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Articulating Korean American Women's Power Amidst Conflicts of Colonialism and War in Helie Lee's *Still Life with Rice*

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Abstract

Gender is a quintessential issue in Asian American literature, since Asian Americans are seen as weak with feminine qualities, according to the Western colonial concept. This paper examines Korean American women's power through an analysis of Hongyong, the female protagonist in Helie Lee's *Still Life with Rice*, who survives Japanese colonization in Korea and the Korean War and finally starts her new life as a Korean American woman in the United States. Hongyong goes beyond the concept of patriarchy in Korea and rescues herself and her family with her intelligence, determination, power, and bravery. As an Asian woman who successfully resettles in the United States, her achievement refutes the Western colonial concept which double-feminizes Asian women and the binary concept about the West and the East. Through Hongyong, the image of Korean American women, as part of Asian American women, is transformed from weak and powerless to strong and powerful.

Keywords

Korean American literature – women's writing – Korean women's power

1 Introduction

Under the broad area of Asian American literature, there are several sub-genres including Korean American literature. This sub-genre refers to writing produced by Americans of Korean descent. These people have come to the United States for various reasons and finally become American citizens. According to Hong, the pre-emigration period happened between 1883–1900, when "a few dozen Korean diplomats, political exiles, students, and merchants came to the United States from Korea, most as temporary, short-term visitors" (Hong 2018, 5). This advent of Korean migrants was not significant, since the number was very small. Then, there was official emigration when approximately 7,000 Koreans, a considerable number, were imported to Hawaii as laborers on sugar plantations from 1902–1905. Some of them returned to Korea, while many decided to remain in the United States because they feared the persecution of Japanese colonizers in their country during that period. Then, more Koreans escaped from the Japanese and later the Korean War to start a new life in this new world.

In the specific field of Korean American literature, although the arrival of Korean people in the United States can be traced back to the early 20th century, the number of literary works produced by Korean Americans is relatively small, compared with their Chinese and Japanese counterparts. Early Korean American works are largely autobiographical, narrated from the perspective of educated Koreans in exile. As Park puts it, despite the number of writings in the Korean language by the first generation of Korean immigrants, which establish the identity of these people and "the formations of the diasporic Korean self and community," those works are often overlooked (Park 2016, x). Only a small number of people were interested in this literary genre, and thus there were not many studies done on it. Later, Korean American literature became more visible. As Kim (1997) explains, Korean American writings were mostly brought to press after 1980. These literary works were written by descendants of the first-generation Korean Americans, whose memories of immigration and their homeland were fading. In particular, the early voice of Korean Americans was that of the privileged, educated elites, not the laboring class. This group included Korean students, political exiles, and descendants of Korean sugar planters in Hawaii or farm workers in California and along the Pacific Coast. However, according to Choi and Kim, many of the original works were written in Korean by workers. Yearning for their homeland, these people "cannot distance themselves from their mother tongue, or the culture that has so deftly shaped the approach to their craft" (Choi and Kim 2003, xxiv). Then, these works were translated into English by their masters at the plantations or descendants. Through this process, it can be said that Korean people in

America were spoken for by the English-speaking members of their own group or people from the dominant group. As Kim argues, the stories of early Korean immigrants are portrayed through "filtering memories" (Kim 1997, 156), as their stories are filtered through the perspectives of their masters or descendants. Based on this argument, it is possible that some details in the original works are missing due to conscious or unconscious censorship and limitations of translation.

Despite the condition of the filtering memories, when it comes to Korean immigrants' stories, readers learn about their lives, especially the hardship and suffering which caused them to leave their homeland. This includes oppression and persecution by Japanese colonizers in Korea, which took the form of labor abuse, sexual abuse, cultural subjugation, etc. Colonization left long-lasting effects on a large number of Koreans, including writers. Some of the prominent writers portraying the Japanese oppression and persecution include New Il-han, Younghill Kang, Richard Kim, Theresa Hak Kyuung Cha, and Sook Nyul Choi. Apart from Japanese colonization, Korean American writings also portray political conflicts between North Korea and South Korea which later culminated in the Korean War, which forced a large number of Korean people to abandon their homeland. In relation to their lives in the new world, Korean American writings also present issues regarding their resettlements in the United States, where they were denied subjectivity and treated as "alien 'others'" (Kim 1997, 157), the same form of exclusion suffered by other Asian groups. Overall, there were many horrible experiences which the Korean diaspora had to undergo:

> In the case of Korean American literature, this means literary writers have had the burden and the opportunity of writing for an ignorant public about Korean experiences of Japanese colonization, the Korean War, the postwar division of Korea, and Korean immigrant experiences in Hawai'i and the mainland.
>
> CHU 2004, 38–39

