

# After Giving Voice to 50 Years of Silence Through a Book and Documentary

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## ABSTRACT:

*Few people made note of the news of Jan Ruff-O'Herne's passing on the morning of August 19, 2019, at her home in Adelaide, Australia, surrounded by her children, grand- and great-grandchildren. She was 96 years old. Jan Ruff-O'Herne left a trail of more than five decades of campaigning against the employment of rape in wartime and had spent much of her life reclaiming her dignity. She was the first European woman to dare testify publicly against the horror. She ripped apart the silence surrounding a dark history denied for so long by the party who committed it. For that, she received various awards, including from the Australian Government, the Dutch Government, and the Vatican. O'Herne was one of few European women in Japanese occupied territories during World War II who were forced into sex slavery. The majority came from Asia, namely Korea (the largest number), Indonesia, the Philippines, China, and Taiwan. She was the only survivor who spoke out against the use of the term "comfort women". Comfort connotes something soft, safe and friendly. "We were victims of wartime rape and sexual assault by the Imperial Japanese Army." O'Herne demanded a personal apology from the Japanese Government and was one of a band of survivors who refused to accept monetary compensation from the Asian Women's Fund. She called attention to how rape was employed as an instrument of subjugation in wartime, making it appropriate to be looked at as criminality of war and acts of crimes against humanity. Notably, Jan Ruff-O'Herne's testimony was turned into a documentary produced in Australia by director Ned Lander, titled "50 Years of Silence" (1994).*

**Keywords:** Jan Ruff-O'Herne, Rape, Sex Slave

## ABSTRAK:

Tak banyak orang membaca berita mengenai kepulungan Jan Ruff-O'Herne pada pagi tanggal 19 Agustus 2019 di rumahnya, di Adelaide, Australia, dikelilingi oleh anak, cucu dan cucu buyutnya. Usianya 96 tahun. Jan Ruff-O'Herne meninggalkan jejak perjuangan selama lebih lima dekade untuk berkampanye melawan pemerkosaan dalam perang dan menghabiskan sisa hidupnya untuk merebut kembali martabatnya. Dia adalah perempuan Eropa pertama yang berani bersaksi di depan publik secara terbuka. Dia merobek kebisuan sejarah hitam yang ditolak untuk waktu yang sangat lama oleh pihak yang melakukannya. Untuk itu, dia menerima berbagai penghargaan, di antaranya dari Pemerintah Australia, Pemerintah Belanda, dan Vatikan. O'Herne adalah salah satu dari sedikit perempuan Eropa di wilayah pendudukan Jepang selama Perang Dunia II yang dipaksa menjadi budak seks. Sebagian besar berasal dari Asia, yakni Korea (terbesar), Indonesia, Filipina, China dan Taiwan. Dia menjadi satu-satunya survivor yang berjuang untuk menolak penggunaan istilah "comfort women". *Comfort* mengandung arti sesuatu yang lembut aman dan ramah. "Kami ini korban perkosaan dan serangan seksual dalam masa perang oleh tentara Kerajaan Jepang". O'Herne menuntut permintaan maaf Pemerintah Jepang secara pribadi dan berada dalam

barisan survivor yang menolak kompensasi berupa uang dari Asian Women Fund. Dia juga menekankan bagaimana perkosaan menjadi alat untuk menundukkan dalam perang sehingga harus dilihat sebagai kejahatan kriminal perang dan kejahatan terhadap kemanusiaan. Dan yang menarik lainnya adalah testimoni atas Jan Ruff-O'Herne ini juga dibentuk menjadi sebuah film dokumenter yang diproduksi di Australia dengan sutradara Ned Lander, berjudul *50 Years of Silence* (1994).

**Kata kunci:** Jan Ruff-O'Herne, Pemerkosaan, Budak Seks

## INTRODUCTION

I met her in Tokyo in 2000 and in The Hague in 2001.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Hague, early December 2001**

On the Lucent Danstheatre stage, The Hague, Holland, Jan Ruff-O'Herne (78) held aloft her copy of the 240-page thick Final Judgment given to her directly by the Chair of the Judges' Council Gabrielle Kirk McDonald, on that day, local time, in December 4, 2001. Her mouth worked furiously. Tears flooded her eyes.

Decision was made by the Judges's Council after hearing 35 testimonies from 75 survivors who attended the Tokyo Tribunal in 2000. The People's Court was in response for Japan's failure to take responsibility to provide justice for some 200,000 women in Asia, who had been coerced into sex slavery in 'comfort stations' to service Japanese soldiers during World War II.

