

The Past and Present of Women's Literature

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Abstract

This essay aims to consider the limitations and possibilities of women's literature. Although women's literature played an enormous role in the renaissance of Korean literature, it was ghettoized into a literature of the biological woman. Especially Sin Gyeong-suk and her admirers confine women in the gendered space of the kitchen and thus keep women's literature relegated to a subgenre of literature.

We cannot ignore the fact that women's literature of the 1990s, in criticizing the male-dominated literature of the time, asked questions about literature itself. Nevertheless, its power to provoke has been remarkably weakened by a market logic that commercializes the works of female writers and by the attempt of male critics to replace subversive women's literature with the image of home and maternity.

However, new paths in women's literature are being explored through the recent works of Cheon Un-yeong, Hwang Byeong-seung, and Kang Yeong-suk. They reposition women and femininity to the point where conventional lines between masculine and feminine blur while deepening and enlarging the scope of Korean literature. Cheon reveals a reversive gender consciousness through phallic women and feminine men; Hwang summons innumerable in-betweens ranging from man to woman by showing the performative and subcultural gender identities that constitute male and female; and Kang suggests a conceivable aesthetic of femininity by thinking of lives of women on the boundaries, especially in terms of the female body and sexuality.

Keywords: women's literature, femininity, gender, plural genders, gender ideology, dichotomy, women's body, phallic women, borderline, border crossing, politics of identity, aesthetics of femininity

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I Am Not a Female Writer

Femininity is a recurrent theme in discussions of the literature of the 1990s, especially women's literature. It has functioned as a standard for aesthetic evaluations of women's literature after the 1990s, with collateral themes such as maternalism and feminine writing. However, what is implied by femininity is so diverse that it cannot be summarized into a single term. In addition, the concept has been indiscriminately used in extremely different ways, ranging from deprecation to liberation of women. This sort of conceptual confusion is also found when employing the concepts of maternalism and feminine writing, but femininity in particular is used without its signification or relationship to other concepts being clearly defined.

As a result, the concept of femininity has become a cliché thoughtlessly used by those who do not carry out any serious research on feminist literature or even those who are anti-feminist. However, the more easily the concept of femininity is accepted as a cliché, the vaguer the meaning becomes. Eun Hui-gyeong, who is considered representative of the genre of women's literature in the 1990s, makes the following self-negating remarks, which suggest how femininity or women's literature has been misunderstood:

I neither intend to talk about femininity nor represent it. My attitude remains the same regardless of whether femininity refers to a feminine sentiment or a feminist orientation. My novels have been interpreted as a "search for the female self," and therefore were not evaluated as the tiger at which I was aiming, but as a lion.

Of course, I have written stories with female protagonists. I have used a female narrator, a third-person narrator, and a male narrator, but the subject is always female regardless of the narrator. However, those women do not represent all women; rather, they represent humankind.

I am not concerned with foregrounding femininity. I am only concerned with human beings. What is the essence of human relationships, how do they define life, how is tension between self and other, including other people and society, revealed? Through these

questions, I try to show the irrationality of life that lies beyond cause and effect, human beings as limited beings, and the warmth and wounds of their suffering.¹

Through Eun Hui-gyeong's self-negating manifesto, "I am not a female writer," we can perceive how femininity and women's literature have been used in a gender-biased manner, to the point that they have even been rejected by women writers themselves. In other words, femininity and women's literature have been judged based on the biological sex of the writer, i.e., *female*, and not viewed as an aesthetic principle of literature. Behind this misreading of women's literature lies a view that regards femininity and women's literature as "trivial" literature, pertaining only to biological women and insufficient for exploring and elucidating the essence of human relationships. Even though women's literature is welcomed as an alternative literature in the pursuit of *private/micro/internal/female* discourses after the collapse of *public/macro/external/male* discourses, this dichotomy is inherently limited as it forces us to consider women only in terms of their relationship with men, by reiterating the schema of biological discrimination or sex.

The boundary of women's literature paradoxically becomes narrower when autobiography, confessional writing, and *bildungsroman* are defined as feminine, and excessive aesthetic significance is attached to them. In fact, autobiographical writing aestheticizes femininity and highlights one specific aspect of feminist writing. However, we cannot deny the fact that the autobiographical writings of Bak Wan-seo, Kong Ji-yeong, Sin Gyeong-suk, Kim Hyeong-gyeong, and Eun Hui-gyeong regardless of their aesthetic achievement were gendered and privileged as feminine, thereby preventing sincere inquiry into women's literature and reproducing a vulgar understanding of women's literature. Women's literature first used the images of separation and isolation ironically, by emphasizing the confined charac-

1. Eun (1999, 349-350).

teristics of femininity. However, it has become, in consequence, ghettoized as a literature of one's own.

