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**Yang Guy-ja and Shin Kyoung-suuk: Two Contrasting Women’s Voices in Korean Literature Today**

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Protest against the lot assigned to women alternated with mournful brooding over it in Korean women’s literature since the beginning of “modern” literature in Korea early in the twentieth century.

The first generation of Korean women writers were brave “new” women, who dared to defy the iron rules of Confucian decorum and come before the public. They tried not only to emancipate themselves but to help their oppressed sisters find liberation and selfhood. Na Hye-sok, Kim Myong-sun, and Kang Kyong-ae were among these true pioneers and subversives.

The fate of Na Hye-sok (1896-1946?) explains the circumspection of the next two or three generations of Korean women writers. Primarily a painter, Na wrote short stories in her early twenties calling on Korean women to realize the indignity of their oppressed status and to seek human dignity and self- fulfillment through a hard-working, self-determining life.

She became more famous, however, for her alleged sexual license than as a painter or writer. Her diary shows that up to her late thirties she tried hard to remain loyal to her wifely and maternal roles in spite of the many humiliations and frustrations of an unhappy marriage. It is hard to tell what the nature and extent of her “free love” was, but she came to be known as a shameless voluptuary who used her artistic pretensions as an excuse for sexual abandon. She is believed to have died on the street, a destitute beggar. Her tragic life and death made her name a stern warning to young women with literary or artistic aspirations. “Do you want to become another Na Hye-sok?” was a frequent reprimand to daughters and younger sisters.

For a woman to become a writer required tremendous courage, and to[page 24] survive as one required careful strategies. One such strategy was to limit oneself to “feminine” subjects and viewpoints while making only occasional forays into the “masculine” domain of political and ideological spheres. Not that the “feminine” subjects did not provide women writers with ample material. Korean women in the turbulent period of consecutive national disasters and rapid social restructuring needed spokeswomen for their trials and sufferings, and women writers supplied this need. More importantly, even though women writers refrained from making overt protests, their precise delineation of the lives of women in their familial and communal relationships contained tacit reproaches against the social system that heaps so many wrongs and injustices on women. Ch’oe Chong-hui, Son So-hi, Im Ok-in and many other women writers won recognition as forceful writers and yet avoided social ostracism by making covert, rather than overt, protests.

There were, however, certain women writers who could not and would not disguise their fury and who produced works that jeopardized their “respectability” and “charm” in the public eye. Pak Kyong-li (b. 1927) always confronted the cruelties of life unflinchingly. She started out as a poet but soon turned to prose fiction, and produced works bearing the imprint of her boldness and penetration. In the late sixties, she began the historical saga Toji, or The Land. This sixteen-volume river novel is a chronicle of a whole nation caught in the whirlwind of violent historical transitions. This monumental work has won this dedicated author the grateful respect of the whole nation.

A writer also in her sixties but regarded as more of a contemporary on account of her late debut is Park Wan-so (b. 1931). She exposes human selfishness, hypocrisy, and cruelty so relentlessly that she has been compared to an entomologist dissecting insects under a microscope. Treating mainly contemporary subjects, hers was one of the voices that kept alive the spirit of resistance against the tyranny of power and oppression of convention during the dark years of military dictatorship. She has made up for her late debut with notable productivity—about three volumes of novels and short stories per year on average.

Standing on the shoulders of their literary mothers and elder sisters, the women writers who have emerged in the past two decades have been able to write on the subjects of their choice in the manner they wanted to. They neither limited themselves to feminine subjects, nor did they avoid them. They seem to be writing only to give voice to their vision. Because they have been able to express themselves freely, they have enriched and invigorated Korean literature incalculably. Whereas Korean male writers tend to be overly serious and somber, women writers brought technical versatility, playful humor, lyri- [page 25] cism, fantasy, and psychological penetration. They, more than their contemporary male writers, are responsible for creating the fertile literary soil that is nurturing so many interesting and important works.

In this paper I will look at two women writers who have risen to prominence since the 1980s. They present an interesting contrast in their attitudes toward the lot of women. Even though Yang Guy-ja and Shin Kyoung-suuk both have keen insights into the causes of women’s suffering, their attitudes toward the status of women and the feminine psyche are very different. Yang Guy-ja is as socially concerned a writer as any male writer claiming to be the ‘‘conscience of the age”; Shin Kyoung-suuk, in contrast, is almost exclusively preoccupied with the internal landscape of the feminine mind and heart.

