

Article

# Aesthetic of Queer Failure in 2010s' Korean Literature

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## Introduction

In Korean literature, the 2010s witnessed a significant increase in the representation of queer themes, marking a departure from the marginalization and symbolic representation of queer characters in previous decades (H. Kim 2018). Before this period, queer characters often symbolized social deviance, requiring regulation within the dominant socialization process (K. Kim 2018a, 362–65). The absence of a clear methodology for establishing an alternative to heteronormativity relegated queerness to a supplementary concept associated with the socially marginalized (Jung 2008, 85). However, the mid-2010s marked the emergence of distinctly categorized queer literature that acknowledged and represented queerness more prominently (Choe 2018). This article explores the aesthetic of irony in the representation of queerness—not merely as identities but as a performative act of resistance against societal norms.

Defining literature that represents queer individuals' lives as queer literature necessitates questioning not only the definition of queerness itself but also the concept of representation through writing. As will be further discussed, queer is a concept that loosely encompasses identities deviating from normative sexual identities and fluidizes the categories of sexuality and identity. Thus, queer literature destabilizes the clear-cut dichotomy between queerness and the writing that represents them. In this context, defining queer literature as a performative act that disrupts the narrative of identity formation and the social stability it provides holds significant political meaning. Oh Hye-jin's (2018, 81) definition aligns with this notion, describing queer literature as a genre that disrupts the principles of normativity by engaging with practices and imaginations that cannot be reduced to the dominant rules of heteronormativity and the dichotomy of sexual differences, producing political and aesthetic effects that disclose the fictionality of these principles. This definition underscores the inherently disruptive nature of queer literature, challenging the fixed categories imposed by normative principles.

Choe Hyonhui similarly argues that the essence of queer literature lies not in the accurate depiction of queers' lives but in the narrative aesthetic that interplays the world constructed within the narrative and the external world of

the narrative's readers.<sup>1</sup> According to Choe (2018, 238), queer literature blurs the boundaries between the narrative world within the text and the reader's external world, creating a third space of experimental writing. This aligns with Kim Keon-hyung's assertion that queers in narratives often lead to the dissolution of narrative structures. The self-deconstruction of these narratives is often patched up by non-queer narrators who impose meaning on queerness, thus reinforcing the impossibility of representing queerness and maintaining its status as impenetrable otherness to the normative. As Kim (2020, 226) notes, "the narrator who extracts some meaning from the deconstructive force of queers yields to their own narrative, restoring their power and authority over the narrative by rendering queerness impossible to establish its status in reality."

Building on this insight, this article argues that queerness within the narrative is depicted as failure and that this dual failure in content and form inherently generates irony as a characteristic of queer experimental writing. It identifies irony as a legitimate aesthetic that queer narratives can be adopted in their attempt to represent queerness. As will be further discussed, irony as a rhetorical device extends its implications beyond a narrow aesthetic sense to political dimension in queer theory. By establishing irony as a distinctive aesthetic in queer literature, this article presents the literary representation of queerness and the queer as the subject of writing within the framework of queer theory. This process itself is designed to manifest the practice of queerness within queer theory, ultimately answering the following question arising from the discussions on 2010s Korean queer literature: how can the literary representation of queerness move beyond the destructive politics of queer social failure to present an aesthetic strategy with political significance? However, the purpose of this article is not to present the definitive answer but to explore one possible theoretical approach to the methodology of queer failure.

Among the narratives from 2010s Korean queer literature, this article particularly analyzes Park Min-jung's "The School for Wives" (2014) and Park Sang Young's "The Tears of an Unknown Artist, or Zaytun Pasta" (2017). Park Min-jung's short story is set in a speculative world where same-sex marriage is

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<sup>1</sup> This issue is similarly presented in Lee Eun-ju's (2022) recent discussion about Park Sang Young's *Daedosiui Sarangbeop* (Love in the Big City). I argue that in order for queer literature to be established as a critical concept, one must question the very methodology of analyzing romantic narratives according to heteronormative standards.

legalized, allowing the successful societal realization of queerness. However, in reaching this success, queer characters embody the irony of being reduced to heteronormative relational dynamics. The speculative nature of the narrative brings into sharper relief the inherent ironies entangled with social integration of queerness. Conversely, Park Sang Young's novella humorously unveils the complete failure of queer characters within society and the willful ignorance of possibilities beyond that failure. Numerous commentators have noted that Park Sang Young's queer narratives centralize the rhetoric of "jokes," which serve not merely as passive mockery of social norms but as active enactments of queerness itself (K. Kim 2018b). It is on these grounds that Park Sang Young's novella is analyzed as an exemplar of irony, a distinctive narrative aesthetic to queer literature.

The reason for selecting the two stories for analysis is their effective demonstration of irony as an aesthetic methodology in queer literature. "The School for Wives," by depicting non-oppressive relationships among lesbian characters, has been evaluated as presenting an alternative to heteronormative intimacy (Shim 2017, 47). The potential for this queer alternative becomes clear due to the speculative setting of the short story, but I focus on how this speculation ironically intensifies the unreality of affirmation and realization of queerness. The queerness in the story's lesbian narrative is realized not through its feasibility within the narrative but through the ironic reception of the narrative itself.

"The Tears of an Unknown Artist, or Zaytun Past" employs jokes as a rhetorical strategy that generates representation through the queer narrative itself. This aspect has been regarded as a significant formal feature of the author's queer literature. The novella features a protagonist whose name, age, and profession as a film director aligns closely with the author himself. This setup indicates that the act of creating a narrative representing queer individuals is intertwined with the depiction of a queer artist—the creator of the narrative—within the story. In this sense, the novella employs the rhetoric of "jokes" to expand the political realization of queerness within reality, making it both the theme and the strategy of delivery. Consequently, it should be interpreted as queer literature generated and interpreted through the principle of irony. This makes the work particularly noteworthy when reading 2010s Korean queer literature and the works of its representative author, Park Sang Young, from the perspective of irony as a unique aesthetic of queer literature.