In this context, the self-negation of Eun Hui-gyeong as a female writer appears to result from the anxiety that her own literary outcome would be defined as narrow and exclusive by means of the one-sided qualifier of female. Besides, commercial success most women writers achieved in mainstream literary circles² has strengthened the traditional literary prejudice that identifies women's literature with popular literature, which deals with sex, love, and marriage in a sensationalistic way without any aesthetic filter. Therefore, women's literature, which electrified Korean literature in the 1990s and led the mainstream literary discourse, is destined to be criticized as mere fashion and disappear without a word. This may be why it is no longer attended to in the millennium. Currently, no up-and-coming female writers are advocating feminist literature, and literary critics are no longer paying attention to women's literature.

Has women's literature, then, become sub-standard, outdated, and driven out of business? However, has women's literature ever been taken seriously in terms of aesthetics or politics? The blame should not be put on women's literature itself but on the improper approach to it. Discussions of the novels of Sin Gyeong-suk, especially *Oettan bang* (An Isolated Room), which gained commercial success as well as an enthusiastic critical response in two leading literary journals, *Changjak-gwa bipyeong* and *Munhak-gwa jiseong*, vividly reveal the limitations placed on women's literature in the 1990s. In consequence, I suggest that women's literature of the 1990s fell into the grammar of conventionality and that the conventional grammar repeated and reproduced trite and fixed ideas about femininity and women's literature, by concentrating on discussions of Sin Gyeong-suk who was appreciated as the most feminine writer of the 1990s.

2. Despite enormous commercial success, the novels of Jeon Gyeong-rin, Kong Ji-yeong, and Kim Hyeong-gyeong have not been considered in literary magazines since 2000. This highlights the changing status of female writers and women's literature.

We can consider a possible revival of women's literature in the 2000s only through this detour of negation.

Women's Literature in Trouble

Motherhood has been represented by such hackneyed symbols as the sacrificial mother, yearning for home, and nostalgia for the past. Therefore, motherhood has customarily been seen as an origin, essence, or the telos of a woman. Likewise, we may call motherhood the assembly area of myth, convention, and prejudice regarding women, as it is the last battlefield for feminists. It is the erosion of the maternal myth that best characterizes the works of women writers in the 1990s. It may be the reason why family novels written by women during this period frequently dealt with conflict between mother and daughter. Now, motherhood came to be accepted not as a myth transcending the generations but a social construct related to discursive and ideological changes. However, most critics still think of motherhood as the ultimate manifestation of femininity and the final goal of feminine identity. The works of Sin Gyeong-suk are the very nucleus of the motherhood discourse. In the 1990s, critics referred to these works as the "Sin Gyeong-suk phenomenon." Paik Nack-chung, Kim Myeong-hwan, Yeom Mu-ung, and Yun Ji-gwan, who were male critics from the nationalist, *minjung* literature camp, praised above all the feminine qualities, such as a sense of maternal care, presented by female characters in her writing.³ The following passage illustrates this evaluation of the femininity or maternalism embodied in the works of Sin Gyeong-suk:

When Sin Gyeong-suk is faced with intolerable grief or anguish, she returns silently to her desk and seems to write stories like a mother serving food. For a mother, the kitchen is "the one and only place where she can withstand the brooding sadness in her heart" and is

3. Paik (1997); Kim Myeong-hwan (1996); Yeom (1995); and Yun (1996).

also a holy place that holds the secret pleasures and prohibitions of life; for Sin Gyeong-suk, writing stories seems to be the same as that kitchen. . . . The dominant consciousness in her stories is pervasively maternal. Recent responses to her stories correspond with the secret need of this age to rest one's head on a mother's knee and recover a sense of comfort and relief. . . . Running the risk of generalization, I argue that the rise of female writers like Sin Gyeong-suk is due to the longing our generation feels for a rebirth through maternalism.⁴

