

Framing the Forgotten: Beauty, Innocence, and Religiosity in the Representation of Indonesian Comfort Women

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the documentary **Because We Were Beautiful** (2010), which focuses on the testimonies of Indonesian **juugun ianfu** (military comfort women) who experienced sexual violence during the Japanese occupation of the Netherlands East Indies (present-day Indonesia) from 1942 to 1945. Framed through a feminist lens, this study utilizes Cockburn's concept of "war as a continuum" to explore how the documentary portrays the "post-war" lived realities of **ianfu**. The main research questions are: (1) What dominant themes emerge in **Because We Were Beautiful** (2010) that frame the testimonies of the former **ianfu**? (2) How does the documentary represent how these former **ianfu** remember and forget their "post-war" experiences? This study employs documentary film analysis with a constructionist approach to examine how **Because We Were Beautiful** represents the narratives of former Indonesian **ianfu**. This article argues that the documentary serves as a redemptive effort by the Western colonizer (the Netherlands) toward its colonized subjects (Indonesia), while simultaneously vilifying its Eastern colonizer counterpart (Japan). Furthermore, the documentary reflects the Dutch perspective on Indonesian comfort women "under Western eyes"—borrowing from Mohanty's term—by reproducing Western stereotypes of colonized Third World women as physically beautiful, sexually innocent, and religiously devout. This research highlights how postcolonial narratives of gender, memory, and violence intersect in the screen representation of wartime trauma.

Keyword: Indonesian Comfort Women, Postcolonialism, Gender, Violence, War as a Continuum

INTRODUCTION

Juugun Ianfu (従軍慰安婦) or military comfort women (*ianfu* or comfort women) refers to girls and women who were forced into systematic prostitution to provide sexual services for the Imperial Japanese Army before and during World War II (1939–1945). The kanji bears the meaning of women who service the (Japanese) military by offering comfort and solace. However, it is notable that this notion of comfort has long been contested and is considered a euphemism. Ruff-O'Herne (1998), a former Dutch *ianfu*, is among those who explicitly rejects the euphemism "comfort women" as there is nothing warm, soft, safe and friendly (terms that are associated with the term "comfort") entailed in the system. Ruff-O'Herne refers to herself and other *ianfu* as "war-rape victims, enslaved and conscripted by the Japanese imperial forces" (1998, pp. 165–166). Nonetheless, the

comfort women system existed in countries, regions and territories that Japan occupied during its period of imperialist rule (1932–1945) such as South and North Korea, China, Taiwan, Micronesia, Southeast Asia (Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Indonesia) and even in some areas of Japan itself (Kyushu, Nagoya, Hokkaido, Okinawa) (Hicks 1997, 17). This research aims to study the representation of the comfort women issue during the Japanese occupation (1942–1945) of the Netherlands East Indies (present day Indonesia) through a Dutch-made documentary entitled *Omdat Wij Mooi Waren* or *Because We Were Beautiful* (2010).

Because We Were Beautiful is a documentary directed by Frank van Osch, following the journey of Hilde Janssen, a journalist and anthropologist, and Jan Banning, a photographic artist, when they went to Indonesia to track down the survivors of *ianfu* and talked to about fifty of them. The documentary is a part of an overarching *Troostmeisjes/Comfort Women Project*, which also includes Jannsen's textbook “*Schaamte en Onschuld/Shame and Innocence*”, Banning's photo exhibitions and bilingual photobook “*Troostmeisjes/Comfort Women*”. Even though most of the people and parties involved in this project were Dutch, the project mainly took place in Indonesia and invited Indonesian collaborators to contribute. The documentary portrays the memories of Indonesian former *ianfu* before, during and after the Japanese occupation of the Netherlands East Indies. The film serves as a platform for these women to tell the world their stories. In this regard, it influences the changing of stigma attached to Indonesian former *ianfu* and educates society about these (almost) forgotten colonial atrocities.

The central questions guiding this research are: (1) What dominant themes emerge in *Because We Were Beautiful* (2010) that frame the testimonies of the former *ianfu*? (2) How does the documentary represent the ways in which these former *ianfu* remember and forget their “post-war” memories? To explore these inquiries, I draw on Cockburn's (2010) concept of “war as a continuum”, which allows for a nuanced understanding of the Indonesian *ianfu*'s gendered experiences before, during, and after the Japanese occupation. In addition, I engage Hall's (1997) theory of representation to examine how the memories of the former *ianfu* are given meaning, constructed, and communicated through the film's signifying practices.

