

## Book Review

### **Review of Jooyeon Rhee, *The Novel in Transition: Gender & Literature in Early Colonial Korea* (New York: Cornell University East Asia Program, 2019)**

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“What is the use of literature if it cannot change the world?” asks Song Mong-yu of Yun Dong-ju in Joon-ik Lee’s historical film, *Dongju: The Portrait of a Poet* (2016). This conversation between two Korean writers indicates that colonial literature in Korea, under the administration of imperial Japan, was entrusted with a political mission: the literary imagination was offered up as a means for Koreans to salvage themselves from their abject situation. While Song and Yun were writing in the late colonial period, primarily between the decade of the 1930s and the mid-1940s, Dr. Jooyeon Rhee’s maiden work, *The Novel in Transition: Gender & Literature in Early Colonial Korea* (2019; hereafter *The Novel*), explores the landscape of modern Korean literature in the first two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

Although the time covered by her study is slightly earlier than the time depicted in Lee’s movie, Rhee’s *The Novel* centers on the same practical role of literature; it suggests that writing new fiction or translating novels in colonial Korea was a political act that was designed to create the necessary new discourses of nationhood and modernity. In the spirit of Frederic Jameson’s modernity, many early twentieth-century Korean novels were imbued with “the desire called Utopia.”<sup>2</sup> Naturally enough, the utopian dreams of each individual *sosŏl* took on a range of forms and fictional characteristics, based partly on each author’s political stance, thus serving to make colonial Korea’s literary scene into

an arena of ideological competition. As Jameson rightfully argues, third-world texts are “necessarily” allegorical,<sup>3</sup> and Korea’s colonial literature is no exception. In this study, Rhee investigates the novelistic figure of allegory amidst the collision of individual speech in the modern print media, the clash of civilizational discourses, and the circulation of world literature; in the process, she discusses the concept of gender hegemony as a core epistemological theme.

Rhee’s discussion starts in the early 1900s with the story of how the definition of fiction (*sosŏl*) in the late Chosŏn and early colonial period had distinctly different connotations from the modern Anglo-American one of the novel as a voice for social criticism. As Rhee explains in Chapter 1, *sosŏl* at the turn of the century was a much broader genre, encompassing oral performance, vernacular fiction, and even newspaper editorial writing. Among these forms, fiction written in Korean dialect was exceptionally undervalued, being seen mostly as reading material for women and the lower classes; it was not suitable for the nobles (*yangban*) in the late Chosŏn period, for whom the disdain for the vernacular novel was partly rooted in Confucianism, which looked down on creative writing as “nonsense,” and partly rooted in an attitude of cultural toadyism toward China.<sup>4</sup>

Nationalist intellectuals, such as Sin Ch’aeho, however, realized the genre’s usefulness as a modernizing tool. This is because fiction can effectively disseminate political ideology through its vivid and epically-organized narratives. In pursuit of a Korean Enlightenment, the use of the Korean alphabet (*Han’gŭl*) rather than Chinese characters (*Hanmun*) and the exploitation of the modern print media were recommended, since these two innovations were viewed as having potentially far-reaching power to reach the masses. For this reason, even though popular novels or oral narratives with obscene elements were criticized as part of a harmful tradition that needed to be eradicated, reform-minded social elites encouraged colonial intellectuals to use “New Fiction” (*sin-sosŏl*) and print journalism to help make grassroots subjects into patriotic national ones.<sup>5</sup>

Alongside her discussion of the revolutionary transformation of the *sosŏl* form, Rhee also describes the book industry and fiction-reading

practices at the turn of the century. Since vernacular fiction had formerly been located at the periphery of state power and the Confucian moral order, reading *sosŏl* in the late Chosŏn era was regularly censured as subversive. Male intellectuals especially condemned the *sosŏl*'s female readership since they regarded literature as a social realm in which various political discourses ought to contend, while believing that women should submissively remain within the domestic sphere. However, such awareness gradually changed; in order for Korea to become a modern civilized state, male academics began to believe that women ought to read *sosŏl* as a necessary part of the nation-building process. Indeed, within the didactic fictional narratives, the masses were even sometimes represented in the figure of the "New Woman" (*sin-yŏsŏng*), a being reborn as a civilized national subject through a process of modern education.<sup>6</sup>

In Chapter 2, Rhee discusses this gendered representation of the nation in the context of the development of world literature. Using the example of Chang Chiyŏn's Korean adaptation of a biography of Joan of Arc—*The Story of a Patriotic Lady* [애국부인전] (1906)—Rhee argues that reformist writers and translators promoted Confucian virtues, patriotism, and modernity by twisting certain details of the Western texts. This reliance on the transnational literary force was somewhat natural when considering the barren soil of Korean creative fiction. What is more, some translators began to appropriate these Western novels in order to hint indirectly that Western power was superior to Japanese, as a subtle form of subaltern resistance. In the nationalist narratives of *sin-sosŏl* written by male authors, femininity often operated as a vehicle to convey anti-imperial messages and the need for modernization—even if they still affirmed traditional gender boundaries.