According to Rita Felski, men are degraded into split beings because of the contradiction of modernity, even though they are the subject of the modernizing project in the discourse of modernity. Motherhood is figured as the ultimate symbol of redemptive totality.⁵ This old-fashioned, gendered rhetoric, which replaces modernity/post-modernity with men/women, is echoed by those who take comfort in the stories of Sin Gyeong-suk. Sin Gyeong-suk's sacred place is the kitchen-like story, just as the mother's sacred place is the kitchen. The kitchen story meets the secret needs of men, who want to be given comfort and relief, and serves them as an angel giving comfort, using the commonplace image of a mother. Paik Nack-chung's critique of *Punggeum-i itdeon jari* (Place That Once Had an Organ) is not far off. He points out that a series of conflicts, among which a woman in love with a married man gives up on the idea of running away with him, are accompanied by moral awakening. He refers to mothers in the hometown as beings that evoke moral awakening.⁶ According to this logic, in the end, the immoral acts of an adulterous woman can only be stopped by the maternal instinct.

However, the maternal space, as symbolized by the kitchen in the stories of Sin Gyeong-suk, becomes dematerialized as a mythic space separate from reality, overlapped with other literary arguments

4. Kim S. (1996, 110-111).
5. Felski (1998, 94).
6. Paik (1993, 109).

connecting Sin Gyeong-suk's writing with privacy or interiority. Particularly in *An Isolated Room*, the well presents itself as the symbol of private female myth; most critics interpret the well, into which the narrator drops a rake, as a symbol of the wounded interiority of an individual. Thus, diving "into the well of interiority" in the novel was appreciated as a symbol of profound self-reflection and contemplation in terms of the "pursuit of private authenticity."⁷ Bak Hye-yeong's essay synecdochically clarifies aspects that connect the interiority of Sin Gyeong-suk's writing with the private world:

Sin Gyeong-suk's writing is the apex of individuality formed by the literature of the 1990s. The space of individuality displayed in her works is imagined as a closed room, which suggests the minimal existential space where an individual isolated from the world of others or hurt by relationships with them can live. Women in her stories usually experience immense desperation and injury stemming from relationships with others and conjure a sense of a fractured, self-imprisoned life. They appear alone, staring into the existential abyss of life.⁸

Interiority is an important theme in the works of Sin Gyeong-suk, as can be noted in the statement, "the basis of all the themes in Sin Gyeong-suk's stories is concern for the interiority of an individual."⁹ It is not a psychological space where "the mind operates independently from external reality,"¹⁰ but an ethical space where the bleeding individual turns to contemplation instead of blaming others, with the aid of self-reflection. Namely, private space or interiority becomes a holy space of one's own, where an individual can more deeply reflect on life, as well as a domain where s/he can protect her/himself from others.

This symbolic space is gendered as a privileged space for women

7. Seo (2005, 118-119).
8. Park (1995, 31).
9. Hwang J. (2001a, 123).
10. Hwang J. (2001a, 123).

only, like kitchen or well, formalized in the works of women writers. It is why interiority is considered a private world for women writers of the 1990s. The status and characteristics of women's literature in the 1990s have been shaped by the framework of "interiority equals privacy equals femininity" on the antipodal axis of grand discourse of the 1980s. In other words, critical advocacy of women's literature took place in the context of support for the new literature of the 1990s and in the critique of the literature of the 1980s, which lost its voice and influence in the socio-political context of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the consolidation of capitalism.

Hence, it is understandable that women's literature is no longer discussed in the 2000s, following the weakening of literary discourses of the 1990s. In turn, we can be sure that the excessive vitality of women's literature in the 1990s was merely "the bubble exaggerated over the utility"¹¹ and was provoked by critical discourses of the 1990s, which made use of and distorted it as an auxiliary concept to explain changes in literary discourse or interiority. It seems natural, then, that femininity or women's literature has not renewed aesthetic tensions or revised feminist discourse but has become a rhetoric that recycles fixed notions of women.

