we discuss about the reasons why this issue and these victims have ‘not been
subject of narratives’ in the Philippine society, it is important for us to clarify its
relationship with the globalization of politics, economy, consumption, and even class,
at the same time.

2.4 Politics of the ‘Narrative’
The ‘method of narrating’ in Korea and the ‘lack of narrative’ in the Philippines about
the issue of the ‘Comfort Women’ are affected by the way the Japanese look down on
other Asians. When female victims demand that the Japanese government make a
public apology and give reparations, the Japanese government and society
misinterprets them. It is perceived by Japanese that comfort women ‘only want to get
money’ or that the ‘issue is an anti-Japanese sentiment’. The Japanese government
always takes the position that ‘the issue has been already settled when reparations
between two nations were executed,’ without having to face the voices of these
women. The issue of Japanese military ‘Comfort Women’ is not an issue where only
victims and supporters are struggling against the Japanese government. The fact that
there exist few citizens in Japan who will not forgive the attitude of the Japanese
government’s indifference and will not understand the issue shows the immaturity and
insensitivity of Japanese society.
Such fact is connected to the mode of Japanese society where Asian women have
been exploited using currency and exploitation of sex and labor as the carrot and the
stick. The reaction of a victimized country towards Japanese society, depending on
the foreign policy and internal politics of the country, produces not only the ‘lack of
narrative’ in the case of the Philippines where there is a reflection on economic power
relations, but also ‘the method of narrating’ in the case of Korea where the phrase
‘damage to Women’ is replaced with ‘damage to nation’ in order for shaping
individuality, ethnicity, and nation to become crucial issues.
It is important for us to discuss and narrate the issue of Japanese military ‘Comfort
Women’ in daily life. At the same time, it is important for us to be sensitive towards
how the issue is narrated and how it is not narrated. The ‘method of narrating’ with its
tendency to marginalize female victims and the ‘lack of narrative’ with its inattention
to the post-war lives and the damages on the victims are two sides of the same coin.
The fact that survivors of former Japanese military ‘Comfort women,’ continue to
appeal and demand attention is a call to be recognized and not be disregarded. This
means a protest from them against the ‘lack of narrative’ with screaming ‘don’t ignore
me!’

3. Trial and error of Japanese feminists
An issue of the Japanese military ‘Comfort woman’ has already become a global issue. However, as I described in chapter 2, there also exists the ‘lack of the narratives’ in each local field. In particular, there is the ‘lack of narratives’ about the Japanese women of the ‘Comfort Women’, and because of this, the Japanese feminists have been often criticized about the ‘lack of narrative’ by the Japanese feminists and also lack of their actions and movements.

Generally speaking, in the narrative, people apt to understand the issue of the ‘Comfort Women’ as a conflict structure between Japan as a wrongdoer and Asia as a victim. But actually Japan is such a country as they sent both the Japanese soldiers who became assailants and the Japanese ‘Comfort Women’ who became victims by the Japanese soldiers. Nevertheless, though the Japanese feminists have left the Japanese ‘Comfort Women’, they have made their efforts towards connecting with the Asian victims as much as they can when they criticize the Japanese Government about their responsibility to the wrongdoing by the Japanese Military and by the Japanese Government which have not yet solved this issue. If they produce their narrative about the Asian ‘Comfort Women’ victims because they are ‘guilty’ that people in a wrongdoing country mention themselves as part of the victims, where can we find another ‘guilty’ that people have ignored the Japanese ‘Comfort Women’ for long years? Before the survivors of the ‘Comfort Women’ came out as victims in each area, a supporting community for them had already organized such as ‘The Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan’ in Korea or ‘Task Force on Filipino Comfort Women’ in the Philippines. But the Japanese feminists have not organized even such a community group for the Japanese ‘Comfort Women’.

Whenever the Japanese people mention the issue of the ‘Comfort Women’, they are always in ambivalent position. Because of such difficulties, there are some Japanese who ‘dare not’ produce their narratives about this issue, who ‘can not’ produce their narratives, or who ‘dare’ produce their narratives even though they might be criticized. The Japanese feminists have undertaken such tensions and difficulties, and they try to intervene in this issue as their responsibilities. In this meaning, their feminism is tested by this issue.

The two tensions mean that one is, as a domestic problem, a tension of being called ‘anti-Japan elements’ or ‘masochistic historical view’ by the right wing group, and the other is, as a hurdle in a relationship or solidarity with Asian survivors, a tension of being denounced as a coward or of being doubted about their ‘positionality or sense’ as a ‘nation of an assault country’.

About the former, they should argue enough to understand this issue as one of the most serious problems in Japan. Until today because of a lack of domestic discussion in Japan, a lack of understanding this issue is lasting, and the Japanese Government keep their attitude that they have not solved this issue.