According to this statement, writing Korean American literature has meant writing history, which depends largely on the first- or second-hand experiences of the writers. This history concerns not only exclusion and discrimination in the United States, but also history in the home country and the diasporic journey of Korean Americans. Some of the important works include Younghill Kang's *The Grass Roof* (1931) and *East Goes West* (1937). Through these two books, Kang "came to represent Korea and Koreans to Western readers" (Kim 1997, 159). Apart from these autobiographical novels, there are other books portraying Korean American women. For example, there was a period when

more than a thousand Korean women were brought to the United States as 'picture brides' to solve the problem of bachelor Korean men. Since interracial marriage between Asians and Americans was forbidden by law, 'picture brides' were imported to help Korean men set up families. This phenomenon brought about interesting books such as Margaret Pie's *The Dreams of Two Yi-Min* (1989) and Won Kil Yoon's *The Passage of a Picture Bride* (1990), which portray the journeys of these women (Hong 2018). In addition, Theresa Hak Kyuung Cha's *Dictee* (1982) is another novel which represents modern Korean American literature. Using avant-garde technique, this book presents the struggle of Korean women during the period of Japanese colonization, which resulted in their shattered memories and psychology and the loss of their mother tongue and voice.

Although the voice of early Korean American literature is represented by certain groups of Korean immigrants (the educated as mentioned above), contemporary Korean American literature is created by diverse groups. According to Kim (1997), "their work emerges from their hybridity, heterogeneity, and multiple positions as raced and gendered Korean American subjects in the West" (Kim 1997, 170). In the early period, Korean immigrants in Hawaii were the pioneers who produced their literature. However, at the present time, there are Korean American writers from different places and heterogeneous groups, whose identities are products of hybridity. In addition, more female writers become engaged in this literary area. In fact, there are even more female than male writers in contemporary Korean American literature (Kim 1997). This is because early on, mostly male Koreans were brought to the United States as laborers, while female Koreans were barred until the 'picture bride' era. At present, more female Korean Americans are born on American soil and have more freedom to relocate. In addition, they enjoy freedom to write and become writers. Helie Lee (1964-present), the author of *Still Life with Rice,* a biographical novel studied in this paper, is a contemporary female Korean American writer. Published in 1997, this book is based on her grandmother's memories of the homeland during the Japanese colonization and the Korean War. These two conflicts have dramatically changed the life of Korean people, leaving long-lasting memories. Through this novel, Lee, as a product of hybridity (Korean and American), explores her family's identity, particularly how the Japanese colonization and the Korean War shaped the life of her grandmother, her mother, and herself.

Korean American literature is part of American literature as a whole. In fact, American literature is constituted by people of different ethnic groups due to the diversity of people in the United States. Unfortunately, Korean American literature has been marginalized by the mainstream. As stated by

Chu (2004), "Indeed, Korean American writers are still constrained by the limited allotment of discursive space granted to them, as a subset of the minority, 'Asian American writers,' at the bookstore, in book reviews, and in the classroom" (Chu 2004, 38). In spite of this limitation, the significance of this literature is undeniable, since it is considered life-writing of its people who are a part of the United States. In many cases, Korean American writing illustrates how the conflicts of Japanese colonization and the Korean War molded the lives of the first generation who fled the country and the lives of subsequent generations, as can be seen in *Still Life with Rice*. Therefore, more studies on Korean American literature should be conducted to make it more visible in the scholarship. Through *Still Life with Rice*, I investigate the life of Hongyong, the female protagonist and the author's grandmother, as a representation of Korean American women. I argue that although these women are viewed through a Western colonial concept as weak and powerless, this biographical novel refutes this notion and presents Hongyong as strong and powerful. She goes against the patriarchy in Korea and the Western colonial patriarchy, as proven by her heroic actions during the period of Japanese colonization in Korea, the Korean War, and a successful new life in the United States.

2 Patriarchy and Women's Oppression

Patriarchy is an oppressive system derived from the differences between sex and gender, the two terms which might be difficult to distinguish. While sex indicates a person's biological and bodily identity, gender is associated with "social differences established according to sex" (Sechiyama 2013, 1). As can be seen from the traditional concept of gender, men and women clearly divide their social functions and statuses; men are almost always superior. According to Lerner (1986), one of the pioneers who studied the roots of patriarchy, women have been systemically suppressed for centuries. They were excluded from the cultural and intellectual production, as they were not allowed to be educated or participate in the making of history. A reason for this exclusion was that women had to devote most of their time to pregnancy, child rearing, and nursing, which were seen as much less significant than the work done by men. Lerner further argues that in religions, which were powerful institutions, women were denied the role of mediators between gods and humans and could not enter the priesthood. This notion can also be explained by ancient Western culture which has it that "Women, lacking man's capacities, cannot attain full status as human beings. Women are viewed as deficient or handicapped and can, therefore, only attain an impoverished sense of personhood" (Clark and

Wang 2004, 408). This assumption gives men, in their opinion, legitimacy to control women because they see women as not fully human. Therefore, they are unable to live by themselves without men's control and directions.