It is ironic that the well of motherhood and interiority emerged from the uncritical repetition of conventional and traditional ideas of women, femininity, and women's literature. According to Hwang Jongyon, women's literature became a legend cursed to disappear with history, or a "well of legend."¹² That is, they drowned them-

11. Kim MiHyun (1999, 331)

12. Hwang J. (2001b). In this article, he states that the imagination of the well represents the tradition of female culture and a pleasant vision of feminine creativity. It is meaningful to find out the source of feminine creativity and imagination from the traditional female culture or the well; on the other hand, this critical attempt does not represent the improved interpretation of femininity and maternity, and is no more than the repetition of conventional mother image formed under patriarchy. Changes of critical discourses in women's literature are evident in recent debates; especially, the isolated room of Sin Gyeong-suk is reevaluated as "the place where the patriarchy dominates with the form of warmth." Kim Y. (2002).

selves in the well of interiority. As a result, the stereotypical metaphors of *kitchen* and *well*, which were used to signify women's literature of the 1990s, have shifted and reduced women's literature to a marginal subgenre by limiting it to a literature of women's own. In this regard, female or feminist (including male) critics who have passionately advocated for it cannot be exempt from responsibility. Paradoxically, their critical attempt to support motherhood and interiority as a strategic base for women's literature only prolongs and fortifies preexisting notions and stereotypes.

However, prejudice and misunderstanding of femininity and women's literature have continued up to this time. Critics of *kitchen literature* and *well literature* are guilty of misreading and critical prejudice. Subsequently, they enclose women's literature within a restricted category and forbid the possibility of productive literature, as well as limit discussions of femininity and women's literature to the dichotomy of biological sex. It may be difficult to go beyond the patriarchal dichotomy of masculinity and femininity and talk about women"; in this respect, there might be no "outside of masculine discourse."¹³ Nevertheless, alternative women's literature begins with the attempt to deconstruct this schematic and normative dichotomy. This attempt should not be obsessed with the singular gender but should conceive of the possibility of plural genders. Also, it should not assign private space to women and imprison them there, but should discover alternative feminine domains. In the following sections, the paper will examine the new literary achievements, and then describe the topography of women's literature in the 2000s, focusing on the works of Cheon Un-yeong, Kang Yeong-suk, and Hwang Byeong-seung.

13. Hwang J. (2001b).

Beyond Gender Dichotomy

Recently, the works of female writers have diverged in too many different directions to be easily categorized, as in the case of women's literature of the 1990s. Some of these works are remarkable for having erased any traces of conventional gender difference. For example, the immature characters that refuse to grow up in Bae Su-a's 1990s novels are transformed into homosexuals who are freed from the material, snobbish world in her 2000s novels, focusing instead on pure spirit.¹⁴ In these novels, homosexuals are not depicted as sexual minorities isolated from society but as de-gendered beings without conventional male and female gender differences. Yet, the elimination or concealment of gender difference, as displayed in Bae Su-a's characters, is a novelistic device that speaks for the separated and independent way of life of an individual ego, distant from totalitarianism, rather than direct objection to the existing patriarchal gender ideology. The following paragraph from *Dongmulwon kinteu* (Zookind) replaces the preface and explains the methodology and principle of writing:

Though it is unusual, this novel had a clear goal in mind. This was to leave the gender of the main character undetermined. In a passive sense, s/he can be either man or woman. If we read into it a little further, it is a deliberate castration of sexual identity. If the gender is left undetermined, the character's social position, emotional state, reactions to specific events, and the unconscious identification the writer or reader feels when they read the story will all be blocked. Moreover, because it is difficult to establish self-consciousness, which is regarded as very important, the character differs greatly from typical, more attractive protagonists. Definitely speaking, a de-gendered human being is currently not looked at favorably. Nevertheless, the reason I did not define the character's

14. The representative novel featuring homosexuals is *Eseiseuteu-ui chaeksang* (The Desk of an Essayist).

gender is because I wanted to negate those emotions that are naturally conferred by sexual identity.¹⁵

For the writer, the conventional gender division is seen as a naturally accepted standard. Accordingly, this fixed concept of gender "is seen as the most ignorant and deserving of contempt"¹⁶ for the writer, who has rejected the socially accepted and stereotypical values that function as an ideology for the majority. In this regard, Bae Su-a's de-gendered characters mock and ridicule Korean society and culture, which are dominated by a lack of individuality and majority rule, rather than being aware and critical of still-pervasive male-centric values. This is why Bae's writings cannot be considered feminist literature, even though they could be. This idea becomes clearer when we see the degendered characters that appear in the works of new women writers. Although such non-traditional characters distance themselves from the stereotyped characters in previous novels, they are also problematic because they can lack feminist awareness or can even be interpreted as anti-feminist.¹⁷

In Cheon Un-yeong's novels, as well, the elimination or reversal of sexual difference appears, especially in "Neukdae-ga watda" (The Wolf Came)¹⁸ in which the wolf, an animal that is ordinarily seen as a male symbol, is invested with maternal characteristics, thus becoming a new sexual signifier. Furthermore, the grotesque and ravenous female characters that frequently appear in her stories are very unusual for Korean literature. In most of her stories, the female body is described as distorted and abnormal: a girl with an enormous head in "Wolgyeong" (Crossing the Border), a grandmother who looks like a carnivore in "Sum" (Breath), a wife with a wrinkled face in

15. Bae (2002, 5-6).

16. Bae (2002, 6).

17. For example, the little boys in the short fiction of Kim Ae-ran are gender-neutral or degendered. Because they try to discover the origin of life and writing in their absent father, they might be thought of as characters loyal to the paternal genealogy that connects father and son.

