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LIVING IN THE MIDST OF DYING: RE-READING ASIAN WOMEN'S HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS

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Abstract

This essay explores the possibilities posed by Asian women's hidden transcripts in articulating a theology that takes into account the marginalized resistance strategies of women in their struggle toward liberation. It investigates Asian women's creative strategies of resistance and how these strategies are valid and significant sources in doing feminist liberation theology in general and Asian feminist liberation theology in particular. It specifically tackles silence, humour and laughter, and stories, songs, and dance as Asian women's hidden transcripts that challenge us to re-think contemporary theological reflections on liberation.

Keywords: Asia, Liberation, Resistance, Women

1. Unpacking Asian Women's Hidden Transcripts

Asia is a vast and diverse continent that has come to embody both tradition and change, the old and new, in the face of global patterns of integration. One of the groups caught in this paradoxical dynamics is the women. Poverty and discrimination has always had a woman's

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face in Asia. While globalization has brought positive changes, increased economic competition has posed more challenge and pressure to existing multiple roles of women in production, reproduction, and community management. Asian women, in particular, have to cope with this global way of living by working more, risking more, and suffering more. Many of them live and work in unjust and exploitative situations. This paper asks how they negotiate these situations and resist their oppression. It tackles this question by examining the ways in which Asian women refuse to give in to their oppression. More specifically it discusses the strategies they use, which at first glance may look negative or weak but are actually potent.

James Scott calls these strategies “hidden transcripts.” By hidden transcripts Scott refers to a politics of disguise and anonymity among subordinate groups that is partly sanitized, ambiguous, and coded. He says this is often expressed in rumours, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemisms that usually come from folk culture. These, according to him, do not contain only speech acts but a whole range of practices that contravene the public transcript of the dominant.¹

1.1. Silence

One underestimated hidden transcript of Asian women is silence. In the Philippines there is the legendary protest of the Cordillera women in defence of their ancestral land from the government’s plan to put a nuclear power plant. Patria Agustin describes this protest:

In one of the dramatic protests, the women, *not* the men, opened their wrap-around skirts, boldly facing the government engineers in their nakedness. This humiliated the government functionaries, causing them to run away. The second occurred with the arrival of trucks hauling the equipment to start work on this project. The mothers, carrying their babies, came down from their houses with their young children. Silently, they positioned themselves around and under the trucks, blocking the unloading of the equipment. The women and children did not move away from where they stood. Only when there was an understanding that the truck would go back with the equipment did the women and children withdraw.²

¹James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, 14-15, 19.

²Sr. Aurora Zambrano, “Women in Tribal Filipinos, Their Land and Cultural Heritage,” *Kalinangan* (March 1985) cited in Patria Agustin, “Women and Politics in the Philippines,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3, 2 (Fall 1987) 117-118.

As explicitly stated by Agustin, the protest is clothed in silence. There was no need for words. This very absence of words made the protest more eloquent. In feminist discourse, however, silence is often shunned. This is mainly due, I believe, to the overwhelming association of silence with passivity and lack of agency. I find this problematic and Western (including feminist) thinking, in my opinion, considerably account for this diminution of silence.³ First, there is the negative understanding of the concept of silence. In the western mindset the emphasis is on self-assertion and active protest against oppression. Consequently, silence becomes the opposite of words and protest, and is reduced to cowardice, passivity, and invisibility even when one is attempting to communicate through it. It is also construed as withdrawal, absence, a sign of shame and dishonour, acquiescence to injustice, or resignation to oppression. The persistent negative portrayal of Asian women as silent and silenced, the “long-suffering, passive, submissive, needing to be saved” women also reinforce this denigration of silence.⁴

But is there really nothing significant about silence? Is there nothing at all that could be gained from it? Is it irredeemable from a feminist theological perspective? As an Asian feminist theologian I say no. For when the various ways in which it is utilized are thoroughly scrutinized, one could see that silence is also a part of resistance. One problem Western feminist theologians have with silence is that it is devoid of words. Words in the Western context is *the* mode and language of resistance. Silence does not speak hence it

