
Modernity of Literature and the Gender of “Interiority”: *Queries to From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men*

From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men: Translating the Individual in Early Colonial Korea. By Yoon Sun Yang. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2017. 224 pages. ISBN: 9780674976979.

Young-Hyun SO

On Reconstructing History of Literature after the Deconstruction of the History of Literature

Yoon Sun Yang's *From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men: Translating the Individual in Early Colonial Korea* (2017) is a study which poses challenging questions to the description of history of literature which views the shift from 'domestic women' to 'sensitive young men' as a literary progress, taking on fictions published between 1906 and 1918, a transitional period of Korean literature. What significance does it hold to take issue with it?

The spectrum of time periods and writers and their oeuvres under study in the discursive field of Korean literature has broadened gradually. Needless to say, this development is not a sole result of the body of researches cumulated over time since the 1950s when research on modern and contemporary literature began in earnest. As reflection on the self-evidentiality of modernity was widely circulated in the academic and literary circles from the 1990s, the dismantlement of myths concerning modernity,

Young-Hyun SO is a senior researcher at the Institute of Gender Studies, Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea. E-mail: yhso70@hanmail.net.

nation, literature, and history has forged an irrevocable orientation, along with which the dissolution and reconstruction of literary concepts and categories took place in full swing in the study of Korean literature under the influence of postmodernism and post-colonialism. The work of disintegration and reconstruction, which may be summarized as ‘from literature to culture,’ has extended the category of literature which had been confined in large to poetry, novel, and drama to include texts in a broad sense. It can be said that research on discourses in newspaper articles and historical narratives as well as mass culture, e.g., film, advertisement, and comic strips has become part of the study of literature.

Moving beyond just interpreting the significance of certain writers and writings, the interest of dissolution and reconstitution has evolved to the formation and arrangement of modern Korean literature in entirety. The limits of the existing portrayal of literary history which is conceptually based on nationalism, ethnicism, and male-elite centrism have been scrutinized from various angles. From the 1970s when studies on modern and contemporary Korean literature yielded substantive outcomes, the positivist methodology which buttressed their specialized expertise was instrumental to defining the canonical texts of literature and sophisticating the literary history. From the 1990s, rereading of those texts whose status had been firmly established by the literary history was full-fledged, utilizing resources produced by gender (history) studies and inquiries based on the methodological reflection on cultural history. Doubts on the view of conceiving writers as people with creative authority and literary works as organic completions with embedded truths led to questioning the depiction of literary history which established the genealogy of canonical texts. The research trend to shed new light on “‘literatures’ excluded by the conventional literary history with a nationalist-male-elite orientation” and contemplate on alternative ‘literary histories’ with the “prospect for ‘plural histories of Korean literature’” (Cheon et al. 2013, 8) has made explicit outcomes through the 2010s.

To focus my discussion on its relevance to *From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men*, the circumstances of strictly excluding from the literary

history popular writings (popular fictions) in distinction from canonical texts making entry into it were put to question, and on that basis *sinsoseol* which had been discussed selectively in regards with the modern origin of Korean literature—began to be revisited as a research topic of early modern Korean literature. *Sinsoseol*'s value started to be noted not only as the narrative of the enlightenment period but as strong outputs for the publishing market along with modernization of the printing and publishing culture. Probing on the dividing line of the pre-modern and the modern period and discourse on the origin of modern Korean literature therein were made vigorously in the early phase of the research, which could be expressed succinctly as full-blown reflections on modernity. Studies on *sinsoseol* went beyond excavating evidential materials in a positivistic manner and employed them as major texts for discussion on the formational stage of modern Korean literature and further as reliable narratives to explicate the complex facets of the formational period of the modern era. This is closely linked with the context of the deepening of the research trend inquiring about what to make of it after the dismantlement of the history of literature. Yang's study treads along the line of the research trend of dissembling and reconstructing literary concepts and categories in various ways since the 1990s, attempting to reconsider the origin of modern Korean literature by adopting research outcomes produced in the field of the study of Korean literature and calling into question the conventional portrayal of the literary history.