This article contends that the queerness does not refer to a sexual identity or deviations from heterosexuality but relates to a "critically" positional quality that renders the representation of queerness possible only through the reader's active engagement in narrative comprehension. In this context, Judith Butler's theory, which establishes queerness as a critical stance constantly questioning identitarianism, is noteworthy. As previously mentioned, "queer" is a term generally used to encompass deviations from heterosexual norms, fundamentally disrupting the power that regulates sexualities from an identitarian standpoint. Butler presents queerness as an interpellation—a performative that challenges the stability and cohesiveness of identity within power dynamics. As she states, "the term 'queer' emerges as an interpellation that raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability, within performativity" (Butler 2011, 172). In essence, the power to name someone as "queer" encompasses even those who cannot be fixed or classified, establishing itself as a definitive regulatory power. In this regard, the power and queers as the central moments of its establishment are retrospectively created based on the interpellating act of queerness. Queerness, then, becomes a meta-discursive marker that signifies the inherent limitations of heteronormative society and gestures toward the potential for alternative social imaginaries.

Incorporating this performative notion of queerness radically shifts the understanding of the portrayal of queer identities in literature. It compels a move away from the historical derogation of queerness as a marker of the other, reframing it as a critique that questions the naturalization of societal divisions and the power structures that enforce them. Queerness in this sense is a lens through which to challenge the prevailing narrative and to reconstitute the representation of identity, going beyond the heteronormative confines. Thus, queerness is not merely a theoretical concept relevant only when observing the marginalization of "queer individuals" by power or doing a deconstructive reading of sexual identity narratives from a critical perspective. At this point, Judith Halberstam's discussion on the queer art of failure is significant.

Halberstam argues that failure, especially queer failure, is not merely a lack of success in terms of meeting socially recognized standards. Halberstam (2011, 88) suggests a reconceptualization of success and failure that validates alternative paths and modes of being: "Failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities." Queer failure becomes a conscious detachment from normative metrics of success, an acknowledgement that such metrics often

exclude queer lives and experiences. In the context of contemporary Korean queer literary works to be examined in the following sections, queer failure is not simply an end state; it is an active engagement with the conditions of queerness within a society that relentlessly seeks to homogenize. This engagement is characterized by irony—a refusal to submit to the normative benchmarks of societal integration and an embrace of the indeterminacy that queerness represents.

Paul de Man and Lee Edelman's theorizations of irony add further depth to the representation of queerness and queer failure. De Man elevates irony to a significant rhetorical device in modern rhetoric, considering it as a means of shifting the axis of text interpretation from the author to the reader. He articulates irony as an issue that resides within the performative capacity of the reader whose main concern is to render a text in front of them intelligible (1996, 166–67). When a text's primary rhetoric is irony, the readers must subvert the surface meaning and attribute a disparate, antithetical significance to it. Irony thus functions within the text as a mechanism that simultaneously emancipates the readers, allowing them to experience freedom from the text, while also raising awareness of the inherent limitations of this freedom confined within the act of textual comprehension. This approach to irony reframes the reader's role, necessitating an active interpretation that seeks meaning beyond the superficial narrative.

In this sense, de Man's concept of irony directly relates to this article's method of establishing queerness as a performative stance critical of the regulatory power over sexualities from an identitarian perspective and linking it to the interpretation method of queer literary texts. Edelman builds on de Man's argument to clarify the significance of irony in the context of queer theory. For Edelman, irony disrupts the "governing logic of narrative transitivity" that seeks to perpetuate societal norms and narrative (Hall and Jagose 2013, 294). It represents a structural defiance that allows queerness to question and subvert the temporality and teleology of the dominant societal narrative. In the literary works under examination in this article, irony emerges not merely as a literary device but as an intrinsic aspect of queer expression and critique. It underscores the performative nature of queerness as depicted in the fictions—queerness that is simultaneously revealed and obscured, integrated, and alienated. Irony thus becomes mechanism for these texts to question the very processes of societal integration, to challenge the readers to consider the multiplicity of meanings

and resistive potential of queer narratives.

This article, drawing from these theoretical underpinnings, delves into the Korean literary narratives that articulate queerness and queer failure with a sense of irony. These works demonstrate the role of queerness as an active force that not only critiques societal norms but also presents a radical reimagination of those norms. Queer failure, as depicted in the texts, eschews the notion of integration in favor of a more profound interaction with the societal fabric—one that can potentially rewrite the codes of identity and community.

Park Min-jung's "The School for Wives" articulates the ironic nuances of social integration, where queer identities often undergo a process of concealment and transformation to align with societal expectations. In contrast, Park Sang Young's novella "The Tears of an Unknown Artist, or Zaytun Pasta" demonstrates the complete embrace of queer failure as an embodiment of queerness within society's current order. In these narratives, queer failure becomes a form of resistance and a critique of the very notion of success as defined by a heteronormative society. The characters' refusal to relinquish their queerness, despite the pressure of societal conformity, marks a potent political stance—a move that suggests true integration is possible only when the societal norms themselves are questioned and reconfigured.

This article thus emphasizes that these works do not merely represent queer lives; they perform queerness through irony and failure, engaging the readers in a dialectic process that challenges the established narrative of identity and society. The queer characters depicted in these texts illuminate the inherent tensions and contradictions of attempting to integrate into society that fundamentally misconstrues or opposes queerness. In sum, this article argues that the representation of queerness in the two of the representative works from Korean queer literature in the 2010s is inherently ironic, serving as a performative act that defies normative societal narratives. This irony, interwoven with the narratives of queer failure, does not simply reflect a social reality but actively participate in the construction of an alternative queer utopia, one that transcends the limitations imposed by existing social structures.