The fact that Yang Guy-ja has won many literary prizes and abundant critical attention is no surprise to anyone. That Shin Kyoung-suuk’s purely “personal” stories are not only popular but winning literary prizes and receiving critical applause, on the other hand, may be something of a surprise to those who know the Korean literary climate. It seems an indication that Korean literary critics are now ready to “enjoy” literature, and to be a little less insistent that literature be the sentinel of social justice. The end of the long military rule brought more than political liberation.

Yang Guy-ja (b. 1955) made an early debut and has been producing works of courageous and forceful social criticism for two decades now. In the dark eighties torn by the Kwangju massacre and the slaughter of student dissidents, Yang Guy-ja’s themes were the same as most serious writers of the day: the persecution fears of powerless citizens, the economic injustices that keep the poor entrapped in poverty while giving the rich unearned millions, the compromises with conscience demanded by survival needs, and so on. Her stories, therefore, were not especially “feminine,” except for the greater fullness of humanity of her characters and greater concreteness of action and dialogue.

“Wonmidong Dwellers” (1987),her second collection of short stories, is based on her experience of life with her neighbors in the cheap housing district of Puchon, a satellite city of Seoul The stories present a total picture of the social, economic, and psychological lives of “small citizens” in an era which ignored their existence.

In the opening story of the collection, a young head of a family, tired of eviction notices and soaring “key money” for rent in Seoul, moves to a cheap apartment in Puchon with his family of mother, pregnant wife and small daughter. His mother offers grateful prayers to the Lord for enabling them to find their “Canaan” at long last, and his pregnant wife, hunched up among [page 26] their furniture and belongings in the freight section of the moving van, extracts a glimmer of hope in the fact that Puchon is adjacent to Sosa, renowned for peaches, the fruit that in Chinese mythology is said to grow in the Elysian fields.

Their humble apartment is located on the Main Street of Puchon, together with a tiny “supermarket,” an electric appliance repair and retail shop, a photo studio doubling as a DP&E shop, a small patch of field cultivated by a stubborn old man using night soil, a hairdressing salon, and a “ginseng tea” room run by a tired woman who used to be a prostitute. The owners of these modest shops and properties, plus some unpropertied citizens, are his neighbors. As neighbors they have petty conflicts of interest, causes for mutual distrust and resentment, but also occasions for finding unexpected decency, even nobility, in each other.

In “I Go to Karibongdong on Rainy Days,” the family’s “new” apartment begins to leak, and an amateur tile-and-plumbing worker comes to redo the bathroom. At first, the family is fearful that the “summertime” plumber may be fleecing them and also may lack the skill to do the job properly. While the plumber exerts himself physically, the couple undergoes mental agonies. At last the plumber finishes the job at sundown and fixes the leaky spot in their roof as a “service” and asks for about a third of the agreed-upon fee, saying that the job turned out to be much smaller than expected. Thus, it is the poorer and more ignorant person who proves to be the more generous and honest. While treating him to liquor afterwards, the husband learns that the coal briquet retailer doubling as a plumber in the summer lives in a one-room basement tenement with his wife and four children and that on rainy days he goes to Karibongdong to demand money from his ex-neighbor and client who moved out of the neighborhood without paying him a cent of the 800,000 won in credit owed to him. The client opened a new and larger factory in the new neighborhood and is apparently doing a thriving business, but continues to put off paying his penurious creditor on one pretext or another.

A serious and talented writer from the beginning, Yang Guy-ja kept maturing, and her touch has become surer and her compassion deeper with the years. Her 1989 story, “Sorrow Is Sometimes an Asset,” is to my mind the best story based on the “Chongyojo” (the nationwide labor union of Korean schoolteachers, who are prohibited by law to form or join labor unions) situation. In this story Yang Guy-ja focuses on the pains of the teachers who were dismissed, as well as the inner conflicts of the former union members who left the union to keep their jobs, and the atmosphere of terror surrounding everyone suspected of unionist sympathies, rather than on the brutal and insidious [page 27] government persecution itself.

Yang Guy-ja’s ultra-feminist novel I Desire What Is Forbidden to Me exploded on the literary scene in 1992 with the force of a bombshell. The novel is based on a somewhat implausible but compelling premise: a young telephone counsellor becomes thoroughly disgusted with all the abused wives who pour out complaints and self-pity on the phone but take no action to amend their lot and instead simply wait for their husbands to reform, as if by some magic. Out of fury and frustration she decides to prove to all women that there is no such loving, caring man as they dream of who can give meaning and fulfillment to their lives. To this end, the heroine, Minju (a plausible enough feminine name, but also a homonym for “democracy”), kidnaps the most popular actor of the day, a man whose gentle, caring look and affectionate smile make all women yearn for such a mate. Her aim is not to make him her sexual toy but to wait and see how he degenerates in confinement, when deprived of all. ego props, and to expose his “real” face to all the women for whom he is a symbol and a promise.

