Popularizing Gender, Politicizing Literature:

Gendering Popular Literature in South Korea

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the gendered dynamics of popular literature in South Korea from the post-liberation era to the contemporary period, highlighting how women have shaped, contested, and redefined the literary landscape as readers and writers. Focusing on the cultural, political, and emotional dimensions of literary value, this study foregrounds the pivotal role of gender in the formation and reception of *taejung munhak* (popular literature). Challenging the entrenched binary between "pure" and "popular" literature, the dissertation explores how women have historically been excluded from literary authority but have simultaneously forged alternative spaces of cultural participation and aesthetic legitimacy.

Structured across four critical historical moments, the dissertation traces: (1) the emergence of the "bookish girl" as a cultural figure and the formation of gendered reading publics; (2) the self-representation of working-class women through autobiographical fiction, with a focus on Shin Kyung-Sook's *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*; (3) the appropriation of genre fiction by feminist writers, including the rise of feminist science fiction and cozy mystery; and (4) the affective politics of contemporary feminist literature, exemplified by *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*. Drawing on feminist theory, genre studies, and Korean cultural history, the dissertation offers a genealogy of women's literary practices that challenges the marginalization of female authorship and redefines popular literature as a contested, politicized, and generative field of cultural labor. In doing so, it advances a feminist reconfiguration of literary value in South Korea and contributes to broader discussions on gender and the politics of reading in modern literary cultures.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between gender and literary value in modern South Korea has historically been marked by power imbalances, issues of representation, and questions of legitimacy. This dynamic is particularly evident in the contested realm of *taejung munhak* [popular literature], which is not only an artistic category but also one that is deeply intertwined with gender, class, and cultural hierarchies. This dissertation examines how South Korean women—as readers, writers, and critics—have engaged with, critiqued, and reshaped the cultural meanings of popular literature from the post-liberation period to the present day. At the core of this inquiry is an investigation of how gender influences the reception, production, and theorization of literary texts, especially those generally categorized as "popular." Through a historical and critical analysis of key female figures, genres, and discursive shifts, this study highlights the extent to which gender politics have influenced South Korea's literary landscape and challenged the persistent marginalization of women's literary practices.

Popular literature is often defined through a framework of negation. It is considered to be accessible rather than refined, emotionally resonant rather than intellectually rigorous, socially engaged rather than aesthetically autonomous. However, as Stuart Hall argued, such binaries are neither neutral nor natural; they are produced and maintained by "the forces and relations which sustain the distinction, the difference"(Hall 355). In the context of South Korea, these institutional forces include literary associations, academic critics, publishing networks, and sociopolitical structures more broadly—all of which have a history of privileging certain forms of

writing while excluding others. This dissertation argues that the category of popular literature is not only constructed through mechanisms of cultural gatekeeping but also deeply influenced by gender. Women's literary contributions—particularly those that are widely circulated, resonate with emotional registers, or emerge from marginalized social positions—have often been dismissed as excessive, sentimental, or derivative. Therefore, the study of popular literature in South Korea may not simply be disentangled from gender studies.

To advance this argument, this dissertation foregrounds women's interventions in their reading practices, literary production, and literary criticism. I argue that women's participation in literary culture has simultaneously revealed and challenged the binary distinction between "high" and "popular" literature. Far from being passive consumers or producers of lowbrow literature, women have used the idea of popularity itself to question dominant aesthetic norms, reshape cultural authority, and express alternative values. This is particularly evident in the post-liberation period, when debates over literary legitimacy intensified alongside the country's modernization and democratization as well as the evolution of its national identity. As South Korea transitioned from colonial occupation to military dictatorship and, ultimately, to liberal democracy, the literary landscape was continually influenced by ideological struggles over which texts were significant, who warranted recognition as cultural authorities, and what the public purportedly desired. Women's voices were often sidelined in these struggles—yet they were far from silent. Through their writing, reading, and cultural critique, women have consistently contested the normative beliefs that shape literary value, especially those related to class, education, language, and emotion.

Popularity, Cultural Taste, and Gender

In general, popularity in literature refers to the mass reception of texts by broad readerships and the inclusion of entertaining elements that appeal to emotional and sensory pleasure. However, the term "popular" does not refer solely to a genre category or a certain stylistic register—it encapsulates a broader process by which literature operates as a cultural commodity and a social practice. In this context, popularity refers to both the industrial mechanisms of production and distribution, and the cultural ways in which texts are used, interpreted, and valued by various publics. The popular is not merely about wide circulation; it is about how literature becomes meaningful, how it intersects with lived experience, and how it shapes and is shaped by socio-political structures.

The ambivalence of cultural popularity has long been a subject of debate in critical theory, particularly within the frameworks of cultural Marxism as developed by Antonio Gramsci, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin. These theorists grappled with the tension between mass culture's potential for political awakening and its function as a vehicle for ideological conformity. On one hand, popularity of art culture can democratize access to high art, amplify the voices of the marginalized, and generate new affective and political communities. On the other hand, popular culture can become complicity in reproducing dominant ideologies, reducing human experience to commodified entertainment, and depoliticizing public life.

Adorno especially offers pessimist interpretation of popular culture. For Adorno, the cultural industry exemplified the worst tendencies of modern capitalism: the standardization of cultural forms, the erosion of critical consciousness, and the illusion of choice. Popular culture, in Adorno's view, instilled false needs in the

public—desires that are shaped by consumer capitalism rather than by autonomous or genuine interests (Adorno and Horkheimer 107-114). Adorno's concern was with defending the capacity of high art to negate and think differently. For Adorno, only autonomous art can truly resist domination by preserving space for critique within an increasingly commodified and administered world (Adorno 226).

In contrast to Adorno's critique of the cultural industry as a mechanism of mass deception, Benjamin saw mass culture as site of potential emancipation. In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," Benjamin emphasizes how the industrialization of arts can dismantle the aura of elitist art and make cultural participation more accessible (217-251). His optimistic vision for political potential of popular culture is elaborated in "The Author as Producer." Benjamin distinguishes between the bourgeois writers, who produce entertainment for market consumption, and the progressive writer, who uses the tools of the cultural industry for political struggle (768). For Benjamin, the democratization of art through industrial means could lead to new alliances between aesthetics and politics and to a redefinition of artistic autonomy itself.

The contradictory and conflicting function of cultural popularity—its capacity to both seduce and awaken—continues to inform how we theorize popular culture today. This dissertation takes a position close to Benjamin, acknowledging the capitalist underpinnings of the cultural industry while also recognizing the radical potential within popular texts. I use the term "popular" to refer not only to texts that achieve mass circulation and commercial success, but also to those that generate significant affective investments and produce social visibility for marginalized experiences.

Particularly, the popularity of certain texts—especially those authored and consumed by women—demands a more nuanced understanding of how popularity operates ideologically and politically. Often, the so-called "great divide"[1] between the high and popular literature overlooks the gendered dynamics that disturb and complicate this distinction. Whether interacting with elite literature or what is considered pulp fiction, women readers have routinely been depicted as excessive, irrational, or derivative. Andreas Huyssen points out that there has been a historical tendency to associate femininity with cultural decline, placing aesthetic value within a masculine framework characterized by disinterested autonomy. This gendering of cultural forms reveals a male anxiety regarding the perceived deterioration of traditional culture and the emergence of mass culture, which was viewed as a feminized threat. The figure of Emma Bovary, as discussed by theorists like Andreas Huyssen, exemplifies the feminized mass reader, characterized as someone who engages with "inferior literature—subjective, emotional, and passive" (Huyssen 54). Bovary serves as a powerful illustration of the ways in which gender influences literary reception.

The political significance of the gendered dynamics in popular culture can be theorized through taste. Hannah Arendt offers a deep perspective on the political function of taste in art. In her essay "Crisis of Culture," she contends that taste goes beyond personal preference. The taste of art consumers constitutes an important political expression, demonstrating how people make judgments, interact with one another, and form communities. The acknowledgment of shared tastes can foster a

[1] The term "Great Divide" was proposed by Andreas Huyssen in his study *After Great Divide* to describe the evolutionary logic of high art since the 19th century. Huyssen argues that early modernist art, in establishing itself as a culture hostile to society or critical of it, adopted a strategy of detachment, a conscious exclusion from popular culture.

powerful sense of belonging, suggesting that taste serves as an organizing principle in both the social and political realms. Although taste may appear elitist and entail classifying individuals based on their aesthetic preferences, it also serves an essential democratic function by uncovering a person's identity through their aesthetic judgments rather than their skills or product choices (Arendt 223). Arendt sees taste as a political faculty—a mode of judgment that allows us to imagine a shared world. Taste thus becomes an expression of belonging and an organizing principle of community, for example, among women. Cultural taste can serve democratic functions by affirming women's marginalized perspectives and enabling public discourse about gender.

Arendt's view contrasts with Pierre Bourdieu's conception of taste, which views taste as a socially conditioned form of distinction. Bourdieu argues that what we perceive as individual preferences are in fact expressions of class habitus and cultural capital. Taste is less about autonomy than it is about social positioning—it functions to maintain boundaries between classes by naturalizing specific aesthetic preferences as superior. In this view, popular taste is devalued not because of its content but because of the social groups associated with it. The cultural authority of the literary field, then, is sustained by symbolic violence: the capacity to define what counts as legitimate taste while delegitimizing others as vulgar, commercial, or excessive.

While Bourdieu's sociological critique sees aesthetic judgment can reproduce elitist distinctions, this view has been challenged by other theorists who defend aesthetic experience as a terrain for political emancipation. Jacques Rancière argues that the aesthetic is a space of disidentification—a site where existing social roles can be disrupted and new political subjectivities can emerge. *In Nights of Labor* (La Nuit

des Prolétaires), Rancière recounts how 19th-century workers appropriated literature to reframe their place in the world. Far from being dupes of bourgeois culture, these workers used aesthetic engagement as a mode of self-fashioning and resistance. For Rancière, the political force of aesthetics lies in its ability to redistribute the sensible—to make visible what had been excluded from perception and representation. Aesthetic taste is not merely a reflection of class; it is a practice of world-making.

This dissertation draws from these overlapping and diverging accounts of taste and popular culture to rethink the politics of literary value in South Korea. By placing women at the center of this inquiry—as agents of literary production, reception, and critique—I aim to demonstrate how popular literature becomes a field of political struggle. It is a space where the boundaries between high and low, private and public, aesthetic and political, are constantly being contested. And it is a space where feminist interventions have made lasting impacts—not just by entering the literary field, but by transforming its terms of engagement.

The central concern of this dissertation is to reconceptualize popular literature through a feminist perspective. I argue that what is considered "popular" is never ideologically neutral. Rather, it operated as a regulative ideal, differently applied to male and female writers, filtered through the gendered norms of genre, authorship, and readership. When men write for mass audiences, they are often celebrated for their educational or civic contributions. In contrast, when women do the same, they are frequently criticized for indulging in sentimentality or catering to gendered tastes. This dissertation contends that these cultural imaginaries influenced educational curricula, publishing decisions, literary canons, and the distribution of cultural authority. Nevertheless, women have not only been marginalized in literary culture,

but they have also actively reshaped it. Through alternative modes of authorship, criticism, and cultural participation, women have created new literary communities and have challenged the dominant aesthetic norms. It is important to recognize that women have not merely been subjects of the cultural hierarchy; they have also been influential agents within it. They have written against established literary conventions, produced alternative critical discourses, and fostered new communities through reading groups, literary magazines, and digital platforms.

Popular Literature and Feminist Revaluation of Literary Value in Korea

The term “popular literature” itself is ideologically loaded and historically contingent. It has often been defined through exclusion: as that which is too emotional, too commercial, or too accessible to count as legitimate literature. Popularity in literature should not be read as antithetical to political critique or aesthetic value. Rather, it must be understood as a space of struggle—a contested site where meanings are produced, negotiated, and transformed.

In Korea, these anxieties associated with cultural decline by feminized consumption were articulated as early as the 1930s, when leftist intellectuals such as Im Hwa lamented the rise of serialized fiction and the proliferation of commercial publishing. His essay ““T’ongsoksosŏlron” [Theory of lowbrow literature] (1936) marked the first attempt to draw a formal distinction between “mass” and “public” readership, reframing *taejung* not as a political subject but as a consumer audience.

In the same period, the term “pure literature” emerged as a designation for “art-for-art’s-sake” writing. Writers and critics—most notably rising novelist Kim Dongri—adopted the label to differentiate themselves from the leftist literary movement of the 1920s. Asserting that art should be autonomous and purposeless, this

literary orientation coincided with the rise of Japanese militarism and mounting intellectual repression. The dissolution of the Korean Artists Proletarian Federation (KAPF) in 1935 marked the decline of ideologically driven collectivist literature, which had been dominant in the country since the 1920s (Y. Kwŏn 1104).

By the 1950s, however, the discourse around pure literature had evolved. With many leftist ideologues aligning themselves with the North Korean regime, the pure literature bloc no longer had a clear ideological adversary against which to define itself. As observed by literary scholar Kim Hansik, the disappearance of this antagonistic counterpart rendered the logic of exclusion ineffective as a basis for literary identity (H. Kim 239-241). Until a renewed call for political engagement emerged with the 1960 April Revolution, the pure literature camp—still represented by Kim Dongri as its senior figure—turned its attention toward opposition to "world literature" or, in other words, the promotion of anti-communist themes.

The framing of opposition between pure and popular literature in the 1950s was reignited not by proponents of pure literature but by advocates of popular literature. Most notably, this conceptual framework was re-evoked by Kim Naesŏng, a prominent writer of detective fiction. In his 1948 essay, Kim argued that popular literature served as a compromise for readers who lacked elite literary sensibilities, suggesting that the divide between the two spheres would eventually fade as readers' cultural sophistication improved (N. Kim 4). His argument centered on readership, asserting that popular literature does not necessarily wield less creative merit. He sought to redefine literary value in terms of audience accessibility, thus elevating the cultural status of popular writers. In this sense, the dichotomy between pure literature and popular literature was a strategic play by those behind the latter to attain parity with the literary establishment. By establishing themselves as equal but distinct

interlocutors, they fostered discursive space in which popular literature could be seriously considered.

While the 1950s saw a proliferation of writings that reassessed the cultural legitimacy of popular literature, the intervention of novelist Kim Malbong (1901–1961) is particularly notable for diverging from her male contemporaries in her critique of vulgar entertainment. She publicly denounced the authority of high literature in the post-liberation period and urged her colleagues to drive out the specter of *sunsu* [pure] literature, arguing on behalf of literature's social responsibility as well as its capacity to both reach and represent ordinary readers (C. Yi 4). In her 1958 essay—possibly the earliest theoretical exploration of popular literature by a Korean woman—Kim contended that popular literature must aim for social morality rather than mere escapist amusement (Malbong Kim 4). Her belief in literary responsibility, which emphasized both ethics and accessibility, laid the groundwork for a critique of literary hierarchy from a feminist perspective.[2]

The dichotomy that she identified between pure literature and popular literature is emblematic of the broader reconfiguration of literary values that played out by women in the 1950s. In her essay, she explicitly distinguished *taejung* [popular] literature and *tongsok* [lowbrow] literature. The latter tends to target the mass market and often features sensationalistic narratives that include themes of sexual violence. By contrast, Kim's concept of popular literature occupies a more nuanced position between pure literature and commercial fiction, framing popular

[2] Kim's belief on social engagement of literature was expressed by her engagement in prostitution abolishment movement during the liberation period. For the prostitution abolishment movement led by Kim, see D. Yang. Kim's serialized novel, *Kainŭi shijang* [The Market of Cain] (1948), was written to inform the public of the victims in South Korea's system of licensed prostitution. The novel tells the story of a damsel who is kidnapped by a U.S. Army soldier and falls into the prostitution industry but escapes with the help of a female social activist. It deals directly with the state-regulated prostitution under the US military regime and depicts sexual assault by U.S. soldiers.

literature as a form of middlebrow culture. Popular literature, as she envisioned it, resists binary classifications of high and low; it occupies a liminal space with the potential to challenge entrenched cultural hierarchies. This perspective situates women's literary preferences outside elite aesthetic norms while distancing them from the misogynistic tropes often found in lowbrow entertainment. In doing so, it foregrounds the cultural agency of women readers long marginalized by dominant literary institutions.

At the same time, Kim Malbong's legacy is marked by contradictions. While she emerged as a modern woman writer and early advocate of feminist and anarchist ideals—most notably her call for the abolition of licensed prostitution in the late 1940s—her later works reflect the ideological constraints of the Cold War. Following Korea's division and the outbreak of war, she aligned herself with a patriarchal, anti-communist nationalism. Kim's literary voice became deeply enmeshed in the gendered discourse of Cold War South Korea—illustrating how narrative, emotion, and ideology were mobilized in tandem to reinforce conservative national identity.[3]

The question of a writer's social responsibility, which Kim Malbong frequently emphasized, has been assessed differently depending on ideological orientation. Evaluations of literature based on political content and the author's social consciousness have often been accompanied by normative judgments about women writers' political adequacy and historical awareness. As a result, women writers deemed insufficiently political—and the women readers who support them—have frequently been relegated to lower cultural positions, accused of possessing inferior tastes and a lack of critical engagement.

[3] For further criticism of Kim as a "cultural warrior" who supports anti-communism and American liberal democracy, see Kim Kyŏngyŏn and Yi Minyŏng.

The recent feminist reappraisal of Kim Malbong marks an important turning point in the study of women's popular literature.[4] Drawing from cultural studies methodologies, this shift emphasizes the political and epistemic challenges women pose to dominant literary values and institutions. Rather than merely revisiting neglected women writers or applying feminist political frameworks to their texts, cultural studies foregrounds the lived practices of meaning-making—particularly those of readers who have historically been marginalized by male-dominated literary discourse. In this sense, cultural studies materializes new voices and reorients scholarly focus toward cultural practices, rather than simply the canon.

Emerging in postwar Britain through scholars like Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and the Birmingham School, cultural studies critique the traditional split between high and low culture and instead treats everyday practices—television, fashion, popular fiction—as politically significant. In contrast to Adorno's theory of the culture industry, which positions audiences as passive consumers, scholars in cultural studies argue for the agency of audiences, who actively interpret, appropriate, and sometimes resist dominant cultural messages. Subcultural expressions, gendered media consumption, and diasporic cultural forms are seen as potential sites of resistance and rearticulation.

Despite its critical potential, feminist literary studies influenced by cultural studies often fall back on a familiar mode of evaluation: locating feminist consciousness in the author herself. This author-centric approach continues to value intention and creative autonomy, often at the expense of acknowledging the reception and consumption practices that shape a text's cultural significance. In this framework,

[4] Recent research on Kim Malbong tends to focus on the women's culture that is represented in her works. For the research on sex workers, see Pyŏn Hayŏn. For the research on women's Christian culture, see Kim Yeram. For the study on dating culture, see Pak Sujŏng.

visibility tends to be granted to educated, middle-class women, often assumed to be engaged in a recognizable struggle—typically for cultural recognition against male intellectuals or against the conservatization of female authorship. Yet, such assumptions may obscure other forms of readerly agency and the fragmentation of women's reading publics that resist simple social categorization.

In this regard, the turn toward reception studies and reader-oriented approaches offers a significant corrective to author-centered models. This dissertation thus focuses on works that have garnered overwhelming support from women readers not because they conform to a recognizable feminist or political agenda, but because of their aesthetics of reclusion and expressions of sentimentality. In this dissertation, I approach women's literature not as a fixed genre or identity category, but as a cohort of shared taste—emerging historically, socially, and politically. My goal is to trace how women writers and readers have mobilized the resources of popular literature to carve out new cultural spaces, challenge dominant ideologies, and propose alternative forms of belonging. In so doing, I treat literature not only as a textual object but as a social practice—mediated by institutions, embedded in everyday life, and generative of political meaning. Specifically, the analysis includes Shin Kyung-Sook's novel *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* (1995) in Chapter III and Cho Namju's *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (2016) in Chapter V. These works transcend conventional literary categories, creating emotional communities among female readers who cannot be easily classified by class, ideology, or social role.

To support this aim, I deploy an interdisciplinary methodology that combines literary analysis, feminist cultural studies, intellectual history, and reception theory. I examine magazines, interviews, literary journals, publishing records, and best-seller lists to reconstruct the discursive and material contexts in which women's popular

literature emerged. My approach attends to the ways in which literature is shaped not only by authorial intention and formal qualities but also by institutions, affective communities, market logics, and reading publics.

By foregrounding women's cultural labor within the realm of popular literature, I define popular literature as the process of competing agencies—writers, readers, publishers, critics—who struggle over the meaning, value and function of literary texts. In this context, women's popular literature becomes a vital site of negotiation, where alternative modes of reading and writing can emerge. Rather than participating in the nationalist literary tradition dominated by elite male intellectuals, postwar and contemporary Korean women created new discursive spaces where feminist concerns could be explored through accessible, affect-driven narratives. Popularity here is not a concession to market logic, but a tactic to claim visibility, redistribute cultural authority, and engage broader publics. The history of women's literature in South Korea is thus a history of reshaping the literary field from its margin—infusing it with new affects, ethics, and politics. It is a process not of assimilation but of transformation: reimagining the literary not as a fixe canon but as a living archive of social desire and struggle.

Given this, the central aim of this dissertation is to reconceptualize popular literature through a feminist lens in South Korea. I argue that what is considered "popular" is never ideologically neutral. Rather, it operates as a regulative ideal that is applied differently to male and female writers, filtered through the gendered norms of genre, authorship, and readership. When men write for mass audiences, they are often celebrated for their educational or civic contributions; however, when female writers do the same, they are frequently criticized for indulging in sentimentality or catering to gendered tastes. This dissertation contends that these cultural imaginaries have

influenced educational curricula, publishing decisions, literary canons, and the distribution of cultural authority. Nevertheless, despite Korean women being marginalized in literary culture, they have also actively shaped it. Through alternative modes of authorship, criticism, and cultural participation, women have created new literary communities and challenged long-dominant aesthetic norms. It is important to recognize that women have not merely been objects of the cultural hierarchy; they have also been influential agents within it. They have written against established literary conventions, produced alternative critical discourses, and fostered new communities through reading groups, literary magazines, and digital platforms.

Chapter Overview

This dissertation explores the evolution of this influence across four critical historical moments, each defined by different literary forms, institutional discussions, and gendered audiences. In doing so, it engages with broader conversations in feminist literary studies, genre theory, and Korean cultural history. Moreover, it contributes to existing scholarship by providing a gender-focused genealogy of popular literature—one that highlights women's cultural labor and examines the emotional, ideological, and epistemological frameworks that have historically devalued it.

Chapter II explores the emergence of the "bookish girl" as a cultural figure in the post-Korean War era. It focuses on literary magazines, reading communities, and gendered literacy discourses, examining how young women's engagement with high literature was often framed as excessive, misguided, or socially disruptive. Drawing on feminist theories of intimacy and the public sphere, this chapter argues that women's reading practices constituted a form of counter-public formation that defied both patriarchal domesticity and masculinist citizenship.

Chapter III shifts to the representation of female factory workers and their engagement with literature from the 1970s to the 1990s. Through an analysis of Shin Kyung-Sook's autobiographical novel *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* (1995), this chapter examines how working-class women navigated the contradictions of literacy, authorship, and political activism. Moreover, it highlights the aesthetic strategies that women employed to reframe their lived experiences as legitimate cultural and political knowledge.

Chapter IV analyzes the appropriation of genre fiction by feminist writers since the 1990s. While genres like mystery and science fiction have traditionally been associated with male readerships and commercial appeal, female Korean writers have repurposed these forms to articulate feminist critiques, generate new modes of narrative pleasure, and redefine the boundaries of literary legitimacy. This chapter situates feminist genre fiction within broader debates on middlebrow culture and the politics of taste.

Chapter V investigates the shifting emotional landscape of feminist literature in the 2010s with a particular focus on Cho Namju's *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (2016). It examines how feminist anger and emotional estrangement are mobilized in contemporary fiction not only as themes but also as narrative strategies. In doing so, this chapter explores how literature serves as a medium for political affect, social critique, and collective identification in an era marked by both digital mobilization and anti-feminist backlash.

The dissertation concludes by reflecting on the implications of its findings for the study of literature and gender in the contemporary moment. Amid rapid transformations in South Korean literary culture driven by digital technologies, transnational circulation, and shifting institutional norms, the question of what

constitutes “popular literature” demands renewed critical attention. More specifically, the role played by women in shaping literary popularity through authorship, readership, and mediation must be reexamined—not as an auxiliary or sentimental supplement to serious literature but as something that is central to the production of cultural meaning. By foregrounding women’s cultural labor and aesthetic strategies, this dissertation aims to reconfigure our understanding of literary value, positioning it not as an abstract or ahistorical ideal but as a field of gendered negotiation and political possibility.

CHAPTER II

KOREAN BOOKISH GIRLS:

REVISITING WOMEN'S READING CULTURE IN KOREA

This chapter aims to provide a basic understanding of the shift in and transformation of the intimate sphere through the lens of women's reading practices. Since the late 1950s, the reading of literary works has given way to a distinct female-centered sphere within Korean culture. This women's culture is distinct from that which existed during the colonial period, when female subjects existed as counterparts to—and opponents of—the masculine culture. In the post-Korean War period and under the dictatorial regime of Park Chung Hee (Pak Chŏnghŭi), female subjects in the cultural sphere began to develop a singular discourse wholly independent of masculine discourse; the central power responsible for gathering those women into a gendered community lied with the intimacy among women. These periods in Korean history are often discussed separately, but from a gender-focused perspective, there was a significant degree of continuity in the Cold War-era culture between the 1950s and the 1970s, with cultural politics bolstering the gender division with a focus on the values of domesticity. This chapter assesses the gender ideologies in the Korean cultural sphere that continue to have a strong influence to this day and aims to highlight women's rewriting and reappropriation of the cultural signs that formed the basis of feminist culture after the 1980s. Thus, it argues that women's culture has been shaped by female subjects' desire to develop their own language and imagination, which consequently transformed the boundaries of intimacy that had long been restricted in domestic spaces.

For this comprehensive overview of the cultural significance of women's reading practices, I use the concept of *munhak sonyŏ*, which may be translated to "bookish girls" in English, to discuss the various discourses and components that inform the cultural meaning of female readers. The word *munhak sonyŏ* is the Korean reading of the Chinese 文學少女, made up of the Chinese words for "literature" and "girls." *Munhak sonyŏ* emerged in Korean culture during the 1920s through the reception of the Japanese words *bungaku shōjo* (文学 少女). I translate the term as "bookish girls" rather than "literary girls" to distinguish it from the Anglophone notion of "literary women."[5] Typically, literary women are those who are involved in women's writing and authorship, be it professionally or in the amateur realm. The key qualities of bookish girls, on the other hand, rarely include ambition for social recognition or concerns over monetary gain; instead, they indulge in the pleasure of reading itself, and their reading practices are often problematized due to their overindulgence and snobbism.

Serving as an indicator of female readers who exclusively read literature, the term "bookish girls" has been adapted and circulated across various forms of media to represent women's mass education and popularized tastes. It was a signifier that served to direct women's reading for leisure outside of school. Its meaning was coined in the 1950s, and it continues to circulate today as a critical signifier of the collective of female readers who communicate with one another through literature. This chapter analyzes the intense misogyny linked to the concept of bookish girls in Korean culture. It then proceeds to reassess the communicative actions of bookish girls as constituting a woman's strategy to make space for autonomous individuality

[5] In Korean culture, the concept of "literary women" in Anglophone culture is more closely represented by the word *yŏryu*, which encompasses both amateur and prominent female writers.

beyond the domestic spaces assigned to women. Toward this end, this chapter examines the concept of bookish girls in Cold War-era culture along three dimensions: anti-nationalist issues stemming from an affinity for foreign cultures; anti-civic matters attributable to a lack of rational communication; and the creation of counter-publics through implicit communication.

To lay the groundwork for these efforts, this chapter begins by examining the cultural context of the late 1950s. In this era, the cultural meanings associated with bookish girls were redefined as part of broader movements in cultural consumption. The chapter later goes on to analyze texts with misogynistic narratives that portray bookish girls negatively in various mediums, including newspapers, magazines, poems, short stories, and novels.

Bookish Girls in Modern Culture

In the introduction to their collection of research on Japanese girls' reading practices, Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley assert that the literary establishment in Japan has long dismissed the value of not only the cultural production of girl authors but also the cultural preferences of girl readers. It has done so based on the view that girls' reading represents a means of escaping into a fantasy world and fulfilling their desires (Aoyama and Hartley 10). As with the cultural meanings of young female readers in Japanese culture, the term bookish girls in colonial Korea referred not only to female readers who enjoyed literature but also to a broadly feminine way of consuming literature and other cultural products for lightweight entertainment, particularly entertainment centered on romantic feelings.

Studies on bookish girls during the colonial period in Korea often explore the cultural significance of their pleasure-seeking reading. Such endeavors focus on the

subversive and anti-institutional nature of women's reading practices. Literary scholar Chŏng Miji points out that, during the colonial period, the concept of bookish girls was linked to women's reading practices that broadly extended beyond the reading of textbooks. While school textbooks were devoted to knowledge acquisition—the primary objective of modern education at the time—the reading of romantic and sentimental stories by bookish girls was viewed as a means of squandering the expensive education that they had received (M. Chŏng 29–31). Hŏ Yun, another literary scholar observes the intimate friendships that were blooming among female students at girls-only schools; these close emotional bonds developed through reading defied traditional gender norms—represented by heterosexual normativity—and reflected the discontentment of young women toward the dominance of patriarchy at that time (Y. Hŏ 10).

These perspectives point to bookish girls' positioning on the modern cultural topography, which is distinct from that of other female stereotypes that responded to cultural modernization (e.g., new women, female students, modern girls). Among the new generation of women receiving modern educations and exhibiting modern cultural styles, new women and female students were often involved in political initiatives aimed at modernizing their everyday lives through the acquisition of new knowledge. Naturally, schools represent the critical space in which to have such modernized experiences, including the discourse of free love. Modern girls, on the other hand, represented passive consumers of modern entertainment; their range of activities was limited to spaces defined by consumption culture, such as theaters, cafes, and department stores. The spaces for bookish girls, however, were largely unspecified. They wandered the periphery of modern spaces like schools and theaters. Their unfulfilled longing for idealized fantasies could be met only by books, not by

Korean society. Rather than accepting their poor surroundings, they yearned to fulfill their dreams despite their shabby lives, inspired by fictional worlds. Bookish girls' longing for ideal worlds that did not align with their real-world social and material conditions garnered negative attention from nationalist ideologues.