On the Literary Landscape around the 1910s

As it can be found in the body of researches conducted to date, appellations which are used in reference to the period around the 1910s such as the enlightenment period, the transitional period to the modern epoch, and the patriotic enlightenment period let us have a sense of the perspective and appraisal of the literary landscape of that era. The term, "early colonial Korea," in the book title gives a clue to some aspects of the footing and perspective of the author's discussion. Concerning the literary landscape around the

1910s, the expression illustrates that, while keeping distance from the stance leaned to unilateral cultural adoption which was enforced by the Japanese empire or of the nationalist one (based on indigenous modernization theory) which arose in reaction to it, the work falls under the wave of the study on modernity which pursues to obtain a new understanding of the era. The study on modernity, concretized in the forms of cultural history in the academic arena of Korean literature, has brought vitality to the research on the colonial period. Taking a wider view to interdisciplinary work, debates in history circles, which are at the basis of the studies in the literary domain, can be mentioned. Indigenous modernization theory and colonial modernity theory, which still impregnates seeds of controversy in the academy and have yet to advance the discussions explicitly, have lost vigor in discourse and remain in a standstill, as the outlook to address the modern times as a whole has weakened. It is, probably, the influence on the academic realm of the dwindling imagination for what is to come after the modern period, with the impetus of reform eroding and the power of capital aggrandizing.

The research trend to attend to the structural aspects of naturalized institutions and ideologies and take historical contexts into full consideration while staying away from a preset and fixed understanding of main components comprising literary concepts and categories has been transformed, irrespective of its intent, into explorations on the origins in the discursive sphere of Korean literature. This is discovered in researches on the births and origins of various things, including *Origin of Modern Korean Fiction* (*Hanguk geundaesoseol-ui giweon*) (Kwon Bodurae, 2000), *The Birth of Brother: History of Folk Customs in Modern Korean Literature* (*Oba-ui tansaeng: Hanguk geundae munhak-ui pungsoksa*) (Lee Kyoung Hoon, 2003), *Reading in the Modern Era: the Birth of Audience and Modern Korean Literature* (*Geundae-ui chaekilgi: Dokja-ui tansaeng-gwa hanguk geundaemunhak*) (Cheon Jung-hwan 2003), *Birth of Schools* (*Hakgyo-ui tansaeng*) (Lee Seoung Won, 2005), *The Birth of Literary Youth* (*Munhakcheongnyeong-ui tansaeng*) (So Young-Hyun, 2008), and *Birth of Cultural Snobbery* (*Sokmulgyoyang-ui tansaeng*) (Park Suk-Ja, 2012). Discussions on the births and origins of all sorts of things—which are not

entirely unrelated with Japanese studies on the histories of its institutions, culture, and custom—have resulted in, paradoxically, strengthening the approach of understanding history as a set of discrete time periods with the modern period at the start of many new things.

Later, together with reflections on it, research interests in the colonial period were extended toward existences and domains omitted from the discourse on modernity. Continuous attempts have been made to sustain the initial intent of the study on modernity to investigate fundamentally whether the modern period, which began with the eradication of solid hierarchies such as class and ideology, has brought about human emancipation. Strictly speaking, it is undeniable that the work of dissolution and reconstruction in the field of the study on early modern Korean literature has moved in the direction of broadening the categories of study. While the significance of enlarging literary concepts and categories still holds, questions have been raised as to whether proper research methodologies are being developed. The advent of the era in which the meaning of politics and the value of ideology are fading has resulted in research on the colonial period losing its driving force.

What significance does Yang's work have in the light of the research trend and stream of early modern Korean literature? From *Domestic Women* to *Sensitive Young Men* examines, by picking up the print media and novels of various forms from the 1910s, the political and cultural landscape of the era characterized by the clash and amalgamation of tradition and modernity and the onset of colonial experiences. On the list of the review are: works of representative *sinsoseol* writers including Lee Injik, Lee Haejo, and Kim Kyoje (*Tears of Blood* [*Hyeol-ui nu*, 1906], *Mt. Chiak* [*Chiaksan*, 1908, 1911], *A Coldhearted Flower* [*Parkjunghwa*, 1910], *Peony Hill* [*Moranbong*, 1913], and *Flowers in the Mirror* [*Kyungjunghwa*, 1923]); Jang Eung-jin's *Confession under the Moon* (*Wolha-ui jabaek*, 1907), Lee Kwangsoo's novels; short stories by intellectual young writers of the 1910s such as Hyun Sangyoon's *Persecution* (*Pipbak*) and Yang Geonsik's *Sad Contradictions* (*Seulpeun mosun*); and short stories of female writers who appeared in the literary scene in a large number around the 1920s, e.g., Na Hyesuk's *Kyonghee* (*Kyeonghee*)

and Kim Wonjoo’s *Awakening (Jagak)*. The investigation is conducted, in a narrow sense, in the context of the research of the literary landscape around the 1910s, and in a broader one, in that of literary modernity during the colonial period.