Before proceeding further with my discussion, I will issue a trigger warning applicable throughout the article as it analyses, mentions and depicts sensitive topics such as war, colonisation, occupation, comfort women, sexual violence, violence against women, rape, prostitution, and sexual slavery. If any of these topics cause distress and discomfort, I encourage the readers to prioritise their well-being and practice self-care as needed.

While there is a significant body of literature on comfort women in general (or notably on Korean comfort women (for example: Min 2003; Chuh 2003; Orreill 2008; Varga 2009), less has been written about Indonesian comfort women. Hicks (1997) provides a broad, detailed picture of how the system was established. His work contains exhaustive accounts of the comfort women system, the differences among the comfort stations in the occupied territories, the summarised stories of *ianfu* across countries (including Indonesia), and the aftermath of the system. While Hicks attempts to analyse the implication of patriarchal society and masculinity upon the system and its operation, he

does not examine the issue from a feminist perspective. Recalling how the comfort system is a form of violence against women during war and armed conflict, comfort women's experiences can only be comprehensively understood through gender analysis. Therefore, I suggest that a feminist approach is required to gain a deeper understanding of the issue by not only focusing on the *ianfu*'s experiences during the occupation, but also examining the preconditions that enabled the establishment of the system and emphasising their "post-war" experiences, as I demonstrate in the discussions.

Furthermore, Lie (1997) underlines how the comfort system is a form of state-sponsored prostitution by Japan. He gives a captivating overview of how Japan, as a state, acts like a pimp to advance its geopolitical aims through the establishment of the comfort division or *iantai* (慰安隊) during the Asia-Pacific War (1937–1945) and WWII (1939–1945), and the Recreation and Amusement Association (RAA) during the US occupation of Japan (1945–1952). However, Lie focuses only on the Korean and Japanese comfort women. In this article, I extend Lie's analysis of the sexual political economy of the comfort system, to the context of Indonesia.

While Mackie (2000) highlights the link between gender and militarism that perpetuates institutionalised sexual violence such as the comfort women system, her analysis is mainly centred on international human rights discourse. In contrast, my research analyses a documentary which is considered a form of victim-survivors' testimonials that Mackie only mentions briefly. Comparatively, Yoshimi (2002) provides rare accounts of soldiers' recollections of the comfort system. The distinctions between the *ianfu*'s testimonies and the soldiers' recollections of what happened in the comfort stations reveals how both parties remember and forget differently. This is an interesting approach considering previous research emphasise the importance of victim testimonies while glossing over the testimonies of perpetrators. However, considering that her book does not offer a comprehensive account of Indonesian *ianfu*, this is one of the gaps I fill in my research.

Building on this focus of the Indonesian experience, McGregor (2023) offers a close perspective of the Indonesian context of the comfort system. By linking the comfort system with pre-existing forms of sexual exploitation and prostitution in the Netherlands East Indies, her work expands the discussions to include both Indonesian *ianfu* and Dutch *ianfu*, two groups of "women who were abused in the same colony, yet remained divided by a crucial postcolonial fracture" (McGregor 2023, 209). Along a similar line, Rahmayna (2022) takes a more contemporary approach to activism related to *ianfu* in Indonesia. Even though Rahmayna stresses how the comfort system was a form of sexual slavery, the military aspect is missing in her definition. This paucity makes it seem like the activism is focused on fighting sexual violence, while neglecting the institution(s) involved in condoning it.

Currently, there are only two journal articles which examine the *Troostmeisjes*/Comfort Women Project: McGregor and Mackie (2018) focus on Banning's photographic project and exhibition, while Rahmayati (2021) centralises her research on individual photos of the comfort women taken by Banning. Hitherto, no one has analysed *Because We Were Beautiful* in their work. This fact contributes to the novelty of my research in terms of the

object of analysis.

Even though McGregor and Mackie (2018) do not directly analyse the documentary, their research provides a broader perspective on the photographic project that is also a part of the overarching Comfort Women Project in which the documentary is included. McGregor and Mackie perceive the issue from the lens of memory politics and conclude that Banning's photobook and exhibitions are a form of the Netherlands' "politics of pity" (2018, p. 140) towards Indonesia after its colonisation. They define the "politics of pity" as an emphasis on creating feelings of pity for the "unfortunate" Other. I suggest that this approach echoes the content and justification for the Ethical Policy¹, introduced by the Netherlands in the late 19th century and early 20th century during the colonisation of the Netherlands East Indies. Through this photographic project and building on McGregor and Mackie's conclusion regarding the "politics of pity", I hypothesise that through *Because We Were Beautiful*, the Netherlands followed the same pattern to fulfil its moral duty. Yet this time, they managed to implicate Japan and shifted the focus of the perpetrator of colonial atrocities which occurred in the Netherlands East Indies from the Dutch to the Japanese.