18. Cheon (2004).

“Haengbok gomulsang” (Happy Secondhand Shop), the woman with a hunchback in “Poong” (Embrace). In addition, the women are so violent that they beat their husbands, exploit their grandsons, or even take men’s lives. These qualities of coarseness, carnivorousness, and violence have been gendered as masculine and have never been ascribed to women, at least in Korean literature. In this respect, we can call Cheon Un-yeong’s female characters “phallic women.”¹⁹

However, on the one hand, Cheon’s female characters who possess masculine desires take on conventional masculinity as pseudo-males, and on the other hand, as deformed characters who cannot fulfill their masculine desires, they are ambiguous beings who fear the punishment of the symbolic order at the same time that they disturb that order. “Crossing the Border” clearly illustrates this. The narrator is a twenty-year-old woman who stopped growing when she was thirteen. Less than 150 centimeters tall, she has a large head like a hunchback. She has lived alone in the house since her parents left, and survives on half the wages of the woman she hires. Her only pleasure is stealing glances at the woman’s body:

While the woman gathers up her skirt and sits on the floor to pick up strands of hair with her fingers, I steal a glance at her full breasts where they stick out of the top of her shirt. Even though she is well over thirty, her breasts are still quite firm. Breasts are breasts, of course, but the woman’s ass is also really appetizing. Like two gourd dippers placed side by side, the cheeks form a gentle curve before swelling out. . . . Peeking through a crack in the door while holding my breath, I stare at her ass and imagine shoving my finger all the way between her ass cheeks or spanking them hard.²⁰

The passage above, where the main character stares at the woman’s body, seems to be told by a male narrator. In particular, from the description of her firm breasts and gourd-like ass to the sadistic

19. Lee M. (2006, 92).

20. Cheon (2001, 70).

desire to hurt her, the narrator experiences a secret sexual thrill in fragmentizing and objectifying the woman’s body through the voyeuristic eyes of a man. By appropriating voyeurism, which is viewed as a masculine sexual perversion, “I” becomes a sadistic subject sharing sensuality and aggression. Therefore, the “I” can be called a pseudo-male imitating masculine desire. However, this cannot be completely affirmed because the deformed body and perverse desire of “I” are evoked by the father’s prohibition of desire. In other words, “I”’s phallic and perverse desire can be seen as distorted by fear of the phallic desire of the father, who kills the insatiable mother, as well as repression of the feminine desire for her father. Accordingly, at the end of the story, when “I” witnesses the naked woman’s happiness at being with a man, she comes to understand, however vaguely, the banquet of female desire, overcoming the paradigm of desire as defined only by taboo and transgression.

Surely, the phallic women in Cheon Un-yeong’s novels have pseudo-male characteristics in their rehashing of conventional masculinity. Moreover, most of her characters are not free of the paradigm of conventionally gendered desire because they are punished for their perverse and excessive sexual desire. This is why it seems unsophisticated to construct a gynocentric regime of jouissance and desire beyond the social conventions of sex. Nevertheless, as eccentric sexual beings that walk the line between male and female, her characters can be said to take on deformed shapes that make it difficult for them to be accepted in the male-centric symbolic order. Thus, they reveal their ambiguity by internalizing the order and being implicated in it, while disturbing that order. It is this ambiguity that challenges fixed ideas about gender and helps us to overcome worn-out assumptions about femininity.

