

From "Comfort Women" to "Survivors": Politics and Performativity of Naming in Jan Ruff O'herne's Fifty Years of Silence

Bidisha Behera^{1*}; Dr. Manisha Mishra²

^{1*}Research Scholar, Department of English, Rama Devi Women's University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha

²Associate Professor, Department of English, Rama Devi Women's University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha

Email: beherabidisha889@gmail.com

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Abstract— The acts of naming and labelling have emerged as contesting cultural practices that have persistently shaped the narratives and discourse surrounding the history of Japanese military comfort women. Terms such as comfort women, sex slaves, victims and survivors are interchangeably used to identify the Asian women subjected to the system of sexual slavery under the Japanese military regime during the Second World War. Such terminological homogenization, however, not only obscures the violence underpinning the system, but also erodes individuality, by regulating public memory and socio-political recognition. Drawing primarily on Butler's theory of injurious speech and performativity, this study undertakes a critical discourse analysis of Jan Ruff O'Herne's memoir *Fifty Years of Silence*, positing that the politics of naming is a performative and cultural phenomenon, which is neither inherently injurious nor emancipatory, rather conditioned by discursive practices through which euphemistic labels are imposed and institutionalized. The study further examines the counter-discourse enabled by reiterative acts of public testimony, reclamation of proper name and self-assertion as survivor, in resistance against historical and cultural erasure within the discourse of comfort women.

Keywords— *Comfort Women, Performativity, Naming, Survivorhood, Jan Ruff O'Herne, Judith Butler.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Naming is essential in the sense that it attributes identity and recognition to the unidentifiable. Primo Levi observes "To give a name to a thing is as gratifying as naming an island", while citing the risks that accompany such acts of naming, particularly when the "phenomena so named" (Levi, 126) becomes essentially defined by the very name. Indeed, naming or christening becomes a part of the identity and renders a sense of belonging and context to the bearer of the name. However, it may also be employed to impose stereotypes and shatter the sense of belonging, dignity and identity when corrupted through unethical and derogatory practices, as is to be found in the case of comfort women.

The origin of the comfort woman system can be traced back to the Japanese military imperialism during the Second World War, when the comfort stations were established with the motif to engage as many women as possible for the sexual gratification of the soldiers, following the tragedy of Nanjing massacre, which resulted in mass genocide and rape of Chinese civilians between 1937 and 1938 (Tanaka, 1999). The public testimony of the former comfort woman Kim Hak Soon in 1991, revealing her identity as a comfort woman as well as her former identity, brought into limelight the lost history of these women who appeared in glimpses of the war history as labelled prostitutes. This euphemism formally appeared in the seminal work of Yoshimi Yoshiaki in 1992, making its course into the mainstream public, academic and media discourse, with the surge of activism, testimonies by former victims and advocacy drives by Korean NGOs and feminist welfare associations such as the Korean Council in the early 1990s (Ward and Lay, 2018). While initially the system was strictly restricted to the recruitment of professional prostitutes of Japanese and other nationality, with the territorial expansion the procedure developed into a systematic state sanctioned drive as women aged between 12 to 21 years were recruited through coercion, deception, or were

simply sold to the military brothels named "comfort stations". However, these women have been denied recognition and justice by Japan and their native nations ever since, framed as legally and consensually recruited prostitutes in the political discourse. After 50 years of oblivion, misinterpretation and stigmatization since the end of the war, the former victims as well as their supporters denied the tag of 'comfort woman' and demanded that the victimized comfort women be addressed as "sex slaves", "war victims" or "survivors" in recognition of their traumatizing experiences during World War II, under the Japanese military imperialism.

The primary issue that forms the focal aspect of this study lies in the homogenization effected through linguistic and cultural practices which are made apparent through the stereotypical classification of all the comfort women as prostitutes, regardless of whether their involvement was voluntary or coerced (UCLA, 1944; Seaton, 2006). This study critically scrutinizes the layered nuances of naming as a cultural practice, analysing its performative force.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Contemporary scholarship on comfort woman issues reflects extensive interdisciplinary engagement with diverse thematic concerns such as politics of trauma, memory, testimony, geography, ethics of representation and identity. Significant scholarship has also emerged within diaspora and displacement studies.

Mijeong Kim (2020) examines the untranslatability of trauma and narrative and positions narrative practice as a contested space for ethical testimony. Similarly, Shim Young Hee (2017), drawing upon Ulrich Beck's theory of emancipatory catastrophism, demonstrates the transformative potential of the catastrophic experience of Han, which can facilitate narrative healing. On the other hand, Khushbu Verma and Nagendra Kumar (2022) analyse the devastating impact of repetitiveness and delayed re-enactment in narrative retelling practices.