³In Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978, 340, for example Mary Daly urges women to be active voicing agents, implicitly labelling silence as a non-value. Exceptions include Christin Lore Weber, *Woman Christ*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987, 17, cited in Naomi F. Southard, “Recovery and Rediscovered Images: Spiritual Resources for Asian American Women,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed., Ursula King, New York: Orbis, 1994, 382, who argues: “Ebbing has been called weakness, but perhaps we will discover in it a new kind of power. Perhaps there is power in all that we have associated with the ebb side of the cycle: silence, waiting, emptiness, darkness, receptivity, detachment, aloneness, and death” and Janet Walton who asserts “silence and lament are partners in the struggles toward truth... silent time is fertile space, necessary for attentiveness, dreaming, and imagining... Our silence and laments are deeply engaged and wide-reaching. They are another source of power.” Janet Walton, *Feminist Liturgy: Matter of Justice*, Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001, 40-41.

⁴In reality these images are partly a western creation peddled out of ignorance and colonial purposes. See Susan Mann, “Myths of Asian Womanhood,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 59, 4 (Nov. 2000) 857-858.

is not resistance. Rita Nakashima Brock, however, argues that silence speaks and that it may also be an active strategy. Brock contends that “the spiritual power of silence lies in its capacity to nurture mystery and presence, the power of the semiotic... Silence as presence creates spaces squeezed out by words... nurtures complex emotions and experiences known only in the silent knowing of self and other.”⁵

Another problem Western feminist theologians have with silence is it being a response by women to gendered physical violence. As one who has done research and written on wife battery, I recognize the problem posed by silence in such context. I am uncomfortable, however, with the proclivity to conflate silence with gendered physical violence. The problem with lumping or exclusively associating silence with rape and wife battery is that it strips and denies silence of its theological possibilities. Brock herself points to “the complexity of silence: its freezing of memory in inaccessible mystery, its signal of a stubborn refusal to speak, *its indication of truth suppressed by fear, and its revelatory power beyond words*” (emphasis mine).⁶ She goes on to say that “the healing of relationships can [even] be known in silence” for “silence is not always the absence of communication, but can be a deeper interrelational connecting. Silence allows many things to coexist without eliminating each other; it makes space for emotional complexity and ambiguity.”⁷

Interestingly Brock also points to the Asian roots of the significance of silence. Here lies, I believe, one reason why it is significant to recover silence from its suppression. It does not only have value; it has Asian value. As could be seen with Brock Asian women or women of Asian descent are increasingly re-framing silence by presenting other ways in which Asian women understand and use it as a form of resistance. Nantawan Boonprasat Lewis even describes silence as a new meaning to [Asian] resistance and liberation. Lewis contends that there are Asian cultural expressions, such as silence, that have been understood as indications of submissiveness, subservience, and obedience and that this has been questioned by

⁵Rita Nakashima Brock, “Interstitial Integrity: Reflections Toward an Asian American Woman’s Theology,” in *Introduction to Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives*, ed., Roger A. Badham, Louisville: WJK Press, 1998, 192-193.

⁶See Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Asian-American Daughters Rewriting Asian Maternal Texts,” in *Asian Americans: Comparative and Global Perspectives*, ed., Shirley Hune et al., Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1991, 239-248 as cited in Brock, 192.

⁷Brock, “Interstitial Integrity,” 193.

feminist scholars as a misreading of the “hidden transcripts” that some women have used as resources for survival. She cites Jung Ha Kim’s study on the participation of Korean-American women in the church. Kim’s study revealed that “churched” Korean women, contrary to public perception, are not “all passive and victimized” and that they utilized silence as a tool to resist a church that regards them as secondary to men and systematically excludes them from power structures. Lewis explains:

the women’s understanding and use of silence not as a self-internalized expression of submission but as a means of resistance has allowed them to experience a sense of freedom and liberation. They interpret their silence as disagreement and as resistance to the treatment they receive in their church. This comes about as a result of not finding a channel in which to raise their concerns in church, whether at Sunday worship services or as members of the decision-making body of the church. Consequently, learned silence as adopted by “churched” Korean women needs to be understood not in terms of submission but rather in terms of resistance, and as a strategy of survival.⁸