Conversely, Rahmayati (2021) approaches the object of analysis from the perspective of photography studies, thus offering nuance to the interpretation of the former Indonesian *ianfu* pictures. Rahmayati concludes that the close-up photographs of the *ianfu* showcase personal distance with the observers and invite interactions from the observers. Ultimately, she argues that the subjects of the photographs demand ethical responses from observers. While this analysis of the photographs is novel, Rahmayati seems to take the conceptualisation of the term *juugun ianfu* and comfort women in Indonesia for granted. This lack of a deep understanding of the historical context of the comfort women in the Netherlands East Indies resulted in her analysis mainly revolving around the portrayal of *ianfu* as passive victims of injustice.

Synthesising these discussions, previous scholars have primarily focused on (1) the establishment and general operation of the comfort system, (2) the memory politics of the victim-survivors in postcolonial narratives, and (3) the photographic representations of Indonesian comfort women. However, there remains a notable gap when it comes to the Indonesian context of the comfort women, which is often less-elaborated upon or unexplained. This article seeks to address that gap by foregrounding the representation of Indonesian comfort women in a documentary produced by filmmakers from the Netherlands, a nation with a long and complex colonial history in Indonesia.

In so doing, this study directly engages with the research questions posed earlier by: (1) identifying the dominant themes that shape the representation of the former comfort women's testimonies, and (2) examining how the film visualises *ianfu* victim-survivors' remembering and forgetting within Indonesia's "post-war" context. Through this approach, this article extends existing scholarship by situating the politics of

¹ The Ethical Policy was based on the idea of fulfilling the so-called "moral obligation" and ethical responsibility towards their colonial subjects by promoting the welfare of the native Indonesians (*pribumi*) through economic development, agricultural reforms, and the establishment of schools, hospitals, and other institutions to provide basic education in line with European curriculum and healthcare (Taylor, 1976, p. 640).

representation embeded in *Because We Were Beautiful* about Indonesian comfort women's experiences within the broader discourse of gender, violence, and postcolonialism.

METHOD

This research applies Nichol's (2007) documentary film analysis as the methodology, complemented with a "constructionist approach" (Hall, 1997) to examine how *Because We Were Beautiful* represents the narratives of former Indonesian *ianfu*. According to Hall, constructionist representation is a practice that uses material forms (in this context, the material object is a documentary) not for their tangible characteristics, but for their symbolic function, as they make meaning through the cultural and social systems that allow them to signify (sign-i-fy) (Hall, 1997, pp. 25–26). Accordingly, the analysis focuses on how meanings of *ianfu*'s experiences are constructed through textual signifiers, including spoken language, subtitles, and the interpretation of gestures, rather than through purely visual or technical aspects such as editing or cinematography. These textual signifiers are crucial, as they shape how the *ianfu*'s testimonies are framed, interpreted, and conveyed, influencing how the viewers make meanings of their represented stories.

The analytical procedures involved five main stages. First, the documentary was viewed multiple times. Second, the documentary was textualised (transcribed and annotated) in sequence of scenes from the beginning to the end. Third, the textualised form of the documentary was used to identify recurring textual and narrative patterns. Fourth, key scenes containing recurring narratives were grouped and organised into three dominant themes. Fifth, the findings were interpreted within the constructionis framework to uncover how the film frames particular meanings and representations of Indonesian comfort women's experiences.

In addition to the film analysis, I incorporated the interviews I conducted in 2024 with the people who work on the documentary: the film director Frank van Osch, researcher-journalist Hilde Janssen, photographic artist Jan Banning, and translator Eka Tanjung and Ine WawoRuntu. The purpose of these interviews was to obtain contextual information regarding the film production, translation choices, and aims of creating the film. Yet, it is important to underline that the interviews serve as complementary data to enrich certain parts of the discussions rather than the primary method of analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this part, I discuss the stories of 11 Indonesian former *ianfu* interviewed in *Because We Were Beautiful* by structuring their stories on how these women understood "war as a continuum" (Cockburn, 2010) through the process of remembering and forgetting their time as *ianfu*. The findings are structured into three sections, with each elaborating on the three main themes that appear in the documentary: beauty, innocence, and religiosity. I posit that the documentary represents the 11 former *ianfu* according to what Mohanty (1984) describes as a corresponding set of universal images of Third World Women produced by the West.

I begin by explaining the use of quotation marks for the term "post-war" in this research.

I perceive it as a way of problematising the image and assumptions built into the term. Although “post-war” typically refers to the period after active conflict, feminist scholarship shows that the gendered and structural violence of war pertain beyond the official war endings. Following Cohn and Ruddick (2004) and Cockburn (1998, 2010), I perceive war as a continuum encompassing pre-conflict, active conflict, and post-conflict violences. Further, the conventional definition of war lacks an understanding that war is gendered on practical and symbolic levels, as argued by Cohn (2013).