Emergence of Plural Genders

If Cheon Un-yeong disturbs divided gender identities through grotesque pseudo-masculine female characters who mimic male

desire, the male poet Hwang Byeong-seung enables us to think about femininity beyond the category of biological sex by introducing a poetic speaker who desires a womb. In addition, this poetic imagination of femininity takes femininity outside of the dichotomous boundary of sexual identities, by producing plural beings, neither male nor female, human nor animal, at the boundary of the patriarchal symbolic order. In the poetry of Hwang Byeong-seung, a womb goes beyond simply referring to the female biological organ and takes on the symbolic meaning of a matrix for the poetic imagination, as illustrated in this excerpt from the poem, "Geomeun baji-ui bam" (Night of Black Pants):²¹

Where did I leave my strong womb?
Awakening corpses in the plaza
On a sonorous night, I delivered a stepmother
Losing a pocket that fit just right
Everyone is sad tonight

In this poem, the pocket-womb that the poetic speaker lost is a detachable thing. It becomes the metaphor of "black pants." At that moment, "the pants, which have been regarded as male garments, become ambiguous and in-between, both masculine and feminine, by being structurally the same as the pocket-womb that is an internal void."²² Hollow objects that remind us of the womb frequently appear in the poetry of Hwang Byeong-seung: "drawers" in "Seorap" (Drawers), "sacks" in "Neomu jageun cheonyeo-deul" (Too Little Maids), "kingdom of mouths" in "Juchiui h" (Family Doctor H), etc. They are not singular but plural, and not natural but acquired and detachable. They are where the "I" makes its "old name ridiculous" ("Sikoku") by "coming and going" ("Family Doctor H") all its life and giving birth to new "I"s incessantly.

Thus, we cannot confine the womb in Hwang Byeong-seung's

21. Hwang B. (2005, 22).

22. Heo (2005).

poetry to a biological organ. It is not simply a place of production, but also a place where what is produced goes to disappear. While refusing a fixed social identity, what is produced in the pocket-womb is metonymically replaced or deleted. For this reason, the transgendered people, drag queens, and cross dressers who frequently appear in Hwang's poetry cannot be defined as new sexual identities. On the contrary, they only become "people who are unknowable even after everything is revealed." They even want "not to be called any name until death" ("Sikoku"). Likewise, it is the poetic imagination of the changeable subject emerging from the changeable womb that makes it impossible to name these strange plural beings according to this world's nomenclature, as in the poem "Coming Out":

Shy, shy animals like me
In pockets, deep in drawers
You, too, have plenty

You hate shyness, so each time you're shy
You write postcards then erase them
Cut your wrists then close them again
Become your grandfather who died a hundred years ago then
become your great-grandmother

The poetic speaker erases the statement immediately after s/he states that her/his genuine identity is the back of the head and the anus. Likewise, self-manifesto as social criticism is rejected or effaced in the poetry of Hwang Byeong-seung. Thus, I becomes your grandfather who died a hundred years ago then becomes your great-grandmother. The questions of self-identification are prolonged with suspended answers after the narrator s coming out as the back of the head and the anus. The I, in that process, becomes Miranda in Mario, Mario in Miranda, Jean in Mario, Mr. Cheetah in Jean.²³ These are people who are in exile from the singular world of self-identity and the cir-

23. "GirlMirandaDesperationMakingLog," in Hwang B. (2005, 151).

cularity, or the world of any and all things and a moment and eternity (Hwang B. 2005, 152). Because of this, the poetry of Hwang Byeong-seung could be viewed as the story of a lunatic with too many personae (Hwang B. 2005, 153). These personae who reject a singular gender identity are imprisoned in a psychiatric ward, but their identity as psychiatric patients does not completely explain them. That is simply a sort of performance. Thus, Rita, who resides in the ward, whispers: Don't worry, nurse, this is just a performance.²⁴

These performing subjects fail to identify themselves. The many personae in Hwang's poetry are the double ego or morphemes of the poetic speaker. One of these personae, produced by the diastole and systole of the womb, is the "drag queen Sikoku," who "wears this tiny thing, chopped off at the root by the butcher, on the waist"²⁵ or "walks in the fire with a dick made from one hundred percent pork meat."²⁶ As such, a penis is both artificial and detachable, like a womb, in the poem. Thus, the penis and the womb, the biological organs that distinguish man from woman, become machines that can be attached to and separated from other machines.

Free of both genders, the cyborg without genesis, or "drag queen Sikoku" penetrates into the boundary between man and woman and mystifies all the defined beings. Like all marginal beings, s/he disappears at the moment a single standard or criterion tries to define her/him, leaving behind only the "sound of his/her laugh."²⁷ These drag queens question the boundary itself, surpassing the limits of sexual identity; on the one hand, they shatter the still firm patriarchal order, and on the other, they investigate a mythicized femininity through normalized feminism. Accordingly, the plural genders suggest the possibility that we surpass the dichotomy through different modes of discussion about femininity.