Another major strand of comfort woman research conceptualizes the body as a contested site of violence, transmission of power, trauma and resistance. Paula Ruth Gilbert (2012) analyses how processes of de-silencing challenge regimes of imposed visibility, while Leo T.S. Ching (2019) treats the body as the locus of colonial and macho-nationalist violence. Dr. Shu-Hua Kang and Frank T. Y. Wang (2025) further develop this perspective by examining how early-life structured oppression shapes lived experiences in retrospect. Moon Cassinelli (2019) and Yonson Ahn (2018) draw attention to the development of queer bonding as a coping mechanism among survivors, which manifests in the form of lesbianism and trauma bonding. Collectively, this research transcends the portrayal of comfort women as passive victims to foreground the questions of agency, identity and embodied resistance.

Yoo Hannah (2022) builds her analysis on the guilt-shame dynamics and perpetrator-survivor interactions, demonstrating how moral responsibility is inverted by reinscribing blame onto the perpetrator. While relevant research by other scholars, such as Deborah L. Madsen (2017), Xiaoyang Hao and Jiabao Pan (2025), and Katharina R. Mendoza (2003), similarly examine the ethics of narrative representations of trauma, cautioning against risks of over-sensationalisation, commodification, and normalisation of the survivors' traumatic experiences. In a similar vein, C. Sarah Soh (2009) critiques the dominant master narratives that marginalize the comfort women's narrative voices.

More recent studies reflect upon the political and discursive practices embedded in comfort women narratives as instruments for shaping testimony, witnessing, representation and remembrance. Aisha Al Kuwari's (2022) study of comfort woman memorialization foregrounds public memorialization as central to reconstruction of historical memory, privileging commemorative practices over diplomatic efforts, employing a feminist perspective to interrogate the contested national narratives. Kyounghee Cho and Siyao Xing (2025) examine memory politics as a political and discursive practice that takes effect through institutionalization of memory mediated through non-state civil society intermediaries, a process in which discourse functions as an apparatus of power in shaping remembrance, diplomatic negotiations and construction of national identities.

In a similar vein, Dionisio (2025) addresses the intersectional dimensions of the comfort woman discourse and the need for an inclusive enquiry, critiquing the revisionist and activist paradigms of binary narratives in comfort women discourse. This study situates comfort women discourse at the heart of the feminist enquiry of the patriarchal influence on remembrance and forgetting, demonstrating that discursive practices can inadvertently lead to the perpetuation of idealization and normalization of gendered violence and injustice.

Seo-Young Kim (2026) pays a tribute to the comfort women by naming them as miracles, citing the importance of naming as a sign of recognition, compensation and reassertion of identity. This work also addresses the linguistic nuances of terminology

found in comfort women discourse, that reinforce semantic transformations. For instance, the preference of framing comfort women within single inverted comma is read as a form of denial of the perpetrator's perspective—a significant discursive practice that signals the author's rejection of the term's validity while still acknowledging its existence in public discourse.

Despite the sustained scholarly engagement with comfort women discourse, cultural politics of language and its performative agency within a discourse appear underexplored, often featuring as a part of broader debates on history, diplomacy and representation. Existing research largely employs terms like comfort women, victims, survivors, sex slaves as descriptive and definitive categories, rather than examining how such acts of labelling can potentially negotiate identity, historical memory and ethico-political recognition. The present study addresses this lacuna by investigating the performative force of the linguistic acts of naming and labelling and their broader cultural and political implications. The paper differs from the existing scholarship in its treatment of naming as the primary analytical lens through which the politics of identity, recognition and historical memory are re-interpreted.

III. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGICAL INSIGHT

The paper adopts a qualitative and interpretative framework, employing in-depth textual reading and discourse analysis of Jan Ruff O'Herne's memoir *Fifty Years of Silence* as its primary text. The analysis focuses on the discursive formation of subjectivities through the performativity of language, arguing that naming is a linguistic act whose cultural and performative force is conditioned by discursive practices of reiteration, institutionalization, and resignification. The colonial re-ascription and the consequent discursive act of renaming of the comfort women is equally emphasized, accentuating the subsequent performative reconfiguration of identity through reclamation of proper names, as well as the self-assertion of survivorhood. Besides that, this study also takes into consideration the naming and renaming of institutions and spaces, to trace the production, institutionalization and normalisation of particular forms of subjectivity and historical memory through euphemistic nomenclatures.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is primarily informed by Judith Butler's theory of performativity and injurious speech as articulated in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. Butler's conception of language as performative provides the central analytical framework for understanding naming not merely as a descriptive linguistic act but as a practice capable of constituting, regulating, and re-signifying subjectivity. Her notion that the force of language is contingent upon its reiteration and discursive context forms the basis of the present analysis. To contextualize the institutional production and circulation of naming practices, the study also engages Michel Foucault's understanding of discourse and subject formation. While Butler explains the performative effects of naming upon the subject, Foucault offers a complementary perspective on how discursive regimes authorize, normalize, and sustain particular modes of designation. Together, these frameworks facilitate an examination of naming as both a political practice of power and an agential force of resistance.