Male writers produced many critical caricatures of bookish girls and their supposed absurdity, yet female writers in the 1930s, such as Chang Tŏkjo, approached bookish girls from a different angle. Chang caricatured bookish girls as immature and ingenious—but emphasized their endearing cham. One of Chang's most notable works dealing with bookish girls is "Haebaragi" [Sunflower], published in 1937. The protagonist, Inae, insists on the exchange of romantic feelings and gestures with her husband, but her husband insists that the focus of their relationship should be on building a stable and dependable foundation rather than expressing passion. When Inae's husband scolds her, he calls her "my sweet bookish girl" in reference to her love for theaters and novels (D. Chang, 1937a 282). Although he does not care for his wife's vanity, when it comes to his true, intimate feelings, his fondness for her bright energy represents his only source of emotional enjoyment in his dull life as a businessman (D. Chang, 1937b 53). The male character's expectations of his wife are emotional comfort and entertainment, demonstrating that women's emotional care was coming to constitute a significant factor in the domestic sphere during the colonial era.

Chang depicts bookish girls as modernized wives who offer emotional comfort and enjoyment to their counterparts: modern boys. This dynamic partially emancipated the domestic sphere from the traditional family norms that long demanded wives' submission. At least in Chang Tŏkjo's depictions, bookish girls like Inae were less rebellious than new women, who directly threatened masculine

authority and patriarchy. Inae's complaints never went beyond the boundaries of marriage, and marriage and traditional normative values and structures fundamentally persisted; they simply came to be accompanied by expressions of intimacy. In the domestic sphere, bookish girls were socially recognized due to their function in bridging the gap between modern systems and Korean reality, transitioning traditional intimate dynamics (such as those that long characterized marriage) into their modernized forms. The concept of bookish girls in the early twentieth century also emphasized experiences pertaining to intimacy rather than anything that had to do with modern knowledge or consumer culture; they were representative of the new desire to escape institutionalized traditional forms of intimacy while institutionalizing the emerging desire for new forms of intimate relationships, such as romantic love.

The dichotomy between the public and private spheres from Western social theory—whereby men are in charge of the public sphere and women are in charge of the private sphere—could be a progressive idea in colonial culture. Women were allowed autonomy, at least in the domestic sphere. However, during the Cold War era, the representation of bookish girls underwent a major transformation following the intervention of state ideologies. As the South Korean regime built a patriarchal state system based on militarism and industrialism, gender expectations were increasingly linked to prevailing nationalist and statist ideologies. Nationalist culture symbolically identified the nation with the patriarchal family unit, and gender divisions came to be used as a mechanism to suppress women's free imagination and intellectual autonomy. The next section discusses how ideological projects surrounding women's reading altered the function of bookish girls in Korean culture.

The Nationalist Problematization of Women's Reading

Following Korea's liberation, women gained opportunities to participate in political and economic activities as citizens with legal rights—including suffrage—as well as the right to a public education. Despite these civil rights granted to women, however, their advancement into the public sphere was not always guaranteed. The cultural transformation of South Korean society, which was shaped by political actors working to establish a democratic civil society, paradoxically exhibited a tendency to uphold traditional gender structures. Patriarchal traditions were routinely reinforced when it came to women's gender roles in intimate relationships, including romantic relationships, sexual relationships, and kinship, offering a sharp contrast with the rapidly modernizing political culture.

The perception that women's economic activity represents a threat to traditional intimacy is a hallmark of Korean nationalism. Representing women in charge of the household economy (due to men's loss of economic power) as prostitutes was a common trend in Korean culture from the colonial period until the 1960s.[6] In the post-Korean War period, women enjoying U.S. popular culture were subjected to intense misogyny, accused not only of sexual promiscuity but also of a lack of patriotism. Women in dance halls was seen as a major social issue in the

[6] Choi Chungmoo asserts in "Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea" that male South Korean nationalists on the side of resistance against the regime often cast misogynistic glances at educated women, not just because they challenged traditional patriarchal authority but also because their familiarity with the materially advantaged U.S. culture made them more likely to collaborate with the dominant foreign power (C. Choi 25). Kelly Jeong also interprets the post-war crisis of masculinity and misogyny as a "failure of the national and patriarchal authority" (K. Jeong 63); see Chapter 3 for an analysis of post-war male writers, including Yi Pŏmsŏn and Son Ch'angsŏb.

1950s, and there was widespread social disdain for women who provided sexual services to the U.S. military.[7]

At the root of this distaste was dissatisfaction with a national system dependent on U.S. economic aid. South Korean society had begun to (ostensibly) modernize its legal and social systems, but it still lacked the economic and cultural strength to enact truly modern processes. Anger at the privileged few who relied on economic aid to accumulate personal wealth extended to consumers with an affinity for foreign cultures and the ability to enjoy an extravagant lifestyle. Alongside direct condemnation of the sexual morality of women who engaged in consumer culture, antipathy toward the South Korean government's reliance on U.S. economic aid was represented symbolically using gender norms by ideologues who advocated for the development of a national economy and culture independent from U.S. influence. For example, Ham Sŏk'hŏn—one of the most prominent anarchist thinkers against Pak's dictatorship—likened the construction of national culture to the domestic labor of women (e.g., cooking, washing, making clothes). In his 1961 essay "Chŏlmŭn yŏsŏngege chugo ship'ŭn mal" [What I Want to Say to Young Women], traditional gender roles are used metaphorically to illustrate the idea of a national culture creating something clean and new out of something dirty and old. However, his emphasis on traditional gender roles was more than a metaphor. In the conclusion of the essay, Ham directly solicits young women to give birth to sons who will go on to be revolutionaries and create a new world (Ham 121).

[7] The most prominent example of this comes from the criticism against Chŏng Pisŏk's novel *Chayupuin* [Madame Freedom] (1954). The heroine Sŏnyŏng indulges in dance and other typical forms of American leisure, such as moviegoing, shopping, and picnicking, neglecting her duties as a housewife. Toward the end of the narrative, Sŏnyŏng repents for her extravagant indulgences after being impressed by a speech given by her husband, a prominent nationalist linguist. For a deeper discussion of the novel *Madame Freedom*, see Charles Kim, especially Chapter 2.

The idolization of devoted female characters who sacrifice themselves for their family and their nation was a typical strategy employed to promote traditional femininity. Historical figures like Shin Saimdang as "a wise mother and a good wife"[8] and Yu Kwansun as "a martyr daughter of the nation" became prominent during this period.[9] Through the historical glorification of women's devotion, the ideology of state power permeated into women's intimate relationships. Despite women's assigned role being a domestic one, women's devotion to the family was framed as equivalent to serving public and national interests.

Postcolonial ideologues often harshly criticized women's consumerism while glorifying traditional gender roles. Charles Kim notes that the aforementioned metaphor illustrates how Korean ideologues sought to align Korean culture with modern demands without sacrificing its national identity to Western modernity. He refers to this perspective as "postcolonial traditionalism," emphasizing the push for modernization in Koreans' everyday lives. The value of wholesomeness came to function as a critique of corrupt governance and a genuine attempt to foster collective progress toward "the elusive goals of socioeconomic equality, as well as economic and cultural independence from the West—America, in particular" (C. Kim 212).

The April Revolution of 1960 (also known as the 4.19 Revolution or Sa-ilgu) marked a crucial turning point that realigned women once more toward exclusion. This civil revolution sought to democratize South Korea's political culture while restoring the traditional gender structure that had been disrupted during the liberation era and the Korean War. Literary scholar Kwŏn Podŭrae argues in *1960nyŏnŭl mutta*

[8] For more detailed discussions on the signification of the symbol of Shin Saimdang, see Sujin Kim and Kwŏn Ohŏn.

[9] The symbol of a female nationalist hero represented by the figure of Yu Kwansun was constructed through the translation of Joan of Arc. See Charles Kim, especially Chapter 3.

[Interrogating the Sixties] that the call for women to return to domestic roles was one of the crucial arguments made for social reform during the April Revolution. Although women from various classes and generations participated in the revolution, the consumer campaign led by female college students was the only recognized social movement that truly reflected women's involvement in the April Revolution (Kwŏn and Ch'ŏn 465–467). Kwŏn elucidates how the April Revolution entrenched gender divisions by confining women's citizenship to the private sphere for the purposes of material and symbolic reproduction. This gender dynamic underlying the civil revolution mirrored the needs of male subjects who had lost their economic dominance in the aftermath of the Korean War and were seeking to restore their patriarchal authority.

As domesticity took root in women's culture during the April Revolution, the stereotype of bookish girls seemed to exhibit some overlap with domestic femininity and the performance of wholesomeness. A woman who reads alone was perceived as safe from sexual danger, unlike those who socialized with men in dance halls and movie theaters. Bookish girls were also associated with a frugal lifestyle, distanced from American consumer culture. Although the figure of a bookish girl was considered appropriate in domestic spaces, women reading was still generally viewed as a disturbing sign, especially when it came to highly literate women reading foreign literature.

The new generation of patriarchs of the 1960s, who aspired for national cultural and economic growth, such as the liberal ideologues of the April Revolution and the young elite officers of the subsequent military revolution, harshly criticized women who indulged in exotic fantasies and, in turn, were purportedly neglecting the national task at hand.

For example, one need only compare two poems, one by Park Chung Hee and the other by Shin Tongyŏp, a prominent dissident poet. In 1963, two years after leading a military revolution, Park Chung Hee wrote a book called *Kukgawa hyŏkmyŏngkwa na* [The Country, the Revolution, and I] (1963) to discuss the purpose behind the revolution, his regime's accomplishments and his ideology.[10] Park outlines his vision of economic growth for the nation, emphasizing the importance of labor and criticizing higher education and luxurious lifestyles as barriers to economic progress. He argues that extravagant living—as evidenced by people selling farming tools, sending children to college, and dining at fancy restaurants—constitutes a major hindrance to national economic growth (C. Park 178). In his poetry, his view of extravagant living is embodied in the image of a young woman who reads high literature:

> To the sound of churning machines, sweat!
>
> You, a young girl sitting in the second-class compartment, your white hands holding a book of French poetry.
>
> Your white hands I abhor. (C. Park 178–179)[11]

Park's aversion to the bourgeoise's habitus, shaped by liberal art education, is often linked to his historical belief that the economic and political crisis in post-war Korea was driven by the inappropriate adoption of Western modernity. He envisioned people rebuilding the national economy and culture as physically strong and masculine men

[10] An English-language translation of this book was published in the same year under the title of *The Country, the Revolution, and I* (1963). This English version skipped some elements of Pak's poetry; thus, my reference here follows the Korean publication.

[11] This poem is featured in *The Country, the Revolution, and I*. Park Chung Hee included several untitled poems in this book, which are typically referred to by their first lines. Nevertheless, in editions published in the 2000s, editors titled this poem "A Girl Reading French Poems in a Second-Class Carriage (1961)," mirroring the famous line of this poem which mentions a girl reading a book of French poetry. See volume 25 of *Pak Chŏnghŭi sijip* [Park Chung Hee's poetry collection], published by Kip'arang in 2017.

shedding blood and sweat. In contrast, Park associated the image of intellectuals reading and contemplating with a feminine, delicate body. Although women engaging in literature was no longer seen as inappropriate in terms of gender norms, women who pursued reading during this period were subject to a new form of misogyny rooted in the socialist and nationalist nature of Park's military regime, which was rooted in the sanctification of manual labor.

Shin Tongyŏp's "Kŭmgang" [Kŭm river], a book-length epic poem published in 1967, is a typical example of how dissident intellectuals in this period viewed female intelligentsia as an opponent of ideal femininity. "Kŭm River" vividly depicts the peaceful, anarchistic state of traditional Korean culture and idealizes a simple life in which women marry wearing wildflowers in their hair. For many nationalist poets, including Shin, the figure of women performing care work within traditional national communities was a symbol of the utopian tradition that the Korean nation should restore. As a natural opponent of the violent and decadent modernity, maternal femininity was often portrayed as a sacred ideal; behind this idealization, however, there was a condemnation of women outside of domestic and national spaces. For example, in the sixth scene of "Kŭm River," Shin draws a parallel between women with advanced literacy and corrupt bureaucrats. Both pursue economic benefits with their intelligence instead of the pure values that once existed in traditional Korean culture:[12]

I wonder

By butter, jazz, dollars

And yankeeism, our land

[12] This translation is my own. There are no published English-language translations of *Kum River*. David McCann provides the extracted translation of *Kum River* in *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Korean Poetry*. See McCann.

Is rotten.

(…)

Dollars smell good,

Korean college girls,

Stretched out like Korean water celeries,

Wading around dollars

All day with their *Life* magazine.

In Shin's poetic imagination, the college girls carrying English news magazines are likened to Korean water celeries, which are vegetables that are easy to grow with just a little water, thus calling to mind notions of shallowness and feebleness. It implies that these college girls' knowledge of foreign cultures and languages is superficial and that they use these English magazines merely to fulfill their vanity.

Both poems frame women outside of domestic spaces as irresponsible and corrupted—selfish women who fail to consider the nation's future. Despite their ideologically distinct standpoints, the state-based nationalism of Park and the resistant power of dissident intellectuals like Shin coincide in their use of cultural gender divisions to foster a united image of the nation. Women's reading practices give way to autonomous individuals: The girl in Park Chung Hee's poem is leaving home for school, while the college girls in Shin Tongyŏp's poem walk around the U.S. Embassy dreaming of one day leaving Korea for a new world. Women who read foreign books were perceived as dangerous because they leave the domestic space through the world represented in the text; foreign books became women's means of dreaming beyond their immediate surroundings and confines—of boosting their knowledge and using their imagination.

Bookish Girls Unqualified for Cultural Citizenship

In the 1960s, as bookish girls encountered hostility, young male readers were experiencing a rise in their level of cultural privilege. The distinct terminology used for female and male readers illustrates how the reading of high literature was gendered in this period. The term "bookish girls" refers to female readers of any age as girls, emphasizing their perceived immaturity. In contrast, young male readers were referred to as *munhakch'ŏngnyŏn* (文學 青年), which translates to "literary youth." Through the word "youth," which came to refer to male college students from Seoul after the April Revolution,[13] the term "literary youth" highlighted male readers' political awareness as well as their potential to drive societal change (S. Pak, "Munhaksonyŏrŭl Hŏharar" 50-61).

According to Charles Kim, male college students became central to Korean political culture after the war, creating the idea of a morally aware student vanguard, which he refers to as student vanguardism. He argues that the emergence of this new generation was crucial: "a mass protagonist that was to serve as the hope, the exemplar, and the representative of the Korean ethos" (C. Kim 76), offering a contrast against the narrow elitism of the privileged class. It represented a notable shift in social elitism—its transition from a basis on inherited social status (e.g., caste) to a basis on acquired qualities (e.g., education, ethos). It is important to consider the changes in the concept of elitism from the late 1950s to the late 1960s, just before the Yushin dictatorship became deeply involved in shaping the gendered structure of Korean culture. The structure of Korean culture was being reconstructed due to the

[13] For the theoretical and historical background of the term "youth" in Korean culture, see S. Lee, especially pages 1–15.

country's economic growth, and a new group of elites was emerging to lead the masses.

Distinct from the traditional privileged class, which was grounded in the colonial education system and led by those who often studied in Japan, the new generation of intellectuals studied at Korean universities, which were typically established after Korea's liberation. In a clear departure from their predecessors, who were heavily influenced by the Japanese language and Japanese literature, literary youth were educated in the Korean language with an entrenched emphasis on Korean literature.

As public schooling was designed for the common people, literary texts in school textbooks were typically selected for their ability to enhance communication skills rather than their literary merit (S. Pak "Chŏngchŏnŭi Munhwasa" 244-245). As Bruce Cumings points out, mass community is characterized by guaranteed social mobility and masses' access to elites without the need for intermediate groups—and Korean society in the 1970s fulfilled these conditions (Cumings 69–70). Public education, which guaranteed equal opportunities to the masses following liberation, was an important social condition for South Korea's entry into mass society in the 1970s. The advent of mass society demanded the redefinition of the notion of popularity from the quantitative to the qualitative—from the intellectual to the performative. Cultural aristocracy is enhanced in mass society rather than weakened, as it is a key means of distinguishing new elites from the masses despite the lack of stable social belongings. Jose Ortega y Gasset's account of the characteristics of the masses may be used to understand this shift as linked to psychic cultural contagion. In his book *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930), Ortega y Gasset argues that the appropriation of high culture as a commodity for the masses is a key characteristic of

modern mass society. As the average literacy and consumption power of the masses increased, enabling them to consume texts that had previously only been available to a privileged few or elite, a shift in standards was necessary to critique the masses' consumption of culture. He argues that the masses are no longer a matter of size or class; rather, the masses are defined by their psychological pursuit of collective mediocrity. Therefore, cultural elites should be defined by their individual autonomy and ability to self-reflect, which frees them from the psychological contagion of wanting to be like everyone else (Ortega y Gasset 13–14).

The purported cultural inferiority of women prevalent in the 1960s shows that feminine qualities were beginning to be defined as characteristics of the masses. In other words, the desire for psychological contagion and sameness—key psychological characteristics of the masses—coincided with women's emotional and sentimental attitudes in their cultural practices. Even when women read serious literary books, their reading practice was faulty on the level of performance, as the empathy, emotional involvement, and identification that women felt proved their deficiencies as autonomous individuals.

This negative perception of women's identification with the fictional world was intensively expressed in the reception of existentialist literature in the 1950s and the 1960s. As Kelly Jeong points out, French existentialist literature was at the core of the new youth culture after the Korean War. The reception of French political ideas and the role of intellectuals like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre profoundly influenced the formation of Korean elite culture (K. Jeong 64–65). However, the cultural function of French existentialist literature in Korea was not applied to female readers; instead, women's reading of existentialist literature was discussed alongside the rising number of suicides by girls. For example, in 1960, two high school girls in

the same class committed suicide together, and their suicides were widely framed as a result of their indulgence in existentialist literature. The girls came from economically affluent backgrounds and excelled academically, so it was difficult to identify any source of misfortune in their privileged lives that would make them choose death. The media at the time analyzed the books that they read and the sentences that they underlined in their books as indicative of a sense of futility and a longing for death, concluding that existentialist literature fueled their nihilism. Park Imun, a prominent professor of French literature at the time, criticized the girls for not digesting French literature properly; he argued that even if Sartre's *Nausea* and Camus' *The Stranger* involved a deadly poison for the two young girls, the sin would not lie with the poison itself—it would lie with the intellect of the young girls who misread the intentions of the two writers (I. Pak 4).

Criticisms of bookish girls often implied a distinction between women's reading practices and men's, creating a hierarchy between the two. Although female readers became major consumers of high literature, they were not considered aristocratic readers; rather, they were simply a mass of people who were easily swayed by fads and the emotions surrounding them. They lacked the rational capacity to see literary works' broad historical and social contexts and apply them to the reality of Korea. This dynamic is linked to another purported flaw of the bookish girls of the 1960s: their lack of rational communication skills.

Bookish girls' core problem was often said to be their excessive emotional expressiveness. In 1961, poet Chang Manyŏng, who was known for his lyrical poetry and his involvement in the literary establishment since the colonial period, expressed discomfort with bookish girls who sent him unilateral letters. In his essay "Munhaksonyŏŭi p'yŏnji" [Letters from Bookish Girls], he notes that bookish girls

today seemed more sentimental than the young female readers who sent him fan letters in the 1940s. Whereas the earlier generation offered thoughtful reviews and warm support, the bookish girls of the 1960s often shared anxiety-riddled monologues and yearnings that were not even connected to Chang's writings. Ultimately, Chang concludes that excessive sentimentality is a persistent and chronic disease among girls in post-war Korean culture (M. Chang, 190–192). Chang's discomfort in this essay reflects the broader negative assessment of female readers' writing by the literary community at this time, which stemmed from their purportedly one-sided communication and vague emotional turbulence. As these bookish girls generally made no effort to approach writers' original intentions and failed to engage in rational discussion, their letters left their recipients bewildered and offended.

Considering that Chang's above-stated essay was published in 1961—the year after the April Revolution—amid mounting efforts to revive patriarchy, the criticism of bookish girls' sentimentality epitomizes the cultural techniques of the 1960s that sought to exclude women from the realm of citizenship. The one-sided expression of emotion is often criticized for lacking a key quality of citizenship: the ability to communicate rationally in public spaces. The European origins of citizenship differ substantially from Korea's historical and cultural background, yet the post-April Revolution model of Korean citizenship shared essential characteristics with Western bourgeois public-sphere principles.

Jürgen Habermas explains that the gap between government institutions and democracy gives way to the creation of a public sphere to bridge this divide. The April Revolution began with election fraud, which led to the emergence of civil power that sought to bridge the gap between state governance and citizens' political awareness. Citizenship was defined by individuals' ability to engage in rational

communication rather than their legal rights alone. The term “common people” reflects the equal political standing provided by constitutional rights, yet it does not necessarily indicate genuine citizenship. Common people exercised their universal suffrage irresponsibly through election fraud in exchange for small bribes in the form of rubber shoes or rice wine. The essential characteristic of genuine citizenship in this context was communicative rationality, which emphasized fairness and justice in governance rather than legal rights.

While the April Revolution anchored the concept of civil liberties in Korean society, it also led to the possibility of people with the same legal rights being disqualified from citizenship. In other words, the concept of citizenship contributed to the separation of gender and citizenship. As equal rights to suffrage and public schooling were constitutionally guaranteed, women were equal citizens under the law of the Republic of Korea; in terms of citizenship, however, sentimentality was a significant flaw of women that disqualified them as qualified political subjects capable of participating in discussions about public interests. Arbitrary and sentimental attitudes were often used to justify the fact that women could not be equal civic agents with men, even if they were sexually chaste or intellectually capable.

Despite the prevailing negative views of women's reading habits, critiques of bookish girls in the 1960s revealed a distinct group of women whose experiences and behaviors set them apart from both men and prior generations of women. These women embodied characteristics—including citizenship—that the established system failed to recognize. By the end of the 1960s, women who sought to articulate their identities and share their experiences in their own terms began to express themselves through literary magazines. The section that follows examines how women created a communicative space through their education and literary magazines.

Reading to Belong: Literary Magazines as Women-Only Spaces

The negative portrayals of bookish girls outlined in the previous section depict them as marginalized individuals who were outside the cultural system, in conflict with the national ideology, and perceived as unqualified for public-sphere communication. Nevertheless, the generalization of bookish girls—their transformation into a collective symbol—served as a catalyst for culturally marginalized women outside of the literary establishment to recognize and address their peripheral existence. The 1960s represents a pivotal moment in the history of women's culture, as literature became a communicative framework through which women could connect with one another despite the restrictions placed upon them.

Following the liberation period, there was a notable shift in Korean society brought about by the increased significance of education. College education played a critical role in the social mobility of individuals and families. However, education opportunities were scarce for women, especially those from peasant backgrounds who had few options beyond primary schooling. Young women's societal roles typically involved aiding their families and ensuring that their male siblings could receive an education by carrying out household responsibilities or engaging in factory work. For these women, literary magazines offered a valuable opportunity for them to connect to their peers who were able to attend school, giving them a glimpse into the world beyond their domestic and factory lives.

Literary magazines for teens, such as *Hakwŏn* [Lyceum] and *Yŏhaksaeng* [Girl Students], flourished between the 1950s and the 1970s, creating a space in which young literary enthusiasts could engage with contemporary cultural trends beyond their individual regional or class boundaries. These magazines frequently featured

sections for reader contributions, a practice rooted in modern magazine culture since the 1910s. By the 1960s and 1970s, these reader submissions—especially those submitted in response to prose and poetry contests—had come to define juvenile literary magazines.

Lyceum played a central role in this transformation.[14] In 1954, it launched one of the earliest literary contests targeting teenage students. Prize winners received critical feedback, editorial guidance, and the opportunity to revise their submissions. More significantly, however, they gained access to prominent literary figures, such as the novelist Kim Tongri and the poet Sŏ Chŏngchu, who served as judges. Many of these early participants would go on to become influential voices in modern Korean literature.[15] Functioning akin to an informal apprenticeship, these literary prizes provided rare opportunities for young writers—especially those outside elite educational institutions—to connect with renowned authors, making literary magazines a crucial pathway for the transmission of cultural capital beyond elite schooling.

However, access to this cultural authority was shaped by gender. Girls who submitted work to these magazines often expressed a deep sense of inadequacy, uncertainty, and anxiety about their qualifications. As Chŏng Miji observes, submissions from undereducated girls were common, and many contributors referred to themselves as ignorant girls who had not completed primary school or bookish girls who feared not being taken seriously. Their narratives were marked by feelings of

[14] For more details, see Kim Hansik's analysis of the industrial and cultural conditions that influenced *Lyceum* to transform its identity from a liberal art magazine for teens into a literary magazine that would go on to attract a wider readership (H. Kim 297–303). See also Kim Hansik, especially 303–311. He provides information on how the prize winners of literary contests were assigned to the literary establishment.

[15] For a list of renowned writers who began their literary career through *Lyceum*, see the blog post of Ch'oe Chonghŭi, *Lyceum*'s first editor-in-chief.

shame and self-doubt, reflecting internalized barriers to cultural engagement (M. Chŏng 42–43).

These anxieties were notably diminished in submissions to magazines that explicitly targeted female readers, such as *Girl Students*. Founded in 1965, *Girl Students* held less prestige within the literary establishment than *Lyceum* and was rarely viewed as a launching pad for professional literary careers. The evaluative criteria applied to submissions in *Girl Students* differed markedly from those in *Lyceum*: Judges treated the contributions not as serious literary endeavors but as leisurely activities. Rigorous critique, detailed correction, and revision were common in *Lyceum* but nearly non-existent in *Girl Students* (Yangsŏn Kim, "1960nyŏntae yŏsŏngŭi munhakkyoyang hyŏngsŏngŭi sidaechŏk t'ŭksŏng." 40–41). Instead, the literary space in *Girl Students* functioned as a platform for girls to share feelings and experiences that emerged from their unique position as girls in their specific time and place—their experiences with girlhood. This girl-only setting created a protected and empathetic environment in which young women could share their personal issues and emotional difficulties. Reviewers such as renowned poets Cho Chihun and Chang Manyŏng focused on developing connections and mutual understanding among girls rather than discovering promising young writers. Readers of *Girl Students* found their own emotions and experiences reflected and validated by the works of their female peers. Struggling to find like-minded friends with whom to discuss literature and driven by a common passion for poetry and fiction, many young female readers turned to pen pals as an avenue for connection. By the mid-1960s, pen pals had become a popular mode of peer-to-peer communication.[16] In line with other literary

[16] Pen pals were popularized in the 1960s by the International Pen Pal Association to facilitate virtual connections between countries. The trend of pen pals among teenagers in South Korea has become the basis for friendships based on a wide variety of cultural interests, including

magazines, *Girl Students* featured advertisements for letter exchanges. However, while male readers of *Lyceum* often used these networks to find friends of the opposite sex, female respondents more often sought same-sex peers with whom they could exchange intimate feelings.[17]

Within this gendered cultural realm, *Girl Students* provided young women with a sense of belonging. For many girls in the 1960s, the affective bonds mediated by literary magazines were particularly significant on account of the difficulty they had trying to form intimate relationships within their families or local communities. As argued by Judith Mayne, the private sphere for women is not simply personal; it denotes a deeper, more emotionally charged space because the home—far from being a sanctuary—often imposes reproductive labor on women (Mayne 34). The entanglement of instrumental and emotional relationships complicated women's experiences of intimacy. Traditional forms of intimate relationships—those grounded in heterosexuality and kinship, such as marriage and family—frequently proved to be incompatible with women's desires for emotional fulfillment.

According to Anthony Giddens, the structural constraints and normative expectations imposed on women within bourgeois institutions often led them to seek a "pure relationship" beyond such frameworks. While Giddens conceptualized romantic love as a quintessential form of a pure relationship capable of enabling subversion, in Korea, the highly gendered educational environment fostered a parallel valuation of same-sex friendships as pure relationships. Since the establishment of Ehwa Girls' School by U.S. missionary Mary Scranton in 1886, South Korea's secondary system

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reading, creative writing, and music. For more details on this phenomenon, see S. Chŏng.

[17] My research focused on *Girl Students* publications in the 1960s. During the 1970s, *Girl Students* adopted a fashionable feminine approach focused on dating and romantic relationships with male peers.

evolved with strong gender segregation, meaning that, for many decades, young women in Korea spent the majority of their teenage years in female-only educational spaces. This gendered environment enabled the formation of emotionally intimate relationships among same-sex peers—relationships that were unburdened by patriarchal roles or material concerns. Thus, the inability of some girls to attend secondary school did not have exclusively academic consequences; it also meant the loss of opportunities for girls to form same-sex peer networks. In this context, magazines like *Girl Students* functioned as alternative affective communities, replicating the peer intimacy offered by girls' schools. This was particularly vital for young women who existed outside the formal education system.

The gendered sphere constructed by *Girl Students* was shaped not only by the magazine's targeting of female readership but also by the explicitly gendered tastes and sentiments embedded in its literary content. For example, the magazine introduced a new category of fiction termed *sonyŏ* [girlish] fiction, which often overlapped with *sunjŏng* [pure love] fiction. Literary scholar Kim Yangsŏn describes such fiction as "wholesome melodramas," characterized by dramatic and emotionally charged narrative elements—such as birth secrets, familial abuse, chance encounters, romantic love, and forbidden relationships. However, these stories invariably concluded with wholesome resolutions: the avoidance of sexual exploration, a moment of epiphany following emotional turbulence, or a return to familial or educational normalcy (Yangsŏn Kim, "Ch'wihyangŭi Kongtongch'ewa Sonyŏdŭlŭi Mellodŭlama" 244–251). Much like how girls' schools established a gendered *habitus*, girls' magazines like *Girl Students* systematized literary tastes and cultivated a distinctive aesthetic discourse.

This aesthetic framework was grounded in both Korean and European literary traditions. The magazine's literary canon prominently featured Rilke's lyric poetry as well as French and German romantic novels, such as D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, André Gide's *La Symphonie Pastorale*, and *The Narrow Door*. These works not only embodied feminine literary tastes but also expanded the imaginative possibilities for the self-image of the adolescent girl beyond the bounds of national and institutional identity. *Girl Students* illustrated how the imaginative worlds constructed by girls in the 1960s frequently crossed national borders. The idealized girl depicted in the magazine was not confined to the figure of a middle-class student attending an elite school in Seoul. Instead, through the inclusion of illustrated literary features, the magazine illustrated girlishness in a transnational register.

The fantasies presented in *Girl Students* were often inspired by translated Western European poems and novels written by women and marketed as girls' literature. These texts were accompanied by vivid color illustrations depicting girls in European-style dresses amidst exotic landscapes. Such images crafted a vision of girlish innocence and emotional sensitivity that transcended local norms and reimagined femininity on a global scale (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The inner cover of the magazine *Girl Students* (vol. 1, 1965).