24. "Habits of Rita," in Hwang B. (2005, 66).

25. "Girl from Daeyami: Transgender in Wilderness," in Hwang B. (2005, 134).

26. "EroticDestructionYoungVillage," in Hwang B. (2005, 96).

27. "Cheshire Cat's Psycho Boots_7th Sauce: The Queen's Hobby of Oral Sex," in Hwang B. (2005, 71).

Crossing Borders, Becoming Borders

Evidently, the poetry of Hwang Byeong-seung discloses one aspect of exploration of femininity that emerges apart from traditional ideas and literary conventions regarding femininity. In this case, femininity is expressed like a symptom via the subcultural imagination rather than an automatic examination. This is why Hwang's poetry does not consider the principle of femininity as the ultimate goal of writing, even though his poetry is similar to the poetry of Kim Hye-sun, who is a feminist poet who writes narratives of women by calling forth the innumerable others that reside within the feminine body. Hwang seems to accept, in contrast, femininity as a poetic methodology to alternatively represent the self in a post-capitalist society where the Other is weakening and the ego is disappearing. Therefore, Hwang's representation of femininity is not his core literary principle but a secondary effect.

On the contrary, the works of Kang Yeong-suk are noteworthy because they actively pursue the possibilities of femininity and women's literature and elevate themselves in terms of aesthetics. In particular, her novel *Rina*,²⁸ which was recently published and awarded the Hankook Ilbo Literary Prize, is significant because it questions the singular gender system of masculinity and femininity by examining the lives of plural beings who reside at the boundaries of that system. At the same time, it describes the feminine mode of existence as an alternative epistemological methodology, thinking about margins from the point of view of the female body and sexuality.

Rina is a narrative of odor and dirt, recording a pilgrimage through dirty and foul-smelling spaces. For instance, when Rina is raped in a chemical factory, "foul-smelling chemicals that make her want to throw up"²⁹ are poured onto her belly. But by the end of the

28. The analysis of *Rina* in this section is a modified version of "Saeroun geojinmal-gwa jinbuan geojinmal" (New Lies but Old Lies), which I presented in *Silcheon munhak* (Proxy and Literature) (2006 winter).

29. Kang (2006, 58).

novel, when she is suffering under prostitution and hard labor, the stench has transferred to her own body. Rina confesses, "I am tainted with chemicals. Any children I bear will be handicapped and infertile" (Kang 2006, 313). This portrays how her circumstances are represented through Rina's body. Consequently, her journey is nothing more than a process of shifting the odor of the world into her own body. Rina is not alone in this case. The other outsiders in the book, such as an old woman and a co-worker at a sewing factory, also find their lives turning to shit as they make a journey into a world of shit. Their bodies become a "so-called landfill of shit" (Kang 2006, 288).

As Rina's identity diverges into multiple categories that cause her to assimilate the pain of the world, she exists in an overlapping region that symbolizes national boundaries. Rina transforms herself into an *unheimlich* (uncanny) being by superposing different images onto herself instead of adhering to her own origins. For example, she often looks into the mirror, and she comes to focus on the "dark shadows" and "deep wrinkles" that line her face rather than the original self-portrait. As the narrative develops, Rina becomes "an unfamiliar female face" (Kang 2006, 128). She begins to accumulate different beings inside herself, crossing the borders again and again. These beings remain plural rather than fitting into a single category. She becomes "a schizophrenic and an alcoholic" (Kang 2006, 250), even while she is a good woman who takes care of the old woman. She has sexual relationships with a female co-worker, but she cannot be defined as a lesbian. Likewise, Rina is depicted as a strange and extraordinary being even to herself; she is "hard to know but for the mirror" (Kang 2006, 89). Moreover, she gives up an opportunity to return to the country P, where her family still lives, and erases her origins. Now, she has no home to return to, nor does she want to return. Rina becomes a post-modern and post-subjective being that comprises and exhausts anxiety and fear of the world, having voluntarily made herself into a hollow being within the endless crossing of borders.