## Performing Irony, Representing Queerness: Park Min-jung's "The School for Wives"

"The School for Wives" is set in contemporary Korea, where "same-sex marriage has been legalized" ("The School for Wives" 231).<sup>2</sup> The short story revolves around a married lesbian couple, Seolhye and Seon, both currently 29 years old. At 23, they adopted a three-year old son and have since been raising him together; their son is now nine years old. The two first met fifteen years ago when they were in middle school. Seolhye is a full-time homemaker, while Seon works as a model. When Seon's modeling career hits a plateau, she decides to participate as a contestant in a reality show called "Top Model Survival Korea." Seon manages to reach the final two in the show. To win first place, Seon decides to exploit her sexual identity and the story of her family. She asks Seolhye to appear on the show with their son to further her success. Seolhye contemplates whether using their son for Seon's success is the right decision. Ultimately, Seolhye accepts Seon's proposal, and the story concludes with a scene where the show's team is visiting their home for filming.

"The School for Wives" was published in the December 2014 issue of *Munyejungang* magazine, indicating that the implied readers of the work are people living in Korea in early 2015. As mentioned above, the narrative is based on the premise of legalized same-sex marriage. However, in 2015, same-sex marriage was not legalized in Korea, which leads readers to naturally assume that the story is set in the future. This understanding becomes confused owing to the following description: Seolhye and Seon first met 15 years ago, and at that time, Seolhye was reminded of a "girl who threw tomatoes while laughing in a TV commercial" ("The School for Wives" 217) upon seeing Seon's red hair. This commercial refers to SK Telecom's TTL advertisement that aired in 2000. Considering that Park, the author, was born in 1985, and the commercial gained tremendous popularity in Korea, it becomes evident that the narrative is set in 2015. Readers initially imagined the world depicted in the narrative as

the future, but at this point, it becomes unavoidable to recognize that this is the present world they are inhabiting. Moreover, the story indicates that the couple adopted a child three years earlier, suggesting that same-sex marriage should have been legalized in Korea by at least 2012. In essence, the narrative presents events that could occur in the future as already happened in the past. This work fictionalizes events yet to happen, treating them as already realized, thereby constituting an actualization of the future within the present.

This work exacerbates the temporal confusion by referring to 2015 as the "future" multiple times. In the first portion of the story, Seolhye reminisces briefly about an event from her college days in 2007. Amid this, she realizes that the present is 2015 and thinks of it as the distant future she has finally reached after a long journey: "Now is the future that has come far from back then"<sup>3</sup> ("The School for Wives" 215). This sentence designates the current year of 2015 as both the present and the future. From the perspective of 2007, 2015 is indeed the future, and the significant sense of distance felt by Seolhye between 2007 and 2015 is on account of the legalization of same-sex marriage during that period. For her, a lesbian, the legalization is a highly meaningful event that divides the time before and after. The fictional world depicted in the story decisively diverges from the real world between 2007 and 2015. The perceived distance between the two years is also a distance between fictional Korea and the actual Korea where the readers live. This distance arises due to the event of same-sex marriage legalization. It signifies the space between fictitious Korea and the real Korea, encapsulating the space between the present and the yet-to-come future. This distance between them is also the unsettling distance between the current state of Korea, where same-sex marriage remains unlegalized, and the possibility of such an event occurring. From the reader's standpoint, this work transfigures their present into the future. In this case, does the phrase "legalization of same-sex marriage" imply a transformative power capable of revolutionizing our present and shaping the future? This narrative technique reflects the concept of performativity, where the narrative's speculative nature questions the stability of heteronormative structures.

Excluding the fact that same-sex marriage is legalized, it is difficult to identify notable differences between the fictional world and the reality of 2015

2 Park Min-jung's "Anae deul ui hakgyo" (The School for Wives) was first published in 2014 and then included in the author's collection of short stories in 2017 on pages 211–41. In this article, I refer to the version included in this collection, and all English translation of quotations from the text are my own. For reference, this work was published in English translation by Jasmine Jeemin Lee in 2024, with full bibliographic details provided in the references section.

3 This is a literal translation of the Korean original, "지금은 그로부터 멀리 온 미래다." If translated more naturally, it would be "I have come a long way from that time, and now we are in the future."

Korea. This highlights the inherent irony where the narrative's surface meaning and intended meaning diverge significantly. It implies that even with the integration of queerness into the societal norms of marriage and family structure, the fundamental reform of the existing social order is not achieved. Even as the format remains entrenched in conventional institutions, the social integration of queerness can be viewed as an idealized future from the perspective of Korean society in 2015. This highlights the presence of queer utopianism within the narrative. Regardless of whether same-sex marriage is legalized, the year 2015 is the current reality, and queerness is inevitably positioned outside of societal norms. This realization emerges when the readers perceive the constructed world of the narrative simultaneously as the present and the future. By embracing the fictional world as the present, the readers become aware of the futurity of queerness, while accepting it as the future unveils the perpetual utopian political force of queerness in the present. In this regard, the work critically embodies society's failure to integrate queers into itself by imposing its readers to practice irony.

This temporal dissonance within the narrative resonates with Butler's notion of queerness as a performative act that destabilizes identity within power dynamics. In presenting a speculative yet familiar world, Park's story illustrates how the legalization of same-sex marriage, a seemingly radical future event, does not necessarily lead to a utopian reality. Instead, it reveals the inherent challenges and ironies of integrating queerness into societal norms. By juxtaposing the speculative future with the recognizable present, the narrative exposes the limitations of societal acceptance and the persistent marginalization of queers, thereby engaging the readers in an ironic contemplation of social progress and the utopian ideal.