This fantasy played a productive role by inspiring creativity with a view toward a new world that defied traditional gender norms in Korean culture. In *Modernity at Large* (1996), anthropologist Arjun Appadurai distinguishes between fantasy and imagination, emphasizing the political significance of the latter. Unlike fantasy, which is often driven by marginalized positions to serve as an escape from local constraints, imagination has a projective quality; it serves as a prelude to expression, aesthetic or otherwise. When imagination becomes collective, it fuels action and ideas pertaining to community, nationhood, moral economic structures, justice in governance, fair wages, and foreign labor prospects. Today, imagination functions as a staging ground for action rather than a mere avenue for escapism (Appadurai 7).

It is important to note that imagination is not just a faculty of gifted individuals, as it was often understood since the rise of European Romanticism, but rather a shared property of collectives. The mass media, through collective reading, criticism, and pleasure, foster what Appadurai dubs a "community of sentiment," meaning a group that imagines and experiences emotions together (Appadurai 8). This framework helps to explain the connections formed among bookish girls through literature. While Anderson's idea of imagined community centers on the creation of national institutions through a shared language, Appadurai highlights the resistance of culturally marginalized groups. The case of bookish girls' communities exemplifies how their engagement is not merely about their shared interests; it is also driven by political motivation and a critique of power dynamics that is deeply embedded in their self-understanding.

The political function of fantasy to escape from reality, therefore, helps to explain why women's culture in the 1960s and 1970s centered around serious

literature. As the traditional gender norm was still in operation, women were often marginalized from mainstream education, and their behavior was strictly constricted by patriarchal gender norms. For women, reading high literature represented a way to escape from the real world, depriving them of educational opportunities and fulfilling their fantasy of higher education. By emphasizing this point, it is possible to reevaluate bookish girls' indulgence in high literature and foreign literature.

This argument brings us to the global context of bookish girls, exploring how their connections to society and the wider world were fostered through bonds with particular works or authors. Notably, their affinity for existentialist fiction revealed a desire to understand and validate their feelings through Western literary masterpieces. Below, I examine how bookish girls sought to make their reading habits culturally significant, appealing, and defiant, particularly when it came to translations of German literature, through their admiration for the female translator Chŏn Hyerin.

Disembedding Women's Reading: Bookish Girls as Translators

In *The Female Complaint* (2008), Laurent Berlant defines "intimate publics" as affective spaces that emerge from shared feelings and knowledge, often shaped by mass cultural forms such as women's magazines, sentimental novels, and television shows. Unlike traditional forms of political engagement, these publics are defined by a collective attachment to certain objects or narratives, typically revolving around issues related to gender or domestic life. According to Berlant, intimate publics are characterized by tacit communication activated through shared experiences with and understandings of one another rather than the explicit analysis of attached objects (Berlant 5–6). Within the women's community, certain literary texts serve to

condense the complex contexts that surround women. Instead of relying on explicit communication, bookish girls often "borrowed" accountability from literary works.

In the 1960s, Chŏn Hyerin (1934–1965) translated German literature and wrote essays for newspapers while teaching German literature at universities. Following her death from an overdose on sleeping pills in 1965, the popularity of her writing skyrocketed. By the 1980s, she had become a leading idol of bookish girls. Her translation of *Demian* garnered particular notoriety, achieving a spot on the bestseller list in the late 1960s.[18] *Demian*'s popularity had a lot to do with Chŏn's statement about the book in her essay "Tu kaeŭi sekye: temianŭi kyŏngu" [Two Worlds: The Case of Demian], which was included in her book *Kŭrigo Amumaldo Haji Anatta* [And then Said Nothing]:

> For personal reasons, *Damien* has also become an unforgettable book for me. A friend of mine, who loved *Damien* dearly, came to me one day during my sophomore year of college and asked to borrow it. Promising to bring it back the following Monday, she borrowed my copy of *Deminan* full of red underlining. My dear friend, a model student who was as precise as a machine when we were classmates at girls' school, didn't come back to me on Monday. I thought it was nothing serious and that she just couldn't come. It wasn't until about half a month later that I realized that she couldn't come because she was already dead. She had been reading *Demian* until the moment she died. Why did she die, and why did she—? I couldn't get over that question for half a year. Even now, I remember the day she came to me to borrow the book and the

[18] For the biography of Chŏn Hyerin, see Kim Yongŏn. For the female readers' reception of book of essays, *And then Said Nothing*, see Pak Sukja 2013. This study provides details on the reevaluation process for Chŏn Hyerin by the literary establishment following her death. For details on female readers' reception of *Demian*, see Im Chinha. For an analysis of Chŏn Hyerin's writings, see Sŏ Ŭnju, Yi Tongha, and Yi Haengmi.

> shock I felt afterward when I heard about her death from the mouth of a third party on the side of the road. It was winter. I'll probably keep it in some corner of my brain for the rest of my life. (Chŏn 187–188)

In Hesse's novel *Demian*, the eponymous character is a friend who guides the protagonist Emily away from worldly pleasures and toward a contemplative world, but he always stays silent about himself, leaving the story of his life untold. Chŏn Hyerin takes her real-life friend's unexplained suicide as a mysterious event—just like Demian's fascination with Emily. Here, Chŏn uses the novel to instantly connect a girl who died in a small Eastern country that most Germans do not even know exists. The intimate memory of a friend is quickly linked to the historical dimension of the post-war generation in Germany and literary criticisms of Hesse. Thus, as literary critic Im Chinha points out, Chŏn does not portray her friend who died while holding Hesse's novel as a sentimental bookish girl but rather as a young woman in the throes of existential anguish (Im 52).

Some critics have criticized Chŏn's writing for being narrow and poorly thought out as a result of her questionable efforts to connect issues from different levels, suggesting that she was unable to move beyond her own world into the realm of mature literary criticism (T. Yi 300–312). Others see genius and exceptionality in Chŏn's imagination, praising her for ingeniously connecting different experience levels (Yongŏn Kim 398–401). Examinations of Chŏn's writing have typically focused on confrontations between her privilege and her resistance to it. However, Kwŏn Podŭrae draws feminist meaning from Chŏn's depression. Chŏn rejected both the colonial cultural power of her father's generation and the mass mobilization of Park's military regime. Given that her father had gained social status and wealth during the colonial period, her intimacy with him clashes with her beliefs as a

postcolonial intellectual. Moreover, her moral opposition to the corrupt South Korean regime hindered her ambition to become a legal scholar. Her studies in Germany and interest in German literature may be viewed as a form of exile—an act of defiance against the wishes of her father and her nation (Kwŏn and Ch'ŏn 412–413).[19]

For female readers in Korea, idolizing Chŏn Hyerin was not merely an expression of envy toward her privileged opportunity to study abroad—an experience far removed from the ordinary lives of Korean women at the time. The enthusiastic reception of *Demian* among women suggests that those who lacked Chŏn's privileges still grappled with similar inner conflicts and were drawn to the ways in which she embodied her emotions. Rather than articulating her inner turmoil in detailed and precise language, Chŏn conveyed her emotional connection with a dead friend by reading *Demian*. Thus, the novel serves as a symbolic token evoking the secret inner world of a bookish girl. Chŏn's writing, which bridges that which is unbridgeable—life and death, Korea and Germany—demonstrates how women can navigate the irreconcilable gap between their social conditions and their personal ideals. For those marginalized by the devaluation of women's communicative agency, implicit communication using attached objects offered a powerful means of conveying intimate emotions and creating a space of complete individuality free from the intervention of public ideologies. This shared experience among women readers fosters a sense of community and understanding as well as a connection that transcends social barriers. For women surrounded by countless obstacles, reading literature represented a way to separate themselves from conventional means of

[19] At the time, state approval was required to study abroad. Thus, in many cases, students approved to study abroad were experts in fields that could contribute to Korea's development, such as law, economics, or engineering. Chŏn Hyerin's husband, who studied in Germany with her, was also a student who had been approved to study law in Germany. For more details on the state's study-abroad policies during the 1950s, see K. Kim, especially pages 99–101.

communication. While traditional intimacy was interrupted and disturbed by the "promise of happiness," the virtual intimacy constructed by reading the same books provided bookish girls a sense of community despite the constraints and normative expectations of their everyday lives.

The sense of disembedding[20] is symbolized by Chŏn Hyerin being repeatedly mentioned by later generations of women writers and readers resisting the national culture surrounding them and seeking cultural autonomy. For example, feminist scholar Cho-Han Hae Joang (Cho-Han Hyechŏng) says that she read and interpreted Chŏn Hyerin's writings differently as a teenager than she did as an adult, after returning to Korea from her time studying in the U.S. Reflecting on her own experiences in the U.S.—who was in her thirties at the time of writing this—explained that she could empathize more with the self-consciousness of colonial women torn between their linguistic and cultural limitations and their high ideals (H. Cho-Han 219). In Cho-Han's post-colonialist reading of Chŏn Hyerin, the symbol of bookish girls is aligned with women who study abroad. For those women who feel the sense of disembedding in foreign culture, literary reading served as a tool with which women could analyze inequalities and discontent in their cultural position.

Chŏn Hyerin's literary influence extended beyond resistance against national cultural restrictions. Her writings also provided working-class women with the symbolic means of expressing their desire to overcome the limitations of their social

[20] Anthony Giddens introduced the concept of disembedding in his book *The Consequences of Modernity*. The term describes how social relations are removed from local contexts and restructured across time and space. This process is associated with the decline of traditional social ties and the modernization of everyday life. Modernization led to people being linked within a much grander scope of time and space, and the expanded scope of social interactions gave way to globalization. Giddens summarizes two key characteristics of societal de-localization: one, the development of expert systems that can bind time and space, driven by technological progress and the spread of knowledge; two, the development of symbolic tokens, or mediums that convey standard values that are interchangeable across a variety of contexts.

circumstances, most notably the low cultural status of working-class women. The differing social positions of readers often led to divergent interpretations—not only of the texts themselves but also of what the act of reading meant within their respective lives.

What follows is an examination of how working-class women, particularly young female factory workers, engaged in interpretive practices by relating their readings of high literature to their distinct social realities. Despite literature's potential to forge bonds across class divides, such connections were often tenuous. The emotional connections facilitated by literary texts did not always translate into genuine mutual understanding or solidarity. In fact, tensions and discord frequently surfaced among female readers. However, instead of being purely divisive, such differences contributed to the cultivation of a sense of agency. These women were not passive consumers of elite culture; they were asserting themselves as autonomous reading subjects who critically engaged with the texts, challenging the cultural authority that they encountered.

Reading to Distinguish: Bookish Factory Girls and the Formation of Political Selfhood

As historical scholarship has demonstrated, the culture of working-class women has long remained at the periphery of dominant historical and literary narratives. While often excluded from cultural canons, this culture was not entirely absent, particularly in the domains of popular expression such as music and dance.[21] However, since

[21] For the historical elements that led to the forging of female factory girls as a characterized group, see Janice Kim, who details how female employment was shaped during the colonial period. For the cultural history of factory girls throughout the 1970s, see Kim Wŏn (especially Chapter 7), who traces the factory girls' everyday cultural enjoyment of pop songs. For studies centered on factory girls' literary habits, see Ruth Barraclough, whose studies center

working-class women rarely achieved recognition as literary figures, their practices of reading and writing have received little attention in the fields of literary criticism and history.[22] This gap narrows somewhat with the emergence of the women-led labor movements of the 1970s, during which autobiographical writings by female factory workers gained popularity. Factory girls' writings, usually published in magazines, provided new imaginaries of young working-class women who lived intellectual lives. Reading high literature served, for these women, as a subversive activity that enabled cross-class identification, introspection, and the formation of a distinct working-woman culture that challenged middle-class norms.

Importantly, the category of "factory girls" defies straightforward sociological definition. As Janice Kim points out, the earnings of unmarried peasant girls often supported their families and fed into their dowries. For most factory girls, the greatest possible ambition in life was marriage—the one chance for social mobility in a patriarchal society (J. Kim 73–74). Kim's argument centers on factory workers during the colonial period, but the situation was no different by the industrial period. As with schoolgirls transitioning from girlhood to adulthood, many of the factory girls existed within a liminal space, expected to move forward through marriage or upward social mobility.

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on the representation of factory girls in Korean literature as well as factory girl writers themselves. For a more recent study on the female working class with a focus on the cultural dimension, see Pae Sangmi, who diversifies the representation of women's labor in colonial proletarian fiction beyond factory girls to housewives and service industry employees. See also Pak Sukja 2017 (especially Chapter 3), who touches on housemaids' reading of novels and popular magazines.

[22] The case of prominent novelist Shin Kyung-Sook (Shin Kyŏngsuk) is exceptional. In her earlier writings, she did not refer to her unique experience as a factory worker, and her refined writing style differed significantly from that typically associated with factory workers' literature. This contrast between her identity as a writer and her class background shaped her distinctive literary universe. The next chapter discusses Shin's unique literary world in greater detail.

Nevertheless, women's mere status as factory workers marked a significant social shift from patriarchal family units to peer-based collectives. The transition from peasant family to factory life often coincided with a geographic relocation from a rural home to an urban dormitory or boarding house. Within this context, same-sex peer culture emerged as a vital site of identity formation, with literature providing women with both a common language and a medium of differentiation. Book clubs, whether formed informally within factories or organized formally at night schools operated by university activists, functioned as crucial spaces for self-study and solidarity among factory girls. Moreover, they became avenues for political consciousness, with some factory girls using shared literary interests as a basis for organizing labor unions.

Still, bonds over their mutual appreciation of literature did not always result in a shared cultural identity. As recalled by writer and factory girl Chang Namsu in her autobiography *Ppaeaskin ilt'ŏ* [Stolen Workplace], the interactions mediated by their shared fondness for literature often revealed deep social divides that literary tastes alone could not bridge. For example, in *Ppaeaskin ilt'ŏ* she writes about a conversation she once had aboard a train with Hyŏnu, a university student. At first, she found common ground in their appreciation for Tolstoy and Hermann Hesse, but this connection was soon shattered by Hyŏnu's remark that revealed his limited understanding of the lived realities of factory labor:

> "Uh, that looks like a business. Why are the lights on at night?"
>
> "Because they work," I bluntly replied.
>
> "Do they really work at night? They really work at night?"
>
> I was dumbfounded and stunned… The feeling of disparity that hit me hard in the chest depressed me. I thought, "How can he be so worldly and

comfortable? Are all college students like that?" (N. Chang 36; translation is mine)[23]

This moment ultimately prevented Chang from developing a relationship with Hyŏnu. Barraclough interprets this interaction as an indication that Chang chose to remain in the working class instead of trying to move up the social ladder. This understanding is supported by a scene in which Chang visited her co-worker Sunja after deciding not to contact Hyŏnu. At Sunja's house, Chang heard strange noises coming from the dogs at the dog-soup house nearby. Sunja explained that these noises were made by dogs injected with a drug that rendered them voiceless. Thinking about the dogs waiting to die to be made into soup, Sunja became disgusted and spat out the bread she was eating (N. Chang 38).

From Chang's view, Sunja's empathy for the dogs contrasts with Hyŏnu's lack of empathy for factory workers. Even without any literary knowledge, a worker like Sunja feels discomfort upon hearing the dogs' muffled barking. This portrayal of students and factory workers highlights that Chang's pride as a laborer stems from their ability to empathize and take political action on behalf of the vulnerable rather than from a desire for acceptance among the educated elite. In this way, the figure of the bookish factory girl challenges the notion that engagement with high literature is exclusive to the privileged. Instead, reading represents a transformative tool that allows these women to reframe their experiences and articulate new forms of subjectivity, paving the way for a more assertive cultural and political self-representation in the 1990s.

[23] Unlike the other authors mentioned, Chang Namsu went to university and became a full-time writer. Her writing has been recognized within the literary system in the form of literary awards, the publication of her short stories in literary magazines, and the publication of her novels. Therefore, unlike other autobiographers of female factory workers, she can be said to have entered the category of full-fledged literature.

Chang's *Ppaeatkin ilt'ŏ* is just one example of many autobiographical writings that explore the importance of literary reading. As Ruth Barraclough argues, factory girls' foray into literature and their fight to form unions were twin aspects of the struggle to emancipate themselves within a capitalist society and a wider culture that did not acknowledge them as full members (Barraclough 60). However, the meanings attached to reading high literature were not monolithic. Sŏk Chŏngnam, the earliest recognized writer to record the labor union movement, represented how reading activity gave way to divisions between factory girls.

Known for her early involvement in labor organizing, Sŏk presents a complex account of how literary taste both unified and fragmented peer relationships among factory girls. In *Kongjangŭi pulbit* [Lights of Factories], she reflects on how she survived the physically punishing demands of textile work through immersion in poetry. Despite suffering drastic weight loss and exhaustion from three-shift labor, Sŏk finds solace in the dormitory library, comparing the relief she felt there to that of a crayfish shedding its shell. Her preferred texts—poetry by Heine, Kim Sowŏl, and Yun Tongju—functioned not merely as a distraction but as a projection of who she aspired to become (Sŏk 18).

Sŏk's desire to share this intellectual space led her to attend night schools. However, the vision of elderly activists failed to resonate with Sŏk's self-awareness as a young working-class woman. Sŏk sought to build a community grounded in a shared age and social status to guarantee her autonomy. For her, the value of the book club resided in intimate peer exchange rather than political instruction from outsiders (Sŏk 23). Her friendship with Sunae, a fellow reader interested in labor activism, proved to be foundational to her political engagement. Through their conversations,

Sŏk discovered trust and purpose, affirming that the desire to imagine alternative futures was driving them to engage in union activity (Sŏk 31).

As noted by literary scholar Im Chinha, Sŏk and her peers did not initially join the labor movement based on a theoretical understanding of class struggle. Rather, they were motivated by the prospect of reshaping the limited life scripts available to them as women. Participation in union activities represented a radical break from normative femininity—from the expectation to marry, bear children, and remain secluded within the private sphere (Im 439). However, as their activism intensified, they encountered new forms of inequality—gaps in authority, voice, and recognition within labor union activism.

Sŏk's narrative reveals that these challenges were not limited to external class hierarchies. Sŏk's transition from reading literary classics to studying labor law and sociology led to mounting tensions among book club members. Some members preferred to prepare for domestic roles by taking flower-arranging or cooking classes and, as a result, found Sŏk's passion to be off-putting. The eventual breakup of this book club is emblematic of the difficulties inherent in maintaining unity amid diverse aspirations (Sŏk 75–84). Sŏk's emergence as an influential writer and union activist ultimately distanced her from former friends, many of whom struggled to reenter the workforce after being blacklisted.

Still, Sŏk's writings preserve the voices of those who departed the movement, including that of Sunae, whose skepticism toward intellectual leadership within unions reflects a broader ambivalence among factory girls. Sunae questioned whether factory girls' genuine autonomy in labor activism is even possible given how their experience-based knowledge is frequently subordinated to that of intellectual ideologues (Sŏk 143–145). Sunae eventually withdrew from activism and returned to

her hometown, concealing her thoughts and feelings from Sŏk. This sadness and confusion that Sŏk felt can be aligned with what Chŏn Hyerin felt after her friend committed suicide without leaving any last words.

Unlike Chŏn, the feeling of damaged intimacy motivated Sŏk to expand her world. After Sunae returned to her hometown, Sŏk began to pay more attention to the voices of other factory girls who had been marginalized in the mainstream labor activism. One example is her friend Hyangja, who was dismissed from the factory for participating in the labor union organization movement. Hyangja stayed in a church for labor activists and helped with chores. She felt upset that she was treated like a maid instead of being recognized as an equal labor activist. Hyangja's complaints were expressed not as organized speech, but rather as a rambling outpouring by her drunkenness (Sŏk 233-235).

Sŏk observed these marginalized figures of factory girls with ambivalent encounters with reading, activism, and friendship, thus drawing an affective map of factory girls—one that does not depict convergence to a singular identity.

Conclusion

Bookish girls played a crucial role in shaping new forms of feminine communication. As mass society developed, women formed intimate communities centered on shared cultural interests, fostering virtual spaces for connection and dialogue. Through these spaces, they cultivated a collective understanding of feminist ideals by sharing personal experiences and perspectives. Within this communal framework, new cultural narratives emerged—stories of adventure, a yearning for the unknown, female friendships, and coming-of-age journeys—all of which empowered women to reinterpret and challenge traditional symbols. While the bookish girl archetype carried

widely accepted sociocultural connotations, its meaning evolved in various directions depending on women's social, economic, and educational conditions.

However, this symbol often overlooked the importance of relationships among women as well as questions of agency. As briefly discussed in relation to factory girls, bookish girls failed to establish gendered agency free from nationalist and patriarchal order. Women readers were culturally framed as passive consumers of highbrow literature; mainstream culture portrayed them as naïve young girls detached from real-world concerns and preoccupied with private matters who lacked a sense of collective agency. Questions of knowledge—its value, recognition, hierarchy, and distribution—went unaddressed in their reading activity. Solidarity among women of a particular literary taste often led to insularity rather than broad feminist engagement. Paradoxically, the more women engaged with serious literature, the more it came to be dismissed as sentimental and popular, reinforcing a division between it and that which was deemed authentic, literary, and real.

By the 1990s, women had begun critically reflecting on these limitations, recognizing that the exclusion of their desires and aspirations was shaped by cultural hegemony, meaning that it could not be remedied through education or political equality alone. The following chapters examine three key themes in the construction of gendered literary popularity since the 1990s: women's self-representation, genre literature as a gendered literary field, and feminist popular literature as an element of the broader feminist movement. Through this analysis, I aim to demonstrate how the political visions and demands embedded in the concept of "women readers" have evolved over time in response to societal and historical changes.

In Chapter III, I examine how such ambivalences appear in the fiction of Shin Kyung-Sook, especially *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, which further develops the

literary figure of the working-class female reader as she navigates both cultural aspirations and structural constraints.

CHAPTER III

THE WHEREABOUTS OF FACTORY-GIRL WRITERS: SELF-REPRESENTATION OF WORKING-CLASS WOMEN IN SHIN KYUNG-SOOK'S *THE GIRL WHO WROTE LONELINESS*

Chapter II examined the history of Korean women's reading through the symbol of bookish girls. I asserted that bookish girls represented a post-liberation shift in Korean literary culture, deconstructing social class and hierarchy through women's engagement with serious literature. My goal in doing this was to highlight emerging trends in women's culture that transcend social class and education. This movement was driven by a desire to transition from the private sphere to the public sphere.

In this chapter, I extend this discussion by examining how the transgressive reading practices of bookish girls laid the groundwork for the cross-class, gendered authorship that emerged in the 1990s. Through an analysis of Shin Kyŏng-Sook's monumental novel *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, I explore the cultural politics of working-class women's self-representation.

Introduction: Writing for Common Readers

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf emphasizes that intellectual and creative independence—symbolized by the phrase "a room of one's own"—is a prerequisite for women's freedom. This idea of women's self-sufficiency in the literary world resonates with her portrayal of the "common reader" in *The Common Reader* (1925), where she advocates for a curious, instinctual, and non-academic

approach to reading. Woolf champions common readers on account of their not being constrained by the authority of professional critics. Their freedom enables them to gain unique insights into texts, akin to how Woolf identified the lack of female figures in Greek classics.

This chapter explores one such historical moment in South Korea when women began to assert their voices as "common readers." I interpret the 1990s in South Korea as a period in which women increasingly emerged as "common readers"—those who engage literature not through institutional authority but through lived experience and cultural insight—using Woolf's understanding of the term. In South Korea, the cultural dynamics of "the common people" underwent a significant transformation. While the legal and educational foundations of commonness were laid during the liberation period through universal suffrage and primary schooling, it was not until the *minjung* culture movement of the 1970s that the cultural value of the "common" gained recognition. However, even with the rise of *minjung* culture, cultural hegemony persisted throughout the 1980s with the privileging of elite male voices—especially those of the so-called 386 generation, as observed by historian Namhee Lee in *Making the People*.[24]

[24] In the term "386 generation," *3* represents their age (in their thirties), *8* represents the period of the 1980s (when they attended university in Seoul), and *6* represents their generation (born in the 1960s). The term "386" originally referred to a line of the first personal desktop computers disseminated to the Korean market in the early 1990s. This word was appropriated to depict the new generation leading social and cultural innovations during the 1990s and 2000s. In *The Making of Minjung*, Namhee Lee argues that the 386 generation lost their radical power because they did not uniformly reject modern ideas, such as the nation-state and capitalist development. As agents of anti-government struggle, the 386 generation replaced revolution with the mere replacement of "bad power" with "good power"; however, by succumbing to neoliberalism, they exposed the limits of their ambiguous position on capitalism (N. Lee 294–304).

In 1995, Shin Kyung-Sook's autobiographical novel *Oettanbang* (*The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*)[25] offered a powerful counter-narrative by foregrounding the voices of ordinary women. Shin herself has asserted that her novel records the stories of these everyday readers and "gives them their own place of dignity in this world" (Shin 365). Much like Woolf's critique of Greek classics' exclusion of women's emotional and subjective experiences, Shin laments the absence of working-class women—her "origin and root"—in mainstream narratives. Her articulation of both class and gender identity marked a significant cultural shift: a prominent female author claiming her subjectivity not only as a woman but as a member of the working class. Thus, this chapter examines how Shin's novel makes visible the conditions that marginalized women's cultural status in the 1990s and how it narrates the struggles of culturally disempowered women seeking legitimacy as active cultural consumers.

Although *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* portrays female factory workers of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Shin's reflections are grounded in her understanding of the 1990s. The lone room—a symbol that explicitly echoes Woolf's idea of women's self-reliance—connotes not emancipation but isolation. In Shin's narrative landscape, independence carries a sense of solitude, setting her apart from other women writers of the 1990s who examined themes of female autonomy. As literary scholar Kwŏn Myŏnga notes, Shin shared with her contemporaries (mostly women born in the 1960s) a feminist zeitgeist that viewed choosing a single life in the 1980s as a political act. That such a decision required great courage underscores the

[25] The original edition of *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* by Shin Kyung-Sook was published in Korea in 1995. The Korean title of this novel is *Oettanbang*, which translates to "a lone room." References to this novel throughout this chapter are based on the English translation, *A Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, which was published in 2015 using a translation by Hayun Jung. "Oettanbang" in Sin's first collection of short stories in 1990 served as the basis for the full-length novel. This short story is more directly concerned with the matter of Hŭijae's death. The change in the writer's voice and perspective between the short story and the novel is noteworthy. For a detailed argument on the short story "Oettanbang," see Pak Sukja (2023).

oppressive weight of traditional family structures (M. Kwŏn 75). Yet Shin did not simply reject these structures. Rather, she reaffirmed the emotional and cultural weight of familial ties. Kwŏn concludes that she became a popular author because her novels resonated with readers' common concerns (M. Kwŏn 85).

Kwŏn may emphasize the exceptional choices made by other women writers, but her recognition of Shin's appeal to "common" interests highlights a key feature of her literary project. Shin's work interrogates the cultural norms of the 1990s—especially the question of which cohort defines those norms. The decade represented a moment in which women's voices were becoming increasingly visible, yet the notion of "the common" itself was becoming increasingly difficult to define. Traditionally, commonness denoted the working class—those who formed the societal majority and held equal citizenship rights under the South Korean Constitution. By the 1990s, however, younger members of the working class were exhibiting post-class characteristics, making class affiliation more ambiguous.

Historian Ruth Barraclough observes in her study of factory-girl literature that working-class women largely disappeared from 1990s popular culture, overshadowed by stories of professional, middle-class women striving to establish themselves in white-collar jobs (Barraclough 137). These white-collar "working girl" figures seldom acknowledged the earlier struggles of working-class women who paved the way for them. Sociologist Valerie Walkerdine similarly points out a global transition since the late 1980s, noting that the rise of a consumption-focused working class has blurred conventional class distinctions. As access to education widened, upward mobility among young members of the working class became increasingly prevalent, complicating the ability to define class status based on wealth, educational attainment, or job type (Walkerdine 290).

This chapter investigates how working-class women make themselves visible in culture by intersecting the contested notion of commonness with women's sociocultural conditions. In doing so, it covers the following topics. First, I analyze a critical perspective on women's self-writing as it relates to Shin's work, which fluctuates between labor literature and women's autobiography. I then examine the portrayal of working-class women in Shin's novel *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* with a particular focus on how Shin showcases these women's vulnerability within their cultural context. Finally, I reconsider Shin's refined style of depicting women's emotions in pursuit of an aesthetic framework for contemporary working-class women. Overall, I highlight Shin's self-writing as an important political act designed to engage with working-class women, who she describes as "anonymous friends [who] have given birth to a piece of" her inner world (K. Shin 365).

Reframing *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* Beyond Labor Literature

Today, Shin Kyung-Sook is an internationally recognized literary figure, having been bolstered by the global success of her novel *Please Look After Mom*, which won the 2012 Man Asian Literary Prize and sold millions of copies. Her literary reputation was first established domestically in South Korea during the early 1990s following the success of *Kip'ŭn Sŭlp'ŭm* [Deep Sorrow] (1994) and *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*. The latter especially garnered both critical and commercial acclaim, achieving a rare synthesis of popular appeal and literary recognition.

Paik Nakchŏng, a central figure of South Korea's progressive literary movement, lauded *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* as a major work of literary realism. He emphasized that testimonies of lived experience can animate the concept of *minjok munhak* [national literature] only when they are bound to the transformation

of individual consciousness (Paik 240). Much of this assessment rests on the novel's autobiographical foundation: Shin's own experiences as a female factory worker in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Her transformation from laborer to literary figure was seen as embodying the ideal of the "organic intellectual," long valorized in leftist literary traditions.

To place Shin's novel within the framework of labor literature, however, invites a reevaluation of the literary value historically assigned to earlier writings by female factory workers. At the time of its publication, critics likened the novel to the autobiographies of factory girls and celebrated it as a triumphant extension of labor literature (Yŏm 278–292; Nam 292). Yet this praise often came with the implicit critique that previous efforts by female laborers lacked artistic merit—a gap that Shin had supposedly bridged. By positioning her work within labor literature, critics revived a representational imperative from the 1970s: to make visible the lives of working-class women and assert their cultural value.

Indeed, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* weaves references to key historical events—including the 1978 Tongil Textile incident and the 1980 Kwangju Massacre—into the protagonist's daily life, offering a depiction of factory life against the backdrop of national upheaval. By 1995 (the year of its publication), however, confidence in labor literature's political function had waned. Despite the narrative being set (mostly) in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Shin's novel speaks most directly to the sociopolitical mood of the mid-1990s. The title's emphasis on loneliness and its evocation of emotional estrangement resonated deeply in a politically fragmented post-industrial South Korea, where shame, guilt, and ambivalence supplanted revolutionary fervor.