V. NAMING, RENAMING AND PRODUCTION OF SUBJECT

Names especially in political context often create an illusion of neutrality that conceals the political nature of power. However, every system of power functions within a hierarchical structure, where context is generated and imposed. This section analyses the institutional function of names and how acts of naming and renaming within the Japanese military system participate in the production of "comfort women" as subjects. Drawing upon Butler, naming is understood as not a singular outcome but a continuous discursive process. The continuity is sustained because meaning itself is deferring in a Derridan sense. Subject formation and discourse formation occur simultaneously, with the naming of the subject. In this sense naming and subject formation are intrinsically intertwined, since naming itself performs the initiation and sustenance of meaning through repetitive discursive practices.

Within the Japanese military system, the comfort women were not only physically confined but discursively reorganised through a carefully structured politics of naming. However, the process of naming to be political requires an anchor—a correlative constitution of a field of knowledge that presupposes and constitutes at the same time power relations (Foucault, 27); the naming of the comfort women to be an active force of subject formation within the mainstream discourse requires the power of meaning-making and the very source of power requires the field of knowledge produced through the act of naming and meaning-making. In the context of comfort women, the term "comfort women" was used within the military discourse to name the subjects who were already deemed as prostitutes. The name acquired its meaning the moment they were identified as prostitutes while labelled as comfort women. However, the name gained its agential force through circulation and usage

within political, cultural and social discourse where this interpretation dominated over other interpretations of comfort women. This validated and fixed their identities as prostitutes. Such act of naming, thus, becomes a political act that hegemonizes the meaning produced thereby, by granting it sustenance through coercion and control.

This transformation into "comfort women" exceeds their functions as institutional classification and becomes a process through which a new social identity is produced. The renaming and transformation of the military brothels into comfort stations happens simultaneously, replacing the language of coercion with the language of care and administrative urgency. Together these designations constitute a discursive framework that normalizes systematic sexual violence and slavery, while legitimizing the institution and the identities produced within it, thereby regulating how comfort women and the system are perceived in the official military discourse. The production of subjectivity extends beyond institutional labels to the practice of renaming. In *Fifty Years of Silence*, O'Herne recalls that the comfort women were assigned Japanese floral names upon their arrival in the comfort stations. This act of renaming doesn't just substitute names; it also displaces all social anchors that constituted their former identities.

This study investigates and evaluates this process of naming the comfort women as a cultural practice, whose political force lies in the repetition of the imposed names and circulation of power and control through discourse. Butler's insight of performative speech acts is particularly essential here to map the transformation of contingent institutional designations into seemingly stable social realities and the consequence of such performance. Naming and renaming, therefore, may be understood as performative practices that possess active agential force and more than merely describing the comfort women, become active participants in the production of the subjects.

VI. PERFORMATIVITY, LINGUISTIC INJURY AND POLITICS OF NAMING

This study employs the lens of Butler and Foucault to posit that naming is not merely a linguistic act of labelling and categorizing an individual or phenomenon but a discursively performed act that governs the constitution of identities, semantic regulation and enactment of power. This theoretical framework is essential to the understanding of the politics surrounding the institutional vocabulary of comfort women and comfort station. Generally, the terms comfort women and comfort stations are used to categorize and inform of the employment of sex slaves in military brothels. Now the question arises whether these terms can be considered as injurious or not. And if yes what qualifies them as injurious and what is the degree of their injuriousness. In the military context these terms are labels that function as descriptors or classifying markers. According to the dominant political narratives on 'comfort women', 'comfort stations' were erected for the purpose of providing relief and comfort to soldiers suffering from sexual frustration, categorizing it as a state sponsored initiative to prevent its uncontrollable consequences in the form of war rapes. The term comfort itself legitimizes the nobility of purpose, euphemistically glossing over the violence inherent in the experience of the event.