The Final Judgement symbolically ended the absolution for crimes against humanity which, due to the absence of appropriate mechanisms, had allowed the perpetrators to continually be legally exempt.

In short, the Judges' Council declared guilty the Showa Emperor, Emperor Hirohito, who between 1937 to 1945 was the Imperial Leader of Japan and the Supreme Commander of the Japanese Imperial Army; Rikichi Ando, Commander of the War Forces in the South China Territory beginning October 1940, and others.

"I feel relieved," she said quietly, "But, more importantly, I can feel the high solidarity amongst all us survivors."

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<sup>1</sup> Sourced from reports by Maria Hartaningsih between 2000 and 2001 in *Kompas* daily.

She then hugged Ema Kastimah (75), a survivor from Cimahi, West Java. For a few moments, the two women were engulfed in an emotion only the two could comprehend.

The atmosphere in The Hague that day in early winter was vastly different to that in Tokyo one year before.

### **Tokyo, December 26, 2000**

WHEN she heard the Wagnerian-like march blaring as background music for the dress rehearsal at the Kudan Kaikan stage, Tokyo, Japan, on Thursday (7/12) afternoon, Jan Ruff-O'Herne (77) immediately left her seat.

Her face paled and she covered her ears with both hands. "Could you please change the music," she said in a quavering voice to a committee member.

As the music faded, Jan seemed to slowly calm down.

For many decades, Jan, who had been forced into sexual slavery servicing Japanese soldiers in Semarang for three months beginning February 1944, suffered post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In all those years, she could not listen to or look at anything related to Japan.

The third of four offspring of the French-Dutch O'Herne family, Jan was born in Cepiring, Central Java, in 1923.

Her happy childhood was usurped by the Japanese occupation of Java in 1942. The O'Herne family was interned in the concentration camp at Ambarawa until February 1944, when Jan with nine other girls of European stock were forcibly taken by Japanese soldiers to Semarang.

Nothing at all can give back what was destroyed by the brutality of Japanese soldiers in the chambers of "The House of the Seven Seas", a pleasure club for Japanese officers in Semarang.

"I was released from that house of hell, but the wounds have never healed. Images of that brothel has never left my memory..."

Jan O'Herne told the entire truth about herself to Tom Ruff before they married.

“At the time, Tom sobbed soundlessly, but his love for me never changed. We then promised to never tell the story to anybody else.”

In her happy marriage with Tom Ruff, a British subject who later migrated to Australia and settled in Adelaide, Tasmania, Jan always requested close family members and friends to never give them flowers on any of their happy occasions.

The mother of two and grandmother of also two could never bring herself to explain that flowers reminded her of a vase full of certain blooms regularly placed in her bedroom at "The House of the Seven Seas".

Jan also never went to a doctor unless for something serious. The figure of a doctor in his office reminded her of the one in "The House of the Seven Seas", whom she thought could help her, but instead brutally raped her.

After 50 years going through nights filled with terrible nightmares, in early 1992, by chance Jan saw a program on television in which some Korean women gave testimony about being what was known as "comfort women" during the Japanese occupation.

"I suddenly knew what I had to do..."

The courage of the Korean women gave Jan the strength to be brave enough to take radical action which she said became part of her healing process.

"I had to give testimony regarding the truth. I had to reveal my life's dark secret. What happened to me was not my shame, but the shame of the Japanese Government."

Her book, *50 Years of Silence: Comfort Women of Indonesia* (1994), was written with the support of her entire family, adding to the bibliography about rape in war time. The documentary film version has a duration of 57 minutes, while the book itself is over 300 pages. Could the documentary overcome the psychological trauma suffered by Jan Ruff? Obviously, this would have been difficult. For, after literature has given something voice, a film would have nothing more to say. Also, the other way around, after a film has said its piece, literature is washed over. Of note, though, the documentary, which narration is in English, endeavored to remain true to the textual substance of the book.

## ANALYSIS

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The matter of ‘comfort women’ has developed into a central issue in the debates on history regarding war, as related to nationalism, patriotism, religion, and experiences concerning gender, sexuality, race, and a nation’s subjects.

In 1966, the Japanese Education Ministry inserted the matter of ‘comfort women’ as a topic in the subject of history for middle school. As of April 1997, the topic of ‘comfort women’ has been taught in middle schools as historical fact. Yet, there have emerged two factions with differing perspectives wishing to wrest ownership of the description and definition of ‘comfort women’ in middle school textbooks in Japan.