Using popular novels among those grouped under *sinsoseol* for her study, the author tackles the hierarchal structure of public/private and men/women which hangs over the assessment of their literary value. This attempt makes some visible outcomes. For instance, in Lee Injik’s *Tears of Blood*, she notes the metaphoric significance of Oknyeon’s mother who has been largely overlooked in prior studies and probes the meanings of Oknyeon and her mother, respective symbols of the new and the outdated, through their relatedness. In addition, she captures the significance of the last novel by Kim Kyoje, who is an exemplary *sinsoseol* writer but has few widely-recognized works and has received little attention for the popular overtones of his narrative. She calls attention to the necessity to ask gender questions concerning the ‘interiority’ which is at the core of literary modernity.

On the Footing of Cultural Translation

Surely, as it is implied in the revealing title, *From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men*, the value of the book does not just lie in taking on *sinsoseol* for the study. Interest in *sinsoseol* in this piece is geared to elucidate the political and historical contexts of the era, which is the aim of the work and therefore, is not limited to a certain literary genre which emerged around the 1910s. The interest is concretized broadly through cultural study in its direction and more narrowly via the orientation towards disintegration and reconstruction of the history of Korean literature and the methodology of cultural translation. This is to say, it is a criticism of the existing framework of interpreting *sinsoseol* and a challenge to the studies on the ‘transitional period’ of modern Korean literature. This implicates an attempt to dissemble and recompose the framework of the literary history, which is, thus far, premised on the view of treating the shift from ‘domestic women’ to ‘sensitive

young men' as 'progress.' Setting aside the teleological directionality implied in the term 'transitional period,' it holds that the process of moving from female protagonists in *sinsoseol* to males with internal mind in modern fiction should not be construed genealogically as a linear progression.

To dismantle the conceptual presumption of the 'transitional period,' Yang traces the translation of the term, 'individual,' a concept which explains the essence of modernity. She examines the translation process of the ideas of 'individual,' 'individuality,' and 'individualism' into Korean and the construction of meanings of their Korean translations, '*kaein*,' '*kaesung*,' '*kaeinjuui*,' and '*kaeinjuuija*' as well as *igijuui* (egocentrism) and *jagibonwi* (egotism), as found in various types of proses. Particularly, in the process of the translation of the 'individual' is identified the procedural spectrum that meaning is manifested through the images of female characters in the narratives. On that basis, she rejects the frame of linear progress in the literary history which supposes that interiority of the individual in Lee Kwangsoo's 1917 novel *The Heartless* (*Mujeong*) is the origin of modern Korean literature. Staying away from attaching such a label as (in)accurate or incomplete translations of concepts, she questions the function of the context of meaning *per se*, which is comprehensively built on the non-Western literary tradition. On this account, the book can be seen as an investigation of the translation of the 'individual,' which is at the core of literary modernity, or of the history of the conceptualization of the 'individual.'

The translation of the individual has been, and probably will be, constrained by historical conditions. (p. 42)

What Yang tries to unveil in a critical stance through the examination of the conceptual history is Eurocentrism and androcentrism which lie at the basis of the conceptual framework of configuring the history of literature as a linear progress. To critically intervene in a set of Eurocentric and teleological conceptualizations, she takes note that the translation of the 'individual' has created a complex web of meanings. She hires Lidia Liu's notion of translation as translanguaging practice to grope for a new approach

for the issues of literature's transborder impacts and distribution. For her, translation is not the transfer of fixed concepts between the transmitting and receiving countries (languages), but the very 'process of meanings under creation' amidst historical contexts that play out in a myriad of ways and affect their differentiation and formulation—including the temporal and spatial span that the ideas are adopted and adapted, tradition at the basis of their adaptation, and political stances and genders of translating subjects leading the new formation of the concepts. Certainly the author's discussion does not rest only on the existing research trends surrounding the modernity of literature. It partakes in the examination of literary modernity claimed by new currents of research on modern Korean literature in Korea and at the same time, pursues to revisit unconscious assumptions which are revealed in the process of methodological exercise. It advances the discourse by building on earlier research outcomes cumulated on the beginning and origin of modern Korean literature and, taking a step further, tries to identify the limits of the studies made in Korea on modernity.