In the Eastern world, at the family level, patriarchy confers the absolute right on the male as leader or patriarch of the family. As stated by Sechiyama (2013), the father is the head of the family with the absolute right and authority. This title is inherited by the oldest son who will become the next patriarch. All family members must obey and submit to the patriarch. In fact, this concept is in the same vein as the Western concept, as the word "patriarchy" is a combination of two words – "patri" meaning father and "archy" meaning rule or government. This combination clearly shows that the father is the ruler or the 'government' of the family. It is obvious that the original idea of patriarchy, according to the roots of the word, deals specifically with the family. Although this concept directly pertains to the family, it has a great impact on the society at large because the family is the primary unit of society. That is to say, in terms of society as a whole, this concept also suggests that males possess greater power than females, and that males are always in more important positions.

In the Eastern world, women are taught to be submissive and obedient daughters and, later, wives. If they break this convention, disaster will befall not only them but also their families, as other people will reproach the parents for not properly instructing their daughters. As a result, in sending their daughters to their husbands' families, parents must make sure that they observe this convention: "When you go to your family, you must be respectful, and you must be cautious. Do not disobey your husband" (Clark and Wang 2004, 396). Disobedience will result in the humiliation of the family, which parents will not allow to happen. A very important function of wives is to serve and not to be heard.

Since women are in inferior, powerless positions in both the family and society, they inevitably become subjects of oppression and exploitation, without a voice to express their own will and protest against the injustice they endure. According to Spivak (2006), as a marginalized group, women are like a subaltern group whose voice is denied by the mainstream or more powerful group. Being female, these people are even put in a lower status than the male subaltern. In addition, Spivak looks into women's situations through the lens of Marxism, viewing women as producers whose surpluses are taken by men: "women produce more than she is getting in terms of her subsistence, and, therefore, is a continual source of the production of surpluses for the man who owns her, or by the man for the capitalist who owns his labor-power" (Spivak 2006, 105). In the household, women are assigned jobs which do not count as real jobs since those jobs – such as household chores, rearing children, taking care of old people, and other menial jobs – do not generate income for the

family. Women's work is seen as "work not only outside of wage-work, but, in one way or another, 'outside' of the definitive modes of production" (Spivak 2006, 112). Although women's work is considered outside the modes of production, women cannot refuse it due to their powerless status and lack of voice.

Patriarchy and women's oppression are also associated with colonialism, whereby white Europeans, as colonizers, view themselves as the patriarch. As Said (2003) contends, the West and the East, or the Occident and the Orient, are put in binary positions. Through epistemological power, the West presents itself as the embodiment of strength and invents the East as an entity of weakness by using Orientalist discourse. Said argues that an important function of Orientalism is to:

> express the strength of the West and the Orient's weakness – as seen by the West. Such strength and such weakness are as intrinsic to Orientalism as they are to any view that divides the world into large general divisions, entities that coexist in a state of tension produced by what is believed to be radical difference.
>
> SAID 2003, 45

In fact, Orientalism not only puts the West and the East in the positions of strength and weakness; it also alienates the East as the "other" with qualities diametrically opposed to those of the West. For example, while the West is seen as civilized, virtuous, and advanced, the East is seen as backward, evil, and lazy. This binary concept, coupled with the ideas discussed earlier, allows for the conclusion that the West is the representation of the male, while the East is the representation of the female. Thus, when considering Eastern women, it is undeniable that they suffer more from invention by the Western world. Since many Asian countries were colonized by European powers, we can say that those women suffer from double colonization, as discussed by Young (2001):

> For women, the problem centered on the fact that the conditions against which they were campaigning were the product of two kinds of oppression which put the antagonists of the nationalist struggle in the same camp: patriarchal systems of exploitation were common to both colonial regimes and indigenous societies. Women therefore had to fight the double colonization of patriarchal domination in its local as well as its imperial forms.
>
> YOUNG 2001, 379

It is clear that women in colonized countries suffered from patriarchy in the form of colonialism while, at the same time, struggling against the patriarchal

structure in their indigenous societies. In other words, they were double-feminized by two oppressive forces.