Considering how the comfort women system is a form of violence against women during war and armed conflict, it is crucial to acknowledge that comfort women’s experiences of war can only be understood through the lens of gender analysis. This is true for Indonesian former *ianfu*’s experiences. Even though the “official war” and the occupation is over and the country gained independence, the *ianfu*’s war has not yet ended. As portrayed in the documentary, the women everyday lives continued within the continuum of violence through social stigma, economic hardship, and internalised trauma of being subjected to rape. Raped women are frequently stigmatised, facing ostracism from their own families and communities, where they may be regarded as tainted and worthless “property” (Turpin, 1998, p. 5). Consequently, war is used to legitimise the institutionalisation of violence.

Because We Were Beautiful is a documentary that portrays how Indonesian former *ianfu* remember and forget the continuum of violence they experienced as subjects of the comfort system. I echo Mookherjee’s (2006, p. 443) understanding that remembering and forgetting are social acts in which “remember[ing] to forget” is necessary so as to maintain collective forgetting. In a society that harbours the trauma of violence, collective forgetting is required to avoid further re-traumatisation, to maintain social stability, and to reconstruct identity that is not defined by traumatic experiences. The film I analyse depicted how the 11 former *ianfu* possessed both individual memory and collective memory of violence.

Framing Beauty: Racial Hierarchies and the Colonial Gaze

The title of the documentary *Because We Were Beautiful* refers to the beauty of the former *ianfu*, and this is a theme that frames the entire film. Upon initially coming across the title, I wondered: why did the filmmakers choose the theme beauty to frame the documentary when there are other more important aspects about comfort women’s experiences that could be highlighted? The documentary concludes the research and interviews with the *ianfu* by centralising beauty as the cause of what befell them. However, being beautiful does not explain the rationale behind the forced recruitment of Indonesian *ianfu* and the establishment of *ianjo* (慰安所) in the Netherlands East Indies by the Japanese Imperial Army.

I argue that the title thus demonstrates the romanticisation of the comfort women issue and an understatement of *ianfu*’s struggles as it suggests that because these women were beautiful in appearance, they were recruited by the Japanese army to be *ianfu*. A historian Van Selm makes a similar argument in her review of the documentary, expressing a sense of annoyance about the title. Van Selm also deems it problematic that the filmmakers linked the former *ianfu*’s appearances when they were young and being chosen to serve

the Japanese soldiers. She further argues that the use of past tense, “were”, in the title infers that these women are no longer beautiful now that they are old (Historiek, 11 July 2011).

The documentary begins with scenes of several *ianfu* talking about how beautiful they were when they were young. Paini started by stating that even though people considered her to be pretty, she herself thought that she was ugly. Kasinem stated that she was only 10 years old when the Japanese army took her to an *ianjo*, she was young and beautiful. Iteng, an *ianfu* from Sukabumi, made a remark: “Maybe we were picked... because we were beautiful. I wasn’t ugly... that’s why the Japanese picked me.” Janssen later revealed that the title of the film was quoted from Iteng’s remark. Nonetheless, these statements underline how the Japanese men possessed sexual access to the “beautiful” colonised female bodies. Having exclusive sexual access to those perceived as the most desired and “beautiful” woman serves as a performative indicator of dominant and heterosexual masculinity (Saraswati, 2011, p. 120). As such, by establishing the comfort stations, Japan made sexual access to colonised female bodies exclusive because only authorised people could enter *ianjo* and use the services of *ianfu*. Through this sexual access, Japan performed² a dominant and heterosexual masculinity over its colonised men as they did not possess sexual access to their own “beautiful” women. This can be seen as an act of emasculating colonised men (Indonesia) and masculinising coloniser men (Japan).

On that note, Wainem spoke about how all the men wanted to marry her wherever she worked because she was beautiful. The concept of the “beauty myth” coined by Wolf serves as a good explanation for this. Women are expected to aspire to embody beauty ideals and standards, while men are expected to desire women who embody them (Wolf, 2002, p. 12). Although it cannot be inferred whether or not Wainem aspired to match the beauty standards at the time, her recollection exemplifies how the men around her desired women who embodied (to put it more precisely, whom they thought embodied) beauty ideals and standards. Additionally, Tasmina revealed how men used to fight over her when she was young. In the middle of the documentary, she showed a black and white photograph of her from 1945. She stressed how she was just a village girl at the time. Banning (the photographer) and Janssen (interviewer) both agreed that Tasmina looked beautiful in the photograph. These examples demonstrate the extent to which the women interviewed place emphasis on their youthful beauty. While it is unclear whether the questions from the interviewer led these women to reflect on their beauty or whether the topic just came up unintentionally during their talk, as Turpin argues, being young and pretty in fact has very little to do with becoming a victim of wartime rape (1998, p. 5).