Unconvincing as it may sound, the abduction is carried out rather plausibly in the novel. The heroine, hardened by her father’s brutal abuse of her mother and empowered by the very substantial wealth her abused-wife-turned-illegal-money-dealer mother left her, plots the abduction thoroughly, with the help of a gangster who owes her eternal loyalty on account of the favors his family received from her mother and who worships her into the bargain.

Contrary to her expectations, the actor does not degenerate shamefully nor do the mass media hullabaloo and the police investigation into his past for clues bring to light hidden scandals or misdeeds. Meanwhile, the militant heroine “tames” her helpless captive with sticks and carrots:

“ ...Won’t you give me a hint of the exposures [of your hidden past] to come? I think it might be more piquant to hear it from your own lips.”

“Please leave me alone. I’d rather watch this trash of a movie than talk to you.”

The “trash of a movie” is of course a reference to one of the videotapes I brought him yesterday. I begin to feel more interest in my prey. He is drawing me into a conversation while asking me to leave him alone. That is a sign of change. Paek Sung-ha. He is slowly slipping deeper into my trap.

“Oh, I see you have already played all seven tapes.”

He just tossed back his hair once and kept staring at the TV screen, with-out the least sign of heeding my comment. His handsome profile and the aura of seriousness that surrounds him even in his casual posture form a pleasant tableau. I watch him with the relish of a tycoon enjoying an expensive painting. . . . Actresses sell themselves to millionaires for big cheques. It should be the [page 28] same with an actor. Why not?...

I can make him do it. I can make him do anything. Whatever it is. I talk to the living object of art that I purchased with my time, money, and effort:

“Well, if such movies suit your taste, I can buy you more, any number of them.”

“Don’t talk about movies in that way.”

His tone was fierce. He looked as if I’d splashed him with dishwater.

“Aren’t you an actor, who sells his looks and smiles for big bucks?”

“Don’t think I’d put up with insults on movies. Don’t think that because I’m your captive you can profane my art as well. Movies have been my whole life. Fve never been ashamed of being an actor. Never.”

I like words that carry conviction. Regardless of what conviction. I decide to respect his conviction. He is my captive, but even captives are entitled to their convictions. I prefer my captive to have convictions of his own. So I say without sarcasm:

“All right. I admit that I spoke rudely about your art.”

“Thank you.”

He smiled faintly, the very first hint of a smile since his captivity. His first smile. That means he’s beginning to be tamed.

“If you’re thinking of buying more tapes,” he erased the screen with a touch of the remote control and went on, “could you get me tapes of Ilmaz Guini’s movies? I suppose you know Ilmaz Guini, the renowned Turkish director? I hope you can get Yol, or Sheep, or The Wall.”

He shifted his posture to lean on the wall and enumerated the names of films directed by Guini. Even a Bullet Can’t Pierce Me, Hungry Wolves, The Fugitives, Pain, Enemy, Friend, Tomorrow Is the Last Day, Anxiety, Hope....

The names of the movies were inscribed on my heart one by one as he said them. Even a bullet can’t pierce me. Enemy. Friend. Anxiety. Hope...

When the heroine sends a message to the press explaining her motive for abducting him, the polls show that seventy per cent of the public support her “experiment.” The plot takes several unpredictable turns, until the heroine is slain by her accomplice only minutes before her capture by the police. The book’s final message is not a call for militant struggle but for reconciliation. However, the book, which the author says burst out of her head in such torrents that her typing fingers were hardly able to keep up with it, develops with such vigor and urgency that it seems only natural that its author came to be regarded an arch-feminist.

The novel became a great hit, selling half a million copies in a country of 40 million people. The author thereafter tried rather to live down that success by diversifying her themes, which she was well able to do as she has broad [page 29] knowledge of and close acquaintance with so many occupations, crafts, and types of human beings. She even wrote a sentimental love story featuring ghosts and supernatural interventions, which was a phenomenal success both as a novel and later as a movie. At the moment she is gathering her strength for another major work. Korean readers have great expectations of this author who has already given them so much edification and enjoyment.

Shin Kyoung-suuk (b. 1963), in contrast, began with “feminine” subjects and stayed with them. It is no exaggeration to say that Shin reinstated the romantic love story as a legitimate branch of literature. A typical Shin Kyoung-suuk character is a woman aching from the memory of a loss of, or longing for, someone out of her reach, or about to make a renunciation. The impending or remembered loss has more power over her than the actual reality surrounding her. Social and political realities sometimes impinge on the lives of Shin’s characters, in the form of a brother evading police arrest or returned as ashes after being forcibly drafted into the army. Shin, however, simply notes the loss and pain, rather than making political points. The pervasive atmosphere, then, is resignation and the will to aestheticize suffering.