Considering Asian American people, the United States, as a representative of the West and as a new colonizer in the age of neocolonialism, inevitably viewed Asian woman as weak, powerless, and submissive, based on the concept of colonial patriarchy. The age of direct colonization faded away and finally ended in 1945, but many countries are still not totally free from colonial domination, since they are still imprisoned by neocolonialism, a transformation of traditional colonialism. According to Young, "The essence of neocolonialism is that the State which is subject to it, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus political policy is directed from outside" (Young 2001, 48). This situation happens because powerful countries, such as the United States, still have power to control not only the economy and politics but also culture of the less powerful and poorer countries. With the power of the colonizers in the present age, the concept that Asian American women are weak and powerless still persists. In fact, it can be said that the United States is a country where minority groups suffer from domestic colonialism, since the white majority oppresses and exploits them in ways similar to those that occurred under traditional colonialism. As a result, Asian American women cannot avoid being seen as weak and undermined by the white mainstream. This notion is brought into this study because Lee's *Still Life with Rice* is an Asian American literary work which portrays the life of a Korean American female protagonist. With the concept about patriarchy and colonialism discussed above, Korean American women are ideologically undermined and double-feminized by the mainstream in the new world. This assumption leads to this attempt to disprove the Western view of Asian American women by examining Hongyong's life as manifested in the stories.

3 *Still Life with Rice*: a Representation of Korean American Women's Power

With their roots in the Eastern world, Korean people, as well as other Asian groups in the United States, cannot avoid being viewed as weak and powerless. In addition, scholars in the field of Asian American literature also have similar views regarding the subordination of Asian American subjects. For instance, Eng, studying Asian American male characters, argues that subjects from the Eastern world are always endowed with feminine qualities, as he writes, "Asian American males are both materially and psychologically feminized within the

context of a larger U.S. cultural imaginary" (Eng 2001, 2). Similarly, Ling contends that the "emasculation of Asian American men is intimately associated with the rise of modern Western colonialism" (Ling 1997, 314). This is also in line with Cheung's statement: "Asian and Asian American men [...] have been 'feminized' in American popular culture" (Cheung 1997, 2). In other words, Asian Americans – albeit with their male status – are portrayed as weak and powerless through the media.

My argument at this point is that since Asian males are viewed as weak and powerless, how are their female counterparts labeled? This question is not difficult to answer, as the traditional concept describes females as weaker. Being females from the Eastern world, Asian women are inevitably double-feminized and thus weaker than Asian males. This notion is in agreement with Cheung, who argues that Asian American women suffer from both Asian and Western patriarchy (Cheung 1997). This patriarchal positioning of Asian women in a weak and submissive status means that they are inevitably controlled by men from their countries and the Western society. However, as evident in *Still Life with Rice*, the image of Asian American women as weak and powerless is refuted and made invalid, since Hongyong, the female protagonist, possesses qualities contrasting with the image created by both Western and Eastern patriarchy. Struggling against colonial oppression and war, she successfully rescues herself and her family from many forms of persecution and finally transforms herself into a successful Asian American woman in the United States.

In Korea, a country where the concept of patriarchy is entrenched, women are usually under men's control and manipulation. In *Still Life with Rice*, Hongyong is raised as a regular Korean girl, who is taught to be submissive and to be a perfect housewife for her future husband: "you are merely here to serve and not be heard" (Lee 1996, 34). The role of women is just to be servers with no voice to articulate their own will. In addition, women cannot be independent from men, since their value is determined by their ability to keep husbands and bear sons. This notion is evident when Hongyong's sister decides to leave her horrible husband and laments that "Without a husband, a woman becomes an outcast with no rights of her own. Only through man and son is she made free" (Lee 1996, 143). Through this statement, Lee sadly complains about the injustice of society in which Korean women can obtain their freedom only through men. They cannot be free subjects independent from men. More terribly, a woman without a husband is even seen as an outcast; this indicates that women are not allowed to live by themselves.

Through *Still Life with Rice*, Lee clearly shows that Korean daughters are taught to be obedient to their fathers and future husbands. Raising their voice and making requests are seen as acts of rebellion. Even though Hongyong sees

this as "blind obedience" (Lee 1996, 34), she must comply with all she is taught, since she must live in this patriarchal society. In addition, Korean women are confined to the domestic sphere and not allowed to be more intelligent than men: "young girls must not be so curious" (Lee 1996, 29). This convention suggests that a woman's passion for intellectuality is limited and circumscribed by men. Furthermore, they are seen as undesirable subjects in the family: "Daughters were viewed as lovely bandits, who would take possessions out of their father's home and bring them to their husbands" (Lee 1996, 28). This comparison stems from Korean tradition; when Korean women get married, they depart from their parents' home to live with their husbands' families. Moreover, the brides' parents must pay dowries to the grooms' families, which is why daughters are seen as bandits. Their departures are also very important for their parents, since the daughters must not humiliate them by failing to perform women's duties perfectly. Therefore, parents must strictly instruct their daughters to be desirable, obedient wives and daughter-in-laws for their future families: "If followed diligently, the peace, purity, and happiness of a home may be maintained" (Lee 1996, 34). When Hongyong enters her teenage years, it seems that she loses the freedom which she enjoyed in childhood and is forced to observe women's codes of conduct, preparing herself to be a perfect wife. This situation happens to not only Hongyong, but also all her sisters who are taught that for women, the ultimate goal is to perfectly serve their husbands. In fact, it is their father's happiness to see them have husbands. Even for Baby Sister, the youngest daughter in the family who is crippled, he finally finds her a husband. He is willing to take the poorest man as his son-in-law because he cannot allow people to see his daughter as an outcast, a woman no man wants as his wife, which will bring humiliation to his family.