In addition to the title, the film also implies that these women were beautiful according to Japan’s beauty standard at the time. However, there was a clear hierarchisation among the *ianfu* and Indonesians were ranked low in terms of Japanese preferences. Lie (1997, p. 255) describes how colonial power relations structured these hierarchies, placing Japanese *ianfu* above Korean, and other women from other conquered territories even lower. Hicks (1997, p. 48) expands this, highlighting official recognition of ethnic status

² I use the word “performed” to contextualise it within Saraswati’s argument and her terms of “performative indicator”.

through differential fees, salaries, soldier ranks served, and base assignment; which resulted in Japanese *ianfu* were predominantly sent to safer military bases. Hicks also mentions that the Japanese *ianfu*, of whom most were sex workers, were more mature in age, matched the Japanese standard of beauty, spoke the same language as the soldiers, and possessed more skills in sexual techniques; such traits are more preferred by the Japanese army. It is important to highlight that assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy based on culturally imposed physical standards is an expression of power relations (Wolf, 2002, p. 12).

In this context, the power relations existed not only between the Japanese army and *ianfu*, but were also imposed among *ianfu* of different ethnic origins. Building on these scholars' discussion of the hierarchy among *ianfu*, it seems that the filmmakers' straightforward portrayal of Indonesian *ianfu* as simply "beautiful" lacks a deeper understanding of the perceptions of beauty as racially inflected. Furthermore, if masculinity is contingent upon sexual access to "beautiful" women, then the standards of beauty hold significance for both heterosexual men and women, though for men, being classified as ugly does not inflict the same harm it does on women (Saraswati, 2011, pp. 125–126).

It is not my intention to suggest that the Japanese did not think Indonesian women were beautiful. Rather, I argue that the framing of Indonesian *ianfu* as beautiful in the documentary was a conclusion drawn by the Dutch filmmakers that was informed by the colonial relationship between Indonesia and the Netherlands. This framing is particularly evident in the practice of concubinage during the colonisation of the Netherlands East Indies where many elite Dutch men took "beautiful" local (Indonesian) women as live-in partners, who were referred to as *Nyai* (McGregor 2023, 29). This example reflects a representation grounded in an Orientalist view, in which the male coloniser from the West (the Netherlands) objectifies the beauty of its colonised female subjects from the East (Indonesia)³. Through the filmmakers' reflections and the film's title, they somewhat unwittingly contributed to this view. I argue that the focus on colonised women's beauty in the documentary illustrates how the filmmakers failed to capture the complexities of the comfort women issue due to their limited understanding that racial dimensions and gendered power dynamics shape perceptions of beauty.

Framing Innocence: The Female Body as a Site of Colonial Desire

Innocence is the theme that appears most often in the stories told by the 11 former *ianfu*. What I mean by innocence here is the lack of knowledge and childlike experience when it comes to sexual activities. To explain my argument, I echo the work of Montgomery (2008), who discusses the fetishization of sexual innocence and virginity. However, considering the prominent influence of religion (specifically Islam) in Indonesia, understanding the concept of innocence works within a religious framework as well. This understanding is illustrated by how Indonesian society emphasises women maintaining their virginity until their heterosexual marriage, deeming women who fail to protect their

³ The binary signifier of West and East are used to highlight the power relations that exist between the two countries. I use West and East following Hasan's (2005) distinctions and I use the term Third and First World following Mohanty (1984).

virginity as “immoral” (Sarwono 2012, 48–9).

Even though Montgomery writes in the context of child-sex tourism and prostitution in Thailand, her argument parallels with my case on two levels. First, many of the *ianfu* were taken to *ianjo* when they were very young (for example, Kasinem was 10 years old and Suharti was either 11 or 12 years old⁴); though most of them were teenagers, there were others who could be considered children. For most, their experience with anything sexual was through sexual violence and rape which took place inside the *ianjo*. This example is a form of an institutionalised rape of children. In this way, the comfort system can be perceived as bearing similarities with child-sex tourism brothels which provide sexual services by children. Second, Montgomery traces how foreigners used the services of local prostitutes to the establishment of Rest and Recreation (R&R) during the Vietnam War where US servicemen were entitled to use the services of local sex workers in the locally organised brothels (2008, p. 906). This interaction between the foreign (sexual) service user and the local (sexual) service provider applies to the comfort system recalling how Japan established *ianjo* in the territories they occupied, forcefully recruiting local women to be *ianfu*. Without prior knowledge about sex, the *ianfu* were coerced into satisfying the Japanese soldiers sexually. The accounts of how these *ianfu* remember and forget their experiences of forced intercourse provide a window into understanding how their “post-war” memories were constructed subsequently.

