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NHS2093 Telling Herstories: Recovering Forgotten Women Pioneers

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“The worst life”: Critically analysing Keum Suk Gendry-Kim’s graphic novel *Grass* to check its efficacy as a feminist recovery work

Ghastly. Raw. Powerful. Keum Suk Gendry-Kim’s *Grass* is a horrifying graphic novel about her oral interviews with Lee Ok-Sun. Through its black-and-white brush illustrations, it tackles themes such as grief, sexual assault, pain, and courage in the life of Granny Lee¹. It was originally published in Korean and translated into English by Janet Hong in 2020. For this critical review, I will focus on the English version.²

Some may argue Granny Lee was not a “pioneering woman”, but I disagree. Born into an extremely poor Korean family, she was “put up to adoption” in January 1942 at the age of 14 by her parents.³ Her adopted “parents” used her as a slave at an Udon shop in Busan, Korea. She was then sold to a tavern in April 1942. After twenty days at the tavern, she was abducted by the Japanese forces and forced to work as a “comfort woman” in Yanji, China. “Comfort women” was the term used by the Japanese to refer to their sex slaves during World War II. For the next three years, she was forced to work as a manual labour and raped daily (up to thirty-forty on the weekends) by men. After the Japanese lost WWII, she was left abandoned in China as comfort women were ostracized by the society for sexual relations with the enemy. She was on the streets until she found a Korean slave (whom she met at the Yanji camp) and married him. Four days after the marriage, he left her to fight in North Korea, never to return. She then married another man, with whom she remained for the next 50 years, despite his alcoholism and gambling. In 1996, she managed to find her sibling in

Korea through a docudrama, but they too ostracized her for being a comfort woman. Summing up her life, she says “I’ve never known happiness from the moment I came out of my mother’s womb” also shown in Figure 1. Despite this abhorrent life, she did not lose courage. She became an activist against the Japanese war crimes until she died on 26 December 2022. She was the only witness able to verbally testify in a lawsuit against the Japanese government and was part of the Wednesday demonstrations⁴. This display of courage and determination, despite the shame, grief and trauma shrouding it, makes her a role model — a pioneering woman in activism. Sadly, she remains overlooked when discussing comfort women.



Figure 1: Gendry-Kim 436

Despite the issue of comfort woman being well known and widely studied, academics often focus on law, rights, politics (Gluck 74), responsibilities for the war crimes, or compensation for the victims (Soh 42). These perspectives are androcentric and may fail to recognise the female experience. They may also overlook the individual victims and homogenize the experience of all comfort women. Thus, in this critical review, I will argue that Gendry-Kim’s *Grass* is a good example of feminist recovery work, as it revisits the issue through a feminist lens not only through its content, but also through its form. However, it is

not a perfect feminist recovery work because of caveats in presenting oral history — caveats which are further complicated by the imagery in graphic novels. Finally, I will conclude with why this work matters despite its shortcomings.

First, I use Susan Stanford Friedman's tools to analyse *Grass*. Friedman discusses them in relation with narrative studies (Friedman 5), however they can be applied to feminist recovery work. The first relevant tool is re-vision, which is "the act of looking again . . . through a different lens, asking new questions of familiar texts" (6). Gendry-Kim applies a feminist lens to the history of comfort women. Instead of beginning with the war, *Grass* starts by situating Granny Lee in a maternal role, leaving her husband of 50 years in China to reunite with her family in Korea. Despite it being 55 years since she met her siblings, she is showcased worried about her old husband (Gendry-Kim 14-15). This reflects an androcentric trope, where a wife is described through her familial relations. However, as the story progresses, Gendry-Kim contrasts this trope against the reality that Granny Lee disliked her husband (413) and was ostracised by her siblings (432). This highlights the tensions she faced in her relations yet still endured them. By placing her at the centre of her relations rather than dependant on them, these tensions become visible, which the standard academic coverage neglects. Furthermore, her interview questions intensify the dehumanizing experience of comfort women. When asked about her first period, Granny Lee describes the nightmarish reality of reusing menstrual rags made from torn old clothes and being forced to plug cotton to reduce bleeding so the men could rape her (215-221). This illustrates not only the trauma of repeated rape, but also the complete loss of dignity, as even basic care during menstruation was stripped away. Such re-vision of Granny Lee's life through content is further supported by the form.

