Asian Women’s Hidden Transcripts: Theological and Pastoral Perspective
by Gemma Tulud Cruz

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 face in Asia. While globalization has brought positive changes and increased economic competition, coping with the global way of living means that Asian women have to work more, risk more, and, consequently, suffer more due to existing multiple roles in production, reproduction, and community management. So how do Asian women resist their oppressive conditions? The following section tackles this question by examining the ways in which Asian women refuse to completely give in to their oppression. More specifically, it will discuss those strategies that, at first glance, may look negative or weak but are actually potent.

These strategies could be loosely framed under what James Scott calls “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 rumors, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemisms that usually come from folk culture. These, according to Scott, do not contain only speech acts but a whole range of practices that contravene the public transcript of the dominant.1 The strategies that will be explored for the purposes of this essay include silence, humor, and laughter, as well as stories, songs, and dance.

Silence

One frequently underestimated hidden transcript of Asian women is silence. In the Philippines there is the legendary protest of the Cordillera women in defense of their ancestral land from the government’s plan to put up 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

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when there was an understanding that the truck would go back with the equipment did the women and children withdraw.²

As explicitly stated by Agustin the protest was clothed in silence. There was no need for words. This very absence of words, in a sense, made the protest more eloquent. In feminist theological discourse, however, silence is arguably undervalued. This is mainly due, I believe, to the overwhelming association of silence with passivity and lack of agency. First, there is the negative understanding of the concept of silence. In the Western mindset, for example, the emphasis is on self-assertion and active protest against oppression.³ Consequently, silence becomes the opposite of words and protest, and is then reduced to cowardice, passivity, and invisibility even when one is attempting to communicate through it. Moreover, silence is construed as withdrawal, absence, a sign of shame and dishonor, acquiescence to injustice, or resignation to oppression. For example, the persistent negative portrayal of Asian women as silent and silenced or as the long-suffering and passive woman who, consequently, needs to be saved reinforces this devaluing of silence. Susan Mann argues that in reality these images are partly a Western creation peddled out of ignorance and colonial purposes.⁴ Christin Lore Weber also hints at the diminished place of silence by pointing to its traditional association with the ebb cycle or stage of life, which is linked with weakness and, consequently, lack of power.⁵

At the outset I must say that silence is certainly negative, particularly when it is the only or sole response to a problem and, especially, in cases of violence or life and death situations. The question that remains, however, is this: Is there really nothing of value about silence even from a feminist theological perspective? Is there nothing at all that could be positively gleaned and gained from it? Is it irredeemable, for example, from a feminist theological perspective?

I argue as a feminist theologian of Asian descent that when one thoroughly scrutinizes the various ways in which silence is utilized by Asian women, one could see that silence could also be seen as part of resistance. One problem that mainstream theology, including feminist theology, has with silence is that it is devoid of words. Words, particularly in the Western context, are the mode and language of resistance. Silence does not speak, hence it is not resistance. Japanese-American theologian 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.”⁶

Another potentially contentious perspective on silence, particularly in feminist theological ethics, is the tendency to lump or conflate it with gendered physical violence. Without doubt, silence is a problematic response to any form of violence. The problem with exclusively or overwhelmingly associating silence as a response to violence, particularly in intimate relationships, is that it strips and denies silence of its theological possibilities. It is tantamount to silence being theologically silenced. 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

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³ In Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 340, for example, Daly urges women to be active voicing agents, implicitly labeling silence as a non-value.
fear, and its revelatory power beyond words” (emphasis mine). 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.” As Janet Walton 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.” In fact, as Weber muses, “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.”

Interestingly, Brock also points to the Asian roots of the significance of silence. Here lies, I believe, one reason why there is merit, especially for Asian women theologians, to recover silence from its suppression. It does not only have value; it has Asian value. As could be seen with the points Brock raised, women theologians of Asian descent are increasingly reframing 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 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.

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.”

Asian women theologians themselves exemplified this when they employed silence as part of their resistance to the marginalization of women within the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). Mary John Mananzan shares:

8 Brock, “Interstitial Integrity,” 193.
12 Brock, “Interstitial Integrity,” 194.
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 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 (emphases mine).

Karen Kiefer illustrates the biblical theological relevance of silence, even from a feminist theological perspective. In her essay titled “Silent Liberation: Navigating Feminist Theology Through the Christological Lens of Mary of Bethany,” where she redeems “the quiet one,” that is, Mary of Bethany, and presents her as another “voice.” Kiefer contends that while Peter and Martha proclaim Jesus as Messiah with their words in Matthew 16:16 and John 11:27, and Mary does it with her anointing ritual of Jesus, Mary’s silent act is anything but passive. Mary, Kiefer argues, “demonstrates that action speaks louder than words” and that her act “speaks as a bold and prophetic witness of what others attempt with words.” Kiefer notes further that Mary spoke only once in the Gospels, yet her profound action of anointing was the only one that Jesus replicated and presented as a clear model of discipleship and proclaiming the gospel by action (Jn. 13:14-15; Matt. 26:13; Mk. 14:9).

Humor and Laughter

Humor 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 center in Nepal that 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 such 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 oppression 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!

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.

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16 Erlinda Layosa and Laura Luminarias, Sapang Pagyuko Kawayan: A Collection of Jokes from Filipino Overseas Workers (Hong Kong: Asia Pacific, 1992) as cited in Nicole Constable, Maid to Order in Hong Kong (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 175.
But laughter is upheld by folk wisdom as a means of resistance. In phase 1 of a pioneering research on Filipino humor titled “The National Humor of the Philippines: Defining Filipino Humor in Contemporary Popular Culture Forms” University of the Philippines professor Maria Rhodora Ancheta notes how laughter makes the Filipino survive in the sense that it serves as a strategy for reclaiming power for the populace. Using an analysis of popular cultural media, particularly existing studies of early Philippine joke work from nineteenth- to twentieth-century Filipino visual arts and popular literature, Ancheta contends that the texts also demonstrate the strength of the Filipino character, and how laughter is used to reduce conflicts.