The testimonies given by the former *ianfu* provide various insights into their sexual innocence and trauma, a recurring theme throughout the documentary. Paini’s account stands out as she candidly expresses how she was forced to have sex by Lieutenant Harukuma. The fact that she remembered his name illustrates how hard it was to forget the violence to which she was subjected. A friend of Paini, Sarmi, testified that it was true that Paini had to serve the Japanese. She herself witnessed Paini being tied up and unable to run away. When Janssen asked if she ever experienced the same thing, Sarmi seemed very uncomfortable to answer the question. Wainem made a short remark about the rape she experienced. She said that she was still a child, and she made an analogy that: “If I were cooked, I would not taste good”. Meanwhile, Sanikem revealed that she knew nothing about sex before she became an *ianfu*. She used the Javanese⁵ word “saru” (vulgar) to shy away from Janssen’s blunt question. She also demonstrated her hatred towards the Japanese, using the Indonesian word “benci” (hate) several times in her interview. Talking about the rape they experienced was difficult for these women because they perceived it as something painful and shameful. Collectively, these testimonies emphasise how innocence was shattered by wartime sexual exploitation.

As shown in the documentary, the *ianfu* used strategies to escape Janssen’s questions, mainly withdrawal or avoidance. When being made *malu* (ashamed), women (in the context of Malay societies, in which Indonesia is included) tend to become withdrawn or avoidant (Collins & Bahar, 2000, p. 48). Aside from Sarmi and Sanikem’s account, this strategy is also employed by Kasinem. Kasinem recalled the moment she was

⁴ During the interview, Van Osch revealed that he was surprised to know how young the *ianfu* were when they were taken to *ianjo*.

⁵ Sanikem can be identified as a Javanese by ethnicity.

photographed by the Japanese and informed that she would be sent to Japan. She emphasised how young and stupid she was at the time. At the *ianjo*, she was told to put on makeup before servicing the Japanese. The Javanese word “*wedhi*” (scared) was uttered several times during her interview. Kasinem then proceeded to cry. Despite Janssen’s effort to get an answer, Kasinem kept avoiding to answer the question of whether she had “slept” with the Japanese soldiers. She mentioned that she was already bored and fed up talking about this topic.

Because We Were Beautiful can be classified as a “participatory documentary”⁶. The drawbacks of this type of documentary include the overreliance of witnesses, a simplistic approach to history, and an excessive level of intrusiveness (Nichols, 2007, p. 138). In relation to this, Janssen’s way of pursuing an answer from the *ianfu*, which lacked understanding of how (Indonesian) victims subjected to sexual violence might want to avoid direct questions, demonstrates the downsides Nichols points out. In my interview with Janssen, she disclosed that she was always mindful of the sensitive nature of the subject matter and she strategised ways to ask delicate questions about rape. However, it became evident that at times, Janssen might have been overly insistent in seeking explicit answers, perhaps pushing beyond what the women were ready or willing to share. During our conversation, Janssen also shared that the interviews featured in the documentary were not entirely “raw” or spontaneous. Rather, she guided the women in advance to practice speaking in front of the camera, so that they could be more comfortable sharing their stories. This preparation, while intended to respect the women’s readiness to tell their traumatic experiences, also raises important questions about the extent to which the testimonies were mediated or framed by the interviewer’s expectations and the filmmakers’ representational choices.

Niyem was among the interviewees who cried when elaborating her experience. She said that the Japanese did not care whom they “raped”: “Maybe that’s what they liked, doing it (sex) with children.” In other words, according to Niyem, sex is something that should be done between two adults and not between an adult and a child. Iteng conveyed that on the first day she arrived at the *ianjo*, she was taken to the second level of the building, and was immediately raped. She showed her frustration by saying how “crazy” the whole situation in the *ianjo* was. Iteng said that she was forced to have sex despite not being in love with them. Conversely, Umi shared that she was quite lucky in comparison with her two sisters who were taken by the Japanese before her. She said that her time in *ianjo* was shorter, she only had to serve one man, she did not develop a venereal disease as her sisters did, and that the man did not force her too much. She said that she just did it (sex) randomly since she knew nothing about it. What is striking about their stories aligns with what Montgomery argues: “the stereotype of an innocent virgin being used repeatedly by foreigners in a brothel gives an extremely distorted picture of child prostitution, which fetishises virginity and sexual innocence” (2008, p. 910). The film portray these depictions, through the testimonies of the women, to show the viewers how extreme the situation in

⁶ A type of documentary where the filmmaker acts as a researcher or an investigative reporter who goes directly into the field and engages with the subjects to enact a form of participant-observation (Nichols, 2007, pp. 115 & 119).

the *ianjo* was and how much the *ianfu* had to endure.