Shin Kyoung-suuk, therefore, could easily have been an anachronism in this age of militant feminism and political consciousness, but her very passivity and resignation, aided by her lyricism and tenderness, secured her a place in the hearts of readers- Even though as male-centered as any culture in the world, Koreans have long had a special empathy for feminine suffering as portrayed in literature. In the figure of an abandoned, neglected, and forgotten woman Koreans saw emblematized all the wrongs and mortifications they suffered at the hands of Fate and history. Shin shows women accepting their lot without protest and almost defining themselves by their suffering. It must be reassuring for men to think that there are (still) women who accept their desertion without protest. Even more significantly, male readers seem to identify with her women, and find something peculiarly soothing in their complete passivity. It is a relief for readers not to be urged to take up arms against political abuse and social injustice, which was the message of the socially conscious writers for over three decades or more. And Shin Kyoung-suuk’s lyrical prose is an enchantment after so much harsh rhythm and raw indignation of protest literature.

In her first short story collection, A Winter Fable (1990), the author is very much bound to her childhood and hometown. More than half of the stories in the collection have central characters who are suffering as a result of tragedy in the family. The tragedy that traumatizes and disrupts the families is most often the death of a son who was full of promise. It could also be the dis- [page 30] appearance of a son, or the elopement of a daughter, or it may take the form of an auto accident that cripples the father and turns him from an affectionate head of the family into an insanely jealous husband. The focus of these stories is the effect of these tragic incidents on the remaining family members, and the guilt and pain suffered by the daughter (girls on the verge of womanhood) on account of the devastated parents. The hopelessness of a daughter ever replacing the son is underlined again and again. Having strong attachments and fearing rejection, the daughters suffer terribly. For the readers, the evocative country scene into which the pains are interwoven, and all the daily household chores in a farmhouse, so lovingly carried out or remembered, give the suffering a dream-like quality and imbue it with poetry.

In all of her stories, the present and the past, often in many layers, constantly intersect. The present and the past complement each other. The present fears of rejection, for example, are made sharper by the memory of a rejection in the past. A facial expression of a friend or a lover recalls a similar expression once glimpsed on a parent or a childhood sweetheart. Thus, there is a strong sense that life is repetitive, that all of us are on a wheel that keeps inexorably spinning.

Her second collection, entitled Where the Organ Used to Stand (1993), shows that the author had matured remarkably in just three years. Her range and subject matter have grown much broader. Her verbal magic and her eye for poignant details have grown even finer. The scenes from her childhood in the country continue to give her stories lyricism and charm as well as rich pathos. Most importantly, her characters are much more diverse, and though still not masters or mistresses of their own destinies, at least have more force of character. Lastly, though not yet a political or sociological writer, Shin exhibits a much greater political and social awareness.

“Women Playing Shuttlecock” is an indictment of male sexual violence in effect if not in intention. A woman working at a florist’s falls in love with a photojournalist who came to her shop to take pictures of African violets for the women’s magazine he was working for. She had not taken much notice of him initially but she falls for him hopelessly when, chancing to meet her a year later, he casually drops a flirtatious compliment about her beautiful eyelashes. After trying in vain to drive him out of her mind, she dials the journal-ist’s office and ends up inviting his office mate, who answered the phone, to join her at a coffeeshop. The man, finding out that she didn’t call him out to make love to him, drags her down to the basement of the building and brutally rapes her. The rape she suffers is emblematic of what happens to a woman in a male-dominated society when she cannot ignore men’s casual passes and has[page 31] an imperfect control over her sexual urge.

In “Where the Organ Used to Stand,” the heroine is in love with a married man. In her letter to him she cites, as the reason for her refusal to flee with him abroad, her memory of her father’s mistress who came to her house to supplant her mother and thoroughly enchanted her with her beauty of face, words, and heart. But the woman left after ten days, after the children’s mother came for a visit, not to drive her out or to confront her but just to give her breast to the baby:

It was not that Mother said any rough words to her. Mother just took the baby down from the woman’s back. Was Mother tired of staying away? Or was it her way of enduring? Mother gave her breast to the baby without saying a word. Mother’s breasts were swollen fearfully, and blue veins throbbed on them. After the baby suckled the breasts for a while the veins subsided. In the spring sun mother silently suckled the baby and the woman just stood on the veranda looking down at the yard. Then Mother wrapped the sleeping baby in the quilt, put it down on the wooden floor of the veranda, and came down to the dirt floor where I was squatting. I might have been holding in my hand a piece of the rice cake the woman baked for us. Tears fill my eyes as I recall that moment. Mother undid the buttons of my jacket that were buttoned wrong, buttoned them up right, shook out the earth in my rubber shoes lying nearby, gazed into my eyes for a moment, and went away. In all, she stayed less than half an hour.