Gerald Arbuckle affirms humor as means of resistance in Laughing With God: Humor, Culture, and Transformation. Although humor is a non-confrontational style of critiquing an oppressive situation Arbuckle insists it is effective as it is often able to portray fraud, hypocrisy, and injustice far more powerfully and emotively than the written word. In fact humor’s subversive quality, Arbuckle says, is its most important function as it deflates pomposity and undermines the rigidity of the status quo. It is, in the eyes of Arbuckle, a legitimate way for people who have little political power to draw attention to oppression. When humor pokes fun at the oppressive stringencies and conventions of society, people have the chance to re-imagine alternative ways of behaving. Humor then is prophetic in that it breaks the mold of thinking and provides a designated radically new alternative behavior pattern.

Like humor, laughter is also undervalued in theology. Augustine and Chrysostom, for example, consider laughter as derivative and inessential to faith. Augustine, for his part, says “Human beings laugh and weep, and it is a matter for weeping that they laugh,” while John Chrysostom thinks “it is not for us to pass our time in laughter.” 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. 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, though it appears too many eyes as madness. We hope because it is absurd.”

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 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 theology recognizes and holds in awesome wonder the deep complexity of human experience. 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.

Stories, Songs, and Dance

Stories, songs, and dance are also employed by Asian women as hidden transcripts. For example, a segment on Asia in the documentary The Shape of Water, which chronicles the struggle of Third World women worldwide,
shows women from a village in India telling stories then singing songs about their struggle against the building of a dam. 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 cars, the DHs came up with a song to express their disapproval of the snotty notice.23 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 rice24 and the agricultural work that American colonizers tried to exert 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 ethics since ethics, as dynamic relations between human subjects, cannot be authentically discussed and analyzed without 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.25 In such cases we discover and make visible the other—that is, women—by letting their stories speak. Stories even take on greater significance when they are based on real-life experiences as they creatively describe women’s identities and articulate their positions, questions, hopes, and aspirations.

To be sure, stories that expose gender violence and/or put women as protagonists accord women some power usually denied to them. Stories, for example, are vital to Korean women’s theologies that 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 came out victorious from life-risking ordeals.26

Stories are clearly valuable to those who come from poorer or less educated backgrounds, such as poor Asian women, who do not tend to think in Western metaphysical or philosophical terms, anyway. Stories, for this group, concretize truth and help to give shape to the sort of life the community hopes for. Such a claim could be made in the sense that stories that emphasize or highlight the poor or marginalized become a means of solidifying group identity and fostering hope and commitment.

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 Maria 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.27 Gabriele Dietrich sheds light on this in “People's Movements, the Strength of Wisdom, and the Twisted Path of Civilization,” where she talks about the struggle of the Adivasi people in India against the building of Sardar Sarovar Dam. In the said article Dietrich shares her riveting experience of witnessing young and old women dancing to the songs and slogans of struggle amid pouring rain.28

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.”29 She also makes an explicit connection between singing, dancing, and 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.”30

**Implications for Theology and Pastoral Ministry**

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 is truth to this I rather think that categorically labeling these as accommodation or submission constitutes an impoverishment of theology in general and Asian feminist theology in particular. I think these strategies offer something valuable in articulating Asian women's struggle toward liberation. Unfortunately, these potentially liberating strategies have been rendered less effective today because of their enmeshment in a patriarchal system,31 co-optation by theologians,32 and the uncritical subscription of Asian theologians to Western interpretations.33

Recognizing culture as a site of struggle 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 or, more explicitly, herstory. Theological integrity as well as contextual and creative pastoral work require that theologians and those who work with and among marginal(ized) groups should not fear the scandal of theorizing and making affirmations on cultural practices that are devalued by or contradict the dominant consciousness. Theology and pastoral work, in other words, must be imaginative. In doing this, theology and pastoral ministry does more than pay lip service to diversity, but it celebrates otherness with a steadfast refusal to conflate diverse experiences into false synthesis.

32 The very title of a book on and by Asian women, in a sense, reflects this. See Meehyun Chung, ed., *Breaking the Silence: Theology from Asian Women’s Perspective* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2006).
33 Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, “My Search for Asian Women’s Voices,” *In God’s Image* Vol. 26, No. 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.
The Bible itself is punctuated with silence, dotted with humor and laughter, interjected with song and dance, and filled with stories. 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 center stage and become protagonists, exposing the incongruities of Jewish society in the process. As Klyne Snodgrass points out in *Stories with Intent*, “this 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 neighbor, not the Jewish elite.”

What I am arguing for is for theology and pastoral ministry to see resistance in a spiral or a circle to give women’s hidden transcripts their rightful place. It would serve theology well, for example, to resist thinking in terms of extremes and framing its discourses in opposing categories. To do theology and pastoral ministry 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, humor, 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, for instance, 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. The latter is particularly important for pastoral ministry not just among marginal(ized) groups but among people of different cultures as well. Most importantly, a theology and pastoral ministry that takes these seriously rightly gives a much deserved place to the “everyday theologians” or the people in the trenches who are struggling to live real lives amidst incongruities and injustices.

Truly, there is sound in silence, anger in humor and laughter, and resistance in stories, songs, and dance. Silence speaks, humor 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 deny them is arrogance, to ridicule them is ignorance.

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34 See 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).