This emotional register—especially the recurrent motif of shame—complicates the novel's classification as labor literature. As literary critic Sŏ Yŏngch'ae argues, labor literature has traditionally hinged on the affirmation of a laboring identity and the dignity attached to it. Shin's protagonist, however, expresses ambivalence toward her past as a factory worker, and other characters express a sense of self-hatred over the fact that they do hard labor. Most notably, Misŏ (who sits next to the protagonist at night school) strives to distinguish herself from her cohort of factory girls. She immerses herself in Hegel at school, as it is only when she is reading that she can feel distinct from those around her. According to Sŏ's interpretation, the study of philosophy becomes a talisman for Misŏ, comforting her by assuring her that she will never be resigned to the fate of a mere factory worker (Sŏ "1990nyŏndaeŭi maŭm" 395–396). As Lee Hye-Ryoung (Yi Hyeryŏng) argues, the narrator's upward mobility allows her to speak about—though not necessarily for—other working-class women. In *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness,* the protagonist's transformation into a writing subject individualizes her and marks her as different. Lee deems that the yearning for narrative agency in this novel—expressed through the voices of female characters pleading for their stories to be written—was appropriated by Shin as symbolic capital that the factory girls in the 1970s earned through political activism (H. Lee "Is A Lone Room (Oettanbang) Labor Literature?" 251).

The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness hardly fits within these historically constructed genres of labor literature or artist fiction. Rather, it encompasses and oscillates between genre and identity, inviting a broader readership through its dynamic movement between poles. The author's mingling identity—as a laborer, as an artist, and as a woman—constitutes an integrated figure that, instead of converging

toward a single point of hybrid identity, generates a wave-like movement outward. This wave touches invisible borders, encompassing marginalized figures such as the bookish factory girls, who want to be emotionally connected with their working-class backgrounds and patriarchal families rather than disconnected from their original spaces of social belonging.

The class fluidity that characterizes *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* signals the broader transformations of class identities and their entanglement with emergent feminist concerns. While the 1990s saw significant historical achievements for feminists in South Korea, critiques of its limitations have pointed to its tendency to marginalize the voices of female subalterns. Scholar Chŏng Hŭijin, for instance, warns of the dangers inherent in Korean popular feminism, which often centers the self-actualization of young, urban, middle-class women, thereby rendering it vulnerable to neoliberal co-optation. Within this framework, feminism risks being reduced to the pursuit of the extended consumer choice, overlooking the intersecting structural oppressions faced by non-middle-class women (H. Chŏng 3–7).

Chŏng's critique asserts that, after the 1990s, the feminist movement was increasingly commodified and responses to gender inequality were individualized, contrasting with the feminist politics of the 1980s that foregrounded collective struggle and systemic critique. The earlier period, shaped by *minjung* ideology, positioned working-class women as central to the liberation movement, with intellectuals and middle-class women serving as intermediaries compelled by ethical responsibility. As noted by Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, citing Chŏng Hyŏnpaek, the women's movement had to broaden its base beyond the industrial working class to include the middle class (Louie 427). Alongside democratization, middle-class women became central actors in feminist movements, whose agendas had expanded to

encompass sexual violence, education, environmental concerns, and military sexual slavery. Consequently, the identity of "woman" became homogenized in mass movements, covering housewives, workers, and students alike. However, this broadening gave way to class-specific discourse receding into academic and activist circles, largely vanishing from public engagement (Hur 187–189).

During this period, women writers too turned away from collective identity toward a focus on individual subjectivity and self-construction. The search for a "unique self" supplanted earlier feminist literary concerns over shared conditions of oppression. This marked a significant departure from the working-class solidarity embedded in the feminist literature of the 1970s and 1980s, which generally aligned with Marxist rather than liberal feminist thought (H. Lee "Bright Constellation" 169). Despite the visibility of women writers in the 1990s, their work did not coalesce into a cohesive feminist literary school. This historical gap invites reflection: Can a gendered discursive field be grounded in shared experiences of victimhood? Otherwise, must gender subjectivation be understood through a framework that accommodates differences across class, history, and cultural identification?

The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness does not offer a direct answer to this question, but it does illuminate how literary form and narrative voice navigate this tension. The novel dramatizes the cultural illegitimacy often attributed to the literary styles and themes associated with women's lives. The narrator's literary success elicits pride from her oldest brother, who views her accomplishments as socially redeeming—until she discloses her factory work. This revelation unsettles his sense of middle-class respectability. In contrast, her third brother—burdened by guilt over abandoning activism for legal study—recognizes in her narrative a continuation of resistance

literature. These differing reactions underscore the contested social function of literature: Is it a vehicle for personal expression or for collective reckoning?

"You Don't Write about Us": An Account of Bookish Factory Girls

The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness is an autobiographical novel that portrays Shin's experiences during her teenage years spent working at the Kuro Industrial Complex (a manufacturing hub in Seoul) and attending night school. The novel opens with the monologue of the protagonist mirroring the writer herself: "Why do I write?" "What does writing mean to me?" Although her unique style has garnered popularity among female readers and the praises of prominent literary critics,[26] she doubts the value and power of her style for common readers. Her obsession with writing beautiful sentences is a private desire; thus, she is not confident that her aesthetic desire resonates with and produces meaning for common readers.

This doubt was triggered by a phone call from Gye-suk, a former classmate of hers from night school. This call was the first time they had spoken since graduation. Gye-suk expressed admiration for the protagonist's literary achievements, noting how proud their former classmates were. Still, she remarked, "You don't write our stories" (22). This offhand comment struck the protagonist like drops of "icy water," (29) prompting a profound reckoning with her past—especially the memories of the factory girls who, she realizes, "have given birth to a piece of" her inner world (K. Shin 365).

[26] For example, Kim Yunsik—one of the most well-known academic doyens—considers Shin to be one of the rare writers whose writing is distinct from the popularized writing style of new-generation writers. See Kim Yunsik.

This moment establishes the central tension that drives the narrative: the disjunction between the protagonist's past identity as a factory girl and her present identity as an artist. The novel is a meditation on the cultural and emotional complexities of that transformation, with Shin reflecting on her own identity crisis and that of her peers—factory girls who pursued education through night school, occupying a socially ambiguous and often overlooked position. In foregrounding this tension, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* bridges two distinct modes of women's self-writing: the testimonial impulse to bear witness to collective experience, and the introspective, aesthetic search for artistic selfhood.

Yet this declaration—to write for readers like Gye-suk —also sparked controversy. Criticism from masculinist literary circles revealed deep-seated anxieties within South Korea's literary field when it came to gender. Critics dismissed Shin as a "popular" author—a label loaded with connotations of sentimentality, femininity, and aesthetic excess. Central to these critiques was the figure of the "bookish girl," a symbol of emotional overinvestment, literary indulgence, and perceived political insufficiency, as discussed in the previous chapter. Women who went from readers to writers—especially through autobiographical forms—were often delegitimized upon their work achieving commercial success or resonating with a broad female readership. Strict boundaries existed between emotional expression and intellectual seriousness in Korean literary culture; self-writing was deemed suspect and its political and aesthetic value was frequently questioned precisely because it was accessible and affectively resonant.

This ambivalence surrounding Shin Kyung-Sook's literary reception is encapsulated in the critique offered by literary critic Pang Minho. In his analysis of *tongsok* [lowbrow] in contemporary women's literature, Pang identifies Shin as one of

the most prominent female writers in terms of market power during the 1990s, alongside Gong Jiyoung (Kong Chiyŏng) and Un Heekyoung (Ŭn Hŭigyŏng). He argues that Shin exemplifies the rise of reader-oriented writing among female authors in this period, framing this shift not as an empowering turn toward a democratized literary culture but as evidence of aesthetic and political mediocrity, which he defines as *tongsok*. Pang defines *tongsok* fiction as that which follows common sense and conventional wisdom (Pang 120). He asserts that, when female writers orient their work toward ordinary readers, their literary style and emotional registers tend to lean into cliché and convention.

Pang's concept *tongsok* fiction—translated as lowbrow literature—is influenced by Im Hwa's theory of popular literature from the 1930s. Im, as the leader of a leftist bloc, viewed the mass popularity of popular fiction during that time as evidence of a decline in literature, as readers were largely seeking entertainment. Citing literary realism theory, he emphasized that literature functions as a political tool to showcase real social conditions. According to Im, serious literature requires authors to embed characters within their social environments in a manner that enables them to display social reality. Popular fiction purportedly lacked depth because its standard methods of character development did not reveal the social factors driving characters' behaviors (H. Im 309).

In his discussion, Pang concludes that Shin's writings are lowbrow in nature, as the tragic deaths depicted in her works often lack causality and social or historical context (122). He criticizes her use of outdated images and stereotypical reasoning, deeming her stories reflective of a traditional moral framework that he does not consider threatening (111). According to Pang, her stories provide comfort for readers who believe in destiny and conform to existing ideological standards rather than

questioning them. Although her prose may evoke beauty and emotional resonance, he ultimately views these aesthetic qualities as ornamental, lacking political or philosophical depth (112). Pang argues that Shin presents her works in a sophisticated manner simply to cater to the tastes of female consumers, masking a lack of genuine artistic or ideological rigor (113).

What sets Shin Kyung-Sook apart from the other two writers, Gong Jiyoung and Un Heekyoung, is the nature of her readership. Pang defines "p'yŏnggyun" [average] readers—translated as "average" or "common" readers— as those who seek personal enjoyment and comfort from literature (Pang 113). He considers writing that targets such readers to be a corruption of literary values, as it risks capitulating to commercialism and conforming to dominant ideologies through an overreliance on emotional appeal. According to Pang, genuine literary sympathy must be grounded in historical and political consciousness, exemplified by the sacrifices of labor activists who subordinate personal concerns to collective ideals (Pang 117). In this view, the ordinary women to whom Shin appeals lack such political experience and, thus, cannot function as meaningful historical subjects.

However, Shin's writing confronts and complicates such assumptions. When Shin expresses her desire to find "a dignified place, socially or perhaps culturally" (170) for these ordinary women, she is responding to a demand for justification—an implicit query from Gye-suk regarding the historical and cultural significance of her work. Who is the "we" that Gye-suk invokes, and what is the protagonist's relationship with them?

The novel's narrative functions not only as a personal confession but also as a reclamation of a marginalized cultural subjectivity—that of the factory-girl student, whose story, Shin argues, remains unwritten but foundational. These girls are not

reduced to the cultural cliché of factory laborers; rather, they are portrayed as complex individuals shaped by overlapping identities. The unique experience of night school emerges as a pivotal spatial symbol in this self-explanation, both for Shin and for other women like her. Modeled after the real Yŏngdŭngpo Girls' High School in Seoul's Kuro Industrial Complex—an industrial textiles and electronics hub in the 1970s—night schools were attended by underage female workers whose employers often financed their education.[27]

By foregrounding this liminal space, the novel reveals the instability and fluidity of class identification among working-class women. Factory girls, including the novel's narrator, have conflicting identities, oscillating between their roles as factory workers and students. The girls in *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* sit beside a conveyor belt during the daytime but transform into bookish girls after work in the classroom of the night school, transcribing Cho Sehŭi's *The Dwarf*,[28] reading Hegel, or dreaming of pursuing a career as a photographer.

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[27] In the 1970s and the 1980s, manufacturing companies in major urban centers financed their employees to attend night school. This system of night schools funded by manufacturing companies was called *sanŏpch'ehakkyo* [industry-affiliated school]. The night school depicted in the novel is modeled after the real Yŏngdŭngpo Girls' High School situated in the Kuro Industrial Complex, an industrial hub in Seoul renowned for the manufacturing and exportation of textile and electronic goods. The combination of unskilled manufacturing and night schools was designed to mobilize teenage women as factory workers, reinforcing the gendered labor structure. While teenage men went to industrial vocational schools to learn specialized skills and secure high-paying jobs in the steel and automobile industries, night schools for female factory workers concentrated on the skills necessary in low-paying clerical jobs, such as abacus calculation and bookkeeping. In other words, it was designed to provide them with the training they needed to move into jobs "more suitable" for women. Notably, this training was not done following autonomous choices made by female workers. As depicted in Shin's novel, factory workers at night school could be expelled by the company for behavioral problems or for joining a labor union. For oral history research on these industry-affiliated schools, see Kim Sangsuk. For a discussion of the cultural context surrounding gendered labor, see Hŏ Yun especially Chapter 6. Grounded in Scott's notion of gendered labor, Hŏ discusses how the cultural specificity of gendered labor in Korea was heavily influenced by the gendered education system.

[28] Cho Sehŭi's novel *The Dwarf*, published in 1978 and widely considered a representative work of realist literature, recreates the lives of the working class and the poor. Shin and many other female factory workers have claimed in their autobiographies that *The Dwarf* opened

This fluidity resonates with existing scholarly accounts of class transformation in post-war South Korea. Barraclough interprets these conflicting identities as evidence of class fluidity in South Korea: "The author relates how a person might be one class in the village and another in the city… how a person might rail against the class he discovers he belongs to and indulge in class dreaming" (Barraclough 128). Indeed, *The Girl Who Wrote a Loneliness* captures the disorientation of young women transitioning from rural affluence—"the largest yard… the most chickens"—to urban deprivation: "out here in the city, I am the lower class" (K. Shin *The Girl* 43).

The complexity of class identity is most poignantly dramatized in the novel through the figure of Hŭijae. Hŭijae's story serves as the novel's depiction of young women whose identities refuse to fit within defined categories. Hŭijae's presence—as well as her tragic and unexplained death—complicates any attempt to read the novel as a nostalgic return to adolescence. A former factory girl and night school student Hŭijae leaves both to work at a small dressmaker's shop in pursuit of better pay. Her pregnancy and subsequent rejection by her live-in partner precipitate her suicide. Hŭijae requests that the protagonist lock her door as she leaves, explaining that she needs to return to her hometown. The protagonist remains in a state of prolonged shock and grief upon discovering Hŭijae's death. The reason behind Hŭijae's death is never clarified by the narrative, showcasing how identity often remains unstable and suffering remains unclear.

Hŭijae is a female figure marginalized by the established aesthetic system for female workers amid the *minjung* culture and dissident movements. To earn more

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their eyes to the social realities of working-class people that they had not learned about in school. For a discussion of the historical significance of *The Dwarf*, see Youngju Ryu's *Writers of the Winter Republic: Literature and Resistance in Park Chung Hee's Korea* (2016), especially Chapter 3, which is devoted to a close reading of *The Dwarf.*

money, Hŭijae leaves the factory and school to work at night in a small dressmaker's shop, yet the people around her, including the narrator's brother, see her as a bar girl. This demonstrates that, at that time, there was no frame to represent young women in public places aside from the restricted female stereotypes of a factory girl, a schoolgirl, or a bar girl.

Shin refrains from reducing low-class characters such as Hŭijae to a shared working-class identity. This marks the decisive point at which *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* departs from labor literature. Not only Hŭijae, but several other female characters in the novel resist the constraints imposed by their class background, regional origin, and generational position. Miss Kim, who works in the factory office, actively fights for union organizing and is tortured during police interrogation, defying the stereotype of neat and pretty office girl. Older women—such as the protagonist's illiterate mother and a restaurant owner she meets while traveling—represent those who never left their homes yet dreamed of other worlds from books. Shin emphasizes their singularity—their "different grains"—and, in doing so, challenges the very notion of class-based generalizations, or grouping them simplistically as "ordinary women."

This insistence on individuality does not preclude a sense of collective resonance but rather reframes it. The social significance of Shin's writing emerges from her simultaneous resistance to and partial accommodation of her readers' expectations. These expectations are shaped by access to education and literacy, which intersect with—but do not fully align with—social categories such as class and gender. The protagonist's emotional bonds with other women collectively function as a thread that ties together a heterogeneous group of friends. Shin's address to "common readers" represents a gesture of recognition: She is speaking to women who

have historically been excluded from literary representation and presumed not to be readers of literature.

This gesture of address is deeply ethical and political in nature. As Judith Butler notes, “if I give an account of myself in response to such a query,” I am already “implicated in a relation to the other before whom and to whom I speak” (Butler, *Giving an Account for Oneself* 15). In this sense, Shin’s confessional mode becomes a political intervention—an effort to affirm working-class women as historical subjects and cultural agents. The narrative foregrounds literary authorship not as an isolated form of self-expression but as a dialogic process shaped by the queries of Gye-suk and other factory girls. These social interactions—rooted in shared conditions of class, gender, and generation—structure the author's creative act.

Building on this framework, the sections that follow examine how Shin represents herself and others as “outside of literature” (K. Shin *The Girl* 170) as well as how she envisions a counter-space for women’s lives, one that resists assimilation into dominant narratives yet affirms the political and cultural dignity of the bookish factory girl.

Consistently Writing Hands: The Female Writer as a Laborer

Earlier in the narrative, the protagonist breaks up the plan with her friend to rush home and get the sentences popping up in her head to paper. While taking a taxi home, she discovers a prayer charm hanging on the rear-view mirror. Upon seeing the line wishing for the driver’s safety, she contemplates how her own writing seems significantly less meaningful than the earnest wishes of the taxi driver’s family. This scene highlights her internal conflict regarding the effectiveness of her writing, which

greatly disturbs her self-affirmation to articulate herself as a writer throughout the narrative.

Gye-suk's comment that "your life seems different from us" (K. Shin, *The Girl* 22) highlights this sense of disparity. Despite their shared social roots, the writer comes off as different because she "writes what people like us cannot read" (60) and "does not write our stories." (22) This distinction made by Gye-suk and other female characters such as the protagonist's mother penetrates the fundamental contradiction in working-class writing associated with the productivity of literary writing. As Jacque Rancière observes, working-class writers' fate is to write with the language of bourgeois, thus they should "have made themselves 'different'" from other working class people (Rancière *The Nights of Labor* ix). This dissensus between "the extravagances of these 'artisans' and 'bourgeois'" and "the solid realities of exploitation and class struggle" (Rancière, *The Nights of Labor* 19) resonates with the the protagonist's "feeling of alienation" (K. Shin, *The Girl* 6), caught between her embodied experience as a factory girl and her aspirations as a novelist.

Her literary unproductivity sets the protagonist apart from her friends whose hands labor endlessly. At night school, the narrator finds that her classmate Hyangsuk's right hand "feels solid, nearly rigid" (K. Shin, *The Girl* 116) as a result of needing to wrap candies all day. Ashamed by her own rough right hand, Hyangsuk compares it to the protagonist's smooth hands with a tinge of jealousy, asserting that the factory pays the protagonist "for no hard work at all" (116). As Barraclough points out, the beauty economy of girls is not necessarily primarily centered on heterosexual interaction. The rules are set and the competition is waged within a homosocial community to discipline its own members. Girls hide their de-feminized

bodies—not because they're worried that working-class men would not have them but because they are indicative of their low social status (Barraclough 131).

Aside from the risk of life at the industrial site destroying their femininity, the status of night school students was unstable. While male students at the technical school were trained to be skilled technicians for jobs in heavy industry, where employment was stable, women at the night school were expected to study bookkeeping, literature, and music and to transition into office girls and housewives after graduation. Thus, the failure of female workers to create a literary sphere for themselves in the 1980s was a failure to draw any meaningful distinction between the working class and the middle class. The social dimension of work for women was restricted to activities that could preserve the femininity of their white hands, symbolized in fiction by the labor of office workers or telephone operators. Their lower-class self-perception was constructed not only by the workers' social conditions but also by the gender norms of industrialized society.

The protagonist's resolution to make "a dignified place socially and culturally (170)" is therefore nothing more than a pledge to legitimate the fair value of the rough hands of women who work consistently and who do activity of labor. The key difference between work and labor lies in one's intention. The intention of labor is reflected in a desire for survival—for the means with which to live. Arendt explains:

> It is indeed the mark of all laboring that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent. And yet this effort, despite its futility, is born of a great urgency and motivated by a more powerful drive than anything else, because life itself depends upon it. (Arendt, *The Human Condition* 141)

When factory workers are assembling a radio, they are not conscious of the consumers who will ultimately use the products. In the same way, a writer writes without knowing where her words will go. Put another way, she does not know the meaning that her writing will produce for her readers. Nevertheless, through the endless labor of making and writing, women can approach the truth about themselves. The artist's reflection on the material aspects of writing suggests a role for literature that can compensate for the impossibility of women's self-explanation: writing without a purpose. This role is key, as it is up to the reader to organize meaning from the words.

Shin parallels women's hands doing manual labor with her own hands engaged in consistent writing. By re-imaging writing as a manual form of labor, the writer engages in self-affirmation as a woman and as part of the working class:

> When I am asked this question about my writing method, whether I have the novel's complete structure worked out before writing or not, I think of Mom's sewing kit. I don't have to work out the novel's structure. I don't take notes, either. If I had notes to work from, my thoughts would lose fluidity and refuse to move ahead. … This is why at times I don't know how my writing will turn out until I am done with it. All I do is simply open the sewing kit and gaze into the colored threads, scissors, needles, and broken buttons. (359)

Shin imagines her literary writing as an activity of labor that makes her body "utterly exhausted," (369) just like spinning yarn and assembling transistors on the conveyor belt. This kind of writing as labor that Shin puts forth, however, is not shaped to meet market expectations; rather, it is a reflection of women's demands to "write our stories" (12).

By reevaluating the function of writing, Shin discovers a new purpose for her refined language and style, which were once considered exclusive to the educated middle class. Her unique use of language constitutes a means of production, enabling the recording and circulation of the emotional experiences of the marginalized. She uses her refined writing skills to express working-class experiences instead of maintaining their original purpose as an indicator of high cultural status. Shin achieves both the empowerment of marginalized voices and personal self-affirmation through this transformation which cements her identity as a working-class woman writer.

Walter Benjamin's concept of *umfunktionierung* (re-functioning), introduced in his 1934 essay "The Author as Producer," offers a critical framework through which to understand this transformation. Benjamin critiques the traditional division between writer and reader, which he views as a reflection of the broader capitalist division of intellectuals and laborers. Unlike conventional intellectuals who maintain their privileged status within the bourgeois system, Benjamin calls for an active merging of intellectual and manual labor, dissolving the hierarchy that separates the two. Benjamin's idea diverges from the bourgeois notion of the solitary writer-genius, instead envisioning a participatory form of cultural production in which readers become active producers, contributing to the very structures that shape their narratives. In this concept of the author as producer, the hierarchical relationship between authors and readers is deconstructed, giving way to new possibilities for revolutionary authorship.

He argues that "literary competence should no longer be confined to specialized training but is increasingly becoming a mass product, a capacity inherent in the working-class public itself" (Benjamin 772). Beyond critiquing class barriers in

literature, Benjamin challenges the assumption that politically progressive content alone makes literature revolutionary. He insists that the form and means of production must also be transformed, urging writers to go beyond political messaging and instead reshape the very structures through which literature is produced and disseminated. Benjamin transforms the political analysis of a creative work by moving away from ideological alignment and toward the material aspects of its production.

According to this perspective, writing serves functions beyond ideological expression, as it represents a transformative site that restructures the connections between labor, authorship, and readership. Shin highlights the nature of refunctioned writing as a creative labor to reassess working-class women's emotional writing. Borrowing the ghostly voice of Hŭijae, Shin says the following of the use of a writer's hand, which pulls out emotions submerged "inside the well" (K. Shin, *The Girl* 352) of women's inner worlds:

> No need to feel sorry for me. I've lived in your heart for a long time. Open your heart and think of the living. The key to the story of the past is in your hands, not mine. Spread the grief and the joy of those you've encountered to the living. Their truth will transform you. (K. Shin, *The Girl* 352-353)

In literary writing, expressions of emotion are often intended to convey the writer's inner feelings and evoke empathy from the reader. However, Shin presents the process of documenting and disseminating the emotions of others as a transformative experience that changes the writer herself. This distinction invites a more detailed analysis of emotional writing versus writing about emotions. While emotional writing is infused with the writer's own raw and expressive feelings, writing about emotion entails a more deliberate and analytical exploration of emotions within a broader social and historical context. The link between writing and emotion demands an

understanding of the social situations that produce particular emotions. It contests the traditional undervaluation of emotional expression in women's writing, which is frequently regarded as excessively sentimental or subjective. In this sense, Shin embeds social and political inquiry in descriptions of emotions. Both her characters and her readers are not going to feel exactly as she felt in writing her work; writing about others' emotions inherently invites varying interpretations, encouraging engagement with emotion as a complex, socially constructed phenomenon.

This conceptual shift aligns with Walter Benjamin's argument regarding the transformation of means of production. Hŭijae's ghostly transformation echoes Benjamin's idea that the author should not only mirror social conditions but also reposition herself within them. As Benjamin states, "Rather than asking, 'What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?' I would like to ask, 'What is its position in them?'"(Benjamin 770) By shifting the focus from personal expression to structural analysis, writing about emotion becomes a significant intervention in the systems that influence collective feelings. It transcends mere personal release to engage with the material conditions of cultural production. Literature employs emotion as a dynamic force to shape new modes of social understanding, not merely to reflect experience. The continuously working hands of women drive the affect of feminine labor, thus functioning as a common bond that unites women beyond their social differences, offering a gendered foundation for self-construction. The active power of emotion in literature mirrors the way that laboring hands connect women's experiences based on material experiences across different social classes. The following section analyzes how Shin's aesthetic method transforms these relationships into personal narratives to create shared discourse.

A Lone Room as Counter-Space for Working-Class Women

Although *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* portrays women who are shaped by the intersection of multiple social elements, the imaginary that symbolizes the place where these women live in the novel is a suffocatingly small and isolated *lone room*. As Shin frames her and her friends' exceptional social position as located on the border of a factory girl and a student, she encapsulates it within a spatial imagination of a"lone, remote room" (K. Shin, *The Girl* 32). This room is one of the 37 rooms within a three-story red-brick house in the residential block of Industrial Complex No. 3. As the narrative progresses, the female characters move out of their small rooms near the Kuro Industrial Complex, but the places to which they move end up being "just another isolated room."

By diversifying the sources of women's emotional difficulties, Shin creates a continuum between the experiences of the past factory girls and the women of her present. The lone room, connoting both loneliness and isolation, transcends its role as a spatial symbol of the industrialization era to constitute a reimagination of women's private spaces in the 1990s. This room is resignified as an individual space in which women struggle and persevere, whether as a female author detached from her friends and family or as a girl awaiting rescue amid the ruins of a collapsed building.

In this sense, the lone room may be understood as a heterotopia. As Michel Foucault explains, heterotopias are "other" spaces that exist within society yet remain separate from its dominant structures. They are real, material sites that reflect, invert, or contest societal norms. The lone rooms in Shin's novel embody this paradoxical nature: They are spaces of confinement yet also sites of resistance, solitude, and survival. Like the boarding schools, prisons, or ships described by Foucault as heterotopias, these rooms function as liminal spaces in which the women's identities

are simultaneously constrained and redefined. They are sites where time is layered—where the past of the industrial era and the present of the 1990s coexisted—allowing the novel to reframe historical isolation as a persistent condition in women's lives.

Shin's exploration for "those who are socially and culturally marginalized" parallels her endeavor to find the aesthetic mode to represent those women in her writing and a means of embodying them without distortion or reduction. Portrayals of women in literature have often distorted them or restricted them to some stereotyped images. In the case of working-class women, they do not have a literary figure to represent them aside from the general stereotype of factory girls. Although the stereotype of factory girls gained a positive cultural connotation through the labor movement, those who did not participate in the movement lost a way to represent their lives as working-class women in the social realm. Many working-class women became independent from their families at a young age and began their socialization in the schools and factories of big cities. However, by failing to align with the cultural stereotypes of a factory girl or a college girl, they failed to self-represent effectively.

By considering Shin's critique of using the aesthetic regime to represent people, it becomes clear why Shin invokes Hŭijae as the receiver of her writing. Hŭijae's non-alignment with any of these stereotypes is a key element of her character. According to Shin, Hŭijae is a socially and culturally isolated woman whose face is in "pale shadows"(K. Shin, *The Girl* 32) and, thus, "cannot be placed inside an air of dynamic movement of genre painting" (33).[29] This marginalization is why Shin's self-writing should call back Hŭijae's ghosts from the 1970s. As the

[29] To exemplify a typical genre painting, Shin refers to the paintings of Kim Hongdo. The mode of genre painting implies a historical one with the expectation of uncovering a distinct vitality within ordinary people's lives—as opposed to those of aristocrats. For this reason, minjung art's style and conventions were often attributed to genre painting. For more details on Kim Hongdo and his genre painting, see Hwijoon Ahn.

writers and other girls working at factories "turn into skilled workers, our names disappear" (49) and walk into "gene painting of the industrial labor force from the late years of Yushin regime" (33). Similarly, outside the factory, there are anonymous women who are nameless and uncharacterized. By addressing Hŭijae and other women by their real names, Shin shows her willingness to incorporate those who have not been represented within the existing aesthetic system into the realm of mainstream literature.

Hŭijae's death is an extreme means of expressing her existence, both for herself and for the writer who decided to frame this death literally. Undefined and unexplained by society, she is forever entrenched in people's memories through her dramatic death. According to Butler in *Precarious Life*, it is through extreme events like terrorism and violence that invisible, marginalized groups acquire public visibility. Only when anonymous individuals within the public are exposed to vulnerability and aggression do they recognize their vulnerable position and become aware that others can be hurt in the same way that they themselves can be (Butler, *Precarious Life* 11–12).