But the woman left us the next day. Before leaving, she swept the yards clean, even the back yard. I was wearing a necklace of peach blossoms. She pulled me aside and said, “Lunch is on a tray in the room. The baby has just fallen asleep. Change his diaper when he wakes up. And if your father looks for me, just tell him you don’t know when I left. You understand?

The little girl runs after the woman, to give her back her toothbrush, and the woman tells the girl through her tears, “Don’t become like me when you grow up.”

Since the stories in her second collection were more solid in structure, more haunting and poignant in atmosphere, and had better-defined characters, it was impossible not to be disappointed by her first full-length novel, Deep Sorrow (1994), a two-volume meditation on the perversity of fate that seems to find amusement in frustrating and torturing men and women. The resignation and helpless woes of the heroine of Deep Sorrow presents a glaring contrast to the militant feminism and defiant determination of Yang Guy-ja s heroine in I Desire What Is Forbidden to Me. Unso, the heroine of Deep Sorrow, is a woman who regards love as something that is beyond the human[page 32] power of resistance. She suffers from her unrequited love for Wan, a childhood pal who used to love her but has come to take her for granted and is pursuing an older woman who could give him a big career break. She is in turn loved by Se, another childhood pal who pines for her in much the same way she pines for Wan. Because she is a helpless thrall to her love, she lets herself be used by Wan for diversion and doesn’t even reproach him for his treachery and cruelty. Se, in turn, yearns for her so much that he willingly offers himself as a solace to Unso in her loneliness and pain. After Wan contracts a marriage of convenience with his female boss, Unso and Se marry. Unso continues to pine for Wan even after her marriage to Se, but the situation begins to change when Wan realizes that he still loves Unso and frantically tries to draw her into an adulterous relationship with him. Unso on her part comes to appreciate the devotion and loyalty of Se and grows to love him just at the moment when Se begins to tire of his mortifying position and turns his attention elsewhere. The end is disaster and suffering for all three main characters and most of the secondary characters. The utter passivity of the heroine is frustrating, and the lack of authorial moral judgment on the two male characters who destroy the heroine with their love and betrayal is disturbing, even though they are familiar aspects of Shin’s works. One expects more moral sinew and fiber in a novel, and some willpower and autonomy in its heroine, even in the work of a writer who tends to look upon human beings as puppets at the mercy of outward accidents and inner impulses. The novel, however, is worth reading for the many embedded stories, and the beautiful, lyrical prose. It was a phenomenal commercial success.

After her novel it was not clear where she would go next, and there was some misgiving that she might become repetitive. Soon after the novel came out, however, the author surprised the world in 1994 with the first installment of her autobiographical novel, A Desolate Room, which contained the revelation that she had been a factory girl. Shin Kyoung-suuk is the last woman one would associate with factory work. It is impossible to imagine a person so close to the earth and with such delicate sensibilities chained to a machine. It turns out, nonetheless, that Shin had been a factory worker for three years, and her autobiographical novel gives an honest first-hand report of the life of a factory worker, something which many Koreans ardently yearned to have.

The author says that the reason she has not treated that period of her life in her fiction was not shame but fear―fear of reopening the wound, fear that the pain would engulf and paralyze her. The pain comes through vividly, but Shin as an author shows restraint and control, so the story is not a gloomy tale of woe but one of endurance.

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The shorter works that have come out since show that Shin’s power to recreate emotions, both delicate and intense, and the beauty of her haunting prose are undiminished.

Modernization throes and the long political uncertainties and oppression have put pressure on Koreans to be on the alert against injustices and wrongs, to be politically and socially awake. Such an attitude, however, is antipathetic to the basic character of Koreans. Shin Kyoung-suuk, having no political or social agenda, perceiving history and political reality purely as a form of personal pain, and submitting to that pain with such throbbing sensitivity, made it impossible for Koreans not to fall in love with her. For now, nobody wants her to be any different. Being only 35,however, she will have to develop and expand as a writer. There is no doubt that she will, with the help of her honesty, keen insight, consummate artistry and remarkable intelligence which are evident in all of her stories.

It has taken almost a century for women writers to secure the freedom to write just as their hearts and minds dictate. Utilizing their hard-earned freedom, women writers are raising Korean literature to new heights, injecting charm and warmth and reinforcing seriousness and power.