The group dubbed by Rebecca Clifford (2004) as neo-nationalist-revisionist, maintain that Asian ‘comfort women’ supplying sex to Japanese soldiers were not ‘military sex slaves’ under coercion by the imperial army, but rather ordinary prostitutes who conducted their trade voluntarily.

This faction has asked the Japanese government to retract its apology to the Asian countries it occupied during the war, Korea and China in particular, and to expunge that dark page from the middle school history textbooks. Included in the group refuting the ‘war crimes’ accusation leveled at Japan is education scholar Fujioka Nobukatsu and the cartoonist Kobayashi Yoshinori.

The group is concerned that young people learning about the negative history would lose their appreciation towards Japanese culture. Feminist and professor of cultural anthropology, Tomomi Yamaguchi (2017), thinks this “*Japan is Great*” phenomenon noteworthy to analyze.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Please see [Tomomi Yamaguchi](https://apjif.org/2017/06/Yamaguchi.html), “The “Japan Is Great!” Boom, Historical Revisionism, and the Government”, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, March 15, 2017 Volume 15, Issue 6, Number 3, Article ID 5021, <https://apjif.org/2017/06/Yamaguchi.html>

Another faction, often dubbed the pacifist-revisionists, emphasize human rights. At the Tribunal in 2000, Japanese historians Akira Yamada and Yoshiaki Yoshimi convinced the Judges' Council the 'comfort stations' scheme was carefully and systematically designed by Japan's military commanders who had personal direct access to the emperor. The scheme was a response to the mass rape that had occurred in Nanking, China, in 1937.

Historian Yoshiaki Yoshimi wrote in 1995 that a common notion was perpetuated that comfort women were only a mechanism for sexual release for military privates. Their basic rights as human beings were shunted aside. Many Japanese soldiers held to the myth that 'real' men were men who have 'known' women. Related to this idea, after all the pressures of warfare, soldiers would be encouraged to go the 'comfort stations.'

Yoshimi connected this masculinist-patriarchal view, which also supported licensed prostitution in Japan and its colonies, to the 'comfort stations' structure in war zones (Yoshimi, 223-224).

The term 'comfort women' was used to legitimize the crimes conducted during war time. In 1994-1997, several Japanese high-ranking officials announced that those who were 'comfort women' did so voluntarily. This negated the fact that deception, threat, coercion, and abduction was deployed for the recruitment of the victims.

The failure of the state to take responsibility for its criminal acts had already occurred in the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in Tokyo, in April 1946 to November 1948. The tribunal made no mention whatsoever about the matter of sex slavery enacted by the Japanese military. The Japanese Government violated its state responsibility by destroying all documents, including the documents related to the sex slavery scheme designed during war.

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The issue of 'comfort women' opens opportunity to reassess the historical and contemporary ideological construction on gender and sexuality and brings the debate beyond the dominant male-centric discourse.

Regarding gender and sexual subjectivity, autobiographies and memoirs written by the victims – i.e. the women coerced into becoming sexual slaves to service Japanese soldiers

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during the war – are representation of personal narration. However, this subjectivity, too, is shaped by racial and national differences. The courage of Ruff-O’Herne to write and reveal her personal experiences was an act of outstanding stature. For 50 years she had existed in a ‘protective sphere’ within herself.

In this respect, Jan was a ‘minority’ on several levels: she was a European, Catholic woman, and lived in a developed country in the embrace of a relatively stable and secure family life. Meanwhile, most victims from Asia, Indonesia in particular, lived at subsistence level and dire economic straits, bore stigma, and had an existence which for a long time was ignored by the state.

In her autobiography, Ruff-O’Herne wrote that when the rape victims of the Imperial Japanese Military were herded by Japanese soldiers into a separate women’s prison camp in Kramat, the Dutch women from other parts of the camp treated them with insult, calling them ‘whores’ and ‘traitors’ (Ruff-O’Herne, 115).

It was victim-blaming at work, and they drew a strict line between them and the other prisoners, looking upon O’Herne as the ‘other’. The reaction, besides revealing the presence of the dominant patriarchal discourse, also shows how ‘systematic dehumanizing’ (Bell Hokks, 1984) operates in a victim community.

This contempt was extended to Jan’s younger sister. The support of a Catholic nun closely related to Ruff-O’Herne could not exonerate her from the depths of shame she felt within her, silencing her.

Several angles can be selected to dissect Ruff-O’Herne’s book.

I have tried to analyze the processes within Jan that led to her decision to openly reveal her darkest secret to the public.

Ruff-O’Herne did not speak openly about her devastation prior to 1992, before she saw on television the three Korean women, victimized into sexual slavery by the Japanese military during the war, demand an apology and compensation from the Japanese government.