In describing the tropes of gender in modern Korean literature, Rhee departs from Korean literary scholarship's traditional binaries, refusing to locate colonial writers within a nation-centered conflict as either base Japanophiles or high-minded fighters for independence. In Rhee's reading, the aims of both the colonialist and the nationalist ideal remarkably coincide in their separate endeavors to *civilize* Korea. This coincidence makes it somewhat difficult to determine a given colonial

author's political stance.

In Chapter 3, Rhee deals with Yi Injik and Yi Haejo as writers in this grey area of interest in civilization reform: both writers have generally been criticized by scholars for their alleged pro-Japanese tendencies. Even though there is no trace of anti-Japanese resistance in literary work like Yi Injik's *Tears of Blood* [혈의누] (1906) or Yi Haejo's *The Flower World* [화세계] (1910–1911), Rhee raises some doubts about the charge of “Quislingism.” In her argument, she puts forward two reasons: first, the censorship of the governor-general of Korea was so harsh that in order to publish works, Yi Injik and Yi Haejo had no choice other than to hide whatever nationalistic intentions they might have had; second, their authorship of creative novels aimed at Korean enlightenment, an ambition they shared with more open patriotic reformists. In this way, Rhee suggests that the simple dichotomies of nationalism and colonialism cannot fully explain the complex nature of literary work at the beginning of the twentieth century.

As an alternative, Rhee focuses on the portrayal of femininity and masculinity in this fiction, analyzing the modern Korean novel as a set of gender-political allegories. As Rhee argues in the first half of her book, nationalist writers and translators, certainly before the annexation treaty between Korea and Japan in 1910, tended to feminize the reading public in order to emphasize the necessity for nationwide cooperation in the process of Korean modernization. This led to the situation where there were two different kinds of gender representations in the typical colonial text. The first literary coterie, which included Yi Injik and Yi Haejo, contrasted the corrupt morality, intellectual impotence, and egotistic personalities of male *yangban* with portrayals of independent and socially mobile heroines. Much more than their male counterparts, these heroines frequently cross the borders separating gender, class, and region. In contrast, a second coterie of authors and translators, including Cho Chunghwan, Yi Sanghyŏp, and Yi Kwangsu, tended to depict females as politically agentless and subordinate to their male counterparts. In these literary works, heroines often show an immoral selfishness or disregard and eventually succumb to tragic endings, while the male heroes are characterized as moral or competent enough to carry out successful acts

of revenge on the women who have betrayed them.

Although the portrayals of gender in most colonial fiction were largely divided into these two divergent currents, they shared a common agenda: Korean women in the colonial era were objectified as part of the literary promotion of civilization and civilized values, a process which often reflected nothing more than the masculine anxiety of subaltern writers. In other words, the female characters in modern Korean fiction, mostly written by male writers, served as a form of self-criticism or re-masculinization of Korea's weakened patriarchy under Japan's imperial regime. For the first literary coterie, Korean readers were often required to recognize their own moral and intellectual deterioration in the negative images of the male characters. In contrast, the depiction of heroines as emblems of modernity—schooled in a western way, exhibiting self-confidence, and manifesting a cosmopolitan peripatetic style—is not important in itself but merely a foil device to emphasize these corrupt and tepid males. It is these male figures who pathetically repeat the bad customs of the past and thereby symbolize the paralyzed situation of Korea; it is not an issue of promoting women's rights.<sup>7</sup>

In Chapter 4, Rhee analyzes some of Cho's translations, including *A Dream of Long Suffering* [장한몽] (1913; hereafter *A Dream*). Here, Rhee reveals that Korean adaptations of Japanese domestic novels typically transform the original texts into K-masculine stories in which subaltern males try to rebuild their lost agency under the forces of colonial capitalism. Explaining the brief history of *A Dream*—it localizes within Korea the original Japanese text of Ozaki Kōyō's *The Gold Demon* (*Konjiki Yasha*, 1897–1903), a novel, which, in its turn, is based on Charlotte M. Brame's (1836–1884) popular fiction, *Weaker Than a Woman*—Rhee examines the fracturing point between the Western original and its Asian adaptations. In this way, the author reveals how the translation process reflects gender politics: the “ambitious, bold, and remorseless female protagonist” in Brame's novel is transformed by Kōyō into a Japanese woman who suffers from twinges of guilt, before Cho, in his Korean text, further deforms her, using his young male characters to “discipline” and “correct” her “in the name of true love.”<sup>8</sup> In these two East Asian translations, the men end up dominating the women in order to re-

establish the household order.