Another catastrophic moment in the novel reveals the ongoing present-day vulnerability of working-class women. On television, the protagonist watches a department store building collapse and scenes of the rescue.[30] When one survivor is miraculously found to have survived 13 days after the collapse, the narrator finds an

[30] This novel depicts the tragic collapse of the Sampoong Department Store on June 29, 1995. This devastating event was driven by the greed of the department store owner, who ignored clear warning signs of structural failure. As a result, 502 people lost their lives, and 937 were injured. The name and details of the survivor in the novel are real, as is her remark about wanting an iced coffee shortly after being rescued. For more information about the incident, see Sŏulp'ŭlojekt'ŭ kiŏksuchipka [Seoul project memory collector], which provides oral histories of the individuals involved, including the circumstances of the event, the rescue process, the survivors' trauma, and the process of legal accountability.

intimate face, assumed to be the marks of Hŭijae, from that young part-time working woman with a strong will to live:

> … on the TV screen a face I seemed to have seen before. A face I once loved. It was she. The face that had come back to life from pitch-black darkness. … The deeper I thought about her, the more my shaken mind turned calm and I felt a genuine intimacy, as if I had known her for a long, long time. Thank you, thank you, for living. (K. Shin 313–314)

The young part-time worker, who took a break from college to pay for her tuition, went unnoticed in the everyday operations of the department store. Employed in the basement cafeteria, she was part of the temporary workforce—replaceable and often overlooked. Her vulnerability, ignored in a society where she is neither a capitalist nor a consumer, is only brought to public attention by the downfall of the upscale department store. In the aftermath, as people are stripped down to the fundamental categories of the living and the dead after experiencing indiscriminate violence, the invisible worker from the basement finally gains recognition. She is no longer defined by her job or her status but as a grateful individual simply thankful for her life, identified as "Yoo Jihwan." By addressing the women in her work by their real names, the writer seeks to capture their individuality and distinct life experiences, resisting abstraction. The act of naming becomes a means of literally representing women who appear politically in public yet lack social recognition and agency. Shin calls them by their real names to affirm their presence in history and acknowledge their existence. The phrase she utters to Jihwan, "thank you for being alive," extends beyond Jihwan herself; it is a tribute to all autonymous women in the narrative who have survived and refused the fate of invisible death. This expression also serves as an unspoken message to Hŭijae, representing what the writer truly wishes to have been

able to say to her. Through this awareness of life, the writer recognizes the women who exist in the same time and space as herself as a collective "we." In doing so, she establishes common ground between the self as a creative worker and the self as a lived, embodied subject, demonstrating how literary writing can function simultaneously as both self-representation and social communication.

Shin's strategy to represent women's individuality can be explained as a mode of portraiture as opposed to the mode of genre painting, which aims for aesthetic totality, embodying ideological ideals. Georges Didi-Huberman argues that portraiture is shaped by social hierarchies and political divisions, allowing individual facial images to exist only for those in power (Didi-Huberman 75). In contrast, ordinary people are often represented as an indistinct troupe, subsumed within the unified regulations of a socially integrated system and the aesthetic forms that emerge from it (Didi-Huberman 86). As an alternative mode of representation, Didi-Huberman proposes the group portrait: a collective assemblage of heterogeneous faces that may be endlessly gathered, grouped, and serialized. He describes this as a means of uniting a multitude of unique presences while simultaneously revealing their historical, social, collective, and political dimensions (Didi-Huberman 67–68).

What connects the different women, past and present—Hŭijae, Jihwan and other women with "I"—is their endless struggle to be alive and to maintain a sense of dignity. The subsistence and biological needs that characterize their labor activities have not failed to reach the social and political level. Rather, every moment of a woman's present becomes a struggle for survival, including survival in the face of extreme conditions, including violence, resulting in every woman alive becoming the reader to which her writing calls—an extraordinary, yet entirely ordinary female reader. As an attempt to recall the scattered women into a community of "we," Shin's

self-writing needs to be distinguished from the self-writing of other female contemporaries who attempted to establish exceptional individuality. The broad and subjective category of "we" that she invokes is not an act of invoking the masses as readers but rather a reflection of the writer's struggle to reestablish the working class as her readers. Thus, its political effect needs to be emphasized.

Conclusion: Toward the Common Women Readers

In this chapter, I examined Shin Kyung-Sook's *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, in which the author reconfigures the social and cultural status of working-class women to reclaim their presence. Through this novel, Shin illuminates the historical and social conditions that have shaped women's writing, making visible the often-overlooked struggles of working-class women. By exploring the cultural positions and restrictions imposed on these women—particularly factory workers—Shin critically engages with the fundamental issue of women's self-representation, questioning how women's personal concerns can be endowed with broader social significance. Notably, the novel reflects the author's commitment to writing for the sake of her friends—working-class women who have largely disappeared from public discourse—in an effort to restore their voices and narratives to the literary and historical record.

Despite these accomplishments, Shin Kyung-Soonk pays little mind to women in white-collar roles: telephone operators, flight attendances, and housewives in middle-class residences—the roles that women of that era longed for but were soon to disappear or be disvalued. This antipathy towards middle-class housewives cannot help but highlight the narrowness of perceptions of gendered work.

After the 1990s, young feminists became aware of more diverse aspects of women's labor and work as well as the need for a gendered sphere for female subjects. The following chapter examines female genre fiction writers' challenge to the traditional literary establishment as well as their contributions to the development of a literary sphere geared toward women.

CHAPTER IV

FEMALE-LED GENRE FICTION IN KOREA: GENDERED HISTORY

Through Chapters II and III, I sought to emphasize how bookish girls challenged the marginalized cultural status of women in South Korea. The crucial implication of the existence of bookish girls is not only the gender of readers as subjects but also the reading materials with which they choose to engage. Bookish girls' engagement with serious literature and their drive to be represented through such literature carry significant political meaning. Female subjects have participated in literary venues through their reading and, in doing so, have established a female-centered literary community. Their defiance of cultural barriers, however, has been politically limited. Women's reading has largely been restricted to the boundaries of the literary canon, the authority of which stemmed from existing culturally hegemonic institutions, such as publishing houses, literary critics, media organizations, and academic institutions.

In this chapter, I examine how gender has reframed genre fiction since the 1990s. The reading and writing practices of genre fiction exhibited some aspects that overlapped with the previous generation of bookish girls who indulged in serious literature on account of it relating to women's struggle for literary legitimacy. Ultimately, what made young Korean women transgress national, ideological, and platform-based boundaries was simply the pursuit of pleasure from reading.

Introduction: The Conception of Feminist Genre Fiction

Since the 1990s, the intersection of genre fiction and feminism has become increasingly prominent, mirroring young women's emergence as cultural agents

imbued with feminist consciousness and eager for political engagement. This chapter examines how female subjects have both navigated and transformed the domain of genre fiction, looking closely at the social, cultural, and technological shifts that have molded their participation. I argue that genre fiction has functioned as a vital literary space in which Korean feminists have interrogated and reimagined gender norms.

Defined broadly, genre fiction encompasses narratives that are formulaic and in line with conventions. Unlike the classical literary notion of genre, which refers to universal archetypes, genre fiction is characterized by standardized narrative structures that yield recurring, stereotypical stories, leading to the term often being used synonymously with formula fiction. Abraham Kaplan, reassessing the cultural significance of narrative formulas, posits that popular art operates through predictable structures that fulfill the audience's expectations, highlighting the dynamic interplay between the text and the reader. He asserts that interpretation of genre fiction is inevitably shaped by shifting social and historical conditions.

John G. Cawelti distinguishes popular genre fiction from traditional literary genres by explaining that narrative formulas function as culturally specific and ritualistic forms or, in other words, as social contracts between creators and audiences. According to Cawelti, these formulas create structured frameworks that facilitate individual artistic creativity. Various prominent narrative archetypes—detective stories, westerns, crime thrillers, romances, fantasies, science fiction, horror—all operate within this framework (Cawelti, Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture 6).

The relationship between formulaic narrative structures and feminist artistic practice garnered significant scholarly interest in the realm of Anglo-American feminist criticism during the 1970s and 1980s, coinciding with the rise of second-

wave feminism. Feminist scholars began to analyze the substantial overlap between feminist literature and genre fiction, noting that genre conventions may be appropriated to articulate feminist ideologies. This chapter aims to legitimize the distinction between mainstream literature and feminist genre fiction by looking at the ways in which feminists have reshaped traditionally male-dominated genres. Within this wide field, I highlight three key critical approaches to genre fiction: syntactic, semantic, and materialist.

The first approach argues that certain genres are better suited, structurally speaking, to address women's issues, focusing on the syntactic function of genre. Tania Modleski exemplifies this perspective. In *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, she explores how popular genres frequently favored by women (e.g., gothic literature) maintain a striking degree of narrative consistency. From Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) to 1980s soap operas, these narratives adopt a structure that not only is familiar to women but also resonates with their lived experiences. Modleski argues that this consistency demonstrates the enduring appeal of certain formulaic conventions among female audiences (Modleski 46). Feminist genre fiction, from this perspective, appropriates and rewrites these formulas to subvert patriarchal master narratives and articulate new tropes through a feminist lens. Notably, however, Modleski's perspective has been criticized for purportedly homogenizing female audiences, treating women as a uniform bloc with identical psychological and emotional needs and, in turn, overlooking the diversity of their experiences.[31] It has also been criticized for failing to explain why feminists gravitate

[31] For a detailed criticism of Modleski's approach, see Allen 113-115 and Clancy 119-133.

toward non-feminist genres, such as romance novels that reinforce heterosexual norms.[32]

The second approach looks specifically at genre semantics, analyzing works' thematic content to gauge how women choose to consume media. Annette Kuhn, in her essay "Women's Genres," presents gynocentric genres as a distinct category of media that specifically targets female audiences. Kuhn argues that genres like melodrama and romance are defined not only by their themes but more importantly by the gendered modes of reception that they invite. These genres construct narratives in a manner that is explicitly motivated by female desire and governed by considerations surrounding female spectatorship (Kuhn 437). Despite Kuhn's framework being grounded in film studies, it offers valuable insights for literary analysis by highlighting how social contexts shape genre expectations. Notably, however, her emphasis on audience expectations has also been the subject of criticism for failing to consider the substantial diversity among female audiences and, in turn, for failing to treat women as the active cultural agents that they are in reality. Moreover, her model risks reducing texts to mere reflections of ideology, instrumentalizing art and curbing its subversive potential.[33]

Both the syntactic and semantic approaches attempt to validate feminist genre fiction through gendered differences in taste and a focus on genres widely deemed to be inherently feminine. In doing so, however, they often overlook the evolving nature of genre and the historical forces that shape women's engagement with traditionally masculine genres. As post-feminist media scholars have pointed out, such essentialist

[32] For a criticism of Modleski's synchronic frame, see Feuer 28-29.

[33] Joanne Hollows summarizes the criticism surrounding Kuhn's conception of women's genre literature. See Hollows, especially 38-67.

models neglect the true diversity of women's experiences, reducing gender to a universal category defined by shared oppression.

The materialist approach, which emphasizes the historical conditions that shape both genre and subjectivity, offers a perspective from which to view female-centered genre fiction not merely as a vehicle for reproducing ideology but as a space in which women—as historical subjects—are constructed and reconstructed. By shifting the focus from who produces texts to what is produced and the ways in which the reproducing subject is situated historically, women's genre fiction entails the reconstruction of the female subject as a historical being.

Anne Cranny-Francis advances a definition of feminist genre fiction as "genre fiction written from a self-consciously feminist perspective, consciously encoding an ideology which is in direct opposition to dominant gender ideology"(Cranny-Francis 1). From this angle, feminist genre fiction is more than a mere variation of popular fiction that is consumed by women; it is a politically motivated form that appropriates popular literary conventions in a strategical manner with particular aims. Genre fiction's accessibility and marketability grant feminist ideas access to broad audiences (Cranny-Francis 2). This self-conscious feminist appropriation distinguishes contemporary feminist genre fiction from nineteenth-century women's popular literature, such as works of melodrama and romance. Although these earlier forms certainly addressed women's lives, they often lacked a critical interrogation of genre conventions, reinforcing rather than challenging patriarchal ideologies. In contrast, feminist genre fiction, shaped by second-wave feminist thought, uses allegory and narrative innovation to expose and dismantle patriarchal structures.

Critically, feminist interventions in genre fiction do more than just diversify character representations or subvert sexist tropes. They often engage in deep structural

transformations of the genre itself. For example, female detectives who rely on intuition challenge the rationalist assumptions of detective fiction, while female protagonists in hard-boiled narratives may invert the genre's conventional treatment of violence (Makinen 17). Such dissonance raises the question: When feminist rewriting departs so significantly from genre conventions, does it still fall under the original genre? This dilemma prompts us to consider whether feminist genre fiction constitutes a sub-category (e.g., feminist hard-boiled fiction, feminist detective fiction) or an entirely distinct literary form shaped by women's lived experiences and historical conditions.

This chapter traces the evolution of feminist genre fiction in South Korea through four critical periods: the relative absence of women's genre literature prior to the 1990s; the emergence of online platforms and science fiction in the 1990s; the rise of mystery fiction in the 2000s. Following this historical overview, I discuss key female writers in the Korean genre fiction scene, analyzing how they critique patriarchy and employ global genre conventions to reflect the realities of Korean women. Throughout this analysis, I demonstrate how feminist genre fiction has come to represent a powerful space for resistance, innovation, and cultural reimagination.

The Gendered Landscape of Korean Genre Fiction

Modern genre fiction in Korea may be traced to the 1910s, when Korean expressions for genre fiction were formulated through translations of English novels. Terms like *chŏngt'amsosŏl* (detective novel), *yŏnaesosŏl* (romance novel), *mohŏmsosŏl* (adventure novel), and *kwahaksosŏl* (science fiction novel) began to circulate and gain widespread acceptance by the 1930s. In early modern Korea, these formulaic fictions held a distinct cultural status. Readers needed substantial literary experience to

understand the conventions and predict genre fiction's narrative patterns. As a result, engagement with genre fiction was generally considered an intellectual pursuit and a hallmark of modern reading practices.

The prototypical reader of genre fiction was an educated young man with an appetite for modern knowledge. Nationalist intellectuals and leftist ideologues viewed genre fiction as a vehicle through which to expose Korean youth to global perspectives beyond the confines of their colonized homeland. These narratives, which often focused on science and geography, encouraged young men to use modern knowledge for the purposes of communal betterment. As argued by literary scholar Ch'ŏn Chŏnghwan, genre fiction's readership was generally considered to comprise those who had received a modern education and, in turn, were capable of consuming both high and popular culture (Ch'ŏn 361). Thus, the genre's ideal reader was conceptualized as a male member of the middle-class elite.

This gendering of the reader was plainly evident in early genre fiction, especially when the term *sonyŏn* (meaning "boy") became a key designation for its target audience. In fact, Ch'oe Namsŏn, Korea's first modern poet and a prominent nationalist, titled Korea's first modern magazine *Sonyŏn*, cementing this gendered focus. Translations of Western novels, such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, were published with the assumption that they would be read by boys under the guidance of their fathers (Cho 13). This broad modernizing project targeted young Korean males in pursuit of widespread education and a cultural uplift.

Notably, however, early modern Korean genre fiction did not exclude female protagonists entirely. Yi Haejo's 1918 novel *Ssangokjŏk* [The Twin Flute] featured Korean literature's first female detective. Initially positioned as a heroine, this

character ultimately becomes a victim. As literary scholar Pak Chinyŏng notes, the evolution of genre fiction by the 1930s still hadn't progressed past the near-exclusive portrayal of women as victims, neglecting their potential as heroines or even just their potential for genuine character development (Pak 101). Even as a detective, the female figure is subsumed under the male protagonist's narrative, marking the clear limits of her agency in early genre fiction.

The portrayal of characters in genre fiction became increasingly gendered in the 1920s, especially in the works of Korean male writers who focused on adventure stories. Pang Chŏnghwan, a pioneer in children's rights advocacy and children's literature in Korea, created genre fiction aimed at Korean youth with an emphasis on education. He categorized his own work as boys' detective and adventure fiction, with his stories always featuring young boys demonstrating bravery to overcome villains. As noted by genre fiction scholar Ch'oe Aesun, the young protagonists in Pang's stories were often driven to rescue their friends and family from peril, with many of those in need of rescue being young girls. Pang's narratives frequently used the term *sonyŏn* (boys) to depict male characters engaged in action, contrasting the passive and victimized *sonyŏ* (girls) (Ch'oe 69–72).

This gendered narrative framework became more pronounced in the 1930s. As Japanese censorship loosened and the number of Korean-language newspapers increased, serialized fiction gained popularity. These serialized narratives often blended various genres to attract a wider audience—yet they still maintained a gender bias. Detective fiction, even with its hybrid nature, retained its masculine associations. During this period, Korean detective fiction consistently illuminated the diverse social issues and challenges confronting the colonized nation. The genre gained popularity by engaging with the literary imagination of modernity, reflecting themes of money,

violence, and sex (Rhee 189). Literary scholar Kim Ŭnha interprets detective fiction as a manifestation of masculinized modern science, highlighting its emphasis on intellectual reasoning, observation, deduction, and dissection. Detective stories from this era routinely framed emotions—which were associated with femininity—as obstacles to rational thought. Thus, female characters were consistently portrayed as irrational agents of disruption (Ŭ. Kim 241)—as the catalysts behind chance events, driven by their emotions and physical impulses. Women typically fell into one of two categories: villains, motivated by primitive emotions such as revenge and anger; or pitiful victims, incapable of resolving dilemmas in a rational manner (Ch'oe, Chosŏnŭi t'amchŏngŭl t'amchŏnghata 273–281).

Conversely, melodrama came to be associated with a female readership, serving as a catch-all genre for women. Literary historian Cho Dongil notes that serialized fiction of the 1930s—especially that written by women—often featured romance elements (347–348). Kim Malbong's 1938 novel *Tchillekkoch'* [The Wild Rose] marked a turning point in the popularity of female-centered melodramas. Its focus on a virtuous woman navigating the upper-class world went on to become a highly familiar theme that would echo throughout Korean melodramas. Such stories typically revolve around a poor yet virtuous female protagonist who inadvertently enters the upper-class world and finds herself at the center of various intersecting love affairs. Kim's novel specifically portrays the glamorous daily life of the upper class but simultaneously illustrates how individuals from elite society ultimately bring about their own destruction through their desires. As Sŏ Yŏngch'ae notes in his study of moral melodramas, the novel's protagonist Chŏngsun symbolizes self-sacrifice and dedication. In the central conflict between love and capitalism, she embodies female

morality standing in opposition to capitalist values (Y. Sŏ,“1930nyŏndae t'ongsoksŏngŭi chonjaebangshikkwa kŭ ŭimi” 287).

Although genre fiction written and read by women became more popular, this newfound popularity did not give way to the development of feminist genre fiction. Instead, female-focused stories began to lose the intellectual implications that genre fiction had in the early modern period, now being associated with lower moral standards and excessive sentimentality. Consequently, stories centered on female characters were frequently dismissed as overly emotional or morally simplistic.

The post-liberation literary scene in Korea maintained a divide between male- and female-leaning genres. While men were still imagined as agents of modernity, the concept of modernity itself began to emphasize technological and material progress. The ideology of the Cold War significantly affected both the production and consumption of genre fiction, but the influence of post-war Cold War culture led to an increase in the translation and creation of science fiction, which had been almost entirely absent prior to liberation.

Science fiction has since played a significant role in both North and South Korea, functioning as a valuable narrative mode through which to promote each regime’s technology-related policy and broadly highlight the superiority of their respective systems. In North Korea, science fiction often depicts a socialist utopia (Zur 328), whereas in South Korea, as noted by Sunyoung Park, early science fiction narratives were heavily influenced by ideological filters of anticommunism and development-oriented nationalism (S. Park 350). More broadly, genre fiction has frequently been interpreted as a national allegory, reflecting the common oppression experienced by the Korean nation under colonialism, dictatorship, and economic underdevelopment. While the political perspectives expressed in genre fiction have

varied by historical context, a common hypothesis exists with regard to the political function of the genre. Whether the perceived enemy is the South Korean dictatorship or the North Korean regime, political acts in genre fiction narratives are generally assumed to involve the Korean nation in some capacity. This nationalist bias within genre fiction scholarship has, unfortunately, marginalized the diverse political subjects present throughout Korea.

This nationalist lens has also hindered potential feminist interpretations of genre fiction. Mun Yunsŏng's *Wanjŏn sahoe* [Perfect Society], published in 1967, clearly showcases the lack of gender-focused discourse in Korean genre fiction. The novel portrays an imaginary gynocentric society set in the year 2155. Its protagonist is initially captivated by this technological utopia, but he is soon unsettled by the reversal of traditional Korean cultural values, particularly the lower social status of men. At the time, this novel's futuristic gynocentric society was largely interpreted through Cold War allegories, with the focus of critiques primarily being on matters related to the divided Korean states and the Cold War rivalry between Communism and the West (Ch'oe 257–262). This case illustrates how the absence of interpretative frameworks—rather than the lack of gendered content itself—silences feminist readings. The concept of feminist genre fiction is culturally specific and may not be defined by a single factor, such as the author's gender or the presence of feminist themes. Rather, a true understanding of feminist genre fiction requires an examination of the contexts in which genre fiction is produced and consumed.

The 1990s marked a significant shift. The emergence of feminist genre fiction was driven by readers who were both aware of feminist principles and capable of deriving feminist meanings from cultural products. Feminist genre fiction originated among middle-class women who had access to Western feminist discourse and digital

media. The Internet provided a vast platform for marginalized voices, enabling feminists to create countercultural networks independent of academia and formal movements. From the mid-1990s on—and especially in the 2000s—the online world became a space in which individuals from various minority identity groups could express themselves in a manner free from the constraints of traditional social approval. It facilitated the unification of feminist voices, giving way to a strong and visible presence. This context sets the stage for a dramatic uptick in the prominence of feminist genre fiction, beginning with the emergence of feminist science fiction.

The Rise of Feminist Science Fiction

In the 1990s, feminists who were proficient in the use of online information technology were referred to as *yŏngp'eminisŭ'tŭ* [young feminists]. Feminist scholar Kwŏn-Kim Hyŏnyŏng recalls how these young feminists gathered in women-centered online communities reaching 520,000 members by 2000 (Kwŏn-Kim et al. 130). Online feminist platforms like *P'eminijŭmŭi ch'ŏn'guk* [Heaven for Feminism] and *Yŏsŏnghak tonghohoe* [Feminism Club] offered spaces where young women could openly discuss gender issues, feminist discourse, sexuality, and female-oriented genre fiction (Kwŏn-Kim et al. 19–23).

These digital platforms empowered well-educated, middle-class youth to form exclusive communities dedicated to accessing and disseminating contemporary feminist thought, much of which was informed by Western perspectives. As literary scholar Dahye Kim observes, the advent of digital technology dramatically transformed the power dynamics associated with cultural production and consumption. Kim points out that middle-class youth equipped with advanced digital literacy emerged as key agents in both the consumption and dissemination of

information within these virtual environments. The rise of "techno-fiction," which was characterized by its distinct writing style and online circulation, further motivated these feminists (D. Kim, 2020 52–69).

The digital literary sphere provided women with a counter-space, one that was not confined to male-dominated domains, such as gaming and computing. Women had been marginalized within knowledge systems built upon digital and technological expertise; thus, they often felt compelled to hide their identities or accept subordinate roles (Chŏn 102–106). In online literary communities, however, women utilized their information literacy and language proficiency to construct digital literary archives and engage with international feminist texts, thereby resisting gendered exclusion. Online literary fandoms, particularly those based in systems like Usenet (referred to locally as *PC t'ongsin* [PC telecommunication]) became crucial forums for women in which they could exchange literary interests (Park 357–358). Within these spaces, female science fiction fans accessed, translated, and disseminated feminist genre fiction that crossed national boundaries. Their engagement was fueled by the persistent lack of female representation in Korean literature and their desire to articulate feminist concerns through speculative genre such as science fiction.

One key event was the 1994 publication of the two-volume *Segye yŏsŏng sosŏl gŏlchaksŏn* [Anthology of World Women's Literature], which featured a collection of feminist genre fiction. The translators—members of the science fiction community *Mŏtchin shinsegye* [Brave New World]—articulated their goal of fusing feminism and science fiction as follows:

> Both feminism and science fiction failed to attract popular interest in Korea. However, this situation may be changed when the two are combined. Science

> fiction has the powerful tool of imagination to approach feminist issues. By surpassing the limitations of time, space, and biology, science fiction subverts society's basic assumptions and exposes subtle gender oppressions in the social structure that are difficult to detect. Science fiction eliminates the unnecessary and portrays only the essence, thereby revealing that things that are taken for granted are not always as they seem and, in turn, describing reality from a chillingly sharp perspective. (Mŏtchin shinsegye 347; translation is mine)

This anthology, which features prominent feminist science fiction writers like Joanna Russ and Connie Willis,[34] reflects the substantial impact that U.S. subculture has had on the digital literary fandom in Korea. The relationship between feminists and genre literature in the 1990s is significant not only for its role in shaping cultural spaces but also for the way in which it signaled a shift in transnational cultural flows. While Korean literature was shaped by Japanese influence amid modernization, both in high literature and genre literature, the translation of feminist genre fiction gave way to the diversification of Korean literary imports. U.S. genre fiction represented a pathway through which U.S. feminism and minority politics were brought to Korea, activating Korean literary subcultures and leading to a rising number of women authors

[34] Here is the full list of the selected stories from *Segye yŏsŏng sosŏl gŏlchaksŏn* for which I notate the Korean translation and the original title: Connie Willis, "Seksŭ ttonŭn paesŏl" [All My Darling Daughters]; John Varle, "Leo-wa k'ŭlleo"[Options]; Suzy McKee Charnas, "Hŭphyŏlkwi-ŭi salang" [Suzy McKee Charnas]; Suzette Haden Elgin, "Kŭleisŭ komo-lŭl wihayŏ" [For the Sake of Grace]; Connie Willis, "Ch'ŏtsarang" [Chance]; Pat Murphy, "Namunnip' sai-ŭi yŏintŭl" [Women in the Trees]; Karen Joy Fowler, "Hosu-nŭn inkongmul-lo katŭkch'a issŏssta"; Joanna Rus, "Kŭtŭl-i tolaonta haeto" [When It Changed]; Pat Murphy, "Sikmul anae" [His Vegetable Wife]; Lisa Tuttl, "Namcha-ŭi yŏcha" [The Wound]; Joanna Russ, "Paik'ing-kwa sunyŏ" [Souls]; James Tiptree Jr. "Hyusŭt'ŏn, Hyusŭt'ŏn, tŭl-linŭnka?" [Houston, Houston, Do you Read?]; Ursula K. Le Guin, "Chŏngpokhachi an-ŭn salamtŭl" [Sur]; Joanna Russ, "Nalkŭn saengkak, nalkŭn chonchaetŭl" [Old Thoughts, Old Presence]; Karen Joy Fowler, "Silhŏmkŭkchang" [Praxis].

addressing gender issues, a greater presence of female protagonists, and a growing feminist audience.

Djuna—a science fiction writer and film critic—epitomizes the transnational subculture flows of the 1990s.[35] Her pen name, an homage to lesbian writer Djuna Barnes, reflects her identification with Anglophone minority culture. Djuna has discussed her fragmented encounters with foreign media in interviews; due to her limited access to genre fiction in Korea, she often indulged in English-language books, the Armed Forces Korea Network (AFKN; an American military TV network), and Leonard Maltin's *Movie Guide*. She read untranslated texts, watched American films without Korean subtitles, and memorized descriptions of films without ever having seen the films themselves. These imperfect experiences fed her imagination and went on to profoundly influence her fiction.

As Christina Klein argues in her work on AFKN spectatorship, the language barrier and incomplete narrative transmissions gave way to creative appropriation. She cites Bong Joon Ho (Pong Chunho) as just one example of a filmmaker who absorbed and transformed imported cultural materials under such conditions (Klein 28). She notes that the AFKN audience likely consisted of middle-class urban Koreans who were interested in global trends (Klein 24). However, as was the case with Pong and Djuna, their language skills were limited, prompting them to depend

[35] Djuna has never disclosed her gender or real name. However, I use the pronouns "she/her" for Djuna throughout this study because she used these pronouns for her characters in the English translation of her work. In the Korean language, personal pronouns are often omitted, and neuter pronouns are common, making the gender of characters in Korean novels ambiguous. In Djuna's novels, the narrator's voice often reflects the author's perspective, omitting personal pronouns. In the translation of her novel, however, Djuna designated all gender-ambiguous characters with the pronouns "she/her," clearly indicating that the focalizer of her narratives is intended to be female. Therefore, for consistency's sake, this chapter refers to Djuna as "she/her" despite the fact that she has never publicly confirmed her gender. For more information regarding Djuna's choice of personal pronouns, see Djuna et al.. In the same interview, Kim Bo-Young (Kim Poyŏng) states that she chose to use "they/them" for a gender-neutral perspective.

on the “extra-linguistic mode of reception” (Klein 28) that is visual imagery supplemented by receivers’ imagination.

The consumption of U.S. pop culture constituted a subtle political statement against the Korean government’s authoritarian cultural policies, which restricted cultural exchange, while also representing a form of quiet resistance against the cultural environment shaped by student vanguardism in the 1980s. Djuna has frequently criticized the patriarchal dynamics that characterized student activism at Korean universities as well as the accompanying marginalization of feminist and queer politics (M. Hŏ 331–332). Through feminist consciousness, writers like Djuna reached out to their audience not as a national collective but as women with unique, embodied experiences. Genre fiction, with its potential for speculation and transformation, offered an essential framework through which to express feminist critique.

One of the most prominent Korean writers from the 1990s to the present day, Kim Bo-Young (1975–) also has remarked on how female science fiction writers have confronted their marginalization within the broader media and cultural landscape. Kim, a graphic designer with experience in the videogame industry, is an expert in digital information technology. As her literary journey developed within the male-dominated information industry rather than an online literary community, Kim was able to write more vividly about her firsthand experiences as a woman navigating a low cultural status. For instance, in a 2019 interview, Kim recalled how science fiction was considered to be a wholly male genre when she started writing science fiction in the 1990s:

> There are two sides to science fiction. Science fiction is basically elite literature. Because it deals with science, it was created by educated individuals, and

> education was previously reserved for the privileged. The privileged have long been predominantly white males with capital who have had access to elite education, and they've been able to enjoy and benefit from the genre. However, if SF is the literature of educated people, it is progressive for that reason. As educational opportunities expand, stories told by minorities —stories that break down stereotypes of the world—are bound to become more prominent. I remember when I first started writing science fiction, I went to a junk-science fiction site, and I was like, "Oh, this is just a bunch of 40- and 50-something guys." (Kim Bo-Young, "Ch'ŏnkukbota sŏngsŭlŏun [Holier than heaven]"; translation is mine)

Kim's experience illustrates the self-consciousness of women in genre fiction who considered themselves to represent "minorities" in the field. They were often highly educated and literate yet still felt culturally marginalized due to their gender. Female genre writers have been forced to confront multiple layers of marginalization, which naturally went on to be reflected in the literary worlds that they created.

While the rise of the digital literary scene enabled genre writers to bypass traditional gatekeepers, science fiction written by women remained a largely niche genre. This minority status often led to feelings of powerlessness among authors when it came to market dynamics. In the 2000s, the genre fiction landscape in South Korea saw the creation of cross-genre communities as literary platforms for Korean genre fiction. One notable example is the online genre fiction magazine *Kŏul* [Mirror], which was established in 2003 and is still in operation today. *Mirror* served as a collective network for genre writers. The magazine's founding editor, science fiction writer Pak Aechin, was part of an online genre community hosted by Hitel Telecommunications alongside other early contributors. This magazine provided

women writers from online communities with opportunities to reach a wider audience and enter the publishing market.