However, Rina's escape and transgression are no longer refreshing because this story has already grown tired and old. We know

well the trajectory of prostitutes who travel the channels of capital, as well as the old and new stories of illegal migrant laborers. Nevertheless, Rina's story differs from the usual story of escape. This story fictionally constructs the reality of crossing borders on the body of Rina, who is a contradictory and multi-layered character, and reshapes the former escape story into the literary reality of becoming borders through this fictional construction. When she makes love with Ppi for the first time, she listens to and understands his escape and comes to be "inspired by the fantasy walls of the room collapsing and the borderline like a bank far from the sky coming up to her" (Kang 2006, 140). Ppi's escape is accepted in Rina's body as a "national borderline." At that moment, Rina fantasizes that her body is swelling up as if pregnant. Stories about borders accumulate as much as the vacancy of the body allows.³⁰ Her body becomes the borderline itself. Rina decides to "disappear voluntarily and not to remain even in the background," because she begins to make an endless space for herself. It is like a mirage: its substance is unclear, takes shape in the morning and then disintegrates at night, while constantly moving and overlapping with other spaces. That is the "wonderland" that is located in reality but is nowhere.

At that moment, the borderline becomes a startling literary space where exiled beings can confront the conditions that made them into clichés. In this *unheimlich* space of fiction, we can imagine the discourses and lifestyles created by the character who confronts a brutal reality. Thus, Rina can run and run "toward the borderline that

30. The female body in the former short fiction of Kang Yeong-suk comes to be an event shaped by the tragedy of reality, as well as a method to recognize that tragedy. In that context, the last sentence reading "It was pregnancy" in "Bombam" (One Spring Night) implies the secondary pain of growth, corresponding with the sentence of "Junggugin-ui geori" (Chinese Street), previously written by O Jeong-hui, which entails the primary pain of growth that indicates menarche. However, it is not a simple bodily change, but the significant understanding of a new method to perceive the world, while responding sensitively to and according with the world's pain. In particular, in the short story "Nalmada chukje" (Kang 2004), the female body, which undergoes pregnancy and childbirth, is reborn as a sensory organ that is adapted to tragedy.

appears out of thin air before her, spreading like a blue ridge again” (Kang 2006, 348). Rina’s journeys appear to claim the nullification of borders that is brought about by crossing borders. As Mohanty said, however, “‘without border’ does not mean borderlessness but recognition of the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears and blockages the border represents and recognition of the reality of borders crossing nation, race, sexuality, religion and disability.”³¹ In this respect, Rina’s border crossing is the provision of literary imagination enabled by questioning borders and, further, becoming borders in turn rather than erasing discrimination or difference.

From Identity Politics to Aestheticization of Femininity

As illustrated in the cases of Cheon Un-yeong, Hwang Byeong-seung, and Kang Yeong-suk, it is possible to summarize the characteristics of women’s literature of the 2000s as surpassing conventional ideas regarding women and femininity. Their characters tear away the veil of fantasy or the dichotomous reductionism of male and female to question the consolidated gender ideology underlying Korean society. They are the phallic women of Cheon Un-yeong, drag queen Sikoku of Hwang Byeong-seung, and Rina of Kang Yeong-suk, who cross borders. Their texts overcome the dichotomy of gender difference that is continuously reiterated in Korean literature, and allow us to reconstruct and rethink the category of femininity. Plural beings are significant as they suggest the possibility of new women’s literature crossing the borders of the previous women’s literature by effacing the norm of dichotomous borders, such as margin/center, private/public, and micro/macro, including femininity/masculinity.

Until now, feminist literature in Korea has been constructing an agenda of feminist politics, representing the woman as subject. Indeed, this feminist identity politics criticizes the reality of women’s lives in Korea and results in the liberation of oppressed women, dis-

31. Mohanty (2005, 14).

tributing some power among women who have been disempowered. However, this new women’s literature is limited in its capacity for politics of representation without serious consideration of the category of woman. Women’s literature of the 1990s, in particular, has reproduced the male-dominated perspective on masculinity and femininity by treating femininity as a correlative of biological motherhood and mystifying and privileging it as a healing principle for the harmful effects of male-centered civilizations. This is why women’s literature of the 1990s is no longer discussed despite its considerable achievements.

On the other hand, the 2000s women’s literature foreshadows a new form of women’s literature in the course of communion with various plural beings that negate conventional ideas about women and femininity. It is not limited to merely disturbing the dichotomous gender system, but is a new and vital literary methodology. Femininity is no longer subjectivity of a singular identity politics. It has reached the stage where it can seek a new aesthetics. Thus, the possibility of an alternative literature can spring from this matrix.

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