The final chapter in Rhee's book discusses a second form of Korean adaptation of the western novels—in this case, crime fiction with an epic revenge motif. Once again, Rhee analyzes the twisted or silenced elements of these translations in comparison with the original texts, mainly employing two representative “detective novels” in the mid-1910s: Yi Sanghyŏp's *A Virtuous Woman's Resentment* [정부원] (1914–1915), based on Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Diavola* (1866–1867), and Yi Kwangsu's *Neptune* [해왕성] (1916–1917), based originally on Alexandre Duma's *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1845–1846).<sup>9</sup> In these two Korean interpretations of violence and misadventure, the modernized heroines, by the end, become subordinated to their husbands or fathers, in visible contrast to the original story; in all other respects, however, the male characters adapt themselves comfortably to the colonial capitalist system in order to expose its hypocrisy or to retaliate against their humiliation as subalterns. In either case, however, the female characters depicted in these colonial detective novels reflect masculine anxiety about uncontrollable females, the domestic order, and modernistic social mobility, while the men themselves are endowed with the symbolic power of a knowledge of the modern world and a superior sense of morality.

Rhee winds up her odyssey through the world of early colonial Korean literature with Yi Kwangsu's *The Heartless* [무정] (1917), a literary work that is often dubbed “the first modern novel” in Korea.<sup>10</sup> Using a stream-of-consciousness style, Yi Kwangsu is another modernist writer who follows in the literary footsteps of Yi Injik and Yi Haejo, with his convincing depictions of complex human emotions and the problems of capitalism. Rhee legitimately points out that, in and out of *The Heartless*, the diverse political forces of the *sin sosŏl* are found united:

*the press* as the novel's emerging space, which is where  
transnational literary contacts interact,  
the intrusion of *imperial languages*,  
the discourses of *authenticity and civilization*, and  
the *gendered imagination* of nation and modernity.

In such a narrative, femininity becomes a convenient tool to move away from the inner angst of the male author in the name of the salvation of Korean society: when heroines are raped, this symbolizes the victimization of a colonized society rather than the tragedy of a single woman; when attempts at suicide fail, this life-altering experience becomes a catalyst for a social renovation that severs all connection with the painful history of the nation.

In conclusion, Rhee asserts that *gender* in Korean colonial fiction is the battlefield of different ideologies, the place where diverse utopian visions of society and culture interact and collide. By producing and circulating various gender hegemonies, the author suggests, these colonial writers and translators went in search of new identities with which to negotiate imperial force. In doing so, they were redefining gender roles, restoring patriarchal hierarchy, and, most importantly, establishing the concepts of modernity and nationhood.

The primary strength of Rhee's research is to have successfully escaped the prevalent binaries of nationalism and colonialism. This may not be a new strategy, but it is still a fresh one in postcolonial studies of Korean literature. By investigating the complex power structure behind gender formation, Rhee sheds new light on some canonical Korean novels, demonstrating in the process how colonial male authors created and "otherized" certain key feminine representations that probably never existed. Nonetheless, it is somewhat odd that this book contains hardly any discussion about novels written by female writers in early colonial Korea. Although Rhee rationalizes this extreme imbalance by arguing that, due to its patriarchal nationalism, the literary society of colonial Korea tended to exclude female writers, the inclusion of a discussion of what female writers were doing would have made her study stronger. Despite the male chauvinism of Korea, there were, in fact, a number of distinguished female writers—including Kim Iryöp, Na Hyesök, and Paek Shinae, to name a few—who strove to raise their voices during the period of the Japanese occupation.

In today's era of world literature, Rhee's meticulous study casts a cold eye on the long-standing nation-centered dichotomy of K-postcolonialism. Rather than agonizing over the resistant identity

issues of specific colonial authors, Rhee adopts a different binary opposition in order to understand how the ambiguities and irrationalities of the nation-building project have helped to shape or distort gender, in service to various multiple political interests; in this way, she adds diagonal profundity to the previously somewhat horizontal topography of subaltern literary research, making its space into a multi-quadrant one. Although this kind of structuralist criticism could still be seen as somewhat reductive when faced with the ineffable and hybrid nature of literary creation, this research is nonetheless significant, since it serves to uncover some of the previously unknown territory of the early Korean colonial novel. It is at this intersection, where the seemingly divergent traditional and modern view of gender roles and subaltern politics converge, that the postcolonial scholarship of Korean literature may meet its own transitional image.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rhee is an assistant professor of Asian Studies and Comparative Literature at Penn State University and the former head of the Korean Studies program of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Specializing in modern Korean literature and culture, she is currently working on a new book about the cultural implications of crime and misadventure in the detective novels of late colonial Korea. Her other interests include diasporic art, gender, sexuality, and identity politics. For more detailed information, see “Biography of Jooyeon Rhee,” *Department of Asian Studies*, The Pennsylvania State University, 2021, [asian.la.psu.edu/people/jxr5820](http://asian.la.psu.edu/people/jxr5820).

<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on The Ontology of the Present* (New York: Verso, 2002), 215.

<sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2019), 165.

<sup>4</sup> Jooyeon Rhee, *The Novel in Transition: Gender & Literature in Early Colonial Korea* (New York: Cornell University East Asia Program, 2019), 25.

<sup>5</sup> The term “New Fiction” was formerly the name of literary magazines at the turn of the century in both Japan and China; it has been used in Korea to refer to the novels of the early colonial period (*ibid.*, 88).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>9</sup> Although detectives were often given insignificant weight, crime narratives were commonly called “detective fiction” in colonial Korea (*ibid.*, 156).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.