Notably, the editors behind *Mirror* have referred to it as a *hwansang* [fantastic] literature magazine. "Fantastic literature" served as an umbrella term encompassing various genres, including fantasy, horror, and science fiction. The term stems from Tzvetan Todorov's concept of "fantastique" from his book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970). According to Todorov, a literary event may be considered fantastic when it leaves readers uncertain as to whether the event is real or merely an illusion. Thus, this terminological choice by *Mirror*'s editor suggests that Korean genre fiction writers in the 2000s viewed genre fiction as a field centered on supernatural narratives, offering a sharp contrast with literary realism. By the 2010s, it was rare to find instances of science fiction that reflected contemporary Korean society. Most genre writers had opted for fictional worlds that transcended national boundaries or even human civilization. However, this disconnection from Korean reality served a greater purpose than mere escapist entertainment; it illustrated women's aspirations to craft a literary realm that surpassed the restrictiveness of literary realism long prevalent in Korean literature.

Among the authors who fostered their literary imagination in the pages of *Mirror*, Chŏng Serang (1984–) is one who has found mainstream recognition. Unlike the previous generation of female genre writers who had emerged from online communities, Chŏng kickstarted her literary career through the offline genre magazine *P'antastik* [Fantastique], which focused on cross-genre publications, and engaged with her readers on the online forum of *Mirror*. Chŏng Serang's literary world reflects the genre hybridity of the 2000s and the feminist themes of the era's online genre fiction. Her short story "7kyosi" [The 7th Class] is a notable example of

how Korean science fiction writers reappropriated U.S. science fiction's influence and feminist ideas.

"The 7th Class" depicts a world following the fall of human civilization. In this world, humans live underground, where they need to construct an eco-friendly civilization to avoid giant earthworms that eat plastic and rebar. The story revolves around the protagonist, Ari, and her friends, who attend a school for women. In their history class, the central characters learn that indiscriminate development and environmental destruction led to the collapse of human civilization. Much of the setting for this story draws from Frank Herbert's *Dune* series of novels. It features giant circular creatures hidden in the sand, a desert civilization that opts against the use of mechanical technology, and a girls' school run by women known as witches. While the original emphasized the male Fremen's struggle for freedom, Chŏng Serang reinterprets Herbert's worldview from a feminist perspective, imagining a world that is anti-civilizational and dominated by female intellectuals.

The development of feminist science fiction in the 1990s and 2000s fostered a feminist cultural sphere, which established networks among science fiction-focused writers, magazines, and anthologies. Nevertheless, the knowledge and feminist consciousness within this niche genre were limited in terms of accessibility, requiring both access to digital technology and a solid foundation of scientific literacy. After the mid-2000s, however, female readers of genre fiction pursued a challenge against realist paradigms and patriarchal norms through a more accessible genre: mystery.

A Granny Killer, Detective Girls, and Female-led Mystery

Aside from Yi Haejo's female-led detective novel *The Twin Flute*, female-centric detective and mystery narratives were scarce in Korean literature prior to the 1990s.

In fact, the genre overall was declining by the 1970s, only to be revitalized by the overwhelming popularity of mystery writer Kim Sŏngchong (1941–) following the publication of his debut novel, *Ch'oehu-ŭi chŭngin* [The Last Witness] (1974). This novel, which follows a brooding detective's investigation of a murder tied to Korea's tragic modern history, has become emblematic of masculinized crime fiction. The surge of interest in Kim's works and the subsequent proliferation of imitators have been attributed to the cultural context of the 1970s.

Come the late 1970s and 1980s, there was a marked gendering of the genre, as demonstrated by the rise of hard-boiled detective stories and gritty urban mysteries. This shift must be understood in relation to broader cultural currents that foregrounded the male working-class body as a symbol of resilience and modernity. Film scholar Yi Yŏngchae situates the appeal of the "hard body" within the context of Asian industrial modernism, where the male laboring body—capable of overcoming mechanical threats—came to constitute a celebrated ideal (Y. Yi 178–183). Kim Ŭnha contrasts this fantasy of muscular masculinity with the figure of defiant but nihilistic college student, arguing that lower-class men sought compensatory narratives of heroism and spectacular violence to restore their sense of agency and self-worth (Ŭ. Kim, "Namsŏngchŏk p'at'osŭlosŏŭi Taechungsosŏlkwa Ch'ŏngnyŏntŭlŭi Pansŏngchangsŏsa" 20–26) As observed by literary scholar An Hyeyŏn, the media environment also played a crucial role in shaping the genre's masculine orientation. The proliferation of male-targeted magazines and commuter-friendly sports newspapers contributed to the mainstreaming of crime fiction as a form of light reading and the recasting of masculinity in terms of bodily strength and action (An 57-58).

These developments marked a significant departure from colonial-era detective narratives, which generally featured elite protagonists endowed with intellectual superiority. In contrast, the mystery fiction of the 1970s and 1980s centered on working-class men who embodied physical toughness and moral complexity. Despite their use of violence, these protagonists were depicted as empathetic figures attuned to the everyday struggles of marginalized urban communities. Kim Hongsin's *Inkansijang* [Human Market] (1981) exemplifies this trend, portraying male protagonists navigating impoverished social environments with a mix of action-oriented resolve and ethical sensitivity. The hard-boiled genre's popularity lied not only in its sensationalism but also in its capacity to articulate a socially critical perspective on inequality and systemic injustice.

However, such narratives of working-class masculinity frequently rendered women as passive victims, especially of sexual violence, with female characters often depicted as targets of gang rape, human trafficking, and forced prostitution. Such tropes had existed in Korean detective fiction since the colonial period, but by the mid-1970s—particularly in the work of Kim Sŏngchong—these depictions were becoming increasingly sensationalized with heightened sexual imagery. In *The Last Witness*, which focuses on North Korean guerrilla activity in South Korea after the war, Kim crafts a somber crime narrative that is largely stripped of ideological framing. The female character, Chihye, endures brutal sexual abuse: the daughter of a once-respected guerrilla leader, she is repeatedly raped by other guerrilla members, even after becoming pregnant. Kim's portrayal of Chihye reflects a broader pattern in the genre: Female suffering serves as a spectacle within male-dominated narratives of moral struggle and social critique.

In the male-dominated sphere of mystery entertainment, female readers showed little interest in the Korean mystery genre. Even translations of international female-focused mysteries failed to engage female readers. However, the feminist movement in genre fiction began to make its mark on the mystery genre in the 1990s, culminating in the publication of the *Segye yŏsŏng jakka sŏsŭp'ensŭ gŏlchaksŏn* [Anthology of World Women's Suspense Fiction] in 1993. The translator's note highlights the collection's portrayal of independent women and its significant contributions to feminist dialogue in Korea. Alongside this anthology, several explicitly feminist mystery and female-driven detective novels by Anglophone authors, such as Alexander McCall Smith's *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series, were translated into Korean around this time. Nevertheless, these initiatives garnered little public attention initially. This tepid reception may be attributed to a disconnect between genre expectations and the narrative modes underlying feminist mystery fiction. Korean readers in the 1990s expected mystery stories to offer psychological depth and social critique—expectations shaped by decades of crime fiction that had linked criminality to broader social dysfunction. Readers were drawn to narratives foregrounding the psychological analysis of perpetrators and the structural drivers of crime. These readers often perceived feminist mystery, in contrast, as too subdued or insufficiently thrilling, particularly in comparison to male-centered stories driven by physical violence, action, and sexual exploits. While international feminist critics had begun celebrating female detectives in the 1980s for their "powers of action and practical intelligence" (Craig and Cadogan 246), these representations failed to resonate with Korean readers, for whom these female detectives' investigative methods—based on empathy, imagination, and intuition—were often perceived as less dynamic than those of their male counterparts.

In a landscape where class and gender often intersect, the mystery genre for women has historically been overlooked. However, female readers who have felt marginalized in both politically progressive science fiction and misogynistic mystery novels have reconnected with the mystery genre through Japanese mystery works. In the 2000s, a new wave of Japanese mystery novels—often authored by women and focused on gender issues—began to resonate with Korean female readers. These narratives introduced a lighter tone and featured non-macho detectives, chipping away at the gender gap in readership. Miyuki Miyabe's work was particularly influential in this regard. Her novel *Kasha* [火車] (1992), translated into Korean in 2000 and into English under the name *All She Was Worth* in 1996, became a touchstone for Korean readers. The novel centers on a working-class woman who commits murder to escape her debt, assuming another woman's identity. The narrative sheds light on the structural violence endured by lower-class women, broadening the genre to encompass deeper social critiques from women's perspective. This tale of an impoverished woman engaging in crime to navigate systemic debt struck a chord with Korean readers facing similar societal issues.

This reorientation of the genre toward women's lived realities persisted into the 2010s, with Korean authors beginning to produce female-centered mystery fiction of their own. Whereas women in mystery had previously been limited to the role of passive victim or psychopathic villain, newer works presented women as complex agents navigating patriarchal constraints. These narratives went well beyond psychological archetypes, instead foregrounding social pressures and structural inequalities. The vacuum in female-centered Korean mystery was slowly being filled by a new generation of women writers whose stories depicted women committing crimes, confronting taboos, and challenging gender norms.

Seo Mi-Ae (Sŏ Miae), often referred to as "the queen of Korean mystery novels" in the 2010s, played a pivotal role in popularizing female-centered mysteries, openly expressing her desire to develop female detectives and villains. Sŏ often cited Miss Marple—Agatha Christie's iconic spinster detective—as her favorite, embodying a feminine sensibility. Her novel *Chalchayo, ŏmma* [Good Night, Mom] (2010), published in English under the title *The Only Child* (2020), features a criminal psychologist who suspects that her stepdaughter is a psychopath. The novel intricately weaves cultural norms around stepmotherhood with mystery tropes (e.g., interviewing a male serial killer), giving way to a psychological thriller enriched by cultural intersectionality.

Gu Byeong-Mo (Ku Pyŏngmo)'s novel *P'akwa* [Damaged Fruit] (2013), translated formally as *The Old Woman with the Knife* (2022), is another prominent example of the evolving gender politics surrounding Korean mystery fiction. The story revolves around an aging female assassin who uses her seemingly innocent appearance to her advantage. The novel depicts her overcoming female suffering through murder in her childhood, intertwining her life as an assassin with women's precariat struggling in the urban periphery—waitresses, housemaids, and cleaners alike. As both a temporary worker and an older woman whose existence is often overlooked in the urban space, her marginalized and invisible position constitutes an advantage for her role as an assassin. While this novel adheres to the general structure of the hard-boiled novel, this unique female character enables the novel to explore new avenues for the Korean mystery genre, going beyond a focus on testosterone-fueled energy.

The mounting popularity of female-centered mystery also found fertile ground in the young adult fiction market. By the mid-2000s, Korean publishers began more

clearly segmenting audiences, formally distinguishing between young adult literature and children's books. Publisher-sponsored contests for juvenile fiction invited submissions from any genre so long as the protagonist was young (Minlyŏng Kim 50–60). These competitions offered an entry point for women writers who might otherwise have been excluded from male-dominated genres. Notable examples of works that began as entries in such competitions include Jeong You-Jeong (Chŏng Yuchŏng)'s *Nae Simchangŭl Sswala* [Shoot My Heart] (2009), Gu Byeong-Mo's *Wichŏtŭpeik'ŏli* [A Wizard's Bakery] (2009), and Sohn Won-Pyung (Son Wŏnp'yŏng)'s *Amondŭ* [Almonds] (2017), all of which blend mystery and psychological realism with the concerns of adolescence.

Visual design also played a key role in attracting teen readers. Light novels and manga-style illustrations helped to signal each story's tone and themes. For example, the cover art for *Amondŭ* [Almonds] features a stylized androgynous character whose unreadable expression evokes the novel's central motif of emotional detachment. Despite the novel's hard-boiled elements, the illustration subtly communicates that the narrative departs from macho conventions ([Figure 1]). Such visual cues enabled female readers to access genre fiction that may have otherwise seemed alienating. These design strategies helped to create a media environment in which female-centered narratives thrive, leading to the gender bias of traditional mystery fiction gradually being reimagined.

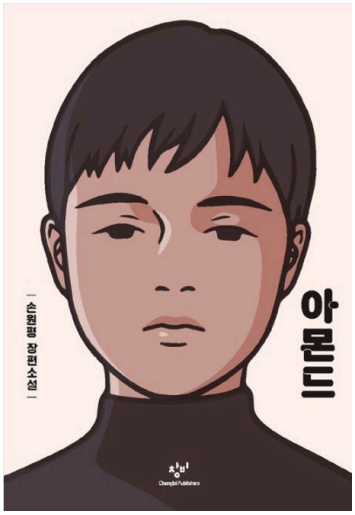

Figure 2. The covers of the novels *Almond* (left) and *Sŏnam Girls' High School Detective Corps* (2013). The images on these book covers showcase the gender of their target audiences.

Pak Haik's *Sŏnamyŏko T'amchŏngtan* [Sŏnam Girls' High School Detective Corps] (2013) exemplifies this fusion of mystery and youth literature, marking a significant shift in the genre's gendered contours. The novel's cover image features a group of ordinary girls in school uniforms, pointing to its focus on everyday school life and girlish characters—far removed from the traditional mystery tropes of violence and sex. The narrative centers on high school girls navigating the pressures of education, ranging from internalized grade hierarchies to the desire for parental recognition. Within this context, the detective plot serves merely as a vehicle through which to affirm the girls' self-efficacy, validating forms of intelligence and creativity that are not captured by traditional academic metrics. As noted by literary scholar Oh Hyejin, the girls' problem-solving relies not on scientific deduction but on emotional intelligence, empathy, and collaboration, proposing an alternative model of rationality grounded in communal ethics rather than individual mastery (Oh 439–440).

Park herself situates her work within the tradition of "cozy mystery," a subgenre characterized by the absence of graphic violence or sex, a confined setting

(often small communities), and amateur sleuths—traits that have made it particularly popular among women readers and writers (e.g., Son) alike. The fact that this subgenre has gained traction among female authors points to the exclusion of representations of violence successfully giving way to a new audience segment: female adult readers. As these gentle mysteries have risen in popularity, the line between children's and adult literature has blurred. Pak Haik herself acknowledges the affinity between children's literature and mysteries. Despite initially viewing them as opposites, she came to recognize their shared "fairy tale"-like formula:

> At first, I thought these two fields were very opposite. It was refreshing to read a fairy tale with the innocence of a child's heart after reading books about brutal crimes. But the more I read, the more I realized that there are strange similarities between the two. As Julian Simmons says in *Bloody Murder*, there is a kind of fairy tale aspect to detective fiction. Justice prevails, the crime is solved, there's a superhero-like detective, a limited set of suspects, and predictable rules that seem to be a promise to the reader. It's not just a classic mystery. A good mystery novel seems to have an element that stimulates the childishness of adults. (H. Pak)

What is notable here is the author's awareness of the function of knowledge and logical reasoning in a detective story or mystery. Pak Haik, on her perception of the link between children's literature and mystery novels, emphasizes the childlike joy of reading the genre. The children that Pak cites here are different from the "boys" who had been presumed to be the subject of national prosperity by nationalist thinkers, and the adolescent readers envisioned by young adult mystery are distinct from the masculine heroes resolving serious social problems in the detective novels of the 1970s and the 1980s detective novels. The focus of the reading experience shifted from an intellectual pursuit of societal analysis toward the pleasure of the act of reading itself.

The absence of specialized knowledge—scientific, psychological, or criminological—in the reasoning processes of contemporary female detectives marked a broader shift in the genre, and this trend was not confined to youth fiction. Many female-centered mysteries of the 2000s and 2010s depict adult women investigators who are amateurs, operate based on their intuition, or are emotionally driven. These protagonists undermine the authority of rationalist epistemologies while offering a feminist revaluation of everyday experience as a legitimate site of knowledge. The emergence of such characters has disrupted the masculinist logic of genre fiction and helped to reconfigure mystery as a diverse, inclusive form with a broad readership. Thus, contemporary female-centered mystery fiction distinguishes itself from earlier feminist science fiction in Korea through its aim at a less specialized, more general audience—one seeking social commentary and psychological depth through accessible, character-driven storytelling.

The growing popularity of cozy mysteries among women throughout the 2010s demonstrates that the rise of feminist genre fiction was not the result of a sudden awakening but rather the culmination of an ongoing reorientation of reader preferences. Contrary to portrayals of post-2016 feminism as an abrupt rupture, the appeal of "gentle" mysteries points to a sustained demand for narratives that center everyday gendered experiences.

Notably, however, the fragmentation of discursive communities presents a significant challenge. As noted by sociologist Chŏng Hyŏnbaek, the robust online forums and review platforms that sustained literary discourse in the 1990s and 2000s have largely dissolved. Since the 2010s, feminist discourse has shifted to decentralized platforms like Twitter, where brief, emotionally charged posts have replaced extensive deliberation. While these platforms can generate viral visibility,

they often lack the sustained engagement necessary to build interpretive communities. Within this fragmented media landscape, popular authors have assumed new discursive authority. They function as nodal points where feminist readers gather, interpret, and contest cultural texts. As genre has become increasingly modular and character-driven, genre literacy and affective affiliation have emerged as key forms of feminist engagement.

"I Am a Woman Writer": Feminist Authorship and Genre Fiction

In the mid-2010s, South Korean feminist movements reshaped the literary landscape, especially when it came to genre fiction. Rising demand for gynocentric narratives led to the rediscovery and reevaluation of works by women writers who had previously operated along the margins of literary prestige. Female authors of genre fiction—historically dismissed or overlooked within Korean literary hierarchies—underwent a form of re-subjectification, increasingly identifying themselves as feminist writers. Crucially, this shift was not merely a matter of thematic alignment; it was a transformation of writers' political consciousness and authorial self-positioning within emergent feminist discourses.

This development indicates that genre fiction's political potential is not inherent to the genre itself but rather something that is determined by discourse—by the dynamic interpretive exchanges between authors and readers. As women writers began to assert their gendered subjectivity, their works catalyzed new modes of feminist engagement. Their growing cultural influence signaled a significant transformation in the evaluative frameworks of Korean literature, destabilizing the longstanding binaries between high literature and popular genre fiction.

One emblematic figure is Yun Ihyŏng, whose declaration "I am a woman writer" rejected any possibility of her writings being perceived as gender-neutral. In fact, following this declaration, she expressed regret at not having made it sooner and indicated that she was determined to incorporate her gender identity into her future works (I. Yun 193-200). Yun's situation illustrates that the emergence of feminist genre fiction in Korea may be attributed to a redefinition of authorship among genre writers alongside a mounting demand from female readers for literature that addresses gender-related issues. In other words, women writers are increasingly seeking out deeper feminist motivation in their writing, going beyond the mere incorporation of feminist elements into genre fiction.

Literary scholar Jae Won Chung situates this shift within what he calls the "material realities of writerly life that go beyond the technological apparatus" (Chung 330), drawing from and extending Terry Eagleton's theory of literary materialism. In Chung's analysis, literary materiality encompasses not only the textual and economic structures but also the affective, institutional, and digital structures that condition literary production. Feminist critiques have been instrumental in delineating how these structures, under the guise of aesthetic autonomy, sustain hierarchical gender and class dynamics. From this framework, affect—the embodied experience of injustice—emerges as a key vector of literary politics.

The case of Kim Ch'oyŏp exemplifies this feminist reorientation within genre fiction. Despite lacking the institutional endorsement of either canonical literary authorities or science fiction genre specialists, Kim's speculative narratives have resonated powerfully with female readers, with her dual identity as a scientist and a woman writer anchoring her narratives within both scientific knowledge and feminist consciousness. In interviews, she credits the feminist movement of her college years

with instilling in her a desire to write stories that reflect the lives of women—stories that she and her peers had once longed to read. Her creative process is shaped not only by scientific inquiry but also by personal and political experience, aimed at an audience of women readers seeking literary representations of their own lives. Her protagonists, often caught between public expectations and private desires, inhabit futuristic settings that nonetheless foreground emotionally and socially grounded conflicts. These speculative settings essentially serve as a device to reveal women's emotional world and conflicts in intimate relationships.

For example, Kim's story "Irretrievable" describes a technology that digitally stores the memories in a person's brain after they die. The story centers on a woman who, after becoming pregnant, accesses her mother's memory database. She seeks to truly understand her dead mother after realizing that she would have a child of her own; technology is simply what enables her to do this. Another one of her short stories, "Ulika pich'ŭi soktolo kal su ŏpstamyŏn [If we can't go at the speed of light]" envisions a future in which space travel is commonplace. Instead of moving to another planet with her husband and son, Anna stays on Earth to perfect the space-travel technology she has been working on. However, the technology that she has been working on is made obsolete by the discovery of a new, superior technology. Anna sets out for the planet to which her family has relocated, but she can only do so through outdated space-travel methods, meaning that she will perish by the time she reaches them. Nevertheless, Anna is determined to continue her journey to do so. Anna, who abandons her family for the sake of scientific achievement, is a very unusual mother figure in Korean literature as a whole.

Notably, the rise of feminist genre fiction has also been facilitated by a shift from author-centered to keyword-centered publishing models. These models prioritize

topical and thematic relevance, such as “women” and “genre” over traditional literary prestige. Through this new model, authors collaborate with producers to develop works that resonate with current social discourses in pursuit of cross-media adaptability. This trend destabilizes classical notions of the author as an autonomous creative genius, instead positioning the writer as an embedded cultural worker participating in a networked ecology of production, reception, and social engagement. Anthologies edited by feminist collectives have brought together women writers across genres and generations, de-emphasizing stylistic differences in favor of shared intersectional concerns. This has given way to a dynamic literary space in which feminist genre fiction functions not only as a form of narrative entertainment but also as a discursive platform for dialogue, solidarity, and critique.

Reconsidering the question of artistic autonomy is crucial to understanding this cultural shift. Hiroki Azuma offers a useful framework of “game-like realism”: in the era of “database consumption,” readers engage with modular narrative elements—character types, tropes, catchphrases—more than they do with cohesive plots or ideological narratives (Azuma 45-49). Genre, under this model, is no longer a way to structure meaning; it is a constellation of recognizable narrative units, especially characters, that enables affective identification (Azuma 96-101). This has important implications for feminist genre fiction. In lieu of unified ideological messages, these texts foster communities of feeling and recognition through character-based engagement and keyword-driven storytelling. Such narrative modes point to a reimagination of literary authorship. Writers no longer operate as sovereign creators; they are mere participants in collaborative networks attuned to the demands and desires of their readers. These shifts underscore a broader transformation in the political economy of literature, where feminist genre fiction is both a product and

critique of the digital, affective, and institutional conditions of contemporary cultural production.

The horror genre exemplifies this evolution. Previously confined to digital subcultures on account of limited readership, horror has risen in popularity in recent years, particularly via the publication of feminist horror anthologies such as *Uriga Tarŭn Kwishinŭl Pullŏonani* [For We Call Forth Other Ghosts] (2022). This crowdfunded project assembled emerging feminist horror writers and was explicitly framed as a challenge to the male-dominated conventions of the genre. Its curatorial vision emphasizes horror genre not as a space of victimization but of feminist subversion, centering female characters as agents of narrative and affective disruption. Curator and contributor Sŏ Kyesu outlined this anthology as a response to patriarchal constraints within genre fiction, arguing that the horror genre's grotesque and violent dimensions serves as a productive medium through which to express feminist critique with Korean society. Sŏ traces the aesthetic roots of feminist horror not to the. horror tradition itself, but to canonical Korean women writers—such as Oh Junghee's "Wangujŏm Yŏin" [The Toy Shop Woman] (1968), and Pak Wansuh's *Kŭ mant'ŏn shinganŭn nuga ta mŏgŏssŭlkka?* [*Who Ate Up All the Shinga?*]—which document women's internalization of misogyny and self-hatred. These texts, Sŏ suggests, represent a vital cultural legacy that feminist genre writers are now reclaiming and reactivating for contemporary readers.

For example, Sŏ Kyesu's short story "Mŏlitalrin yŏcha" [The Women with the Head] (2022) presents a radical imagination of contemporary feminist horror. This narrative allegorizes digital sexual violence and the surveillance of women through a speculative lens, highlighting how horror can serve as a potent medium for radical feminist critique. The story follows a protagonist experiencing a bizarre symptom: He

is unable to perceive people's heads. It is revealed that members of the online community who share illegally filmed videos of women exhibit this symptom. In those illegal pornographies, the filming technique framing the women's bodies without showing their faces is intended to keep the filmed subjects anonymous and obscure their identities, allowing the videos to be circulated online without detection. Ultimately, however, those responsible for such films meet their demise through supernatural consequences. This gory story not only depicts the realities of sexual and patriarchal violence but also engages in a radical rethinking of resistance and agency.

Conclusion

The gendered dynamics of Korean genre fiction—from its colonial origins to its role in the digital age—reveal a complex interplay between nationalism, modernity, and gender. While genre fiction has long been shaped by gendered assumptions, its evolution signals a shifting cultural and political landscape that opens possibilities for feminist reinterpretation. This chapter engages with these concerns by considering the growing significance of semiotic experience and proposing the concept of feminist genre as a cultural foundation for female subjectification in Korea. Through the innovative use of genre conventions, female writers invite readers to rethink the boundaries of feminist literature and its potential to inspire social change. Their works underscore the transformative power of storytelling as a tool for feminist critique and imagination, paving the way toward new directions in feminist literary studies. Genre fiction, in crossing national borders and media boundaries, has maintained formal consistency, functioning as a recognizable feminist marker for readers in circulation and distribution. Through women's shared cultural experiences and the pleasures of feminist

genre evolution, genre fiction has become increasingly important as a significant literary form for women's narratives.

The accomplishments of feminist genre fiction, however, largely remained confined to digital spaces, without significantly influencing decision-making processes in the public sphere. Women's desire to connect the act of reading literature with public communication—and to translate the feminist agendas embedded in literary imagination into broader social discourse—called for a movement beyond digital realms and into visible, tangible engagement with the public. The final chapter examines feminist bestsellers that expose the tensions and divergent perspectives surrounding contemporary feminism.

CHAPTER V

FEELING MISOGYNY:

KIM JIYOUNG, BORN 1982 AND EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS IN KOREAN FEMINIST LITERATURE

By analyzing the symbols of bookish girls and challenges of female genre writers, the previous chapters of this dissertation identified a sense of community and visibility among women within the literary sphere. Now, I turn this discussion toward the female reading public of the 2010s, detailing its presence in public spaces both on the street and online. Alongside the growing influence of popular feminism, gender has come to bear significant agency in shaping literary narratives. Female readers are not merely literary enthusiasts but also active feminist subjects who appropriate fiction, using it as a powerful vehicle to express their feminist ideas. Their engagement with texts extends beyond mere appreciation and serves a broader cultural and political function.

Introduction: Feeling as Cognition

Emotions have long played a central role in the construction of feminist meaning in literature. Traditionally, women's fiction has used emotion as a means of asserting moral superiority. For instance, sentimental novels portray female protagonists whose deep emotions—their sympathy, kindness, and suffering—are framed as evidence of their innate goodness and moral refinement. As Claudia Johnson explores in *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s* (1995), sentimentality relies on affective engagement, urging readers to empathize with the suffering of female characters and, by extension, marginalized individuals. Women's

collective emotional experiences have historically shaped the transformation of individual struggles into political movements, challenging social injustices.

However, the function of emotion in Korean women's literature underwent a dramatic shift in the 2010s. The overt display of emotion and sympathy for female characters is no longer the dominant strategy for portraying women's suffering or critiquing gender inequality. Contemporary feminist literature instead opts for emotional detachment and objective observation, techniques that were once considered antithetical to women's writing. This change mirrors a broader ideological shift in feminism from merely addressing sexism that justifies gender hierarchies to actively confronting misogyny aimed at controlling and punishing women who resist. As noted by feminist philosopher Kate Manne, misogyny aims to make women experience negative emotions (e.g., guilt) and to evoke negative public sentiments toward women.

In this new literary landscape, emotions have ceased to function as a weapon for women and have instead been weaponized against them. The gynocentric moral narrative—through which anger is directed at oppressive male authorities and sympathy is extended to victimized women—is often subverted by misogynists redirecting anger toward women who are perceived as working to strip men of their privileges. This rhetorical reversal is indicative of the broader political and cultural consequences of the emotional discourse in feminist literature.

This chapter examines this shift in emotion's function through an analysis of Cho Namju's novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (2016), a pivotal text that actively disrupts emotional identification with its protagonist and challenges the traditional role of sentimental literature in establishing suffering women's moral authority. Rather than relying on affective engagement, the novel's political impact lies in its

innovative literary strategies, which detach emotion from its fictional characters and prompt readers to consider new approaches to feminist praxis in their everyday lives.

The novel's departure from emotional identification suggests a broader skepticism toward the political efficacy of emotional socialization in feminist movements. By examining this shift, this chapter highlights how feminist literature in the 2010s has moved away from conventional emotional narratives toward a mode of storytelling that emphasizes cognition and historical consciousness. This shift aligns with Raymond Williams' notion of feeling, which diverges from emotion and affect. Williams describes feeling as a form of collective and historical experience—one that is less about personal emotional expression than it is about verbalization and political consciousness. In *Parables for the Virtual* (2002), Brian Massumi similarly distinguishes between emotion (which is structured and socially recognizable) and affect (which represents raw, unmediated experience). Emotion, according to Massumi, is a conventionalized and marketable form of affect, perception, and cognition. While perception here is the outcome of subjective interpretations of sensation, feeling, as Williams conceptualizes it, is responsible for fostering a new sense of communal identity. Feeling is cognition developed through the accumulation of perception on the level of communities. It mediates between the resistance of the structure and the subject. Williams describes the structure of feeling as "thought as felt and feeling as thought" (Williams 132). In other words, feeling emerges as an emotional manifestation of culture and consciousness—an aesthetic that operates and is captured within a structure as an already completed form and an experience occurring in the present.

The concept of feeling as a cognitive process has, since the 2000s, provided the basis for an important approach to reading society and culture in a political light.

From racism to misogyny—emotions as collective and political experiences expressed in the public sphere—scholarly discussions of public feelings have successfully read the political dynamics underlying everyday emotional experiences. A "Public Feelings" project, sometimes referred to as a feel tank, is one of the most outstanding scholarly interventions pertaining to the idea that thinking and feeling represent separate spheres. This interdisciplinary project, which brings feminist, queer, affect, and cultural scholars together to rethink emotions, critiques the rationalism behind traditional politics, arguing that affect shapes political life as much as ideas or policies do (Berlant 341). Instead of treating feelings as private and apolitical phenomena, the scholars partaking in this project (e.g., Ann Cvetkovich, Lauren Berlant, Kathleen Stewart, Heather Love) insist that affect is embedded in the structures of neoliberalism, racism, colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and late capitalism. Their efforts constitute a reframing of the sociological tradition of separating the private from the public. In this reframing, the role of negative emotions is reevaluated not as a medium for processing experiences that are not subsumed by the public but as a decisive register through which to determine what is public and position relationships in the public sphere. In positioning emotions as a central force for the mediation and organization of the private and public spheres, Sarah Ahmed represents another recurring scholarly figure in this chapter. Countering the traditional realm of emotions as private and therefore beyond the reach of the public sphere, Ahmed's concept of the emotional economy reframes emotions not as inherent or fixed to particular bodies, objects, or forms but rather as forces or movements that move, circulate, mediate, and organize relationships.