In her college years in 2007, Seolhye hoped to attain social recognition for her queer identity. In the story's present-day of 2015, such hopes have been realized. However, in reality, this attainment does not translate into a life of success and happiness. The social integration of queerness remains an unrealized future event, even in 2015. Thus, when she refers to Korea as a "utopia," it becomes evident that the complete triumph of queerness within this world is unattainable. This remark highlights that such a utopia exists solely as a non-existent entity and as not manifesting in the current reality. Simply legalizing same-sex marriage does not qualify a society as a queer utopia. As a result, it underscores the impossibility of envisioning a genuine utopia in the present

moment. This designation emphasizes the inherent unfeasibility of utopia in the contemporary context while also underscoring its inseparable link to queerness.

The child of Seon and I. Seolhye murmured. The child is Seon and Seolhye's child, and Seon and Seolhye are the child's mothers. It was something that just a few years ago seemed unimaginable, not even a dream. Such a future was more unrealistic than an alien invasion—an impractical science fiction fantasy and an unattainable utopia. Seon and Seolhye could do anything. They could be each other's sole friend and even lovers. However, being a couple raising a child together, that was a relationship they did not even wish. Not every couple was like that, but Seon and Seolhye were. They didn't feel the need to get married. ("The School for Wives" 227–28)

In this passage, Seolhye, as if unable to believe it, pronounces that she and Seon are a legally married couple with their child. At that moment, she refers to the present as a future that was unimaginable. Then, she goes on to label this present, where the future has become a reality, as an "unattainable utopia." This can be seen as a mere expression highlighting the sudden and unexpected nature of the legalization of same-sex marriage. However, when readers approach the narrative in 2015, they recognize that the narrative's present is the future. In this case, the sense of wonder experienced by Seolhye regarding her reality becomes a commonplace emotion that readers are supposed to feel. In the reality outside the text, readers paradoxically comprehend that the realization of legal same-sex marriage is unattainable. Thus, the portrayal of the narrative's reality as unrealistic is not merely a figurative expression but an objective depiction of actual reality. This assertion finds support in the inherently fictional nature of the situation within the reader's present moment. Consequently, the effect of this work's manifestation of the future within the present can be understood as an acknowledgment of the inherent impossibility of social integration for queerness in the present-day reality.

However, it is noteworthy that the endeavor for the social integration of queerness is not necessarily tied to the heteronormative institution of family centered on heterosexual couples. In the quote above, Seolhye perceives the ability of her and her partner to form a bourgeois nuclear family as utopian. She appraises this situation as a significant progression: the world where same-sex marriage is permitted is regarded as "a world that has become better," "the kind of world that [queers] longed for" ("The School for Wives" 240). Seolhye

acknowledges, “This is the utopia I desired” (“The School for Wives” 241). However, such evaluations are based on the assumption of a predetermined form of social intimacy represented by heterosexual couples and the families they create as parents.

As seen in the quotation above, when being a married couple was not a realistic option, Seolhye and Seon were in a relationship where they could “do anything” together. However, after getting married, they became fixed into a relationship where “Seon is the husband and Seolhye is the wife” (“The School for Wives” 224). When they got married and became parents, Seon became a father who gave off a “stoic head of the household vibe” (“The School for Wives” 231), as she focused on her business. Seolhye became a mother who prepared healthy meals with produce purchased through a cooperative. And under such parents, their son performs his role as a child “with almost no complaints” (“The School for Wives” 230). This portrayal highlights present-day society as one that reduces all interpersonal relationships to heterosexual couple dynamics and the accompanying bourgeois family structure. In essence, it represents a system aimed at eradicating any forms of intimacy that fall outside the confines of the family. It exposes the underlying reality wherein all possible queer intimacies are suppressed, while ironically, we continue to perform our assigned roles within this constructed reality, feigning ignorance of the suppression at play. This reflects the concept of queer failure, which reimagines failure as a subversive act.

If the transition from a relationship characterized by open possibilities to a state where non-marital relationships are deemed inconceivable is perceived as a reflection of utopian progress within society, then, undeniably, our current society already embodies this utopian ideal. In this society, anyone fulfilling the role of a spouse is recognized as a legitimate member, while queers are excluded from this recognition by the very notion of “anyone.” Consequently, queers are perpetually expelled from the societal framework, highlighting how queerness can only exist as an unattainable utopian quality within the present social order, manifesting as an ongoing failure of social integration. We are compelled to retrace the future possibilities of unrestricted relationships back to the past and accept that the only viable option in the present is to conform to the institution of marriage. Consequently, our future is solely entrusted to the responsibility of the child who emerges from these marital unions. Upon Seolhye’s realization that she is also a mother, akin to her mother, she immediately contemplates that “it is more important that I am someone’s mother than the fact that someone is

my mother” (“The School for Wives” 230). This mindset signifies a resistance to incorporate any semblance of a future within her present existence, instead prioritizing the perpetuation of the family unit. Thus, when this work refers to the present as a utopia, it implies an unceasing perpetuation of the present rather than a genuine arrival of the future.

Despite the assertion of utopia’s presentness, we can still envision the futurity of utopia through this work because of the enduring queerness that defies socialization regardless of the circumstances. The work ironically reveals that the failure of queerness to integrate into heteronormative notions of intimacy is the sole pathway to actualizing utopia in the present. This becomes evident when Seolhye and Seon’s family can only be sustained when they perform their prescribed roles as a family within the social sphere and when society acknowledges this performance as natural. In essence, the queerness of queers is only recognized when they can fulfill societal expectations despite the inherent inadequacies stemming from their queerness.