One woman named Suharti was rather open to disclosing things in a more detailed way compared to other *ianfu* in the documentary. She said that she was either 11 or 12 years old when she was taken to Rumah Panjang, one of the *ianjo* locations. On her tenth night, the Japanese divided the girls they rounded up into differently numbered rooms. Suharti explained how a “polite guest” came to her room, opened the conversation by asking how old she was and where she came from before doing it (sex). Suharti mentioned how she never felt satisfaction during the sex and that she could be considered dead when doing it. Suharti’s story illustrates the sexual innocence, as described by Montgomery (2008), that lies in, among other things, virginity. Even though none of the *ianfu* interviewed explicitly uttered the word virginity, this is indicative of the internalised patriarchal values that prevent them from talking openly about the loss of virginity through sexual violence by someone who is other than their husband. The concept of virginity in Indonesia is a product of patriarchal culture in which social, cultural and religious factor contributes (Raihana & Ghufron, 2015, p. 271). The next section further discusses what the implications of rape mean for the reputation of these former *ianfu* in a society that places significance on religion.

I argue that there exists an Othering process in *Because We Were Beautiful* through the depiction of Indonesian *ianfu* as women from the East who are innocent about sexual intercourse, place importance on keeping their virginity, and are secretive about sexual experiences. Therefore, the representation of these women in the documentary adheres to one of the universalised images of Third World women listed by Mohanty (1984, p. 352), “the chaste virgin”. This image is contrasted to the generalised contemporary image of women from the West who know more about sex, do not emphasise virginity, and are not reluctant to talk about sex. This narrative is pursued by the filmmakers while glossing over the fact that the sex these *ianfu* experienced was rape.

Framing Religiosity: The Burden of Sin of the Colonised Women

Throughout this section, I articulate how the representation of Indonesian *ianfu* as religious is constructed in *Because We Were Beautiful*. To clarify, the documentary does not implicitly show the religion of each *ianfu*. However, the religious representations in some of the scenes help narrow the possibilities down. During the Japanese Occupation, the majority of the population in the Indonesian archipelago were Muslim (Benda, 1955), despite the spread of Christianity during the Dutch colonial era (Melamba et al., 2019).

Sanikem and Niyem, for instance, wore headscarves during their interviews and photoshoots, therefore it is safe to conclude that they are Muslim (in the case of Indonesia). The image of “the veiled woman” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 352) is thus applicable to the portrayal of Sanikem and Niyem. Tasmina said that it is up to God whether her sin of being an *ianfu* would be forgiven or not: “If I am forgiven, alhamdulillah. If I am not forgiven, alhamdulillah”. Meanwhile, Suharti was either a Protestant Christian or a Catholic, as can be inferred from a scene where she prayed in front of miniature of Jesus in her house. She also conveyed how she often wondered, when left alone with her thoughts: “How could it be like this? Will the God not curse us? Are we not sinful?” Since Suharti thought of her time as an *ianfu* as a sin, her portrayal of praying in the “post-war”

time is then depicted as her way of atoning for her “sin” during the war.

Similarly, Kasinem also thought that being an *ianfu* was a sin. She murmured how she was not their wife, yet she had become their wife (through sex). From this, it can be concluded that Kasinem perceived sex as something that is supposed to occur between a heterosexual married couple and thus doing it with others is sinful. The way these women stressed how their experiences as *ianfu* were sins that they had to erase sheds light on the importance of religion in their everyday life, influenced by a certain socio-religious interpretation of what constitutes permissible sex and sex as a sin.

During the interview, Wainem told Janssen with an annoyed look, which was indicated by furrowed eyebrows and the sound of tongue clicking, after answering her questions: “Don’t take too long. I want to pray (*salat*)”. Wainem then proceeded to go to her room. At first, I thought that this scene could have been cut out during the editing process because it did not add anything to the story that Wainem told. However, after viewing the scene several times, I came to believe that it did speak for something. How the scene was included implies that the filmmakers intended to portray these women as pious and religious. While it is possible that Wainem might have wanted to escape Janssen’s intrusive questions by excusing herself to pray, Wainem is portrayed as worried that she would miss prayer time. For Wainem, being devout is an integral aspect of her “post-war” lived realities. Commenting precisely on this scene, Tanjung, one of the film translators whom I interviewed, explained that Wainem looked like she had wanted to retreat from the interview. However, Wainem did not explicitly say that she wanted to cease the session. As a translator who paid attention to non-verbal signs of communication⁷, Tanjung translated it as Wainem’s way of sending the team away and concluding the interview. This signal was probably not picked up by Janssen.