This chapter historically traces the point at which the emotional economy of feminism moves from anger to calmness. At the same time, it analyzes why the novel

Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982 played such an important role in women's emotional expression. Contemporary feminist literature, particularly in South Korea, has embraced the pragmatic importance of novels as a means of articulating this shift in the emotional economy of feminism. The emotional transition from anger to calmness signals mounting discontent with the traditional sentimental framework of women's literature and a search for new ways to engage with feminist politics.

To explore this shift, I begin by analyzing how feminist bestsellers were received in the 1990s and how the role of anger was reconstructed. I then examine the emotional economy around misogyny with a particular focus on hate speech in the post-2000s era. Furthermore, in addition to assessing the unconventional emotional strategies employed in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, I argue that the novel's simplistic and detached style is designed to reach a broad audience, meaning that its accessibility serves a distinct political purpose.

Taming Angry Feminists: Emotional Negotiation in 1990s Bestsellers

The 1990s marked a pivotal feminist turn in Korean literary history. This decade was marked not only by the flourishing of feminist fiction that critically interrogated patriarchal norms but also by the emergence of a strong backlash against these works. By examining the key tendencies of 1990s feminist fiction and the resistance that it provoked, I argue that the conflict surrounding feminist literature was shaped by the emotions of feminist characters within narratives.

The rise of feminist literature was supported to a significant degree by the empowerment of female readers. The rapid growth of the publishing industry—facilitated by liberalizing publishing laws, rising consumer purchasing power, and broader access to higher education—enabled feminist novels to reach a wide

audience. The bestselling status of contemporary women's fiction drew widespread attention and controversy, highlighting its cultural resonance and political stakes. Feminist discourse was garnering far greater public exposure than it had in the past, be it on bookstore displays or subway advertisements. These developments signaled a growing collective interest in feminism, particularly as it was articulated by female authors. Nevertheless, feminist books' cultural status was rarely matched by their sales. As argued by James English in *The Economy of Prestige*, the cultural power that grants art prestige is determined by the complex emotional and ideological investments that people make in art (English 3). Bestsellerdom is a site in which prestige and popularity are continually exchanged between symbolic and economic capital. The conflict between mass appeal and critical legitimacy impacted feminist literature, revealing how cultural hegemony sought to intervene in assessments of works in this category.

One of the most commonly employed tactics to disparage feminist literature has been to criticize its angry tone and emotions. Beginning in the late 1980s, stories of women becoming disillusioned with their unhappy home lives and opting for divorce started to gain prominence. Women's rising social and economic status during this period meant that stories of women becoming self-reliant after a divorce were no longer considered unrealistic. Nevertheless, divorce still had a severe negative impact on women's reputations, and women writers sensitively portrayed the anxiety that women experienced as they left the institution of marriage. Works such as Yi Kyŏngja's *Chŏlbanŭi shilp'ae* [The Half Failure] (1988) and *Hwanghorhan pallan* [An Ecstatic Rebellion] (1996),[36] Kong Chiyŏng's *Musoŭi ppulch'ŏrŏm honchasŏ*

[36] Yi Kyŏngja's *The Half Failure* consists of 12 stories centered on female characters who choose to divorce for a diverse range of reasons. *An Ecstatic Rebellion* portrays a woman who indulges in a passionate affair after being married to her college sweetheart for ten years.

kala [Go Alone like the Horns of a Moose] (1993), and Kim Hyŏngkyŏng's *Sewŏl* [The Time and Tide] (1995) are representative of the coming-of-age narratives centered on women's self-reliance and escape from exploitative relationships.

What distinguished these works of fiction from previous novels on female suffering is the emotional shift. Instead of resignation or sorrow, female characters in these novels often exhibited anger, prompting them to fight back against mistreatment and commit to decisive actions, such as divorce. Feminist fiction during this period no longer portrayed women as victims in passive lamentation, instead opting for direct critiques of gendered oppression. These stories brought women's anger into the public sphere, disrupting deeply embedded gendered norms that associated femininity with emotional containment and moral gentleness. Emotion was reimagined as a site of resistance, with anger positioned as a means of clarifying, confronting, and transforming the conditions of women's suffering. Anger came to represent a rational and justified response to systemic injustice, echoing Audre Lorde's argument in her essay "The Uses of Anger" (1981), in which she reframes anger as a generative force for political awareness and change. Lorde writes, "Anger has eaten clefts into my living only when it remained unspoken, useless to anyone" (Lorde 131).

The backlash against feminist fiction, unsurprisingly, often centered on discomfort with women's public expressions of anger. Patriarchal norms have long associated femininity with emotional restraint, nurturance, and passivity. Feminist anger is quickly dismissed as irrational or divisive, with the overly emotional feminist stereotype often being used to delegitimize women's responses to injustice. The contestation over women's anger in the 1990s was reflected in two prominent bestsellers in this period: Yi Munyŏl's *Sŏnt'aek* [The Choice] (1997) and Yang Kwija's *Nanŭn somanghanda naege kŭmjidoen kŏsŭl* [I Wish for What Is Forbidden

to Me] (1992). These two novels initially appear divergent: *The Choice* centers on an embodiment of the "good wife, wise mother" delivered in the mode of a historical novel, while Yang's novel appropriates tropes of the crime novel to follow a radical feminist's thought process with regard to gender issues. Due to the works' distinct characterization and narrative modes, the two novels have never been considered alongside each other in an academic discussion. Nevertheless, I suggest that the two share a common framework when it comes to the moral evaluation of emotion. Both works valorize empathy while casting anger as socially destructive**.**

In *The Choice*, the protagonist *Changssi puin* (Lady Chang) exhibits remarkable artistic and scholarly abilities. However, at 19, she assumes the household responsibilities on behalf of her ill mother, understanding the significance of a woman's role within the home. Ultimately, she decides to forgo her academic ambitions for a rewarding life as a wife and mother, discovering profound fulfillment in "sustaining this world as a wife and preparing the next as a mother" (M. Yi 60; translation is mine). Yi, who based Lady Chang on his own seventeenth-century ancestor Chang Kyehyang, has stated that he penned this novel to encourage housewives feeling overshadowed by the achievements of career-oriented women (Yi Munyŏl et al. 1997). The controversy around *The Choice* arose not from its content but from Lady Chang's comments aimed at twentieth-century feminists. In a well-known passage, Lady Chang critiques feminist perspectives for wearing their divorce records like a badge of honor and exposing men's hypocrisy, self-interest, violence, and authoritarianism (M. Yi 9). This excerpt also features pointed criticisms of contemporary feminist authors like Yi Kyŏngja and Gong Jiyoung, who proclaim that divorce is a "half success" and that adultery should be glorified as "ecstatic rebellion" (Yi 9). When feminists offered critiques of this segment, Yi responded by

admonishing them for their emotional reactions, arguing against what he perceives to be misguided responses from feminists, particularly when it comes to their inclination to provoke, dispute, and follow trends. Consequently, he feels insulted to be compared to feminist critics and authors.

In *I Wish for What is Forbidden to Me*, Yang Kwija also implies that feminists' anger and radicalism are inappropriate. This novel depicts a crime driven by the misandry of a radical feminist named Minju—a young female graduate who has inherited her mother's wealth—whom the narrative follows. As Minju does not need to earn a living, she volunteers at a domestic violence counseling center. While aiding housewives suffering abuse from spousal abuse, she experiences intense anger. She believes that for women to escape unhappiness in marriage, they must discard the romanticized notion that marriage guarantees a joyful life, concluding that women's dreams of a blissful marriage are largely shaped by mass media. As a result, she plans to abduct a male actor who supposedly perpetuates these media-driven fantasies. Sŭngha, an actor celebrated for his portrayal of a loving husband and devoted father, is her target. Minju hopes to reveal his true self, always hidden beneath the mask made by the mass media, shattering women's illusions and making them face the ugly side of patriarchy. Contrary to her expectations, Minju discovers that Sŭngha genuinely cares for his family and, having witnessed the struggles of lower-class women throughout his impoverished upbringing, has profound empathy for female victims of patriarchal oppression. Literary scholar Lee Hye-Ryoung notes that Sŭngha is depicted through emotions traditionally associated with femininity, such as empathy, sorrow, and gentleness, thereby adopting the moral position typically attributed to women in classic sentimental novels (H. Lee "Ŏnŭ p'eminisŭt'ŭ pŏmjoe sŏsaŭi tillema." 251). This novel not only overturns traditional gender roles associated

with moral virtue and domestic life but also upholds conventional emotional standards, revealing a negative perspective on aggressive feelings. Minju's feminist perspective is rooted in her anger:

> The legal system has certainly improved over what it used to be, but the law has the weakness of not being able to reflect human emotion. What could be more emotional than the question of women and men? No perfect law can compensate for a woman's suffering so long as society's ruling system favors men. (Yang 220; translation is mine)

Ultimately, Minju's tragic death highlights the severe consequences of her aggressive emotions. She is killed by Namki, the thug who helped her to abduct Sŭngha before exhibiting possessive feelings toward her. The novel depicts Minju's anger and Namki's intense emotions as equally perilous. Although the story is narrated from Minju's perspective, it ultimately underscores the detrimental nature of feminists' emotional responses.

The emotional politics behind South Korean feminist fiction in the 1990s reveal a profound struggle over who has the authority to feel, express, and politicize anger. Feminist writers reclaimed anger not as a symptom of irrationality but as a powerful response to structural gendered violence. The backlash that they provoked—as evident in the dismissive responses of male authors like Yi Munyŏl or the narrative containment seen in Yang Kwija's novel—demonstrates the extent to which public expressions of feminist anger were perceived as threats to established moral hierarchies. This conflict over emotion was not merely a symbolic one; it was central to the negotiation of gendered authority in the public sphere. As feminist literature challenged dominant emotional structure, it exposed the mechanisms through which cultural legitimacy is granted or withheld. That is to say, 1990s feminist fiction not

only challenged gender norms but also reshaped the emotional terrain of literary and social discourse.

As this study transitions into the 2000s and beyond, it moves to the afterlives of these emotional tropes. The figure of the angry woman, once pathologized, has come to constitute a way for women to reclaim their anger as a rational and politicized response. At the same time, anger has come to be repurposed by men who articulate perceived grievances amid a changing gender order. Tracing how feminist and anti-feminist narratives reframe and appropriate anger enables us to understand how emotion continues to structure gender politics in South Korea.

Fighting Hate Speech: The Emotional Economy of Misogyny in Post-2000s South Korea

The phrase *"Yŏsŏngŭi punnorŭl hyŏmoro waegok'aji mara"* ("Do not distort women's anger as hatred") became one of the most widely recognized slogans during the 2018 Hyehwa Station Protests criticizing the gender biases of the criminal justice system.[37] Through this phrase, feminist demonstrators emphasized that their

[37] Hyehwa Station protests were initiated in response to a perception of institutional bias within the criminal justice system—particularly the belief that crimes against men were investigated and prosecuted with greater urgency than those committed against women. In 2018, a female student who secretly photographed a male model nude during an art class was arrested and made to stand in the photo line, as is customary for felons and social troublemakers in South Korea. Many women compared this to situations where men who commit the same offense are rarely punished, rating this case as an instance of excessive punishment levied against women for violating gender norms. To demand that criminal instances of hidden-camera voyeurism against women be dealt with more swiftly and stringently, women organized the largest women-only rallies ever seen (as of 2025). While it is difficult to generalize the views of all protest participants, the organizers—known as "Pulp'yŏnhan chinshil" [An Uncomfortable Truth]—made it clear that their goal was to end gender bias in the investigation of hidden-camera voyeurism. See Kang et al., especially pages 7–9.

emotional expression should be recognized as legitimate anger instead of being dismissed as irrational hatred. As Marcha Nusbaum puts it, anger is the emotion associated with social justice, as the target of anger is a wrongful act; other negative reactive attitudes, on the other hand, such as disgust, hatred, contempt, and envy, target other people, putting the focus on an enduring trait of an individual (Nussbaum 48). The distinction between anger and hatred captures one of the most important topics in the feminist movement of the 2010s: emotional accountability. Feminist subjects have felt increasingly obligated to distinguish between their emotions and their feelings, expressing them in a proper manner to counter the emotional economy of misogyny, which usually aims to foster irrational hatred toward women.

By the 2010s, misogyny had become increasingly visible in both digital and physical public spaces. Sociological analyses of misogyny frequently trace its origins to the disruption of traditional gendered divisions of labor under neoliberal economic restructuring. In South Korea, scholars of gender studies widely agree that men's perceived sense of crisis and inferiority was exacerbated by direct competition with women in the labor market, fueling misogynistic sentiment. Public expressions of emotion—especially anger—have been dominated by male voices in the post-IMF era. Amid the economic instability and job insecurity of the 2000s, male anxiety over the erosion of gendered privilege found expression in a growing corpus of misogynistic discourse and cultural practices.

One vivid example of this discursive trend is the proliferation of hate speech involving the suffix *-nyŏ* (-girl), as seen in terms such as *toenjang-nyŏ* (bean paste girl), *kimch'i-nyŏ* (kimchi girl), and *kaettong-nyŏ* (dog poop girl). These neologisms served to stigmatize women who transgress gender norms by consuming luxuries, asserting themselves in public, or otherwise defying traditional expectations. Feminist

literary scholar Yi Myŏngho argues that these expressions strategically evoke unpleasant odors, functioning as affective strategies while encapsulating men's concurrent fear and desire toward women who challenge male privilege. The metaphorical language of contamination and moral decay renders women abject, reinforcing gendered hierarchies through affective semiotics (Myŏngho Yi 384).

Feminist literary scholar Kwŏn Myŏnga identifies strong resistance against hate speech, particularly through critiques of sexism in cultural products, as a key feature of the South Korean feminist movement of the 2010s (M. Kwŏn 45). Central to this project have been the denunciation of female stereotypes in mass media and efforts to foster a societal consensus against expressions of misogyny. This emphasis on the emotional economy reflects a broader transformation within gender politics. Emotions are increasingly being recognized not only as personal experiences but also as matters of political and social consequence. Conventional emotional narratives, in which emotions convey moral legitimacy from a position of victimhood, have been appropriated by male subjects who perceive themselves to be economically marginalized under neoliberalism. This shift has necessitated a redefinition of the political functions of emotions. In turn, the feminist movement has sought to more sensitively observe the operation and symbolic function of affect to ensure that gender issues are not misrepresented through emotional misreading. While consistently confronting and analyzing sexism as both a social and cultural structure of oppression, feminists have increasingly begun to view the emotional economy as a point of priority. In the social space of the internet, women have learned to actively and immediately respond to misogyny, and these responses have since become the hallmark of the feminist movement. This strategic shift represented a pivotal moment

in the movement's transformation from elite-centered theoretical discussions to women-centered mass activism.

The feminist response to misogyny gained significant public momentum following the 2016 Gangnam Station murder case, in which a man murdered a woman in a public restroom, later stating that his motive was simply her gender. The incident catalyzed a widespread recognition of misogynistic violence, sparking large gatherings at Gangnam Station. These gatherings, initially framed as vigils, soon evolved into public demonstrations of feminist solidarity. The phrase “yŏjarasŏ chugŏtta” (“She died because she was a woman”) became a powerful rallying cry, underscoring a shift in the feminist understanding of gendered violence as indiscriminate and systemic rather than individually motivated. This reflected women’s critical awareness of the limitations of discussing misogyny solely in the private realm. Since the late 1990s, the rise of online misogyny—especially in male-dominated spaces—has frequently been dismissed as mere humor or justified as a matter of individual free speech. However, the Gangnam Station murder revealed the potential real-world implications of digital misogyny. Feminists began to frame misogyny not just as a threat to their dignity but as a material threat to their safety and survival. As Nussbaum puts it, the multitude of daily transactions that each one of us has with individuals and social groups fosters a lot of negative emotions, but its consequences are generally considered to be limited to reputation—even though far more serious consequences, including rape, murder, and other grave outcomes, are possible (Nussbaum 7).

Following the initial memorial rally for the murder at Gangnam Station, which highlighted the hatred present in masculine culture, feminist activists sought to redefine the emotional framework of political dialogue by clarifying the distinction

between anger and hatred. The protest slogan from Hyehwa Station framed anger as a rational and moral reaction to systemic injustice, whereas hatred was seen as dehumanizing and targeted at essentialized collective identities. By making this distinction, feminist protestors sought to reshape emotional expression and transform the larger emotional and symbolic landscape of Korean civil society. This marked a departure from earlier feminist strategies, which prioritized the identification of institutional sources of oppression. Feminists of the 2010s redirected their critiques toward male entitlement and the cultural reproduction of gender hierarchies, foregrounding the emotional and symbolic dimensions of misogyny. In doing so, they articulated a novel mode of feminist politics rooted in affective analysis and collective emotional reconfiguration. As literary scholar Lee Hye-Ryoung puts it, the new generation of Korean feminism that kicked off in the 2010s is marked by the desire to be a writing subject (H. Lee "Bright Constellation" 219).

Cho Namju's 2016 novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* has become a touchstone in this new brand of affective politics. By the end of 2020, it had sold over a million copies in South Korea and 300 thousand internationally. Many women used the hashtag "[Name], Born [Year]" to express solidarity with the protagonist and proclaim their feminist identities in the face of public backlash. While *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* centers on a single woman's experiences, its resonance transcends individual narrative, echoing across generational lines from those newly awakening to systemic inequality to those who have long been acquainted with its quiet endurance. Women in different cohorts (e.g., life stage, marital status) have revealed how this novel reflects the gendered constraints that they are forced to confront in their lives. As remarked by Jiyoung, the novel's main protagonist, "the world had changed a great deal, but the little rules, contracts, and customs had not, which meant the world

hadn't actually changed at all" (160). The novel exposes how systemic misogyny persists despite superficial progress, emphasizing the need to analyze gendered oppression at the structural and cultural levels.

The narrative begins with the protagonist exhibiting dissociative symptoms, speaking as though she were other people, including her deceased mother and her friend who had died in childbirth. These symptoms prompted her to undergo psychiatric counseling, during which the novel reconstructs her life through episodes of gendered trauma. A particularly salient moment involves Jiyoung overhearing office workers at a park describing stay-at-home mothers with the slur *mum-roaches*. This term, which compares mothers to pests, embodies a new form of misogyny in which women who appear economically dependent are deemed as socially parasitic:

> Jiwon was asleep with a long, clear drool hanging off the corner of her mouth, and Jiyoung enjoyed coffee in the park for the first time in a long while. On the next bench over was a group of office workers drinking coffee from the same café. They looked to be around Jiyoung's age. Knowing how tired, frustrated and exhausted they must be, she still couldn't help [but look] at them enviously. One of the guys on the bench glanced over at Jiyoung and whispered something to his colleagues. Jiyoung couldn't make out every word, but she could hear bits and pieces of their conversation: I wish I could live off my husband's paycheque … bum around and get coffee … **mum-roaches** got it real cushy … no way I'm marrying a Korean woman. (177; emphasis added)

The term "mum-roaches" comes from the Korean word *mamchung*, a neologism that combines *mam*, the transliteration of the English word *mom*, with the suffix *-chung*, meaning roaches. This expression has come to be widely used to convey disdain for

women viewed as economically dependent. In this context, the everyday experiences of stay-at-home mothers are framed as unproductive and exploitative. The term reflects a biased view of gender roles in labor, suggesting that men bear the burden of providing financially for their families while women are relegated to dependent positions, neglecting their own responsibilities.

Unlike earlier hate speech suffixed with *-nyŏ*, which targeted women for perceived individual transgressions, the *-ch'ung* [roach] neologisms of the 2010s signaled a shift toward collective stigmatization. These expressions indict entire communities as exploitative, parasitic, and undeserving of a public voice. As Michelle Cho and Jesook Song point out, the figure of the human bug, conveyed through rhetorical shorthand (e.g., female "mum ch'ung" in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, lower-class "kisaeng ch'ung" [parasite] in Bong Joon Ho's film *Parasite*), connotes that the default human subject in South Korea is a productive male citizen-subject—and that all others are sub-human (Cho and Song 2). The suffix *-ch'ung* is used with neutral objects to convey negative feelings and judgments towards a specific group. By comparing a group of people's lifestyles with roaches, this hate speech criticizes their narrow-mindedness and their failure to acknowledge the world beyond their own small confines. It also implies greed among those who exploit the system without contributing anything in return. These self-satisfied individuals take advantage of others while producing nothing of value. Their actions come at the cost of those who genuinely contribute to the system's upkeep.

Such hate speech aims to degrade the social status of newcomers in the public arena and question their right to voice opinions. The emergence of the term mum-roaches coincided with the increasing political visibility of young mothers during the 2008 candlelight protests. The symbolic threat that these women posed to entrenched

gender roles by appearing in public, with children, and as political actors contributed to the use of derogatory language aimed at silencing and marginalizing them. Traditionally, young married women in Korea were associated with docile femininity and cultural conformity.[38] However, in the 2000s, the term *mam* (mom)—which initially emerged as a neutral descriptor of young mothers—evolved into a political identity through online forums and public protests. Literary critic Yi Inyŏng interprets the visibility of so-called *yumoch'a pudae* (stroller troops) as a moment that disrupted the assumption of maternal political neutrality. They gathered at Kwanghwamun with their children in strollers to physically represent the neutral, non-violent cultural connotations of mothers (I. Yi 3034).

As argued by sociologist Ku Chahyŏk, this trend of politicizing domesticity prompted the initiation of a new civic politics. Prior to this, politics was an outside affair in which the male head of the household left his spouse and children at home to join other men and discuss big things like the nation, the state, reform, and revolution (C. Ku 157).

This development illustrates how the symbolic status of women in the public sphere became more contested. The reorganization of domestic and public boundaries was not matched by a corresponding redistribution of political and economic power within the household. Thus, as a form of backlash against these politically mobilized mothers, efforts were mobilized to retain the masculine monopolies over the public sphere. These efforts were accompanied by misogynistic language, with new terms

[38] Young housewives—*saedaek* (a new bride)—were cultural signifiers of conformist, naïve femininity with a degree of distance from the cultural connotation of economic snobbery carried by the term *ajumma* (auntie) for middle-aged married women. They were seen as compliant with the gender division of labor and avoidant of expressing political opinions. In the 2000s, the value-neutral term *mam* (mom) arose to refer to young mothers. Distinct from *saedaek*, *mam* encompasses a new generation of young mothers upholding an urban lifestyle centered on a conjugal family.

like *mam-ch'ung* emerging in the 2010sm indicating foundational anxiety over the erosion of male dominance in both the economic and political spheres.

Ultimately, the South Korean feminist movement in the 2010s was characterized by a foundational reconfiguration of the emotional terrain of politics. Feminist activists and writers have redefined the role of emotion—most notably anger—as a legitimate and politically potent response to structural injustice, and this re-articulation of affect has not only exposed the symbolic mechanisms that sustain gender hierarchies but also mobilized new forms of collective agency among historically marginalized groups, such as young mothers. By confronting the emotional economy undergirding misogynistic speech and practice, contemporary Korean feminism has carved out a novel and powerful space for resistance within civil society. This evolution reflects a broader transformation in the emotional economy of feminism—one that redefines the targets of affect and demands an ethical reassessment of who gets to feel, express, and be heard within civil society.

The Trap of Emotion: Anger in Intimate Relationships

When Jiyoung is called a mum-roach in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, she feels "shocked and mortified" (178). Hatred is often levied intentionally to cause shame in whoever is on the receiving end. Hateful language forces the receiver to recognize how their bodies are read and judged by society. Shame, in this context, is an effect *produced by words*—a residue of the hatred embedded in language. Kate Manne says that "misogynistic attacks frequently instill a sense of shame in their victims, partially via disgust-based "smearing" mechanisms (Manne 12). Manne asserts that shaming carries social meaning, as it aims to sever the sightlines between the self and the other. The shame felt by victims of misogyny manifests as an effort to hide or flee

from exposure (121). The shaming induced by misogynistic speech represents one of the most effective means of excluding women from public spaces, as it prompts them to perceive themselves as not aligned with the norms of the community.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed discusses shame as a complex and potentially transformative emotion. She asserts that shame is produced when subjects fail "to live up to a social ideal"(Ahmed 106). Insisting that emotions are flexible rather than fixed, Ahmed argues that shame is not inherently negative or paralyzing; it can have a positive political function when it prompts self-reflection and a reorientation of one's relationship with others. More specifically, shame exposes a gap between the self and an ideal. When someone feels shame, they realize that they have failed to live up to a norm or value with which they identify. In this way, shame can foster ethical responsiveness, pushing individuals or groups to acknowledge harm, realign themselves with communal values, and take responsibility for their actions. Ahmed emphasizes that shame is relational. It happens in the presence of others or in the imagined eyes of others; thus, it can bind individuals to a community or cause. However, such a dynamic is only possible when shame does not lead one to withdrawal or self-destruction but instead guides them toward action, repair, and connection.

In intimate relationships, however, failure to meet others' expectations often arouses a different emotion: guilt. Women frequently feel guilty in intimate relationships, especially when they feel anger. This emotional restriction stems from the overlapping and conflicting demands of the intimate and political realms. In *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, Jiyoung's relationship with her husband Daehyun exemplifies this dilemma. After being urged by her in-laws to have a child, Jiyoung tries to

express her frustration, but Daehyun's swift apology and change in attitude invalidate her emotions:

> "I thought about it all the way back, and I think I should defend you when my family's being unfair to you. Because I'm more comfortable with them than you are. When we're with your family, you speak on my behalf, too. How about that? I apologise for what happened today. I'm sorry."
>
> Due to Daehyun's sudden change of attitude, Jiyoung could no longer express her anger at him. She meekly accepted his apology, as if she'd done something wrong. (121–122)

After the conversation, Jiyoung is left feeling guilty, as though she were at fault for expressing herself. This moment reflects how women are socialized to suppress their anger for the sake of preserving emotional harmony—even at the cost of their own desire. Daehyun's attempt to mediate between his wife and their families, while seemingly well-intentioned, further burdens Jiyoung. His belief that her self-expression could jeopardize f 죄 amilial relationships highlights how even supportive gestures can reinforce emotional silencing. Women are often positioned as emotional mediators within families, expected to shoulder the burden of maintaining peace.

Jiyoung's guilt is emblematic of the emotional traps that women face. As observed by philosopher Martha Nussbaum, ruptured intimate relationships strike at the core of identity; thus, the pain may not be resolved easily through legal or public means.[39] The personal, internal nature of these conflicts makes them resistant to

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[39] Martha Nussbaum identifies four key features of intimate relationships. First, intimate relationships are deeply intertwined with a person's happiness and sense of flourishing (eudaimonia). They shape people's life goals and pursuits, so their rupture gives way to widespread disruption. Second, these relationships involve a deep level of trust that goes

rational resolution (94). Jiyoung's psychological deterioration is thus not merely a matter of individual pathology; it is a symptom of deeper structural tension.

The novel traces Jiyoung's life from childhood to motherhood, revealing how deeply women are conditioned to sacrifice their personal desires for familial duty. The emotional economy of guilt and self-effacement is normalized, whether through caring for siblings or giving up dreams to avoid burdening their parents. Intimacy, in this context, becomes a space in which inequality festers under the guise of love and duty. Lauren Berlant's discussions of intimacy offer further insight. Berlant notes that intimacy is not distinct from the public sphere but rather deeply entangled with it. Intimacy is set within zones of familiarity and comfort, such as friendship, the couple, and the family form. These relationships, despite appearing personal, are hoped to endure over long periods of time, perhaps even over multiple generations. Consequently, their internal nature encompasses a public aspect linked to the desire for the formation of societal structures (281). The problem is that these worlds constructed upon intimacy are unstable, constantly haunted by ambivalence and disappointment. Despite widespread confusion over how to "do" intimacy, people cling to its promises even amid their collapse.

Jiyoung's attachment to her family and the emotional demands imposed on her lead to her mental fragmentation. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's concept of love as a social expectation, we can see how departure from intimate relationships can result

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beyond mere reliance. "Trust" here means opening oneself up to the risk of betrayal and living with a certain degree of emotional vulnerability. Third, when such relationships break down, the emotional harm is so personal and internal that legal systems cannot fully address it. This damage often leads to a feeling of helplessness that may be masked with anger. Fourth, intimate bonds often entail genuine affection or fondness—even after harm. This enduring connection can make betrayal more painful, but it also leaves space for healing, understanding, or the rebuilding of the relationship (Nusbaum 93–95).

not only in personal loss but also in a crisis of selfhood. Jiyoung's disorder functions as a literary device to depict this condition. Whether her apparent possessions are supernatural or psychological in nature remains ambiguous, as the novel withholds Jiyoung's inner perspective. The important factor here is the fact that Jiyoung is unaware of her symptoms, allowing her to maintain a degree of emotional detachment and avoid potential relational breakdowns or feelings of guilt. By creating a pathological separation between her body and her emotions, Jiyoung acquires a level of emotional distance from others. This detachment ultimately frees her from any guilt about addressing her situation. For example, in a scenario where she struggles to meet her mother-in-law's expectations as a daughter-in-law, Jiyoung becomes her own mother and criticizes her mother-in-law for not treating her daughter well as a guest. In these moments when she acts like someone else, she betrays expectations, freeing herself from the emotional burden and negative reactive attitudes that she would otherwise experience.

The novel presents intimacy not as a refuge but as the site of Jiyoung's oppression. Jiyoung finds herself isolated, particularly when it comes to issues like childcare. She feels confusion over the controversial expectations levied on her with regard to motherhood. As she says to her husband, "I suffered deathly pain having our child. My routine, my career, my dreams, my entire life, my self—I gave it all up to raise our child. And I've become vermin. What do I do now?" (177). Despite giving up her "self" to meet the expectations of her family and society, she is not being recognized in the way she thought she would be. This sense of confusion is an emotional experience shared by women across countless cohorts. Women are expected to fulfill multiple—often contradictory—gender roles simultaneously and feel unable to fulfill them.