This becomes apparent when Seolhye and Seon describe their own family as “still the most precious family to me” (“The School for Wives” 241). As a married couple and parents, they hold official titles recognized by society. However, when they introduce their family to the wider social sphere, they do not simply say, “This is my family.” Instead, they use the phrase above as if society were asking them: “Is it true that this is your genuine family?” or “Is it acceptable for you to have such a non-conventional family?” The inclusion of the word “still” implies that this family is perpetually vulnerable to relegation to the realm of social abjection and that it is merely an imitation of a genuine, heterosexual family. Furthermore, the phrase “to me” is a substitute for “to queers like me who can never conform to heteronormativity.” Finally, the term “most precious” signifies that this particular configuration of a family is one of the limited options available to queers. This introduction implicitly recognizes that everyone understands the truth regarding queers’ integration into society: queerness can never be assimilated into societal expectations. Simultaneously, this sentence conveys the potential reality of exclusion that queers must confront, with its essence encapsulated in the word “still.”

In this society, queerness entails forming a family, despite being queer, and referring to that family as “still the most precious family to me.” When queer individuals introduce their family using this phrase, it may seem to demonstrate their success in establishing a family and the significance of the

family as a cherished asset. However, in reality, queers are permanently excluded from a society that upholds the highest value of family. Moreover, at the core of queer anti-sociality lies a challenge to the reproduction of family values.<sup>4</sup> This is exemplified through the deliberate use of the word “still.” What becomes apparent through the successful transition of queer relationships into bourgeois families in “The School for Wives” is the inherent antisocial nature of queerness, achieved despite their secular accomplishments.

However, a more significant implication is that social oppression towards queerness can be more stifling when it takes the form of social inclusion rather than active prohibition. In the former case, queers are compelled to define their queerness and ensure its separation from their social lives. Thus, power transforms the prohibition of queerness into the stable reproduction of normality.<sup>5</sup> In this process, the subject's queerness becomes entirely contingent on not being queer despite their essential queerness. If the only viable way to be queer is to be not queer despite queerness to gain social acceptance, then queerness is enacted within society by ironically maintaining a framework of “despite-ness.”

The significance of presenting the future adopted by “The School for Wives” can be further elucidated here. It serves as a strategy to expose the absence of inherent inevitability in the current state, utilizing the syntax of “despite.” The narrative begins by assuming the legalization of same-sex marriage despite its impractical likelihood. As the story unfolds, readers are confronted with a situation where queerness is effectively suppressed regardless of the legal status of same-sex marriage. Thus, it becomes evident that the oppression faced by queers is perpetuated through institutional mechanisms, whether it is the prohibition of same-sex marriage or exclusion from bourgeois family structures.

4 In the scene where Seolhye refers to the present as the long-awaited utopia, In A-young (2018) discerns irony. Seolhye realizes the extent of oppression in her queerness, and this realization ironically leads her to understand that utopia should remain something unattainable and longed for under any circumstances. In (2018) names this ironic practice an “ethical attitude,” but I seek to establish it as an aesthetic of practicing queerness.

5 Based on Foucault's theory of power, which operates to protect society, Halberstam has stated that disciplines “statically reproduce themselves and inhabit dissent.” This implies that the totality of control by disciplinary power over society is established not through the legal prohibition of potential dissenters but through their integration into society via normalization. At this point, the inherent subversiveness of queerness is revealed as it cannot be incorporated into the reproduction of regulatory power or be normalized in any way (Halberstam 2011, 10).

These mechanisms operate in both the present reality characterized by such constraints and the future reality devoid of such prohibitions, resulting in the expulsion of queerness from societal norms.

It also becomes apparent that the perpetuation of societal norms through the oppression of queerness does not necessarily rely on current institutional prohibitions alone. At this juncture, to embody queerness, it becomes necessary to employ irony that exposes the arbitrariness of the existing social order and achieves a seamless totality within that society. Such sentiments as “queers coexist in the same society with us despite their queerness” portrays queers solely under the label of “queers” through the use of “despite” in its syntax. Thus, this queerness, which disrupts the narrative understanding of the text through the performance of irony, does not emerge as a positive and constructive concept for a new society but as a horizon that delineates the boundary where the possibilities of the present society intersect with utopia. Queer elements that undeniably exist within the present but are treated as non-existent are brought to realization through the enactment of irony, and this precisely embodies the unique aesthetic of queer failure.

By positioning queerness as both a marker of failure and a source of ironic subversion, “The School for Wives” embodies the theoretical insights discussed in the introduction. The narrative's speculative nature and temporal dislocation highlight the performative aspects of queerness, questioning the stability of heteronormative structures. The story illustrates how queer failure, rather than being a mere lack of success, serves as a critique of normative metrics and societal integration. This approach aligns with the broader theoretical framework that views irony and queer failure as essential tools for exposing the limitations societal norms and envisioning alternative social imaginaries. Through its ironic portrayal of a seemingly successful yet fundamentally flawed integration of queerness, the story underscores the persistent tensions and contradictions inherent in attempts to reconcile queerness with a heteronormative social order. In doing so, it invites readers to engage in a critical examination of the societal mechanisms that perpetuate exclusion and to imagine the radical possibilities that arise from embracing the indeterminacy and subversive potential of queerness.

## Completion of Queer Failure and Its Aesthetic: Park Sang Young's "The Tears of an Unknown Artist, or Zaytun Pasta"

In "The School for Wives," lesbians achieve socioeconomic success by willingly suppressing their queerness and conforming to the heteronormative structure of a nuclear family. Instead of simply referring to their family as "my family," they must assert that it is "still the most precious family to me." Through this language, queerness becomes a significant obstacle to social advancement, symbolized by the bourgeois nuclear family. Readers interpret performative queerness as compelling evidence that ironically validates societal success. This work elucidates the need for the voluntary suppression of queerness to thrive within a capitalist system. The importance of queers' ironic performance of their queerness becomes evident when readers engage with the narrative as a platform for practicing the theory of irony. Within this narrative, readers must recognize that the realization of a queer utopia inherently signifies the failure of a society incapable of integrating queerness into its fabric.