Hongyong follows her parents' instructions and observes women's codes of conduct. However, she is fortunate that her husband does not oppress her. Instead, he allows her to take part in family decisions and provides her with opportunities to demonstrate her power, talent, intelligence, and bravery. Of course, Hongyong must submit to her mother-in-law and serve her husband's family as if she were a servant. Fortunately, her husband is different from other men, as he is open-minded and does not treat his wife in oppressive ways. In fact, despite his sexual status as a male, it seems that Hongyong's husband is not as strong and powerful and always needs her help. This can even be seen on the first night of their marriage when he is very nervous during the consummation of their union. Having problem-solving skills, Hongyong pretends to be scared and helps him to get through their first night. This incident reveals that she is able to handle situations by her wits. In addition, she outsmarts her husband on many occasions. Situations like this rarely happen in actual Korean society,

as most Korean women must not show their talent and intelligence in front of their husbands. With her open-minded husband, Hongyong has opportunities to exercise her power and use her talent. Although those opportunities come during crises and conflicts under Japanese colonization and the Korean War, they allow her to reveal her inner power. In many critical situations, Hongyong is the one who rescues her children, herself, and even her husband.

An important situation which proves Hongyong's power and intelligence happens when she helps her husband to make the decision for her family to escape Japanese oppression and persecution and flee to China. The Japanese conquest becomes intolerable when the complete program of Japanization, part of cultural subjugation, is carried out:

> Japanese had superseded Korean as the official language of the country in shops and all government buildings. The next year, schoolchildren were forbidden to speak Korean even as a secondary language. They were taught to read and write only the official language of our Japanese imperial rulers.
>
> LEE 1996, 106

In addition, there are other forms of oppression and subjugation which Koreans are forced to endure. More terribly, there is an extremely serious crime against Korean people, as young Korean girls must submit to the Japanese military before marriage. This submission is called in Japanese *daishindai*, literally meaning "team of offering bodies" (Lee 1996, 107), which implies that Korean girls must sacrifice their virginity to Japanese soldiers before marriage. This cultural subjugation and crime against Korean women's bodies deeply trouble Hongyong. The depiction in the story suggests that she is also a nationalist, as she wants her children to grow up speaking Korean and does not want to surrender her daughter's body to the Japanese. She views Japanese oppression as making their home become 'unhome': "We have no home as long as those bastard dogs pollute our soil, pillage our mines, steal our crops, and rape our women" (Lee 1996, 107). Since there is no sense of home in their homeland, Hongyong and her family decide to escape to China with hope to return once Korea gains its freedom and the sense of home is restored.

Hongyong and her family's move to China brings her another opportunity to show her power and heroic qualities. In China, their life is very difficult, as they encounter economic problems and money shortage. This family crisis forces Hongyong to manifest her inner powers and abilities. To rescue the family from poverty, she risks her own life instead of her husband's in trading opium under the nose of the Japanese and Chinese officers. She breaks Korean

norms in refusing to obey her husband's order not to get involved in opium trade: "And for the first time, I disobeyed him. He had a devastated look on his face; I had robbed him of his manhood" (Lee, 118). To have an obedient wife is part of Korean masculinity. Therefore, when Hongyong disobeys her husband's command, it is as if he loses his masculinity. Hongyong emasculates him and becomes a hero who saves everyone from poverty. Hongyong herself also overcomes her fear of the Japanese and Chinese authorities. Smuggling opium from the border into China, she reveals her bravery and sharp wits. Many times when she encounters Japanese officers while smuggling opium, she successfully controls her fear and escapes detection. After becoming more successful, she also learns to make friends and build relationships with Japanese officers in order to sustain her business. Her success reveals her talent to herself: "I discovered I was clever and had a natural talent when it came to business" (Lee 1996, 121). Later, she also bribes both Japanese and Chinese officers to save the business and herself.

The story of her opium business indicates that Hongyong outwits male Japanese and Chinese officers who have more power. In other words, she undermines their masculinity. Her sharp wits are shown again when she runs a restaurant which becomes a center where important, high-ranking Japanese and Chinese officers come to socialize. Hongyong's success in business illustrates that she goes beyond the traditional Korean female sphere. Unlike other Korean women who are taught to be passive and submissive, she argues with her husband and insists on rescuing her family by herself. The power and will inside her are so strong that her husband says, "You have the will of a man […] and the cleverness of a woman" (Lee 1996, 129). Her defiance of her husband – deemed unacceptable in Korean society – transforms her into the great savior of the family.