Drawing upon these examples, I argue that *Because We Were Beautiful* depicts these *ianfu* as religious and pious because they value their religion deeply and use religion as the main lens to perceive what is considered sinful. While it is true that religion also shapes the ability of these women to re-integrate into their own societies, religion is not the only lens. Self-judgement and societal judgement informed by patriarchal values, then deepens their sense of guilt and sin.

It appears that the filmmakers’ minimal focus on religion reflects a broader tendency to frame the *ianfu* primarily through Orientalist tropes of pious Eastern women. I came to this conclusion because of two things. First, in our interview, when asked about the themes that he wished to raise in the documentary, Van Osch did not mention religion as one of them. Second, Janssen’s interviews with the *ianfu* did not include direct questions about religion, such as: How has your experience at the *ianjo* affected your faith? In what ways have your religious beliefs helped or hindered your healing process?

Despite the absence of such questions in the film, the women frequently connected their answers to socially conservative values influenced by their understanding of religiosity,

⁷ Tanjung said that whenever he translates (mostly from Indonesian to Dutch), he does not only translate the language, he also translates the culture. He closely examined the bodily gestures and facial expressions of the speakers. He mentioned that it was such part of Indonesian culture not to say things explicitly.

indicating religion's underlying significance in their lives. This tendency is perhaps what drove the filmmakers to represent these *ianfu* as religious by selectively showing interviews and footages that can be associated with religion and religious practices. Hence, I argue that the film portrays the *ianfu* as religious and represents how their "post-war" lived realities include remembering and forgetting their "sins" through prayers and atonement.

CONCLUSION

Having analysed how the former *ianfu* "remember to forget" (Mookherjee, 2006) their experiences, I find my initial hypothesis about how they understood "war as a continuum" only partially holds. While they connected what happened during the Japanese occupation and its lasting gendered impacts on them afterwards, the women largely did not recognise or reflect on the preconditions that enabled the establishment of the comfort system. Thus, their testimonies were mostly centred on "during" and "after" the war, sidelining deeper comprehension of what factors contributed "before" the war. This point can only be illuminated when we analyse the comfort women issue with a feminist approach to "war as a continuum" (Cockburn, 2010), one that supports an examination of the preconditions that enabled the comfort system to function while also emphasising the *ianfu*'s "post-war" lived realities. Further, the documentary's narrative reveals another dimension: by highlighting the Japanese occupation atrocities, it simultaneously shifts the colonial gaze from the Dutch to the Japanese. This reflects a redemptive effort of the Western coloniser (the Netherlands) to its Third World colonised subjects (Indonesia) by villainising its Eastern coloniser counterpart (Japan). To justify their colonial civilising mission, European colonisers spotlighted local issues to maintain a perceived need for colonial intervention in women's emancipation; this is a strategy that serves to sustain their imperial presence (Hasan, 2005, p. 36). Thus, the film serves as a form of Dutch intervention, framed as support for justice for victim-survivors; but also perpetuates unequal colonial power dynamics.

Importantly, my thematic analyses of beauty, innocence, and religiosity demonstrate how the documentary reproduces Orientalist representations of Indonesian *ianfu* "under Western eyes" (Mohanty, 1984). By reproducing Western universal images of colonised Third World women (Indonesia) as physically beautiful, innocent about sex, and religiously devout, they are constructed as being in need of Western advocacy. These Orientalist representations of women have consistently aimed to portray them as passive, lacking agency, and perpetually reliant on Westerners to advocate for them (Hasan, 2005, p. 30). Consequently, it suggests that the East is incapable of confronting its past, whereas the West can and knows how to address the issues of rape and sexual violence during war and armed conflict. This perpetuates the idea that the West is superior to the inferior East (Hasan, 2005), especially in terms of coping with traumatic histories. This dynamic exemplifies what Hasan terms as "double orientalization" (2005), wherein the *ianfu* are marginalised both as women and as Orientals. This double orientalization in the documentary sustains the unequal power relations embedded in postcolonial discourse, where the comfort women's identities as both gendered and racialised subjects, are instrumentalised to uphold hegemonic Western dominance in historical memory and

justice-seeking processes.

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The author herewith declare that this article is totally free from any conflict of interest regarding the data collection, analysis, and the editorial process, and the publication process in general.

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