Ultimately, understanding silence in the context of resistance amounts to recognizing the fact that

moments of resistance to oppression and healing come in the midst of the puttering and sputtering. Silence that creates prisons must be shattered. The silence of listening must be respected... To heal is to speak and work against injustice *and* to listen to silence. The work of spiritual healing is grounded, finally, both in the solidarity of silence and in the words and actions that convey our vision of justice and wholeness.⁹

Asian women theologians themselves exemplify this when they employed silence as part of their resistance to the marginalization of women within EATWOT. Mary John Mananzan shares:

the women members felt that although there has been significant progress on the awareness of the gender issue, the feminist perspective was still left to the Women’s Commission. The theological production of the male theologians was still oblivious of the feminist perspective. In one plenary session, the women addressed this problem and announced to the men that all the women delegates were leaving the plenum to give time to the men to reflect on the issue. And the women walked out. It may be due to this symbolic gesture that the assembly in its final resolution decide that

⁸Nantawan Boonprasat Lewis, “On Naming Justice: The Spiritual and Political Connection in Violence against Asian Immigrant Women,” in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, ed., Fernando Segovia, New York: Orbis, 2003, 485.

⁹Brock, “Interstitial Integrity,” 194.

there would be a gender dialogue in the next five years... that a compilation of the writings of the EATWOT women theologians of the four regions would be compiled and sent to all members; and that the male theologians would take seriously the inclusion of the feminist perspective in their theological production.¹⁰

1.2. Humour and Laughter

Humour and laughter are also hidden transcripts of Asian women. In a presentation on women and globalization, for example, an American student of mine showed video footage of a centre in Nepal which helps women victims of trafficking who are ashamed of returning to their families. What struck me in the video was how the women were laughing and making fun of themselves in the midst of the tragic situation they were in.

One might wonder, why the laughter? What is humorous about their situation? Doesn't it reek of pain and oppression that one couldn't help but sulk and be angry most, if not all, of the time? The Filipina domestic helpers in Hong Kong who suffer multiple forms of oppression¹¹ even use jokes, complete with a caricature (Maria the stupid DH), to combat their oppression. The DHs (as they are more popularly known) have jokes that not only get back at their oppressive employers but also poke fun at themselves and the problematic conditions brought by migration. One popular joke concerns that of a husband about to leave his wife for another woman:

Husband: Goodbye, mother of five!

Wife: Goodbye, father of two!¹²

At first glance laughter can be seen as a form of toleration of one's oppressive situation. It could also be construed as making light of the situation in order to make it more bearable. In other words it could be perceived as escapist. But laughter is upheld by folk wisdom as a means of resistance.¹³ For example, Gerald Arbuckle affirms humour as means of resistance in *Laughing With God: Humor, Culture, and*

¹⁰Mary John Mananzan, *Woman, Religion and Spirituality in Asia*, Quezon City: Anvil Publishing, 2004, 18.

¹¹I have written about this elsewhere. See Gemma Cruz, "Gendering the Quest for Global Economic Justice: The Challenges of Women Labor Migration to Christian Theological Reflections," *Voices from the Third World* 28, 1 (June 2005) 128-46.

¹²Erlinda Layosa and Laura Luminarias, *Sapang Pagyuko Kawayan: A Collection of Jokes from Filipino Overseas Workers*, Hong Kong: Asia Pacific, 1992, cited in Nicole Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997, 175.

¹³The Filipino proverb *tawanan mo ang iyong problema* (Laugh at your problems) reflects this.