In this light, the following proposition can be posited: if there exist individuals who fully embody social failure, they will aesthetically manifest queerness. This directly connects to Halberstam's art of queer failure discussed earlier. Halberstam emphasizes the subversive potential of failure that forces us to critically reassess societal standards of success. Moreover, Halberstam's theory identifies that the practice of this subversion is possible through performing failure in a queer manner. This article seeks to pinpoint this practice as irony, the aesthetic of queer literature. Park Sang Young's "The Tears of an Unknown Artist, or Zaytun Pasta" (hereafter, "The Tears") portrays a queer artist who seeks social success while preserving his queer identity but ultimately finds himself in a state of "thorough failure" ("The Tears" 215).<sup>6</sup> In other words, his

straightforward representation of queer lives fails to succeed in a society that operates on the principle of suppressing queerness. Consequently, from society's perspective, the predestined failure becomes a form of "completion" ("The Tears" 213), and thus queerness is enacted as a state of nothingness. Therefore, "The Tears" reveals that when the principles of socialization are fully realized, queer lives are reduced to nothingness and ironically exposes society as the true embodiment of nothingness. In this context, the irony is established as the aesthetic of queer failure and simultaneously reveals the inherent utopian horizon within the present.

The protagonist of "The Tears" is Park, a former film director in his early thirties. In his twenties, he directed his debut feature film, *The Unknown Universal Love*. Although the film was selected for a film festival, it failed to receive any awards due to criticism that it lacked typical elements of queer cinema. This evaluation prompted Park to reflect on the significance of his film during a special screening event organized by an LGBTQ+ rights organization, a year later. After the event, Park unexpectedly encounters someone from his past. During his early twenties, Park served in the Zaytun Division and was deployed to Iraq, where he engaged in a physical relationship with one of his fellow soldiers, Wangsha. Following their discharge, their contact was limited. Their reunion occurs unexpectedly after the screening event, leading to a close friendship. The novella's narrative commences with Park engaged in menial tasks at a B-grade erotic gay film company. Subsequently, he receives an invitation to moderate a film-related event, where he encounters Daniel Oh, a filmmaker who adopts a false gay persona for attention and celebrity status. After the event, Park and Wangsha, in a state of intoxication, venture through the entertainment district of a new city near Seoul, seeking to alleviate feelings of "thorough failure" through spontaneous dancing.

A notable point in this narrative is Park's drastic change in opinion about his film. He initially aims to achieve success with his film but is completely thwarted by society, which deems his film not queer enough. Initially, Park

<sup>6</sup> This novella was first published in the Autumn 2017 issue of *Munhakdongne* and then included in the author's fiction collection with the same title. When citing this work in this article, the English translation is from Anton Hur's translation, which was divided into three installments and published in *Words Without Borders* web magazine on February 1, 2019 (<https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2019-02/february-2019-the-tears-of-an-unknown-artist-or-zaytun-pasta-sang-young-par/>), March 5, 2019 (<https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2019-03/march-2019-the-tears-of-an-unknown-artist-or-zaytun-pasta-part-ii-sang/>), and April 1, 2019 (<https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2019-04/april-2019-the-tears-of-an-unknown-artist-or-zaytun-pasta-part-iii-sang/>).

The phrase "thorough failure" appears in the second-to-last paragraph of the work, encapsulating the protagonist's final assessment of Wangsha and his lives as queers. The literal translation of the

relevant passage would be as follows: "Such thorough failure is difficult to find even in the movies. We have failed. We have miserably failed and become nothing." Hur translated this passage as "I had fucked up at a level that was hard to find even in the movies. We had fucked up. We had fucked up and were nothing." Since the phrase "thorough failure" in the original aligns with the argument of this article, the expression from the literal translation was used here.

vehemently rejects the heteronormative society's judgement of his queer film's queerness, but later, he accepts it. Park embodies the irony of seeking self-sufficient representation of queerness through his artistic creation while simultaneously desiring recognition from a fundamentally non-queer, heteronormative society. Eventually he realizes that this irony—stabilizing his identity as queer by gaining societal recognition of his queerness—is not truly queer but rather heteronormative. Let us examine Park's motivation for creating his debut film, *The Unknown Universal Love*:

I went to Iraq to make a queer film the likes of which the world had never seen.

The independent film scene was swept up in a queer film wave when I was in college. I watched every queer flick that opened in Korea out of my natural-born duty as a queer, but I was disappointed each time. The films were melodramatic or transparently political and far from the realities of real gay men (in other words, from myself). It was almost enough to make me homophobic.

I decided to use my disgust as creative energy to become something completely different. I was going to make a 100 percent pure queer movie that did not flaunt my queerness like a medal or consume it through the objectification of melodrama....But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't come up with a script that would turn this world around. I only managed to turn my stomach. Like so many failed film students before me, I ended up running away into my military conscription duties instead, vowing that I'd return someday as the hot new thing debuting at Cannes.

(“The Tears” 147–48)

Park feels disappointed that existing queer films fail to authentically depict the lived experiences of queer individuals, including his own. Many films addressing sexual minorities either romanticize the oppression they face or overtly advocate for identity politics. Park rejects sentimental and political approaches and sets out on a mission to create a groundbreaking queer film that represents queerness from an unadulterated queer perspective, a film that the world has never seen before.

After completing his military service in Iraq, Park undergoes a challenging process and completes his debut film, which naturally features queer characters as central figures. However, contrary to Park's high expectations, the film

receives minimal recognition within the film industry and fails to secure any awards, even at the least prestigious one—the First Diversity Film Festival. The judges comment on the characters' love story, stating that it has no points that show them as different from straight people, simply portraying young people going out, drinking, dancing, and having sex. Initially, Park reacts strongly against such evaluations. However, upon revisiting the film a year later, he realizes that it is essentially about ordinary people who live unremarkably, with an anticlimactic ending. He even contemplates that, aside from the protagonist's homosexuality, there is nothing particularly special about the film. Moreover, he critically reflects on himself, acknowledging that “I'm really nothing” (“The Tears” 207). In short, Park's ambitious queer film is unanimously deemed meaningless.