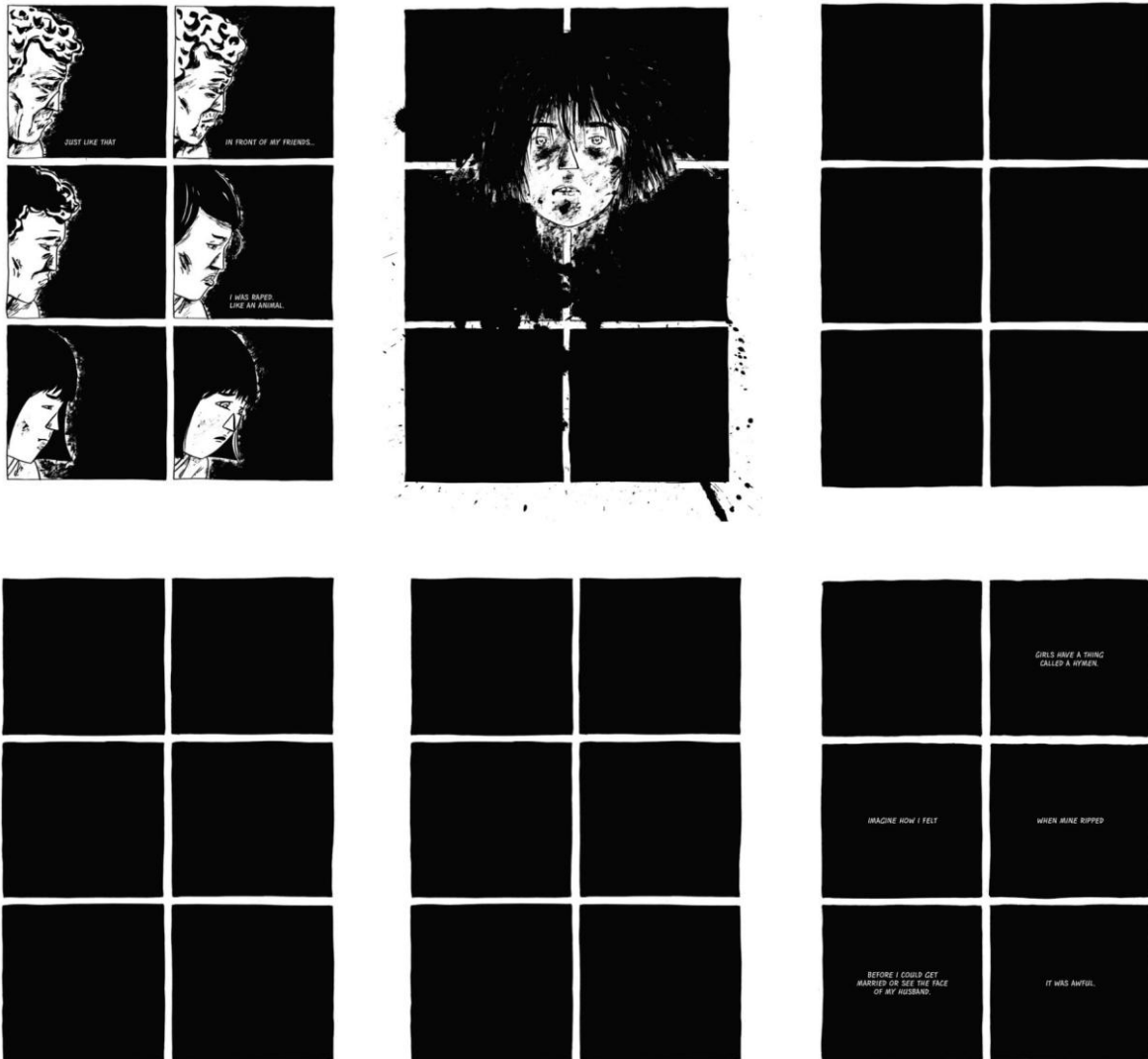


Figure 2: Gendry-Kim's *Grass* page 200 (top left) to 205 (bottom left).

Words may fail to capture the nightmare, but Gendry-Kim's art style ensures the reader experiences it directly. Figure 2 depicts the first sexual assault on Granny Lee. The neatly arranged six panels on page 200 show her becoming young while describing the incident, and the next page immediately breaks the neat arrangement with her lifeless, bloody face staring directly at the reader. The random brush strokes outside the panels further breaks the fourth wall. This nightmare is followed by 19 black panels, serving as a moment of silence and speechlessness, allowing the reader to reflect on the intensity of the situation. The story concludes with plain text on five panels, each with a short yet haunting statement. The

form itself is a re-vision, recasting the severity of events which plain text alone cannot achieve.