About the latter, the Global exchange and dialogue are very important. For example, Kim Puja who is a Zainichi Chosenjin feminist pointed out the ‘vulnerability of the viewpoint from the Colony’ and ‘weakness of the awareness as a concerned person herself’ in the question by Chizuko Ueno who is a Japanese feminist, ‘Can the feminism transcend the nationalism?’(Kim 1998: 194). Furthermore, Kim also pointed out the need to make her/himself aware about her/his position as an audience/listener, so called ‘who and how listens that who narrated for whom’. For describing this more, Kim gave an example such a narrative as ‘this film is not such a
film which criticizes a particular country by name, but such a film which narrates about a universal war and a sexual violence’ by famous Japanese women about “The Murmuring” (directed by Byun Young-joo in 1995), a documentary film about the Korean ‘Comfort Women’ survivors. And Kim criticized the ‘imperialistic feminism’ of the Japanese feminists. She also gave some questions: ‘How can we understand a history of the Japanese feminists who cooperated in promoting a war in a war time, and closed their mouth about an assault responsibility for the Asian people after the war?’ ‘Do the Japanese feminists have to face this question independently?’ Kim explained that this question would connect with the lack of a movement by Japanese women until 1990s when the Korean women’s movement started to appeal, nevertheless the Japanese women had already known about ‘Comfort Women’ in Japan since 1970s. Based on such questions and critics, Kim added ‘I used to describe before that the Japanese feminism had not had a history which transcend the nationalism. But my description does not mean that they ‘can not transcend’ forever. I would rather they did it, and also hope that they would be able to transcend depending on the way.’ Kim’s critics against the Japanese feminists might be something like productive critics not for conflicting with the Japanese feminists but for stimulating self-awareness to the Japanese feminists through the Global exchange and dialogue.

4. Conclusion: Solidarity or Coalition? Seeking for Roles of the Trans-national Feminism

The issue of the ‘Comfort Women’ is not one of the knowledge or ideology. This issue is very clear and no doubt an issue as both a sexual criminal that the Japanese Military attacked women and a nation’s criminal. However sometimes it becomes a very complicated and difficult issue, because some powers function on us for making their responsibility to solve this issue unclear. How can we surmount the ‘lack of narratives’ which is dominated by such powers?

The issue of the ‘Comfort Women’ has been always raised by victim’s side, therefore most of the Japanese have shown very defensive or negative attitudes on the matter. It is necessary the Japanese people face this problem; it is their obligation as well as responsibility. For this necessary, revitalizing the discourses inside Japan, as well as, enhancing international cooperation, and exchanging knowledge and information to coexist as world citizen is crucial.

In 1991, Kim Hak-sun who came out in Korea and asserted that she was a former Japanese military “comfort women” said, “I decided firmly to come out after I knew of reports in the newspapers and in TV (mistakenly handling the comfort women issue). These reports are different from the truth so I have to revise it. I don’t understand why they (Japanese government) told a lie like that. Therefore I decided to come out [Association of Supporters for Japanese Military’s Comfort Women Museum eds 2002:63].”

In 1992, Maria Rosa Luna Henson who was the first survivor came out in the Philippines. According to her autobiography which would be published later, she described that moment by saying “I felt like a heavy weight had been removed from my shoulders, as if thorns had been pulled out of my grieving heart. I felt I had recovered my long-lost strength and self-esteem [Henson 1996:138].”
While Kim Hak-sun came out in wrath to correct the public opinion of the Japanese government on the Japanese military “comfort women” issue, Maria Rosa Luna Henson, came out “because I only got in touch to ease my heart” [Henson 1996:138] and sought for sympathy for her own narrative. Negative statements from the Japanese government on Japanese military “comfort women” moved Kim Hak-sun to come out, and her self-reliant action moved Korean women to call on other nationalities. This call stimulated sympathy from Filipino female activists and their actions, in turn, would cure the heart of Maria Rosa Henson whose figure moved other Filipina victims. The experiences of female sufferers enclosed in a male-dominated — what is called, capital letters — Politics and History, have developed into a social and international issue through the efforts of Japanese military “comfort women” and the help of rapid transmission of information in a global society, the promotion of international sisterhood — solidarity of women who have been isolated from each other — and the power of citizens whose sensitivity has been able to sympathize with those suffering.

On the 30th of July 2007(US time), in US HR121, a House of Representative Resolution calling on to the Japanese government “formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner” over the coercion of women into sexual slavery during World War II, was adopted. Then in the Philippines, Australia, Canada, Nederland (8th November 2007, accepted at the House of Representative), similar resolutions have been placed already. This issue of the ‘Comfort Women’ has attracted attention as a part of the human rights issue and has aroused international sympathy in the world.

To make an international ‘solidarity’ is not easy work in the international power relationships because economical or political powers always function here and there. Because of such global conditions, I would like to make a proposal of a concept of a Trans-nationa l ‘coalition’. When we try to do same things in every side, depending on the conditions such as each area or person, sometimes people may feel difficulty or burden for ‘solidarity’. To gather at

one place from all over the world with spending a lot of money or time is worthwhile by the meaning of making the solidarity closely and empowers each other. However ‘solidarity’ sometimes includes some apprehensions to divide the people if they attended a ‘solidarity space or not, or the people if they are concerned about this issue or not.

The trans-national ‘coalition’ that I regard as important is a style to form a coalition through each person’s specialty for the solution of this issue with owning at least one thing such as an awareness of this issue jointly with each other. We do not have to concern about each residential area or specialized field. Today, we can own our awareness of this issue in the global level. Therefore it will be very important that we show our ability to each other, own

information jointly through our dialogue, and think about agenda together. To respect each other, to share our roles, and to involve many people in our coalition. Through this style, as a result, more people may come to concern this issue actively. When we succeed to open our dialogue much more through such a coalition, we may
be free from ‘lack of narratives’ which has kept dominating by several powers. Because the nation is a kind of structure existing as a function with which such logic of power can easily influence on their people and the narrative within it. Our transnational feminism can be possible only when we, feminists realize and transcend our own particular positions in terms of gender/class/nationality, in the relation with their own nation-state.

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