Despite Park's attempt to portray the authentic realities of queers, neither he nor anyone else can discern genuine queerness within the film. Despite his intentions, what remains is a meaningless depiction of “ordinary people” (“The Tears” 181) that lacks any genuine queerness. Let us revisit the scene where Park, incensed by the evaluations of his debut work, passionately declares, “I [will] never lose” (“The Tears” 182). As mentioned previously, *The Unknown Universal Love* is invited to a film festival but fails to secure any awards. Instead, the top prize is awarded to a queer film directed by Daniel Oh, which is lauded for beautifully showcasing a same-sex relationship and elevating homosexuality to the realm of universal love. However, Park vehemently criticizes Oh's film as a “disaster” for “seriously objectifying” (“The Tears” 178) sexual minorities. In Park's estimation, Oh is heterosexual, and he believes that Oh and the judges who bestowed the prize have an inadequate understanding of queerness and have never viewed queers as “ordinary people.”

In his film, Park aimed to convey the message that queers, despite their queerness, are capable of experiencing universal love. However, upon revisiting the film later on, he acknowledges that achieving the ideal of universal love as a queer reduces one to a state of nothingness. In other words, the social acceptance and success of queers necessitate the complete abandonment of their queerness. This aligns with the notion that the societal integration of queerness demands a complete relinquishment of queerness, thus rendering it unrepresentable. Ironically, the attainment of queerness is entirely dependent on embracing thorough failure. At this juncture, thorough failure establishes itself as an aesthetic characteristic of queerness within the framework of societal

normalcy. Within this context, readers encounter a scene in which Park shares with Wangsha the notion that thorough failure should not be regarded as a mere failure but as a state of completion.

“Don't do that. Wangsha. You're drunk.”

“We completely lost, we couldn't even properly steal one microphone.”

“Stop crying. It wasn't that expensive.”

“I failed. Everything was taken away. The microphone, the dance, even my dad. Everything I love has completely disappeared. We fucked up.”<sup>7</sup>

Wangsha bellowed, “Father! Father!” and bawled his eyes out on the street.

“Hey, come on, cut it out. You're thirty-five years old. This isn't going to bring your dad back.”

“Dead must be dead. Everyone must be dead. They all fucked up.”

“No, they didn't fuck up. They're just complete. Your father completed a successful life. And you've completed your dream of modern dance. We have, I mean, we've...”

We've completed our dreams and all our feelings. That's what I was trying to say but I was crying so I couldn't. (“The Tears” 213)

In this scene, Wangsha reflects on his life and describes it as a profound failure, marked by the absence of a stable family and occupational success. He laments the loss of everything dear to him, declaring that he has been stripped of what he held most precious. Park, on the other hand, aims to convey to Wangsha that being in a state where everything cherished has been “taken away” can be seen as a form of “completion.” This notion connects with the earlier scene where Park adamantly proclaims that he “would never lose” in response to criticism from heterosexual individuals who assert that his film lacks authentic queer elements.

Wangsha expresses his overall sense of failure as a definitive defeat in the eyes of heterosexuals, who have deprived him of all that is meaningful to him. As queers strive to embody and express their queerness genuinely, their

queerness becomes increasingly diminished. However, even with this loss, queers cannot achieve success within the framework of societal norms. It is only when queers willingly surrender their queerness and conform to societal expectations that they can attain social recognition and accomplishment. Consequently, the more queers strive for victory, the more resounding their defeat becomes. If they choose not to pursue victory out of fear of defeat, they are unable to escape the initial state of defeat. Thus, the existence of queerness in the social realm is characterized by a state of nothingness, perpetually confronting society to maintain this state. However, queers find themselves in a situation where even their right to represent this nothingness has been usurped by heterosexuals. They have been entirely defeated in their struggle for recognition of their queerness and their rights by heterosexuals.

This defeat is suffered by “queers who laughed and drank and had sex and were going to die” (“The Tears” 215) at the hands of heterosexuals. Through the defeat, it becomes evident that even though queers and heterosexuals are leading the same lives consisting of laughing, drinking, having sex, and finally dying, queers are arbitrarily differentiated and constructed as beings destined to be defeated by heterosexuals. This differentiation, driven by heteronormative principles, serves as an arbitrary justification for depriving queers of their right to queerness. The deprivation manifests as disheartening, in which queers feel that “everything has been taken away” from them. Consequently, the moment of complete failure aligns, from society's perspective, with the moment where the principles of reality are fully realized through the suppression of queerness, thus signifying a moment of fulfillment. Ironically, this moment also serves as a reminder that the only viable path to realizing queerness is through the failure of queers to succeed within societal norms.

During a gathering, Wangsha becomes very drunk. When a heterosexual individual expresses her intention to depart from the gathering to attend to her household responsibilities and work the following day, Wangsha responds with the following statement.

“Hey, do you think we're drinking because we're not drunk? We're enduring it all with our mental strength. You heteros' mindsets are hopeless.<sup>8</sup> ...Jesus,

7 The sentences spoken by Wangsha in the conversation so far are not Anton Hur's translation, but a literal translation of the Korean original. Considering the context of the following interpretation, the expressions in the original are more relevant. Hur's English translation is as follows: “Don't do that. Wangsha. You're drunk.” / “We fucking lost. We couldn't even steal a microphone properly.” / “Stop crying. It wasn't that expensive.” / “We fucked up. I lost everything. The mike, my dancing, my father. Everything I loved is gone.”