Transformation. Although humour is a non-confrontational style of critiquing an oppressive situation Arbuckle insists it is effective¹⁴ as it is often able to portray fraud, hypocrisy, and injustice far more powerfully and emotively than the written word. In fact humour's subversive quality, Arbuckle says, is its most important function as it "deflates pomposity and undermines the rigidity of the status. When humor pokes fun at the oppressive stringencies and conventions of society people have the chance to re-imagine alternative ways of behaving."¹⁵ Humour then is prophetic in that it breaks the mould of thinking and provides a designated radically new alternative behaviour pattern.

Like humour, laughter is also undervalued in theology. Augustine and Chrysostom, for example, consider laughter as derisive and inessential to faith.¹⁶ Jacqueline Bussie in her study of what she calls "the laughter of the oppressed" as expressed in the classic texts of Elie Wiesel (*God's Mistake*), Shusaku Endo (*Silence*), and Toni Morrison (*Beloved*) offers interesting theological reflections on laughter.¹⁷ Arguing for a theology of laughter Bussie posits that laughter increases our consciousness of faith since faith is born of the very stuff that also engenders laughter namely contradictions, incongruity, and paradox. Bussie also says laughter reflects and heightens our consciousness of hope. She says,

life is a conflict between two narratives: the narrative of reason and reality and the narrative of faith, the narrative of facts and the narrative of longing. This collision can lead to despair or hope, but when it leads to hope, that hope is heroic but appears to many eyes as madness. We hope because it is absurd.¹⁸

This ridiculous hoping against hope that is expressed in laughter actually underscores the notion that redemption's "already" aspect is as real as redemption's "not yet." It drives home the point that the divine is both present and absent and life is both horror and love. It

¹⁴Arbuckle says humour may be a legitimate way for people who have little political power to draw attention to oppression. Gerald Arbuckle, *Laughing With God: Humor, Culture, and Transformation*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008, 12.

¹⁵Arbuckle, *Laughing With God*, 13.

¹⁶For example Augustine says "Human beings laugh and weep, and it is a matter for weeping that they laugh," while John Chrysostom thinks "Truly it is not for us to pass our time in laughter." As quoted in Jacqueline Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo*, New York: T & T Clark, 2007, 1, 9.

¹⁷Wiesel, Endo, and Morrison's texts tackle three of the most tragic events in history namely the Holocaust, Hiroshima bombing, and slavery in North America.

¹⁸Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed*, 184.

highlights the cries of the oppressed for recognition of the “doubleness” of their experience as both children of God and the rejected of humanity. By taking laughter into account, Bussie insists, theology recognizes and holds in awesome wonder the deep complexity of human experience.¹⁹ Ultimately, laughter creates a new space within theology for reconsidering the work and importance of critical doubt as an element within faith for laughter itself exposes the fact that faith is contrarational or metaempirical.

1.3. Stories, Songs, and Dance

Stories, songs, and dance are also employed by Asian women as hidden transcripts. A segment on Asia in the documentary *The Shape of Water*, for example, shows Indian village women telling stories then singing songs about their struggle against the building of a dam.²⁰ The Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong also utilize songs as a form of resistance. In 1994 when a notice was posted by the management of a condominium about Filipina maids washing their feet after washing their employer’s car the DHs came up with a song to express their disapproval at the snotty notice.²¹ The song has the following lyrics: “Washing car is little fun. Rub and scrub in morning sun. Water flooding down the street. Maid wash car but not her feet” and has the tune of *Magtanim ay di Biro* (Planting rice is never fun). The choice of “*Magtanim ay di Biro*” is significant as it is a Filipino resistance song against planting rice²² and agricultural work which American colonizers tried to inscribe on Filipinos.

Stories, songs, and dance may look harmless. In reality they are moving and powerful ways to name injustice, express dissent, and point to solutions. Stories, for instance, are valuable to feminist theological ethics²³ since ethics as dynamic relations between human subjects cannot be authentically discussed and analyzed without

¹⁹Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed*, 186-187.