Configuring history of literature after the dismantlement of the history of literature is, clearly, a justifiable methodology to be employed in order to understand the complexity of the non-Western literary landscape. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the concept of the 'individual' as the 'prototype'—which runs through the foundation of her work—seems, paradoxically, to be already determined in meticulously examining the complex circumstances of its translation and thoroughly reviewing and rigorously analyzing the meaning of the translation for the epoch via narrative figures. This makes us contemplate that positing a unidirectional linear progression from domestic women to sensitive young men in the existing researches might be less a consequence of conceptual limits of specific researchers such as Hwang Jong Yon than an intrinsic constraint of the discourse on modernity in which conceptual discontinuity is reconstructed with the idea of progress.

This said, one can raise the question of whether Yang's construction of history of literature after the history of literature gives, at base, a wide berth to Eurocentric and teleological thinking to allow criticism, or more

fundamentally, whether taking such a 'position' would be something possible in the study from the outset. The question may be rephrased as whether the work aiming for literary genealogy can secure a postmodern perspective. That is because it would be difficult in this approach to go beyond a dialectic understanding of universality-particularity, despite enabling a thick explanation for the singularity of a specific culture.

One may push the question a little further. Introduction of Western culture should not be understood by any means as a one-way dispersion, i.e., from the Western world to the non-Western. If it is necessary to take into consideration that encounter with another culture cannot be parallel exchange and the transfer of concepts, cultural products, or feelings (which are outside the realm of conceptualization) is the result of intricate interactions of multilayered hierarchies, it is additionally required to reflect on the unidirectionality of the vector of the studies. None of the West-originated concepts employed to explicate cultural modernity is 'naturally' clear without ambiguity. If the meaning could be clearly set out, it is, paradoxically, through the process of cultural translation. Speaking of the vector of translation and original text, it is not that translation comes after the 'original text,' but that in reverse the translation process builds and defines the 'original text'; only when this is understood can relativization of Eurocentrism and androcentrism be achieved. If this dimension of translation is considered, the working-out of translation cannot be regarded as tied to a certain period. This will allow us to keep distance from viewing discussions on modernity as a matter of discontinuous temporalities. The insight that the essence of modernity is colonality would lead us to consider the significance of translation working inverse of the vector, and open up a different view on Eurocentrism and counter-/post-Eurocentrism.

On the Perspective of Gender

Setting aside its significance and value in the literary history, it took us such a long time to encounter, among literarily configured beings, women

who walked out of the boundary of traditional norms signified by family to become ‘existences on the road’ and made direct and indirect contributions to the construction of new community. Even if a reunion with a fiancé or recovery of disintegrated patriarchal system is laid out at the end of the desire, women in *sinsoseol* are rare subjects with desires who act to pioneer their own destinies in life. Perhaps, the greatest merit of *From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men* is its examination of the early modern Korean literary landscape around the 1910s from the gender point of view through female figures who are regarded as cultural symbols as well as cultural transmitters. Casting doubt on the definitive presumption that ‘interiority,’ which is often mentioned as a marker of literary modernity, is manifested in a character and such a character is *a priori* more ‘advanced’ than others and closer to the ‘authentic form’ of the individual in the European sense, and questioning the supposition that the autonomous subject discovered via the internal mind is represented by the man, in short, delving into the ‘gender of interiority,’ the book investigates on a new ground the significance of female protagonists in *sinsoseol* for literary history. Examining the complex web of meanings of the translation of the ‘individual’ with the analytic focus on female figures, it enriches our understanding of the literary landscape of the 1910s.

Such an understanding, of course, warrants due consideration of not only the point that translation of modernity passes through the prism of gender but also the fact that it represents the construction of gender system which undergoes the process of making and remaking. For instance, in addition to acquiring a deep understanding of female protagonists’ desires, it should not lose sight of the implications of the fact that the desires, which are interpreted as those of the *femmes fatales* as well, are visualized merely as excessive sexual cravings. From a gender perspective, it is not the desires of all women which are put to punishment, both before and after the modern period. Desires of those women who do not belong to the category of production and reproduction by marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth in the realm of family are not permitted and regarded as dangerous. As the book points out repeatedly, lack of sufficient consideration of the point that vigilance and punishment against women’s desires threatening family and

society are just manifested differently between the pre-modern and the modern period, may result in exaggerating the meaning of change across the periods and obliterate real actions they or female figures undertake in discussing women's emancipation and acquirement of individuality, even though their attainment of interiority and subjectivity did not take place automatically with the dismantlement of the class system and the weakening of Confucian ideology.