Another important quality of Hongyong is her ability to control her emotions. Conventional concepts in terms of gender have it that women are emotional and unable to suppress their feelings. However, Hongyong is presented otherwise. Besides saving the family from poverty through her participation in the dangerous opium trade, she also possesses the admirable ability to suppress her emotions. Unlike typical women who are viewed as weak and emotional, she is able to master the weak side of women. This quality is proved when her husband becomes a Casanova. Thanks to the money from Hongyong's risky business, he becomes a heavy drinker who plays around with prostitutes. She suffers greatly from his betrayal, as she explains:

> It tormented me to watch him gradually return to his lustful habits. Acquaintances and customers began to question his whereabouts. I had to

> bury my sorrow and answer with excuses and lies. "I would rather hang myself on a beam with a rope before I would allow him to take another wife into our home," I swore.
>
> LEE 1996, 131.

In this excerpt, despite her pain and bitterness, Hongyong still protects her husband with lies and excuses, knowing very well that he is with another woman. This protection proves her maturity, leadership, and ability to control her feelings, which are important factors to maintain her family and business. To cope with this misery, Hongyong always keeps her mother's words in mind: "A noble woman controls her emotions" (Lee 1996, 127). With her strength, she does not allow this misery to destroy her family but always gives her husband chances to become a good partner again. It is clear that she also has an angelic heart of forgiveness. In addition, while her husband still enjoys playing around, she suppresses her pain and goes to the north of Korea to buy a piece of land with hope to return in case Korea frees itself from Japanese colonization. She overcomes misery and moves forward to a bright future, managing to bring her family back to Korea after learning that it has gained its freedom when the Japanese surrender in August 1945.

The above discussion indicates that Hongyong saves her family from the Japanese colonizers and poverty in China through power and abilities which exceed the female sphere assigned by the Korean patriarchy. However, her strength and power are put to the ultimate test when another serious conflict, the war between North and South Korea, breaks out. By this time, she and her family have already moved back to the northern part of Korea. Their happiness ends with the advent of Communism in Korea, which later divides the peninsula into two opposing countries. Including this incident into the story, Lee, again, inscribes Korean women, as represented by Hongyong, with strength, endurance, and cleverness. Trying to save her husband from being drafted into the North Korean army, she successfully lies to officers many times before they no longer believe her and beat her cruelly:

> [T]he larger man lurched forward and grabbed my arms, mercilessly twisting them behind me. He shoved his knee into my spine, grinding my face into the gravel. […] I felt hard leather boot stomp the back of my neck, cutting off my words and rubbing my face into the dirt.
>
> LEE 1996, 194

Her willingness to endure this merciless torture, instead of confessing, proves her strength and endurance. She is later put in jail where she suffers many forms

of punishment before being released back to her family. During this period, her strength and perseverance are proved by her survival. Then, she must send her husband and oldest son into hiding so that they are not drafted into North Korea's military. Again, she rejects her husband's wish to stay with her and the rest of the family. In fact, this is another incident which indicates that it is her husband, not her, who is emotional. This situation reaffirms that she is the true head of the family. Hongyong refuses to prioritize emotion over safety because if her husband and son become soldiers, there will be only a slim chance of their survival. She truly understands that parting from each other is painful, but there are no other choices: "I watched as his figure vanished into the night. It was not any easier the second time [he had left the family before]. In fact, it was more heart-wrenching. Something told me I would not see him for a long while" (Lee 1996, 208). Hongyong refuses to wallow in agony because she has a more important duty: taking care of her children and her new-born baby.

Parting from her husband and oldest son is not the only test of Hongyong's strength. Later, she and the rest of her children, including her new-born baby daughter, abandon their home in North Korea because the Communist threat intensifies. Heading south, Hongyong hopes to reunite with her sisters as well as her husband and oldest son. This situation is very difficult and dangerous because she must take care of her two children and new-born baby girl, running from bombs, dodging bullets across battlefields, and struggling between life and death. The depiction of a deadly attack while Hongyong and her children are escaping to South Korea serves as further proof of her strength:

> The planes flew down the line, toggling a bomb every few hundred yards, then swung back to machine-gun the blazing ruins. Bullets hammered the ground, forever stitching bodies to the earth. I was surrounded. In front, to the right, to the left, behind me, shells flashed and danced madly. With each shot, I jerked as if struck. I was certain one mortally wounded me. […] Then out of the chaos came silence. Silence all around, broken only by moans and groans. Slowly the dust and smoke lifted, unveiling a museum of slaughter. Corpses twisted in a multitude of poses like armless, headless Greek statues.
>
> LEE 1996, 221

Again, the dangerous situation which Hongyong must get through challenges the notion that Korean women are weak and fragile. She saves not only herself but also her children. Moreover, the scene of mutilated corpses she witnesses also proves her emotional strength, a power pushing her to move on in spite of depressing circumstances. She cannot allow herself to stop and cry for all

misfortunes in her life but ignores the gruesome scene and moves on with determination.