Other than re-vision, *Grass* also employs recovery. Friedman describes this as “the act of digging, discovering new archives in which to immerse ourselves as a basis for theorizing narrative” (Friedman 6). Gendry-Kim’s interviews serve not only as a counterpoint against standard narratives, but also as a means of comparison between comfort women. While all suffered mutilation during their time at the comfort station, they came from different backgrounds which would have shaped their feelings, thoughts, and lives after liberation. For example, unlike Granny Lee, Park Young Shim grew up without a mother, Kim Kun Ja was a foster child under a colonial police officer, and Lee Yong Soo was two years older than the rest when she was kidnapped (Project Sonyeo).⁵ Such differences may seem minor, yet they can be used to explain the choices these women made. Viewing comfort women as a homogenous group ignores this distinction. This does not mean the broader situation should be ignored, but rather that the individual differences can be used to create a better general description.

The novel is so powerful that I was both stunned and engaged. Other critics share this sentiment, with most reviews being extremely positive. Stella Oh, who analyses grief and shame in *Grass*, writes “Through the aesthetic form of the graphic novel, the author strives to recover a lost history, while nonetheless being painfully aware of the shortcomings . . .” (Oh 187). I agree Gendry-Kim is aware of limitations in her work, as she acknowledges her attempt not to insert her own tone in the narrative (Gendry-Kim 479). Despite that, both Oh and Gendry-Kim fails to recognise the inherent issue with narrative histories. We can use Marita Eastmond’s framework of lived experience to explain this. According to her, there is difference between “life as lived”, “life as experienced”, “life as told”, and “life as text” (Eastmond 249). Granny Lee’s interaction with forces in her life constitute how she lived,

while her interpretation of those interactions is how she experienced it. Given her age at the time of the interview, she might have forgotten parts of her life, so what she told is a reconstruction from memory. Lastly, how Gendry-Kim wrote it down is her interpretation of what Granny Lee told her. For example, Figure 3 shows the feelings of her parents as she was leaving for the Udon shop. How could she have seen this when she was already gone away? Is this Gendry-Kim's interpretation, or what Granny Lee imagined? We cannot be sure, but for the continuity of the story, this panel was important. Yet, this shows life as text, in an extreme situation, no longer resembles life as lived.



Figure 3: Gendry-Kim 93

I would go one step further and add "Life as drawn" in this framework. When writing a text, it is possible to keep a neutral tone, however I believe it is impossible in a graphic novel. The illustrations throughout the book are Gendry-Kim's interpretation of each situation. The faces, reactions, on-panel interaction — all carry an inherent bias. The life as

drawn is furthest removed from life as lived, or even life as told, as another layer of complexity — Gendry-Kim's imagination — is added.

In conclusion, I have argued that *Grass* is a good feminist recovery work, as it employs re-vision through a feminist lens and form, and recovery through individual interviews. However, it is not perfect, since narrative histories are different from what was lived, and the author's tone becomes even more prevalent while drawing. Does this mean we should dismiss it? No. It is still a thought-provoking work. This is especially crucial today, as countries like Japan and South Korea attempt to downplay the past to build better relations. This is a disgraceful insult to the 200,000 girls who suffered under the Japanese tyranny. In fact, Japan's official stance is that these comfort women were volunteers and thus technically prostitutes rather than sex slaves (Lee 4). Thus, exposure and education are of utmost important to acknowledge this historical travesty.

Notes

1. Gendry-Kim refers to Lee Ok-Sun as Granny Lee throughout her work, and I will use that convention.

2. I acknowledge the translation may not be perfect, however for the purposes of this critical review I will assume it is close to perfect. This is a reasonable assumption, given Janet Hong has been awarded the TA First Translation Prize and the 16th LTI Korea Translation Award.

3. Gendry-Kim questions whether this is correct. She writes “But how could granny’s mother not have known” (Gendry-Kim 106), indicating whether Ok-Sun was actually put up for adoption, or was sold by her parents.

4. Wednesday Demonstrations are weekly protests outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul for Japan to acknowledge the war crimes, provide official apology, make legal reparations, accurately record the crime in history textbooks, among other things.

5. These are other known comfort women.

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