The memoir *Fifty Years of Silence*, and every other comfort woman narrative for that matter, resist this narrative revisionism, revealing brutal and dehumanising versions of military brothels where the act of comforting commenced. Ironically the sexual violence and inhuman conditions of habitation in the comfort stations strips them of any signs of comfort and care it is supposed to offer. The terms comfort women and comfort station, hence do not merely designate an individual or describe a place; they actively disguise their true functions, transforming legacies of systematic sexual violence into an act associated with comfort and care. The violence enacted is thus not limited to the physical institution of power but is reproduced linguistically through the name itself by replacing language of coercion with language of care. In doing so these euphemisms function as performative camouflage that performs the dual function of concealing violence from public and bureaucratic scrutiny while effectively forcing them to inhabit a label and the identity that it creates through repetitive discursive practices. They become injurious labels, in Butlerian sense, that metaphorically enables vulnerability (Butler 1997, 2), through erasure.

A label is not supposed to define an individual, by overwriting their realities. To quote Butler, "Linguistic injury appears to be the effect of not only the words by which one is addressed, but the mode of address itself ... that interpellates and constitutes a subject" (1997, 2). For instance, O'Herne's identity and character come to be defined by the imposed tag of comfort woman and its derogatory connotation. She shares an experience where she is labelled as a "whore" without the word being directly uttered in reference to her, even though the implication is unmistakable:

"She turned rudely away from me and I heard some other women whispering, 'Look, there goes one from the whore camp.' It made me feel so ashamed and so I suffered more humiliation and the silence continued" (O'Herne, 2011).

The roots of such discursive practices can be traced back to the initial stage of constitution of comfort women as prostitutes. The sustenance of this imposed identity is therefore credited to the continuous repetition of the act; what makes the naming injurious is the reiterative performance of the speech act. Through the interchangeable use of the terms comfort woman, prostitute and whore the speakers continually perform and reproduce the injury sustained, while O'Herne becomes the subject upon whom the performance is enacted.

Thus, the reference to comfort station as a whore camp enacts the contemporary representation of comfort women as whores within public discourse rather than merely describing them. Butler argues that linguistic injury leaves one derogated and demeaned (Butler 1997, 2). The derogation is amplified when the victims have to bear becoming subjects of sexual exploitation and simultaneously having their individuality eroded with vocabulary that sanitizes, legitimizes and perpetuates that exploitation. When O'Herne feels derogated and demeaned by the speech acts performed by the speakers, she experiences what Butler describes as "the disorientation of [her] situation as the effect of such speech" (1997, 3). This unfolds another aspect of linguistic performativity; the threat of semantic determinism that threatens the immense creative potential of language, in simple terms the desire to fix the meaning, in this context the meaning of name.

Interestingly the designation through euphemisms itself is paradoxical underlining a layered politics of naming. In the memoir, O'Herne describes the comfort station she inhabited during the war was named Nanakai-Tei which literally translates to House of Seven Seas (O'Herne, 2011). While comfort station functions as an official euphemism that reinforces violence implicitly through the rhetoric guise of care, it creates a layered politics of naming in which one performative label is superimposed upon another.

A similar politics of naming governs the renaming of the women themselves, with Japanese alternatives. The reattribution of Japanese flower names to these women reinscribes the subjective reality they have lived and experienced as comfort women. The impact is observed to be dehumanizing. The act of renaming doesn't simply mean superimposing new identities, it also signifies the erasure of the original identity. By replacing their given names with interchangeable Japanese variants, the women are stripped of their identities that connected them to their families, cultures and histories, reducing them to subjects intelligible only through the institutional logic of comfort station.

VII. RECLAMATION, SURVIVORHOOD, AND THE COUNTER-POLITICS OF NAMING

"The contemporary scene of cultural translation emerges with the presupposition that the utterance does not have the same meaning everywhere, indeed, that the utterance has become a scene of conflict (to such a degree, in fact, that we seek to prosecute the utterance in order, finally, to 'fix' its meaning)" (Butler 1997, 92).

This argument emphasizes the volatility of language that irrespective of performative speech acts holds "word-making and sense-making possibilities" (1997), which when unleashed can trigger semantic, contextual and paradigmatic shifts.

In *Fifty Years of Silence* the term "comfort women" appears within inverted commas juxtaposed against the term 'war rape victim', signifying the intentional dissociation of the term comfort woman from the preferred identifier 'rape victim'. O'Herne repeatedly voices her disapproval of the euphemistic label:

"And how dare the Japanese call these poor abused women 'comfort women', I thought, as I watched them on the television. The euphemism 'comfort women' is an insult and I felt it was a pity that the media were also continually using these words. We were never 'comfort women'. Comfort means something warm and soft, safe and friendly. It means tenderness. We were war rape victims, enslaved and conscripted by the Japanese Imperial Army" (O'Herne, 2011).