The perilous journey to South Korea also reveals Hongyong's strength and endurance, which contrast with the traditional image of women. Apart from the hostilities, Hongyong and her children also have to fight against hunger and fatigue which she cannot allow to halt her escape. They walk across a nation with few chances to rest and only limited food. To alleviate their hunger, Hongyong even risks her life stealing food from other refugees. Her heroism is shown again when she offers all the stolen food to her children: "Each child received a good round chunk of meat, which he gobbled immediately. I spared nothing for myself, I was content sucking on the marrow. It was delicious" (Lee 1996, 225). These horrible conditions are made more unbearable by the freezing-cold winter in North Korea. Along the way, they cannot find a warm shelter to some rest and regain their energy. Exhaustion, combined with freezing temperatures, makes it more difficult for them to survive:

> I pushed my children hard. I had to. Only when they were past exhaustion did I let them rest a bit. I would find a dull spot that hid our reflections. A fire was a luxury we could not afford. Together we would press against one another in an effort to keep out blasting chill.
>
> LEE 1996, 223

As refugees, Hongyong and her children run away, hide from the Communists, and fight against hunger, fatigue, and harsh weather conditions. All this, combined with horrible and gruesome scenes of death and annihilation, such as bombed-out ruins and fields of unattended corpses, cannot prevent her from achieving her goal, which is to reach South Korea and reunite with the rest of her family.

Although Hongyong is proved to be a strong and powerful woman, there are several moments when she almost gives up due to the weak side of herself. Her burden is even greater than that of other women, since she has to carry her baby daughter along the way. This extra burden makes the journey more laborious and causes her body to ache. The horrible situation which she is undergoing at this moment is far beyond what ordinary people could overcome. In the story, she also expresses how discouraged she feels and wants to surrender to this tragic fate:

> The planes [which drop bombs], the cold, this damn country, the stench of my own filth pricked at my sanity. Now my worst enemy was not the

> bombs but my own weakness. I was fearful I would snap like so many others and collapse sobbing. I wanted my home and family back. Those longing images poisoned my will to place one foot ahead of the other.
>
> LEE 1996, 226

Another important issue Lee alludes to through the scene above is that Korean women support and boost one another's morale in fighting against their misfortunes. From time to time, Hongyong's weak side tells her to return home to North Korea, where she will not suffer as much. Fortunately, Dukwah, her daughter, pushes her to keep going. Dukwah is another female character portrayed as strong and determined despite facing great hardship and danger. She refuses to give up in any case: "No! We must go where Father is, [...]. No, we must go find him across the border" (Lee 1996, 226). Even when Hongyong is exhausted and debates whether to leave behind the baby girl, who is very sick and unlikely to survive, Dukwah insists that they carry the baby with them. In fact, it is a very difficult situation for Hongyong, and through her judgment she sacrifices her baby for the survival of the rest. Surprisingly, despite her weakened body, Dukwah carries the baby by herself as Hongyong explains:

> Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her struggle beside us carrying ahghee [the baby]. With each step, Dukwah began to lag behind. Her arms and legs betrayed her, but she was unwilling to give up. Every mile or so she crouched down and rested. She repeated this insanity for several miles before she finally collapsed.
>
> LEE 1996, 227

Seeing this effort, Hongyong decides that all of them will go together and not leave anyone behind. Dukwah plays a great part in empowering her mother. Through this depiction, Dukwah is portrayed as another hero who helps all of them to overcome the crisis. This situation also indicates that in order to complete their mission, Korean women must support each other. Especially in this case, survival is a collective matter: it is impossible for a woman to make it by herself.

Despite great hardship and endless calamities, Hongyong leads all her children to shelter at a refugee camp in South Korea, where she unexpectedly reunites with her oldest son and husband. Unfortunately, the test of her strength has not ended yet, since her husband later dies of disease in the camp. The death of her husband destroys her inner balance, as he has been her hope along the perilous journey. Without any money, she, again, manages to arrange a humble burial for her husband, which also indicates her ability to carry

herself and perform another important duty of a wife. Even harder, she must not appear weak in front of her children, who have to live on after losing the head of the family. In fact, Hongyong is portrayed as the real head of her family, since she functions as the key to the family's survival. The loss of her husband is an important reason for her decision to move to the United States. Hongyong becomes an Asian American woman after Dukwah marries a Korean soldier who receives training in the United States before returning to Korea. Dukwah and her husband move to Canada and later to California before Hongyong reunites with them in 1976 and becomes a U.S. citizen 14 years later.