The intervention of a female collective is essential not just for the sake of empathy but also to navigate the unspoken rules of intimate relationships without the need for guilt or to sever valued bonds. This literary strategy reveals that Jiyoung's emotions are not isolated or abnormal. Rather, they are part of a broader, historical "structure of feeling." As Raymond Williams argues, the structure of feeling of any era is shaped by generational change. The emotional tone of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* shifts exhibits a shift from public anger to private apathy, reflecting the rise of a generation of feminists disillusioned by the limits of intimacy as a vehicle for liberation. The novel gives voice to a collective condition by transforming Jiyoung's private confusion into a shared cultural understanding. Her story reveals how systemic misogyny distorts women's emotional lives, making it difficult for them to even know what they themselves feel.

The Utility of Literature as a Cognitive Language

Martha Nussbaum argues that literature serves as an essential nutrient for our humanity. For her, literature nourishes us by cultivating empathy and exercising our moral imagination. Nussbaum suggests that empathy is not merely an innate trait but a practice through which we develop the capacity to engage with stories that challenge our perspectives. Literature enables us to inhabit the experiences of others, making it increasingly difficult to dehumanize those different from ourselves as "disgusting" or "subhuman."

The emotional landscape portrayed in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, however, offers a doubtful perspective on moral praxis. Although the male narrator—who serves as Jiyoung's psychiatrist in the context of the narrative—exhibits empathy toward her story and critiques the systemic gender inequality in Korean society, he

ultimately betrays readers' expectations that his understanding of Jiyoung's struggle would lead to tangible changes in his behavior when it came to gender issues. By the end of the narrative, the psychiatrist decides against hiring female workers, as they could require maternity leave at some point in the future. This conclusion underscores the notion that neither empathy nor the accumulation of objective knowledge can give way to real-world change.

The novel's conclusion showcases *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*'s strategies for deconstructing the conventional role of emotion. While referencing factual elements and logical analysis, the novel intentionally avoids an elaborate portrayal of the emotions experienced by Jiyoung and other women. This avoidance of an overt display of emotion—embodied in the novel's understated prose—resonates with female readers who are skeptical of traditional emotional narratives, contributing to the book's popularity. In fact, many female readers have reported that their lives were transformed after engaging with the novel, as it inspired them to share their own experiences of sexism in a similar voice. This utility is exemplified through the novel's distinctive use of disaffected, naturalistic language. Instead of dramatizing gender conflict, the novel offers feminist commentary through the grounded, everyday dialogue of its female characters.

Notably, the literary style of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* has sparked debate over its classification as "serious" literature within the Korean literary establishment. The reluctance to recognize *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* as such highlights a broader disconnect between women's lived experiences and the conventional standards of literary form. Cho Namju, the author behind the novel, has shared that the original manuscript leaned more toward a sociological tone than fiction. Choosing a report-

style format to reflect the generational history of women like Jiyoung, Cho initially struggled to get her work accepted as a novel. In one interview, she explained:

> If I had studied literature for a long time, I might have had many concerns or expectations about my writing … After it was published, I became worried. Readers might find my book too different from other novels. It might not even be clear if it is a novel or not. My editor advised me to expand on the epilogue, so I added the story of the psychiatrist's wife to make the ending more substantial. (S. Kim 102; translation is mine)

To embody this experience and feeling, the language in this novel does not adopt a novelistic, emotional style, instead employing colloquial, everyday language. *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* resonates with female readers because it is the story of an ordinary woman—and this ordinariness is paradoxically cited as a flaw when it comes to its recognition as *literature*. In fact, the critiques of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* emphasize that the banal style of her writing fails to express unique observations and interpretations of the world. The incoherent perspectives throughout the novel also gave way to compelling critiques of its literary quality. Although Jiyoung's psychiatrist narrates the main story, different perspectives often intervene. In the quotation below, for example, the perspective of the psychiatrist (which conveys what he hears from Jiyoung) mingles with both the omniscient third-person perspective, which interprets the situation based on a sociological reference:

> She had looked around the office one day and realised that there were no women above a certain pay grade. … She couldn't picture herself at the company ten years down the road and resigned after some thought. Her boss grumbled, "This is why we don't hire women." She replied, "Women don't stay because you make it impossible for us to stay."

> The percentage of female employees who use maternity leave has increased from 20 per cent in 2003 to more than half in 2009 … The percentage of female managers has also increased steadily but slowly from 10.22 per cent in 2006 to 18.37 per cent in 2014, but it's not even two out of ten yet.
>
> "So what's she up to now?"
>
> "She passed the law exam last year. The college hung a banner, people were so excited. Did you see it? She was the first from our college in many years." (212)

Literary critic Cho Kangsŏk claims that this intermingling of different perspectives is indicative of a lack of coherence and, in turn, a flaw in the plot. Cho Kangsŏk also asserts that Cho Namju sacrifices the perfection of a novel to convey a political message, drawing on Jacques Rancière's three forms of aesthetic representation from *Politics of Aesthetic* to make this point: the ethical regime of images, the representative regime of images, and the aesthetic regime of images. Put simply, the ethical regime of images aims for truthfulness—for the accurate representation of an ideal model of objects. The representative regime of images values "concordance between a form of intellectual determination and a form of sensory appropriation" (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*). Finally, the aesthetic regime is the sense of a structure that reframes the very forms of our experience. Based on this conceptualization, Cho Kangsŏk suggests that *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* belongs to the representative regime, as the novel aims to circulate facts and messages with political intent. In criticizing the defects of the unelaborated

narrative structure and unfocused details, the flaw that Cho Kangsŏk points to is the lack of individual style on the part of Cho Namju.

However, we must observe here that Rancière never limited the aesthetic of literature to the value of written styles. Rather, he contended that modern literature represented a new regime of writing to replace classicism, which itself prioritized rhetoric and *belle-letter*. Style served as a means of ensuring equal literacy for anybody to read and write "without a father to guide" (Rancière, "The Politics of Literature" 14). Rancière dubs this democratic notion of literature as "literariness." His emphasis on the revolutionary feature of nineteenth-century literature is a continuation of Barthes' idea from *Writing Degree Zero*. Nevertheless, the concept of literariness suggested by Rancière is distinct from 'Barthes', in which all social implication disappears except for the matter of style, which is prioritized. Rancière is less interested in revolution in language. Instead, he focuses on the matter of the subject in literature. He asserts that politics is based on the common human capacity to speak but that this capacity is not fully employed due to the power dynamics inherent in language (Rancière, Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus 2)Thus, Rancière suggests that the politics of literature stem from the disorder produced by literariness, as the ability of literariness upsets "not only the hierarchies of the representational system but also any principle of adequation between a way of being and a way of speaking" (Rancière, "The Politics of Literature" 20). Rancière's concept of political dissensus emphasizes this democratic practice to dismantle the hierachy in language.

Rancière's refocus on the matter of power and subject in literature provides a valuable framework through which to consider the paradoxical relationship between women and their expression in literature. His concept of dissensus entails the matter

of identification, in which "the conflict [is] about what an 'interest' is, the struggle between those who set themselves as able to manage social interests and those who are supposed to be only able to reproduce their life" (Rancière, *Reading Rancière*). The dissensus produced by feminist literature may refer to women's challenges to the hierarchies of the representational system or the emergence of new female subjects who want to differentiate themselves from other groups. In competition with existing art regimes, feminist literature must directly confront the matter of how to best identify itself as a common group.

While Rancière focuses on "class war" in his writing, he pays no mind to the heterogeneity of the working class. Diversity among women, however, is one of the most significant issues in contemporary feminist discourse. As argued above, the emerging feminist readership is looking closely at hierarchies among women in which the aristocratic language of academic feminism has often marginalized ordinary women from reading and writing. As Toril Moi points out in her critique of French school feminism, the emphasis on the problems of textual, linguistic, semiotic, or psychoanalytic theory entails a willingness to accept the established patriarchal canon and fails to challenge the oppressive social and political strategies of the literary institution (Moi 97). The dissensus of feminist literature must therefore be aware of the power dynamics among women that are generated by women's varying degrees of literacy. Otherwise, it may end up once again relocating feminist literature within the male-centered literary establishment.

This leads to the following question: What is the best way to ensure women's literariness that ensures all female subjects hold an equal ability to express their own experiences and interests? In feminist literary theories, one way to undermine the division between "high" and "low" entails exploring the aesthetics of everyday life.

The power and beauty of ordinary language in female writers' texts were acknowledged by literary criticism of Black feminist literature, such as the works of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Observing the function of everyday language can give way to strong bonds of kinship among female characters, especially when it comes to intergenerational relationships. Black feminist literary criticism has developed a framework through which to reconsider the origin of creativity in women's writing as the desire to dismantle the existing social belongings of class or education and to restore kinship among women.

As noted by Rita Felski, the prevailing allegory of women's writing in English literature presumes women's self-expression to be a creative act carried out by an isolated individual, whereas Black feminist literature has crafted an imagination of women's writing that reproduces "a traditional, communal, and noncommodified relationship (80)" between women through everyday language. This focus on everyday language reevaluates oral speech in literature as a popular form in which all women can make equal communication free from social belongings and, most notably, regardless of educational level. Language facilitates "a particular form of kinship between speaker and listener" (Felski 82), restoring the link between women (Felski 80–82).

The function of everyday language in Black feminist literature has generally been devoted to intergenerational relationships, though it has more recently been expanded to quasi-familial relationships, such as friendships. However, a common everyday language is not necessarily developed within every intimate and private relationship. In this sense, it is notable that the ordinary sexism described in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* builds a kind of space in which heterogeneous female subjects recognize one another as part of a collective of women and, in turn, communicate

with one another through a gendered frame. One of the most outstanding features of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* is the way it brings together various speech styles from different female subjects through the narrative. This strategy not only offers a diverse range of women's interpretations of sexist situations but also provides them with the appropriate language to express their feelings.

For example, when in high school, Jiyoung faced the danger of a sexual crime while on her way home from the academy late one night. After barely escaping thanks to the help of an anonymous middle-aged woman, Jiyoung was blamed by her father, who argued that it was her misbehavior—her smiling at men and wearing a short skirt—that almost led to a crime. The woman who helped Jiyoung, however, offered comforting words, advising her not to fall into self-hatred. By simply saying, "It's not your fault," the woman enabled Jiyoung to judge the matter properly:

> But that night, Jiyoung got an earful from her father. "Why is your cram school so far away? Why do you talk to strangers? Why is your skirt so short?" Jiyoung grew up being told to be cautious, to dress conservatively, to be "ladylike." That it's your job to avoid dangerous places, times of day and people. It's your fault for not noticing and not avoiding.
>
> The woman said she was glad Jiyoung was fine, and suddenly declared, "It's not your fault." There were far too many crazy men in the world, she'd had her share of run-ins with these people, and the problem was with them, not with the women. Hearing this made Jiyoung cry. Trying to swallow her tears, she couldn't say anything back. "But you know what?" the woman added. "There's far more great guys out there." (56)

As demonstrated by this encounter, the closeness between women is not limited to the confines of the home. In schools, in workplaces, and even on the street, every instance in which Jiyoung hesitates to speak against unfairness, these "bit-part actors" offer brilliant interpretations, give incisive comments, and act aggressively against sexism. These women play ephemeral roles in the narrative; however, paradoxically, their ephemerality confers onto them a persuasive power. They have the ability to understand and speak about specific situations rather than the entirety of Jiyoung's life or the meaning of the broader narrative.

Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982 restores everyday language through which women can explain their experiences and feelings. Its readable, plain style distinguishes this novel from both academic feminist theory and highbrow feminist literature, thus serving as a catalyst to restore the connection between feminist thought and its practice by women. The political effect of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* emerges from its language, which provides utilitarian and practical words with which women can speak up instead of relying on the mediation of intellectuals and academic discourse. Women's lived experiences and everyday language hold power in and of themselves to produce meaning outside the confines of the literary establishment. The new aesthetic of expression in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* lies in its reproduction of the vivid everyday language spoken by a diverse range of women.

For example, in the segment about "Mr. Flasher," Jiyoung and her high school peers are sexually harassed by a male flasher who preys on girls in school uniforms. The girl bullies, however, respond to the instances of flashing by mocking the flasher instead of feeling the shame expected of young girls.

> During break after the third period, a girl who was known as the class bully shouted something like a catcall or a cheer out of the window at the back of

> the classroom. Some of the less "well-behaved" girls rushed to the window and shouted, "Mister Flasher! Encore! Encore!" They clapped and laughed their heads off. … They spent fourth period doing drills as punishment and writing letters of apology. The class bully who returned during lunch spat out of the window.
>
> "Fucking hell. He's the one who stripped! Those dumb fuckers are punishing us instead of catching the pervert? What the fuck did we do? What's there to apologise for? I'm not the one who flashed my junk!"
>
> The girls giggled. The bully spat out of the window a few more times, still furious. (N. Cho 45-46)

The anger of the schoolgirls stemmed from the reactions of their teachers rather than the incident itself. They faced punishment r for being loud and for challenging established notions of feminine decency. This anger propelled the girls to take matters into their own hands, leading them to secretly confront the flasher and bring him to the police station. Their use of explicit language was invigorating, as it reflected their typical expressive style, and their direct approach gave way to material consequences for the flasher. The diverse ways in which these girls communicated not only provide insights into their varying perspectives but also fostered moments of sisterhood and solidarity against injustice. The use of language in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* exemplifies the new phase in Korean feminist literature: the shift in women's self-representation from passive victimhood to active advocacy and empowerment. By elucidating the novel's literary styles and political implications, this chapter has contributed to a deeper understanding of the affective turn in Korean feminist

discourse and the ongoing transformation of women's narratives in literature. Through the presence of these female characters, the novel goes beyond a mere depiction of Jiyoung's experience as a helpless victim; it provides readers with practical knowledge on how to understand and cope with sexist situations.

New-generation feminists—often called young feminists—distinguish themselves from those who came before them in the tone and language that they use when arguing gender issues. They are characterized by their impetus to speak up in public places. They prefer straightforward language because they strive to circulate and realize their ideas in their everyday lives instead of remaining closed off within the academic and discursive spheres. Their media use emphasizes clear communication, the distribution of actionable ideas, and the achievement of both efficiency and material results. These efforts have given way to a backlash against women's literature and discussions about potential new directions for the field.

Conclusion

The transformation of emotion in Korean feminist literature, as represented in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, marks a critical juncture in the politics of representation and affect. Through a close reading of Cho Namju's novel as well as the broader cultural discourse surrounding it, this chapter examined how contemporary feminist literature has moved beyond conventional sentimentality to engage in a nuanced re-articulation of emotional experience as both a political and cognitive act. Rather than seeking catharsis through empathy alone, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* mobilizes detachment, emotional restraint, and ordinary language to confront misogyny as a systemic structure that is embedded within everyday life.

The novel's strategic deployment of a plain style and its avoidance of traditional narrative coherence signal a broader aesthetic and ideological shift. It not only critiques the affective expectations of women in Korean society but also redefines the very notion of literary legitimacy in the Korean literary establishment. In doing so, the novel demonstrates that affect—particularly shame, guilt, anger, and apathy—is not a private experience but rather a public, relational, and historically contingent force. These emotions become legible through a collective "structure of feeling," offering a new framework for feminist critique that is attuned to the ordinary women.

As young feminist readers increasingly engage with literature as both a pedagogical tool and a form of affective labor, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* functions not merely as a novel but as a medium for feminist praxis. Its utility lies not in the delivery of aesthetic perfection but in the provision of accessible language through which women can vocalize their experiences and claim epistemic authority. The novel reframes literature as a democratic space for emotional articulation and recognition in which feeling represents a method of political intervention.

By foregrounding the entanglement of emotional life and structural oppression, this chapter demonstrated that the Korean feminist literature of the 2010s is not a retreat from the political but a recalibration of its tools. Literature became a site not only for representing injustice but also for transforming the emotional regimes that sustain it. In this light, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* is not merely a story of one woman's psychological unraveling; it is a testament to the enduring power of narrative to articulate shared structures of oppression and imagine new forms of solidarity. As such, it holds a historically significant place in the trajectory of Korean

feminist literature—not because it evokes tears but because it teaches readers how to feel, interpret, and resist together.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

As argued throughout this dissertation, the gendered construction and contested reception of popular literature have enabled South Korean women to discuss how they have historically navigated, challenged, and redefined the cultural hierarchies that shape literary value. Popular literature has often occupied a vulnerable position in South Korean literary discourse, frequently being framed in opposition to high literature. As this study has argued, this distinction is not only an aesthetic one but also one that is ideologically loaded, institutionally supported, and significantly influenced by gender dynamics.

This project critically reappraised that which is "popular" as a culturally and politically significant concept. More than a mere form of mass entertainment, popular literature has served as a symbolic space in which broader social negotiations over gender, class, and cultural authority take place. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's insights from “Crisis of Culture,” this dissertation situated popular literature within a broader framework of cultural judgment and public meaning. Arendt differentiates between enduring works of culture, which invite deep artistic and philosophical reflection, and ephemeral entertainment, which is made to be quickly consumed and discarded. Although individual works of popular literature may fade from public view, their aesthetic judgments and social critiques may be preserved within cultural tradition, continuing to influence the collective consciousness well beyond their lifespan. As Arendt puts it, culture plays a crucial role in the political realm because it helps to shape a shared, common world—a public space where judgment can emerge and

endure—thereby linking art and politics through their common focus on visibility, permanence, and collective recognition (Arendt, “Crisis of Culture” 218–219).

This dissertation examined the evolving dynamics of popular literature and their gender-related implications through four case studies, covering the bookish girls of the 1950s and 1960s who used reading as a form of subtle rebellion, the working-class female writers in the 1970s and 1990s who transformed their literary engagement into political consciousness, feminist genre fiction dating back to the 1990s, and the emotional connections fostered by contemporary bestsellers like *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*. These case studies show that women's cultural practices have consistently challenged the gender biases present in literary criticism. Each case highlights how women's involvement in literature as both readers and writers has been met with ambivalence, misunderstanding, or outright dismissal by dominant institutions.

Crucially, this dissertation’s findings demonstrate that women’s connections to popular literature have historically been used to diminish their cultural contributions by portraying them as trivial, derivative, or overly sentimental. When women’s literary work garners popularity, it has seldom been viewed as a sign of their cultural authority. Instead, it has often been associated with aesthetic devaluation—indicative of emotional excess, irrationality, or middlebrow taste. That which is considered popular among women is frequently described not as public or universal but rather as partial, particular, or niche. This double standard demonstrates that the concept of “popular” is not only historically contingent but also employed in an explicitly ideological manner to maintain gendered hierarchies of value. While popular literature created by and for men may be perceived as democratizing or

socially engaged, that created by and for women is often relegated to discussions of taste, sentimentality, or commercial distraction.

The findings of this dissertation represent a valuable contribution to the field of Korean literary studies by offering a critical reexamination of the genealogies of literary legitimacy and public culture in South Korea. Rather than merely accepting high literature as a space for political or artistic innovation, I have traced how women have utilized literary forms that have historically been deemed excessive, derivative, or apolitical to foster counter-hegemonic cultural practices. In not only writing novels and essays but also forming reading communities, circulating translated literature, reclaiming sentimental tropes, and strategically engaging with mass genres, women have both inhabited and transformed the space of that which is "popular," presenting it as a site of cultural struggle rather than one of mere aesthetic decline.

These findings point to the potential for methodological expansion in future research. First, there is clear room for a deeper exploration of Korean feminist culture, especially when it comes to how female-led platforms have transformed the meanings of "popularity" and "visibility" in contemporary feminist discourse. The rise of digital literary culture—shaped by online literature platforms and social media-based reading initiatives—indicates that gendered dynamics of cultural legitimacy are being renegotiated in significant ways. Second, further research is necessary to analyze the transnational circulation of Korean feminist literature and its reception by global audiences. As authors like Cho Namju and Han Kang garner international recognition, it is increasingly imperative to consider how Asian women's writing engages with and reshapes global discourse in the field of gender studies. Third, the evolving definition of "popularity" in literature—especially in this era marked by a decline in print culture and the rise of platform capitalism—calls for a new theoretical inquiry in the

humanities. While the digital turn has seemingly democratized literary production and reception, it has also introduced new forms of cultural stratification, algorithmic visibility, and affective commodification. What must be revisited, therefore, is the matter of what constitutes popular literature, not just in terms of numerical readership but also in terms of whose voices are amplified—whose narratives are validated.

To popularize gender is not merely to bring feminist ideas into the mainstream; it also entails politicizing literature by exposing and reworking the gendered systems of value that have long shaped literary culture. By examining the vertical and horizontal links between gender and literary popularity in South Korea, this dissertation sought to provide both a critical genealogy and a forward-looking vision. Its findings encourage us to take the cultural authority of women's reading and writing seriously—not as sentimental excess or commercial triviality, but as vital sites of intellectual labor, aesthetic innovation, and political transformation.

This dissertation has centered primarily on print-based literary culture and institutional spaces, including literary journals and publishing markets. Within these arenas, I traced the shifting visibility of women readers and writers as they moved from marginal social positions into cultural participation. However, in examining the political function of popular literature as an intermediate form, this study has not fully addressed the emergence of digital subcultures as a key site for the production of feminist cultural dynamics.

This omission reflects the difficulty of methodologically accessing online genres such as digital romance fiction, which dominate the contemporary literary marketplace yet resist traditional modes of critical analysis. Unlike print culture, the online literary scene does not clearly display women’s movement from social to cultural space. And yet it is precisely in these digital environments that the fragility of

women's presence in public discourse is most effectively negotiated. Online platforms enable new forms of solidarity through shared taste and create affective communities marked by the exclusion of male voices. These "shadow publics" offer an important counter-space to the male-dominated literary field and cultivate feminist alliances not necessarily grounded in ideological critique but in affective identification and genre-specific pleasures.

Future research must attend to these online taste communities and their political imaginaries. Doing so would expand the scope of feminist literary studies beyond the author-centered and canon-focused frameworks that continue to dominate the field. It would also recognize popular literature not only as a site of critical intervention but as a legitimate cultural domain where women readers and writers generate meaning, pleasure, and solidarity on their own terms.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW WITH SŎ KYESU

Interviewer: Your curation of the horror anthology *Uriga Tarŭn Kwishinŭl Pullŏonani* [For We Call Forth Other Ghosts] (2022) was received as a fresh feminist take on genre fiction by women authors. Could you tell us about your intentions behind the project and how the process unfolded?

Sŏ: It started with a simple idea. At the time, there were a lot of horror anthologies being published, but they were mostly by male writers, maybe with one or two women included as tokens. I thought it would be nice to put something together entirely with women writers. There were all-women horror anthologies before, like *Kuishini Onŭn Pam* [Haunted Night] (2022), which I contributed to. But those weren't marketed as feminist projects. I think ours was the first to make feminism the explicit framework for horror.

Interviewer: How do you usually connect with other women writers? I think readers might be familiar with genre groups like *Kŏul* [Mirror] and *Koeihakhoe* [Grotesque Study Association]. What's your experience with these communities or other networks?

Sŏ: I just like writers who write well. If someone writes my kind of thing, I naturally want to get to know them. Sometimes we become close… and sometimes we argue or fall out. It's really like making friends. I joined the *Grotesque Study Association* first, but I was disappointed—it's very male-dominated, and conversations would go quiet whenever feminism came up. So I gradually pulled away. I'm also in *Mirror*, but it's a much looser, less formal group. I even started a creative writing group called *Hwansang Iyagi* [Fantastic Stories] to focus on fantasy shorts, but that didn't work

out. That's when I realized just how amazing *Mirror* has worked. It's really hard to keep something going for that long, regardless of recognition or response.

Interviewer: I'd love to hear how you see generational shifts in horror writing in Korea. Do you feel part of a new generation, distinct from earlier women writers?

Sŏ: That's a tough question. I actually don't know much about the history of horror in Korea. I've heard of *Med K'ŭllŏp* [Mad Club], a horror writers' group from the early 2000s, but that's about it. In the 2000s, women writers weren't writing feminist horror. I even stopped reading Korean women horror writers after a while. I just didn't enjoy reading the same old portrayals of victimized women and animals—it felt outdated like the horror was stuck in old prejudices. Horror, to me, is about the unknown. For a lot of horror writers, what is "unknown" is the others; to men, women are scary; to Koreans, Korean-Chinese immigrants are scary—it's not interesting. There are exceptions though. Writers like Chŏng Bora or Chŏn Hyejin—they don't confine themselves to horror, but their work is great. They feel like the generation before me. I think Cho Yeŭn represents the next wave—she's one of the most prominent horror writers today and writes distinctly feminist horror. After her book *K'akt'eil, Lŏpŭ, Chompi* [Cocktail, Love, Zombie] (2020), you really start to see more female-centered horror in the field.

Interviewer: I get the sense that generational identity has less to do with age and more with publishing platforms. The publishing landscape for genre writers now looks very different than it used to be.

Sŏ: Definitely. These days, contests are major rout for writers to debut—kind of like getting published in a major newspaper or magazine in the past. I've heard that you need to win a big contest to establish yourself and eventually grow into a well-known writer. But contests aren't necessarily focused on publishing anymore; they're often

tied to media potential. If a story has crossover appeal—say, it can be adapted into a film or a webtoon—it's more likely to be selected. Horror, being low-budget and high-impact for films, is especially attractive that way. A lot of stories are written with adaptation in mind.

Interviewer: Your stories stand out for hard-boiled and gory elements. They rarely dwell on the female victimhood or revenge typical of horror. I imagine you've gotten some interesting responses from women readers.

Sŏ: I intended to avoid writing about women with grudges or resentments, but most readers don't seem to notice that. They often focus on catharsis or revenge aspects. That's frustrating. I'm not trying to offer emotional payoff. I have a dark sensibility—I'm interested in fear and disgust, even the unpleasant stuff that feels a little wrong. But people mostly focus on the gore, especially the scenes where male characters die.

Interviewer: That reminds me of your story "Mŏlitalrin yŏcha" [The Woman with the Head] (2020), which really evokes the toxic language of male-dominated online forums. A lot of it reads like posts by incels. It makes me feel as if I am looking at disgusting online posts. The male characters in the story aren't necessarily criminals, but their language is enough to make them seem punishable.

Sŏ: I'm not a big observer of male-centered anonymous online communities, but I do think that anonymous forums function similarly across genders. The tone and topics might differ, but the dynamics are alike. I used to be active on places like "DC inside," so the language came naturally—it's familiar. Anyone who's been online in Korea since the 2000s has been influenced by "DC inside," It's really shaped how people speak and think online. It is unlike the days of liberal online communities like "Hightel" or "Naunuri."

Interviewer: Another story that stood out was “Sansangsuhun” [The Sermon on the Mount] (2020), about a Christian woman who harbors homoerotic desire for another woman in her church. Their physical relationship is violent, but not in the usual revenge or self-defense way we often see in horror. In your story, there is only a vague hatred and lust for the same woman. What kind of feedback did you receive?

Sŏ: Honestly, almost none. I put a lot into that story and really loved it, but the main response was something like, “Oh, this main character is so disgusting.” And yeah—she is. But she’s also just an ordinary, pitiable person. I’ve seen a lot of devout Christians like her—not evil, just deeply conflicted. I tried to frame the violence in a way that bordered on consensual BDSM play. I wanted to show how religious guilt, especially about same-sex desire, can be distorted. Physical closeness between women is complicated. There’s a scene in Pak Wansuh’s *Kŭ mant'ŏn shinganŭn nuga ta mŏgŏssŭlkka?* [Who Ate All That Singa?] (1992), where a teacher makes two girls slap each other. The protagonist starts feeling hatred toward her friend through that act. I think that’s one of the most brilliant scenes in Korean literature. But I also think it’s time for us to move beyond it—it’s been decades.

Interviewer: Your writing feels quite radical in how it approaches gender, which makes you stand out from the more gothic-influenced women horror writers. Instead, your work seems closer to the legacy of feminist science fiction. Are there particular authors or feminist texts that have influenced you?

Sŏ: I don’t stick to just women genre writers, but I admire Octavia Butler—her storytelling is incredible and always gives me a lot to think about in terms of feminism. I also love writers like Oh Jung-hee, Pak Wansuh, and Pak Kyŏngri. I’ve always wanted to write a feminist fantasy that feels like Pak Kyŏngri, but I’m not there yet. When it comes to feminist ideas, nonfiction had a bigger impact on me. I

went through a phase where I was a pretty extreme feminist—I even cyberbullied people. Looking back, I'm ashamed of that. Around that time, I was really into Yi Mink'yŏng's *Uriegen Ŏnŏ-ga P'iryohada* [We Need a Language] (2021), which came out of *t'alk'orŭset* [de-corset] movement.[40] Later, I distanced myself because I started to feel uneasy by her exclusionism. I also liked SF writer Yi Sanhwa—he's not a woman, but he supported trans people early on. Still, his work fell into the trope of women as victims, which I eventually pushed back against. That internal struggle-being influenced and then resisting—shaped a lot of my thinking.

Interviewer: I know you've also written science fiction and romance. Do you have any unique experiences with writing in multiple genres simultaneously? Do you find yourself returning to certain themes regardless of genre?

Sŏ: I'm a typical *otaku*, and I have been having fun writing and drawing fan fiction. I. didn't set out to write in any particular genre; I was just having fun. My first published short story, "Manhoebanjŏm" [Manhoe Chinese Restaurant] (2020) was written in college for a creative writing class. I thought of it as pure literature, not horror. When I showed it to Professor Yun Taenyŏng, a representative figure of pure literature, he said I could be his colleague but wasn't sure what kind of novelist I'd become. Around that time, my undergraduate classmate was organizing a feminist fiction anthology through crowdfunding, and I submitted the story. It was published as pure literature. I didn't even think of it as horror—it wasn't scary.

Interviewer: Last question--do you see your identity as a woman writer and your identity as a feminist writer as overlapping? You have collaborated with other writers

[40] The *t'alk'orŭset* [escape corset] movement, which translates literally as "taking off the corset," is a South Korean feminist campaign that emerged prominently in 2018 as a form of resistance against patriarchal beauty standards. For more information about this campaign, see Hyejung Park, the feminist activist involved in the escape corset movement.

on anthologies and networking projects, so I think you've seen a range of attitudes towards both identities.

Sŏ: I don't think being a female writer automatically makes someone a feminist writer. One of my first favorite SF writers is Yi Sanhwa, a man. His novel *Oryuga Palsaenghaessŭmnida* [An Error Has Been Made] (2018) features a cyberpunk *paekhap* [girls' love] story—he is clearly interested in feminist themes. Sometimes it's even more interesting when men write about women because they're seeing it from the outside. People say male authors' portrayals of women are superficial, but women writers can be just as shallow. I don't think feminist writing should be limited to women. However, the situation of genderqueer writers might be different. We still don't see many genderqueer writers in Korea yet. Very few openly identify that way. I think we need we need to approach their works with a different kind of attention.

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