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## **Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* and the Ethics of Literary Trauma**

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### **Abstract**

The enforced sexual servitude of Korean women and girls, so-called "comfort women," under the Japanese military occupation of World War Two has, since the early 1990s, become a significant issue in global sexual politics. In lectures and written testimony, survivors have called for recognition of and financial compensation for their suffering. However, the situation raises questions concerning the nature of traumatic memory and the reconstruction of historical narratives of trauma. Nora Okja Keller's 1997 novel *Comfort Woman* is an interesting intervention, constituting a literary recreation of historical testimony and raising the question of the ethical position of the writer who takes as her literary subject a trauma she has never experienced personally. This essay situates Keller's work in terms of recent theoretical debates about the ethics of literary trauma. In the close reading of some key passages of the novel, I explore the ethical issues of witnessing, of commodifying trauma as a literary subject, and the potential dangers of "normalizing" stories of trauma in the process of retelling them.

### **Keywords**

Nora Okja Keller, comfort women, sexual slavery,  
trauma, testimony, normalization