²⁰Gabriele Dietrich, “People’s Movements, the Strength of Wisdom, and the Twisted Path of Civilization,” in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, 407-408, shares a similar scene (young and old women dancing to the songs and slogans of struggle) in relation to the struggle of the Adivasi people in India against the building of Sardar Sarovar Dam.

²¹The notice is as follows: Washing oil or dirt off a Mercedes is OK, but not off a maid’s feet.” See “Atin-Atin Lamang” *TNT Hong Kong*, 1, 3, 23.

²²See similar explanation by Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, *The Jesus of Asian Women*, New York: Orbis, 2006, 117.

²³Stories even take on greater significance when they are based on real-life experiences as they creatively describe our identities and articulate our positions, questions, hopes, and aspirations.

telling the stories of women. They are critical, especially in cases of violence against women, as they could shift the cultural and theological discourse by focusing on the contradiction between the lived experience of survivors' agency and the discursive theological meanings that negate such agency.²⁴ In such cases we discover and make visible the other, that is, women by letting their stories speak.

To be sure stories that expose gender violence or put women as protagonist accord power usually denied to women. Stories, for example, are vital to Korean women's theologies which emerged from the interweaving of Korean life stories and the interpretation of the experiences of *minjung* or oppressed women. The *minjung* themselves prefer stories rather than abstract logic that is fabricated from the desk of elite culture. They have difficulty believing in an abstract God since their indigenous myths and stories tell them that the deities were previously human beings who did noble things for their fellow beings, went through suffering, and come out victorious from life-risking ordeals.²⁵

Like stories, songs could be seen as insignificant. As the language of the soul, however, songs speak the unspeakable. They expose the shadows and name the truths we often cannot say in ordinary, conventional conversations and interactions. They express what we think and feel deeply in our hearts. They reflect our joys and sorrows, our hopes and dreams for ourselves and the world. Mary's song, the *Magnificat*, is a classic example of the song as a forceful means of giving voice not only to what ought to be celebrated but also to what needs to be mourned and corrected in the world.

Dance, meanwhile, communicates truths through the body. Like stories and songs, dance is a means of creatively forging bonds with others and pointing to life's tragedies and victories. To the disengaged, storytelling, singing, and dancing in the context of a protest could be strange. But Ma. Corazon Manalo clarifies in "Dance: A Woman's Way to Peace" that just as dance may create moods and provide a sense of context that frames, prolongs, or may even cut off communication, dance can also enhance or destroy life.²⁶

²⁴Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Ties That Bind: Domestic Violence Against Women" in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed., Mary John Mananzan et al., New York: Orbis, 1996, 52.

²⁵Orevillo-Montenegro, *The Jesus of Asian Women*, 92.

²⁶Maria Corazon Manalo, "Dance: A Woman's Way to Peace," *Religious Studies De La Salle Journal* 19, 2 (December 1996) 77-78 as cited in Orevillo-Montenegro, *The Jesus of Asian Women*, 116-117.

Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro goes far and describes song and dance as “expression of resistance.” She avers “Filipinos use songs and dances to tell their stories, their dreams, and their everyday struggles... religious and cultural rituals, as well as their connectedness with their communities and nature.”²⁷ She also makes an explicit connection to Filipino women’s struggle for liberation:

During the teachers’ strike, the women sang and danced in the midst of struggle in order to direct their energies toward justice, peace, harmony, and life. Filipino women, and the people in general, dance and sing in the midst of struggle. Somehow, songs and dances make them resilient, and they laugh and smile in the midst of their troubles and pain.²⁸

2. Asian Women’s Hidden Transcripts: Faces of Liberation?

On the surface hidden transcripts do not fall simply, neatly, and clearly into the resistance category. Some may even see these as strategies that accommodate the oppression. While there may be some truth to this I rather think that categorically labelling these as accommodation or submission constitutes an impoverishment of theology in general and feminist theology in particular. I think these strategies offer something valuable in articulating women’s struggle toward liberation. Unfortunately these potentially liberating strategies have been rendered less effective today because of their enmeshment in a patriarchal system,²⁹ co-optation by Western theologians, and the uncritical subscription of Asian theologians to Western interpretations.³⁰

Recognizing culture as a site of struggle, however, demands that we engage in the recovery of cultural practices that continue to be subjected to “institutional forgetting,” which is a form of control of memory and history. Theological integrity requires that theology

²⁷Orevillo-Montenegro, *The Jesus of Asian Women*, 117.

