

# Akiko and post-traumatic stress disorder



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Comfort Woman, written by Nora Ojka Keller, tells the fictional story of two women, a mother and a daughter, bound by their genetics and torn apart by their varying cultures and experiences. Keller explores not only the past experiences of Akiko the mother, a Korean refugee of World War II who is forced to work at an internment camp as a “comfort woman” to Japanese soldiers, but also the damaging psychological effects – including the onset of what appears to be post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)- that these experience have on Akiko, and subsequently, the way they affect her inability to form healthy relationships later in life. Akiko shows many symptoms of PTSD, a debilitating anxiety disorder caused by “exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened” (NIMH 1). The main symptoms of PTSD include dissociative symptoms, emotional numbness, re-living the horrifying experience over and over, and the inability to form healthy relationships after the experience (NIMH 1). Each of these symptoms is exhibited by Akiko at one point in the novel. Although a variety of events can cause PTSD, there is sufficient research that rape, sexual assault or sexual aggression is a large risk factor in females (Tuft 1). As a comfort woman, Akiko endured intense sexual abuse and throughout the book, reveals, bit-by-bit, disturbing anecdotes about her experiences. For example, Akiko describes an abortion she had while in the camp. The doctor performing the operation offered her a “choice between rat poison and the stick” to remove the fetus. Akiko recounts painfully that as the doctor was “digging and piercing” her womb – her mouth and hands bound – he spoke about women, comparing them to females rats who are controlled by male rats and regardless of circumstances, will “always respond sexually to him” (Keller 22). The doctor

then, “squeezed [her] nipples, pinching until they tightened” and declared, “See?” (Keller 22). Horrifying for Akiko, not only physically, but undoubtedly mentally as well. Perhaps the strongest symptoms of PTSD that affected Akiko are those that are deemed “dissociative symptoms” – or the ability to block out certain memories, slip into “trances” or experience emotional numbness. Akiko exhibits this kind of dissociative behavior several times in the novel. For example, she exhibits emotional numbness early in the novel, when she explains that she was “already dead” when her first baby was born (Keller 15). She speaks of the fact that the Japanese soldiers had not only let her insides “too bruised and battered, impossible to entirely heal” but also took her soul, as well (Keller 15). Akiko also entered into “trances” that are only a part of the dissociative symptoms of PTSD, but also show similarities to the delusions present in many schizophrenics. PTSD sufferers are, in fact, prone to develop symptoms of mild schizophrenia, such as delusions and hallucinations (Braakman 16). In one study, the hallucinations PTSD sufferers exhibited were mostly related to the traumatic event they suffered from, for example, “voices of dead buddies calling for help” and the delusions were mainly “paranoid/persecutory” (Braakman 18). Akiko exhibits delusional behavior throughout the novel. For example, Akiko is convinced that she is able to commune with the dead. When Akiko enters into a “trance,” she truly believes that she is communicating with the dead (Keller 46). Akiko names each spirit she communes with and describes each one as having its own unique personality and appearance. A typical “trance” would involve Akiko attempting to summon the spirit she named Saja the Death Messenger, and according to Beccah, Akiko would “dance, holding in her arms raw meat – chicken, or pig’s feet, or a pig’s head – calling ‘Saja,

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Saja' in a singsong voice." Even when Beccah attempted to stop her, Akiko would continue to "waltz" with the pig's head and ignore her (Keller 47). Akiko also experienced paranoid delusions. Akiko is extremely paranoid about Beccah and the Red Disaster and sal that she believes will taint her young child. Akiko so greatly feared Beccah becoming a woman, that she made desperate attempts to protect Beccah from her inevitable entry into womanhood, including destroying red articles of clothing, not allowing Beccah to attend school field trips and even visiting Beccah's school to sal-proof it (Keller 76). Everything in Akiko's world contained sal, and Beccah began to feel that "sal seeped from the pores of [her]" (Keller 82). Paranoid delusions like this are common to PTSD sufferers. Constantly reliving the traumatic event is another common PTSD symptom, and one that Akiko also exhibited (NIMH 1). Akiko, when she first arrived to live with the missionaries, did anything to keep herself busy. She remembered that she "could not stop cleaning, washing, cooking, gluing because if [she] did, the camp sounds would envelop [her] and [she] would be back there" (Keller 65). She was terrified that if she didn't keep herself busy, she would begin to re-live or feel pain from the experience. To prevent this, she would jump out of bed every morning and "hurry into action" because if she didn't, she knew she'd be "delivered into the camps once again" (Keller 65). There is also a strong correlation between PTSD and depression, with 43 percent to 64 percent of battered women with PTSD reporting depression symptoms as well (Tuft 407). Akiko, according to Beccah, "tried twice to meet the Death Messenger on her own terms" (Keller 47). Suicidal thoughts and gestures are easily the most dramatic and damaging effects of depression. Not only do PTSD sufferers endure bouts of depression, emotional numbness, and fall

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into “trance-like” states, they also develop problems with intimacy and forming healthy relationships (NIMH 1). Akiko never seemed to develop a normal relationship with her husband or her daughter. Her intimacy problems become apparent the first time Akiko has sex with her husband. She is unable to let go and enjoy herself, or feel any kind of affection toward him. Akiko said that “while he positioned himself above me, fitting himself between my thighs, I let my mind fly away. For then I knew that my body was, and always would be, locked in a cubicle at the camps, trapped under the bodies of innumerable men” (Keller 106). Another example of her inability to feel affection or maintain a healthy relationship occurred when Akiko described an incident when her husband is singing to Beccah. The singing reminded Akiko of her husband when she first met him, and the way he “lulled and lured” the girls from the missionary house with that same voice (Keller 69). Akiko said that the songs are “silly songs that my husband sings to comfort our child, but I hate them and I hate him” (Keller 69). It seems that Akiko is unable to enjoy his voice because she feels that while in the mission house, he seduced the woman around him with it – and this overtly sexual behavior, especially exhibited by someone who was supposed to be virginal and loyal to only God – repulsed her because of her past bad sexual experiences. Akiko also expressed her hatred of her husband to Beccah, when she openly cursed him for passing on his sin – his dirtiness – to Beccah (Keller 83). Akiko’s horrifying experiences in the internment camp – which undoubtedly caused her to suffer from PTSD, with possible schizophrenic symptoms and depression – shaped the rest of her life. The trauma she experienced translated into every other realm of her existence – from destroying her mental health, to making it virtually impossible to

function in society, to sabotaging any chance she had of creating new, healthy relationships or maintaining old ones. Works Cited Taft, Casey. “ An Investigation of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Depressive Symptomatology among Female Victims of Interpersonal Trauma.” Journal of Family Violence, v. 24 issue 6, 2009, p. 407-415. Taft, Casey. “ Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms, Relationship Adjustment, and Relationship Aggression in a Sample of Female Flood Victims.” Journal of Family Violence, v. 24 issue 6, 2009, p. 389-396.” Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).” NIMH: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). National Institute of Mental Health. 22 July 2009.