8 The second and third sentences are translated literally from the Korean original. Hur's translation of this part is as follows: “We're making an effort here! You goddamn heterosexuals, you're all so fucking

I'm so sick of straight people. Popping out their ugly babies all over the place."  
 ("The Tears" 187)

Queers, like anyone else, may have concerns about the consequences of heavy drinking for the following day. However, queers can continue drinking despite these concerns. They assert that they can endure it all through their mental strength, raising the question of what this elusive mental strength possessed by queers entails. This notion may imply that queers are inherently aware of the fundamental meaninglessness of societal norms and the principles that constrain social individuals. As a result, truly queer individuals possess a latent power to disregard reality. This empowers queers to declare that they do not solely identify as queer nor as fully accountable members of society; rather, they assert that they are "nothing to begin with, [become] nothing, and [will] always be nothing" ("The Tears" 215). This recognition of being "absolutely nothing at all" represents the ironic practice of queer utopianism ("The Tears" 215).

In conclusion, Park's novella underscores the inherent irony within the societal integration of queerness. The novella reveals that true queerness manifests through the embrace of failure, challenging normative standards of success and exposing the emptiness of societal norms. This analysis aligns with the theoretical discussions in the introduction, particularly Halberstam's concept of queer failure and the performative nature of queerness as discussed by Butler. Through this narrative, Park not only critiques the societal marginalization of queerness but also highlights the utopian potential embedded within the ironic aesthetic of queer failure. Understanding the aesthetic of thorough failure in queer literature, and by extension art, within the context of thorough failure is the reader's task, focusing on the continuous performance of queerness through the societal failures. By engaging with the theory of irony, readers become practitioners in queering the act of reading itself, thus recalling the political implications of queer literature within society.

## Conclusion

In "The School for Wives," the notion of utopia as a future possibility diminishes as queerness is assimilated into society. It becomes apparent that the society perpetuating the existing state of heteronormativity is the utmost form of conceivable utopia. Queerness also takes on the role of an ironic theory that functions as "the impossible within the possible," demanding readers to put this theory into action (Butler 2011, 180). Through the practice of irony, readers come to recognize that the construction and maintenance of society rely entirely on power's narrative of social protection, which obstructs the authentic representation of queerness. Simultaneously, readers embody queerness as a force of irony that dismantles this narrative. However, these attempts at realization ultimately result in a thorough failure, but the present reality of society hinges upon this failure. In this sense, queerness becomes the distinct principle of societal organization that can articulate itself clearly. "The Tears" which declares the completion of the entirety of society, including queers, through the thorough failure to realize queerness, holds significant meaning within this context.

The failure one may experience is ultimately a queer failure, resolute and thorough. The queerness realized through such failure is, in essence, "absolutely nothing," rendering it impossible to be represented conventionally (Edelman 2004, 5). It can only be ironically performed, as the failure becomes increasingly comprehensive. This constitutes the aesthetic of queer failure. In the final scene of "The Tears," Wangsha recognizes that as a queer, everything has been taken away by heterosexuals. However, simultaneously, Park perceives that "we" have been completed. Park can seem to engage in "identifying through loss," where he embraces the antisocial nature of queerness by rejecting the pragmatic response of identifying with identity-based traits that inevitably lead queers to defeat in society. Moreover, he transcends the performance of defeat itself, transforming it into unwavering hope for utopia. He realizes that queers like Wangsha share "the most painful" experiences of thorough failure, which always remain unknown to society and exist as "the most impossible stories." These stories haunt society like ghosts, and Park's aesthetic of converting queer failure into the only possible completion manifests his "willingness to live with ghosts" (Love 2007, 43).

The analysis of the two works above reveals that queer literature in 2010s

Korea suggests methods of resistance against two forms of disciplinary power. “The School for Wives” highlights how power operates to domesticate queerness within a society according to the ideals of liberal human rights discourse. Power employs sophisticated strategies to eliminate any utopian aspirations, regardless of whether they are queer. In “The Tears,” power utilizes regulatory methods that render queerness unrepresentable and, therefore, unidentifiable, reducing it to a ghostly existence. However, ultimately, power inadvertently emphasizes queerness as the original constitutive force of sociality. Whether attempting to integrate queers socially or marginalize them as insignificant, power endeavors to conceal queerness as the unknown core truth of that society and the source of all utopian praxis.

These two works suggest that for the current state of society, arbitrarily constructed by power, to be considered utopian, it must receive validation from queers. A society where same-sex marriage is legalized can only be recognized as a utopia by lesbians, and a society that appropriates everything from queers can only be deemed complete by gays. The two narratives present queerness as an epistemological principle that enables a precise understanding of our society, constituted by heteronormative principles (Sedgwick 2008, 1). Only by becoming practitioners of queerness can we accurately perceive our society. Therefore, our ability to intervene in social change lies in relentless resistance against the domestication and marginalization of queerness.

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## Abstract

This article examines the representation of queerness in 2010s' Korean literature, showcasing a significant shift from prior depictions of queer subjects as symbols of deviance to embodiment of critical resistance against social norms. It posits queerness as a performative act, one that not only challenges established identities but also questions societal constructs. The concept of queer failure is reinterpreted as a subversive stance against normative definitions of success, proposing that failure itself can be a form of critique and expression of queerness. Through analyzing fictions by Park Min-jung and Park Sang Young, this article highlights how irony serves as a central narrative strategy, allowing for a multifaceted portrayal of queerness that both reveals and disrupts. This irony facilitates a deeper engagement with the texts, prompting readers to confront and reinterpret the conventional narratives around identity and societal integration. This article suggests that the ironic representation of queerness and failure contribute to a re-envisioning of social structures, proposing the potential for a queer utopia that extends beyond the confines of current societal limitations.

**Keywords:** queer, narrative, irony, failure, aesthetic