Having in mind these elements which the gender perspective needs to consider, what does the investigation of the literary landscape of the 1910s from the gender point of view involve in terms of a new construction of gender system and its legitimization? This query may be further specified as one about the selection of literary works for analysis in the book. As the author explains, *sinsoseol* cannot be predicated as a genre name created at a certain juncture in the literary history. The circulation of the term is closely related with the political conditions of Joseon Korea that its forced annexation by the Japanese empire was underway and the counter-reaction of intellectuals and writers (who were part of the elites at the time) as well as the environment of the print and publishing market. While *sinsoseol* may be treated as a literary genre representing a particular period in time in the context of literary history, it should not be overlooked that it persisted as a genre quite a while even after losing its significance in the literary history. Besides, as she points out emphatically, narrative features of the literary works produced under the group of *sinsoseol* defy uniformity. Granted that one of its characteristics is a close connection with real-world politics, those from the 1900s, the 1910s, and the 1920s disclose variant narrative traits as much as they share certain things. Considering its attributes as a genre, one may wonder whether ideological contestations raised by *sinsoseol* (e.g., same-sex marriage) are greater in weight than romantic love and courtship issues dealt with in short stories by female writers of the 1920s.

The question may be turned around. If *sinsoseol* is a term which refers to a genre in the context of literary history, 'domestic fiction/novel,' which is classified as a subgenre of *sinsoseol* and frequently used as its substitute in the book, looks like an expedient term emphasizing its narrative characteristics.

But, in fact, the category of domestic fiction/novel is vague and it can hardly be a general term for *sinsoseol*. Although such terms as political novel, debate novel, and domestic novel are in use for the convenience of classification, whether it is proper to call the narrative emerged around the 1910s by that name requires a reexamination. Perhaps, the author uses the term ‘domestic fiction/novel’ in replacement of *sinsoseol* with a hidden intention to emphasize the significance of its modern-style narrative form, a change from that of the pre-modern period. Nonetheless, such a usage only highlights clear distinctions between Western domestic novel and *sinsoseol* or what is dubbed ‘domestic fiction/novel.’ Therefore, one cannot resist asking whether differences in the genders of authors between the former and the latter can be ignored in a study seeking to obtain the gender perspective. Moreover, lesbianism in one-on-one relationships, maintaining long-term intimate relationships and not being tied to polarized gender roles, in fact, resonates with the conservative discourse against the liberation of sex. In that it replaces heterosexuality at the top of the sexual value hierarchy, this position should be considered as a reflection of extreme rejection of sexuality, which sees sexual activity as ugly (Gayle 2011, ch. 5).

Interestingly, this book pays scant attention to the works by Choi Chan-Sik, a representative *sinsoseol* writer. His novels, which are recognized for giving narrative amusement without a political tint, debunk contradictions of the marriage institution and engage in romantic relationships between man and woman for main narrative. They appear to be quite a suitable group of works for the category of domestic fiction/novel which is the focus of the book. This indifference may illustrate that it puts greater emphasis on *sinsoseol*’s significance in the association with political reality. As the author mentions in the analysis of *Peony Hill*, novelistic space in *sinsoseol* is not the ‘realistic’ world created in relation with the actuality of the day. Neither is the imagined national community depicted in it an accurate representation of colonial Korea’s reality. Then, what is the politicity of *sinsoseol* attended to by the book? What constitutes its politicity, which is newly acquired through the analysis of narratives and characters from the gender perspective? That the term of choice is ‘domestic fiction/novel’ indicates that the book’s

prime attention rests on the articulative aspect of cultural translation, which explains literary modernity and modern novel's complexity. Then, what are the facets of the politicity of the literary landscape of the 1910s which are opened up by the articulative quality of cultural translation? The fact that the book makes us read *sinsoseol* as the writers' narratives to fulfill their hopes and wishes (although the analysis revolves around female characters) and resultantly, it is read as looking into the complicated and fragmented desires and anxieties harbored by them, male enlightened (or pro-Japanese) intellectuals of the time, over the imagination of national community, facing the nation in the process of colonization, may reveal clues to the politicity which traverses *From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men*.

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