The television program triggered a process of realization within Ruff-O’Herne, that her personal agony had a structural root cause. But she also understood that collective effort was needed to create significant change.

It was as if the process shed a dot of light on the decades-long struggle within her hidden personal space. Vaclav Havel called this internal space the hidden sphere, a space inside the self where new truths are reexamined and processed; a space where life can be lived openly in the light of truth. (Havel, 1986; Bouvard, 1994).

Hidden spheres are an unreckoned outstanding political force. These spheres, from the perspective of power, are territories of the utmost danger because they can suddenly appear and disrupt an entire system. Once hidden spheres are opened, it is usually much too late to push them back again. It is within these hidden spheres that people can create situations of great panic for power regimes, however minor the act is.

Ruff-O'Herne suddenly saw the world on her own terms and came to a decision. With that decision, Ruff-O'Herne became part of the movement which demanded an apology from the Japanese government for their atrocities during the war.

She was 69 at the time.

In the International Public Audience on Japanese War Crimes in Tokyo in December 1992, Ruff-O'Herne shattered the silence by sharing her story.

In 1994, with the support of her entire family, she published a personal memoir, *Fifty Years of Silence: Comfort Women of Indonesia*, which documented her many anguishes trying to piece together a life as a survivor of rape and sexual brutality during the war.

The decision was no easy one to make.

In whatever condition, the survivor discourse is rife with contradiction, more so when the savagery of the Imperial Army continued to be controversial in the name of 'nationalism', 'national pride', and all the rest of it, while maintaining the idea that victims had no dignity to uphold, and moreover did not even exist. Thus, the pain of contempt dominates and makes the memory of assaults to the body even more difficult to obliterate (Mardorossian, 2002).

Ruff-O'Herne revealed that for her to be able to speak out, she paced the processes of her struggle through an apolitical space: her personal one. Yet, quoting Carol Hanisch



(1969), the apolitical is in fact even more political, especially when it is echoed in the public sphere.<sup>3</sup>

Any movement's processes are begun within the self of the individual. Through consciousness-raising, women came to realize their position and situation in the social order, and at the same time found the subjective identity of their self as a member of a community. Consciousness-raising is understood by feminists to be a process that successfully provided women with the light they needed to redefine and re-name the world around them.<sup>4</sup>

In the consciousness-raising process, power relations and the victim experience are not scrutinized sociologically, because as such, those in power would take over the claim to truth. This rights claim is always used as their political bargaining position because oppressive power starts with a specific perception about female reality, and then continues reproducing it. The process gives the woman a position of "knowing" her reality-- she is no longer in a cognitive and psychological status but can pinpoint meaningful social actions and can wrest the claim to truth from the powerful.

This epistemic stand is most important because it revealed that, all the while, certain experiences, knowledge, and subjectivities were ignored purely because the claim to truth was the prevailing political bargaining chip of the powerful.

Thus, as pointed out by Hirsch (1995), memories related to personal individual experience become the political locus, because they will always be contested by groups wishing to wrest the strongest political bargaining position. This is directly related to how history is constructed and interpreted.

The claim 'I know' is more than an iteration of a preposition.<sup>5</sup> Austin says, when a person announces that they 'know', they are not only announcing a cognitive and

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<sup>3</sup> Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political", from Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, Ed, (1970), Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation. NY; Radical Feminism

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion, see Catharine A. MacKinnon. (1991), *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press. Pages 83-105

<sup>5</sup> J.L. Austin in "Other Minds" says, "...saying 'I know' is *not* saying 'I have performed an especially striking feat of cognition, superior, in the same scale as believing and being sure, to being quite sure. Just as promising is not something superior, in the same scale as hoping and intending, even to merely fully intending; for there is nothing in that scale superior as fully intending. When I say, 'I know', I *give others my word: I give others my authority for saying* that 'S is P' If you say you know something, the most immediate challenge takes the form of asking, 'Are you in a position to know?': that is, you must undertake to show not merely that you are sure of it, but that it is within your cognizance. In J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock (ed), 1970, pages 99 and 100. "I know" in this respect also refers to what Giddens calls *discursive consciousness*, which refers to our capacity

psychological status, rather pointing to a social act of meaning. Giving public witness or testimony is a collective effort by a community of victims to seize their right to claim truth.

These processes are not uniform because every woman has a different experience. Yet those experiences are the very foundations for a woman to construct knowledge of her social reality, for her to create her own definition of a situation. This is the crux of the entire consciousness-raising process for women, because the female social reality is no easy thing to reconstruct.