It is to be noted however, that despite her strong disapproval for its usage in broader discourse, O'Herne continues to use the term 'comfort women' throughout the memoir. The deliberate denouncement of the label doesn't indicate its denial; rather this act commemorates the resistance against nonconsensual infringement of identity through forced acceptance of that label. This response is consequential for someone whose struggle and survival was undermined by the very designation and whose identities were denied public and political recognition within the broader war narrative, being institutionally classified as prostitutes performing the role of comfort providers. While the label comfort woman appears disparaging, it still functions as a marker of their existence as historical subjects, and victims. As Butler observes, "One exists not only by the virtue of being recognised, but in a prior sense, by being recognizable" (Butler 1997, 5). O'Herne and the other comfort women as historical subjects are already recognizable as comfort women within public discourse. Hence, her enduring utilisation of the term may be read as a defensive strategy for concretizing their historical identities without allowing those identities to be wholly determined by the label itself. It is to be remembered once again that a name is not injurious or emancipatory in itself, rather

what renders it injurious or emancipatory is the performative force and the broader cultural and discursive practices within which it operates.

O'Herne makes multiple references to the term 'war rape victims' across the memoir. Although the label appears as a part of a broader discourse surrounding the diverse wartime experiences and its aftermath, each occurrence reflects a significant rhetoric, semantic and contextual shift. At the initial stage she identifies herself through the burden of shame, recalling "I still carried within me the shame of having been a war rape victim" (O'Herne, 2011). Towards the conclusion of the memoir the same designation is accompanied by a sense of recognition and a collective consciousness as reflected in the statement, "By speaking out and meeting other war rape victims and being able to forgive, I had found healing for my tortured mind" (O'Herne, 2011). The changing context of the same term may be interpreted as a positive indicator of discursive evolution and a counter-measure against the erosive politics of naming enabled by dominant revisionist narratives. Rather than solely functioning as a reminder of victimhood the designation "war rape victim" gradually becomes a mode of recognition of their survival through reclamation of the lost self, reconfiguration of the politics of naming and assertion of survivorhood.

"I was proud to be an O'Herne. The O'Hernes were always energetic, they never sat back. I was an O'Herne and proud of it. As I looked at my name, I saw before me in a flash my whole life: my idyllic childhood in Java, my years in prison camp, my marriage to Tom, my role as a mother, my migration to Australia, my life as the teacher, Mrs. Ruff, and finally, at eighty-four years old, I am once again an O'Herne" (O'Herne, 2011).

This excerpt from the memoir highlights the cultural nuance of naming that makes it emancipatory. Her flashback navigating the transitional phases of her life reflects her realization and acknowledgment of her survivorhood. O' Herne recognizes herself by her root identity and her "self" prior to her engagement as a comfort woman, that had remained in the shadows of oblivion and denial. This realization of self-identification doesn't, however, remain confined to individuals, rather extends to a collective level. O'Herne and other comfort women are united by a collective consciousness, that renders them a shared identity of "survivor". O'Herne recalls keeping the original names of her fellows at the comfort station in a handkerchief to commemorate the violence, brutality and injustice they survived. (O'Herne, 2011)

The weaponization of the derogatory euphemism, compounded with the strong assertion of the proper name, self-recognition as a survivor and identification of other victims as survivors, marks O'Herne's departure from infamy and victimhood to survivorhood and the reclamation of her lost self, highlighting the power of performative naming. This heralds the idea of counter politics of naming, where name performs an inversive function of emancipation, which is observed in this case through O'Herne's attempt to counter the politics of naming that threatened her erasure from history, memory and existence.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This inquiry ultimately points out that language itself becomes a part of the traumatic apparatus, while simultaneously providing the means of resistance, recovery and emancipation. The final movement from "comfort women" to "survivors" signifies a movement from mere terminological alteration; it maps the trajectory of transformation in the politics of naming itself, revealing the dynamic capacity of language as a contested space for the enactment of violence, power, resistance and emancipation. In the memoir *Fifty Years of Silence*, language does not appear as a passive witness to wartime sexual violence and trauma. It becomes a contested political terrain with active agential force where history, identity and power are constantly performed, challenged and negotiated. This demonstrates writing as a creative and effective medium, capable of facilitating the performative force of language.

At a broader level, this study may be situated within linguistic and discourse-oriented critical studies by foregrounding naming as a significant analytical mode of inquiry in understanding the reciprocal relation between history, politics and subjectivity. This framework further contributes to the broader field of postcolonial inquiry by demonstrating how naming operates as an active agential force paradoxically facilitating subjugation as well as resistance, and by substantiating the significance of politics of naming in understanding the relationship between language, power, and historical memory in postcolonial and post-conflict contexts.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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