²⁸Orevillo-Montenegro, *The Jesus of Asian Women*, 117.

²⁹Southard, “Recovery and Rediscovered Images: Spiritual Resources for Asian American Women,” 380.

³⁰Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, “My Search for Asian Women’s Voices,” *In God’s Image* 26, 4 (December 2007) 23 talks about a Filipino male theologian whose mindset is shaped by Western norms and did not recognize *In God’s Image* (IGI), the first and only feminist theological journal in Asia, as a “scholarly” journal because its format resembles that of a magazine (it contains essays, poems, songs, art, and other forms of theological musings of Asian women). What that male theologian failed to see is how the journal helps express the creativity of Asian feminist theologians, popularizes theology through various forms, and how it is not stuck to the traditional format of dense words and high language that is not accessible to the ordinary person.

should not fear the scandal of theorizing and making affirmations on cultural practices that are devalued by or contradict the dominant consciousness. Theology, in other words, must be imaginative. In doing this theology does more than pay lip service to diversity. It celebrates otherness with a steadfast refusal to conflate diverse experiences into false synthesis.

The Bible itself is punctuated with silence, dotted with humour and laughter, interjected with song and dance, and filled with stories.³¹ Jesus himself knew the value of silence and used humorous stories to criticize the injustice in his time. In his parables the marginalized, e.g. Samaritans, ridiculously take the centre stage and become protagonists, exposing the incongruities of Jewish society in the process.³²

What I am arguing for is for theology to see resistance in a continuum or a spiral to give women's hidden transcripts their rightful place. Theology has to desist thinking in terms of extremes and framing its discourses in opposing categories. To do theology justly we need to see life and reality in its full spectrum and complexity, particularly by not thinking in terms of either/or but in terms of both-and. "Both-and," as a form of wholistic thinking, is a good way to see Asian women's hidden transcripts as embedded hence part of the same reality of resistance and struggle for liberation.

Dichotomous thought, indeed, stands in need of interruption. Silence, humour, laughter, stories, songs, and dance – unsilenced as they are by action and unfettered by contradictions – are placed in a unique position to provide such an interruption. Theology needs to take these cultural practices seriously if it is to confess its own inadequacies and sustain a hermeneutics of rupture. In so doing it resists the perennial danger of domesticating negativity or disingenuously dismissing seemingly weak cultural practices. Most importantly, a theology that takes these seriously rightly gives a much deserved place to the "theologically oppressed," the everyday

³¹See 1 Kings 19:9-18 (God's silence), Gen 18:9-15 (Sarah's laughter), Judges 5 (Deborah's canticle), Exodus 15:1-18 (Moses and the Israelites singing after crossing the Red Sea), Mark 6:17-29 (Herodias' daughter's dance), and Luke 10:25-37 (parable of the Good Samaritan).

³²This is a characteristic of Jesus' parables known as elements of reversal which functions like the punch line of a joke. Parables that contain elements of reversal are among the most powerful instruments for change that Jesus used for they force unexpected decisions and actions. The tax collector is righteous not the Pharisee, the Samaritan is neighbour, not the Jewish elite. Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2008, 19.

theologians, the people in the trenches who are struggling to live real lives amidst the incongruities and injustices.

Truly, there is sound in silence, anger in humour and laughter, and resistance in stories, songs, and dance. Silence speaks, humour and laughter destabilizes, while songs, stories, and dance narrate, mourn, and celebrate life's triumphs and tragedies. They are ways of questioning, finding, and insisting on the sacred in our life experiences. To forget to include them is like having theological dryness. To deny them is arrogance, to ridicule them is ignorance.