There are several reasons. Firstly, women's social reality and situations were defined by oppressive powers who created the ideology of the 'dutiful woman' in the first place.

Secondly, if there is no understanding of the dominant ideology regarding moral autonomy in our culture, also the moral definition of those enjoying special privileges, the women's voice will always be silenced.

This situation of helplessness is supported by the deep-seated view that women are part of the generalized other<sup>6</sup>, borrowing a term from Seyla Benhabib (1995, 1997), which can be freely interpreted as a social community creating their own definition of self-identity for their community members.

People cannot freely interpret their roles but take on the 'shoulds' and internalize them individually. Personal identity melds into these, and this is what caused Ruff-O'Herne to repress her pain for 50 years.

This concept of the generalized other goes hand in hand with what is known as the concrete other, again borrowing from Benhabib (1997), connoting that every rational being hold their own real history and identity, and unique affective emotional situation. In the

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to reflect and give detailed and explicit reasons for our actions. B. Herry, Priyono, *Anthony Giddens, Suatu Pengantar*, 2002, hlm.28-29, or dubbed by Paulo Freire in *Paedagogy of the Oppressed* (1978) as critical consciousness.

<sup>6</sup> The term is derived from George Herbert Mead. Seyla Benhabib uses the term to critique moral solutions that refer to formal and abstract thinking in the debate between Gilligan and Kohlberg. In her study, Gilligan (1982) related the fairness trait to development of the masculine moral reasoning and caring traits to the development of female moral reasoning giving birth to essentialist interpretation. Her basis was differing perspectives in seeing and solving moral dilemmas. In reaction to Gilligan's viewpoint, Kohlberg (1984) stated that fairness and rights on the one hand, and caring and responsibility on the other were not two differing strains of moral development, rather two different orientations not determined by sex. For further reading, see Seyla Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Others: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Moral Theory" in Diana Tietjens Meyers (ed), *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, 1997, pages 736-751 and 754, 22n and Karlina Supelli, "The Female Conception on Morality", posited in a Public Lecture to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Women's Studies Program, Universitas Indonesia, 10 November, 2000.

concrete other lies the conscience. Relations with other people are organized based on the norms of equality and complementary interbeing.

There is a common thread which runs through both the narrative in the book and the documentary: Jan Ruff-O'Herne's struggle to reveal the atrocities conducted during war when as she was passing through Java in 1945, she and thousands of other women were turned into sex slaves to service the lust of Japanese soldiers as they were occupying Indonesia.

The documentary, which has an old-fashioned feel to it, on the surface looks like historical biography. Yet focus is more on Jan's persistence in demanding justice, apparent in her trip to Tokyo, her gathering other Dutch women sharing her fate, her testifying at international tribunals, rather than recording her suffering as a sex slave.

Documentary film in fact have the means to reconstruct events, especially brutal acts of sexual violence against women during wartime. Yet the documentary placed more emphasis on the quest for justice which had created much news attention.

Thus, the book and the documentary were not a call for revenge, but instead was a realization of basic human rights.

## **CONCLUSION**

Jan Ruff-O'Herne's autobiography did indeed "disrupt" the dominant discourse. It weakened political tactics while 'unsettling' patriarchal constructs regarding subjectivity.

Yet to Jan, most important was that the entire proceedings of Tokyo and The Hague were her process for continual healing. Jan Ruff-O'Herne ends her book by saying that despite for a long time being afraid of the consequences of her actions, she had finally arrived at a feeling of peace and love and acceptance (Ruff-O'Herne, 152).

In closing, I wish to posit that feminism and advocacy of human rights have reached a stage where persons can dispute sexual violence, both in war and any other situation.

As Jan Ruff-O'Herne herself said, "Similar things can always happen during any war, anywhere. In a situation where the world never changes, we need to continue reaching out to search for justice."

Yet, assault and sexual assaults happen not only in war. If we wish for change so the mechanisms for justice for victims are made clearer and more accessible, sexual violence in all its manifestations needs to be obstructed.

If we continue to ignore this, the strive for democracy, humanity, human rights, justice, fairness, and all those notions construed in the grand theories to benefit human life remain mere jargon: continuously being spewed as bubbly ideas yet remaining nothing but empty wrapping!

Despite its many lacks in comparison to the book's substance, the documentary film also holds its place for establishing the historical truths of one individual who suffered physical and mental devastation during World War II. The documentary received international recognition, while the book was widely accepted for having been translated into several languages, including Indonesian.

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