Another important quality of Hongyong which has not been discussed is her ability to treat people with *chiryo*, the art of massage done by slapping the body, which she has learned from a woman in China. In fact, she uses this treatment to help many people in Korea before relocating to the United States. She helps disabled people to get back on their feet and live a normal life again without asking for money. Even for social pariahs suffering from leprosy, she willingly helps them without any feeling of disgust, volunteering to offer treatment at a clinic for lepers. In the United States, she also offers this service to patients from many places: "People come to us from faraway places called Florida and Washington D.C.; some even followed us from Korea. I still charge nothing, though. The fee is whatever patients can afford, because my work is not about money. It never was" (Lee 1996, 313). By treating people for free, she represents compassion and giving which complement her powerful qualities.

Considering all the situations Hongyong must overcome, it is obvious that she is strong, courageous, intelligent, and determined. In addition, the way she offers *chiryo* treatment to people indicates her angelic quality. Based on these characteristics, she contradicts Western ideology which portrays Asian women as weak and passive. Hongyong's successful resettlement in the United States also gives her a new identity as a strong and powerful Asian American woman. In writing about Hongyong's life, Helie Lee, who is her granddaughter, wants to discover the roots of her family, which are also the roots of her own identity. In writing the life of her grandmother, Lee has completed this mission. This book also uses Hongyong's voice as first-person narrator to tell the story, which gives more authority to Hongyong herself.

Still Life with Rice can also be read as life-writing, as it is based on the real life of Hongyong, Lee's grandmother. Life-writing is a genre of writing which describes and depicts people's lives. Life-writing can cover whole lives or parts of lives of people. This writing genre not only includes autobiographies, memoirs, and biographies, which are familiar sub-genres to most readers, but also diaries, letters, court testimonies, biographical fiction, or even online blogs in the age of technology. Consisting of accounts of a person, life-writing can

be employed by both the writer and the reader in the investigation of one's identity and history (Leader 2015). In the same vein, Coleman (1997), who has studied women's life-writing, argues that through life-writing women seek to understand themselves, as it allows them to revisit past memories. In addition, it connects women's past with their present and the writers with other women. That is to say, life-writing helps women to better understand themselves and other women. At the same time, it promotes the connection and network between them. In *Still Life with Rice*, Lee investigates her family identity by writing the life of her grandmother. As a Korean American woman, Lee yearns to understand the roots of her family; she needs to understand the past in order to make sense of her current identity. This life-writing has revealed to her that her Korean American family is constructed by the strength and power of Hongyong, her grandmother and Dukwah, her mother. In addition, Lee is able to connect herself to other writers who have stared down the same culprits to become Korean American women. For example, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, the author of *Dictee* and Nora Okja Keller, the author of *Comfort Woman* are writers whose families were deeply wounded by Japanese colonization and the Korean War. Apart from these two writers, there are also many more Korean American women, who might not be writers, but whose identities have been constructed by these two conflicts. Life-writing, for Korean American women, serves as their collective memories and the inscription of their strength and power which are important factors for their survival.

4 Conclusion

Still Life with Rice presents a new vision of Korean American women which contrasts with the image created for them by both Eastern and Western patriarchy. Especially in the United States, they are double-feminized because of their inferior gender status and Eastern origins. This biographical novel represents Korean American women's writing, which contests patriarchy in both their homeland and the United States. According to Wong and Santa Ana, Asian American women's writing indicates "their need to contend with Eastern and Western patriarchy as well as racism" (Wong and Santa Ana 1999, 93). Being immigrants in the United States, these women are both sexualized and racialized at the same time and become inferior beings whose voice is suppressed. The Orientalist discourse, as discussed by Said (2003), puts the West and the East at opposite poles where the East represents femininity and weakness. It is clear from the discussion above that *Still Life with Rice* refutes this notion, since it presents Hongyong, an Asian woman, as strong and powerful. Lee

learns about her grandmother's heroic life in both Korea and the United States before setting it down in the form of a novel which can be viewed as life-writing. Crafting this biographical novel, Lee grabs a chance to reveal strong and powerful dimensions of Korean American women who should not be negatively stereotyped through Western ideology. As Grice puts it, "auto/biographical and life writing work are some of the most important ways in which Asian American women's voices from history can be recovered and heard" (Grice 2002, 29). Life-writing becomes an arena for them to articulate themselves and break the boundary assigned by Eastern patriarchy and Western patriarchy. *Still Life with Rice* not only recovers Korean American women's voices from history, but also challenges sexist and racist views in the United States and beyond.

In fact, all Asian Americans, not just women, have to grapple with both racial oppression and gender conflicts in the United States. This is an important reason why these two issues often appear in Asian American literature. According to Cheung (1997), "From the beginning, race and gender have been intertwined in Asian American history and literature" (Cheung 1997, 10). Although Lee does not portray Hongyong's racial encounters in the United States, she promotes Asian American women's power through this novel and its central character. *Still Life with Rice* does not lament women's suffering from gender oppression. Instead, it firmly articulates the power of Korean American women and refuses to be silenced by Western ideology.

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