

DISABLED BODIES IN KOREAN FICTIONS IN THE 1970s: *THE DWARF* AND “YOUNG-JA’S HEYDAY”

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Abstract The modernization’s intervention with human bodies around the 1970s in Korea is epitomized in Cho Se-hui’s *The Dwarf* and Cho Sunjak’s “Young-ja’s Heyday.” In *The Dwarf*, the protagonist as Other represents the powerless low classes, especially manual labourers. Utilized like mechanical tools, his grotesque body is reified. Having lost one arm while working as a labourer, Young-ja becomes a prostitute, a sexual commodity. Both marginalized characters, who dreamed of escaping from the reality, die when they lose the exchange values of their bodies. Both best-sellers implicitly criticize the dominant capitalistic system that exploits low-class bodies to the extent of dehumanization.

Keywords Other, body, modernization, reification, commodity.

Introduction

What reflects the condition of human existence most undecisively is the human body itself. A human body can never be separated from the circumstances in which it exists. What crucially determines bodily states is the socio-economic situation where bodies are placed. Bodies are affected by the socio-economic system that utilizes them for production and ideological representation. The body is a site upon which social, cultural, economic, and political forces are imposed. The impacts of such forces linger upon and remain in bodies.

Bodies in modern Korea vividly exemplify such an interrelation. The modern Korean society, especially after the liberation from Japan, underwent drastic changes accompanied

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by the unprecedented rapid industrialization. The mechanization altered the mode bodies existed. Bodies as materials were coercively incorporated into the capitalistic system of production. The violent forces required for the operation of the mechanized system were unavoidably exerted upon bodies. The mechanization's intervention with human bodies in Korea was arguably at its apogee around the 1970s. Human bodies were most harshly exploited and abused in the industrialized system. The relentless exploitation of low-class bodies was accompanied by the dehumanization of labourers, namely the reification and commodification propelled by the capitalistic project.

The vestiges of brutal forces, often in alliance with dominant ideologies, can be detected in cultural products. Literary works reflect such a miserable condition of life. Some Korean modern writers during the 60s and 70s have been preoccupied with the bodily states of contemporary Koreans. Deformed bodies elucidate the imposition of socio-economic forces upon bodies. For the deformed bodies are the results of the devastating force of capitalistic industrialization. As labouring bodies were exploited extremely harshly, they were damaged to the extent of being out of the range of normal human bodies. Representative of Otherness, they can expose some ways bodies were exploited to an extreme degree.

We can find two great works that feature disabled bodies as commodified or reified. Cho Se-hui's *The Dwarf* (1975) and Cho Sunjak's "Young-ja's Heyday" (1973) are remarkable for deformed main characters. The English titles are translations, and the original Korean titles are respectively *Nanjangiga Ssoalrin Jageun Gong* and *Young-jai Jeonseongsidae*.¹ *The Dwarf* is a collection of 12 short stories that were serialized from 1975, and published in a book format in 1978. As a short story, "Young-ja's Heyday" forms a part of related stories set in the hostess culture. As the most representative works of the two major writers, both are very well known to the public.

¹ The original meaning of Cho Se-hui's work is 'A small ball shot by a dwarf.' There is another translation titled *A Dwarf Launches a Little Ball* (Seoul: Jimoondang, 2002). This translation by Chun Kyung-ja is, in terms of meaning, closer to the original Korean work. However, this is a shortened translation of some limited parts of the original collection. Thus, I chose *The Dwarf* published by University of Hawai'i Press in 2006. In this version mostly used for referencing, the author's name is written 'Cho Se-hŭi,' which is slightly different from Cho Se-hui. The book thoroughly adopted McCune-Reischauer Romanization system to represent Korean language. However, I primarily used 'Cho Se-hui' which is usually used nowadays, especially by Korean official institutions. It is according to Revised Romanization of Korean system. Except for some resources and textual parts originally Romanized according to McCune-Reischauer system, the officially revised system is used in this article.

In this article, I will focus on how the main characters' deformed bodies are used as a mechanistic instrument or sexualized commodity in the capitalistic Korean society that was undergoing industrialization and urbanization in combination. In order to socio-historically contextualize their works, the history of disabled bodies in the modern Korean literature needs to be retraced. In their emphasis on the bodily features, their works are distinctive from traditional Korean works. In fact, "it can be seen that very few traditional Korean tales highlight the disabled figure in the first place."² It is undeniable that disabled main characters are hardly found in general. It needs to be noted, however, that there are some differences between periods. Disabled figures can be more frequently found comparatively in works during the Japanese colonization period. This tendency can be definitely attributed to the miserable states of Koreans suffering from the colonial exploitation by Japan. Although Korea was emancipated in 1945, this gloomy mood, coupled with the dramatizations of disabled bodies, continued into the following periods. Not long after the Liberation, the Korean War broke out, and a dystopian atmosphere pervaded in its aftermath. This period characterized by despair and pain was followed by the beginning of industrialization in the early 1960s. The industrialization that precipitated the dehumanizing situation in the 70s became the determining factor of bodies' existential mode. The novel ways bodies were forced to function are reflected by the two writers. The deformities of bodies in their works are deeply intertwined with the mechanization of society relentlessly driven by the capitalistic pursuit. Against this brutal force, there arose resistant or subversive writings. Both *The Dwarf* and "Young-ja's Heyday" need to be placed in this trend. Especially, *The Dwarf* demonstrates a critical viewpoint upon the dominant system, though implicitly expressed to avoid the censure of the military regime. *The Dwarf* was "part of a new wave of socially engaged text."³ The fiction "responds to the ideological issues of its time as well. As such, it eloquently represents the literature of the 1970s."⁴ Though in a form of popular fiction, "Young-ja's Heyday" is also critical. It can be

² Kyeong-Hee Choi, "Impaired Body as Colonial Trope: Kang Kyong'ae's "Underground Village"," *Public Culture* 13, no. 3 (2001): 432.

³ Sunyoung Park, "Dissident Dreams: Science Fictional Imaginations in 1970s South Korean Literature and Film," in *Cultures of Yusin: South Korea in the 1970s*, ed. Youngju Ryu (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 2018), 175.

⁴ Marshall R. Pihl, "The Nation, the People, and a Small Ball: Literary Nationalism and Literary Populism in Contemporary Korea," in *South Korea's Minjung Movement: The Culture and Politics of Dissidence*, ed. Kenneth M. Wells (Manoa: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), 214.

agreed that during the 1970s, popular fictions tended to signal resistance to the oppression of the military regime.⁵

Though the two fictions share much in common, they are differentiated or even contrasted in some aspects. While *The Dwarf* presents an abnormally small body of proletariat as instrumentalized like mechanical devices, “Young-ja’s Heyday” depicts a life of a woman who loses one arm and thus becomes a prostitute. Besides the differences in their scopes, the literary methods they employ are contrasted and the critics’ evaluations also differ. Critics have not so highly evaluated Cho Sunjak as Cho Se-hui. While Cho Sunjak is basically classified as a writer of popular fiction, Cho Se-hui has received critical attention much more seriously. Cho Se-hui is undoubtedly one of the most important Korean writers. He rose to this position solely thanks to *The Dwarf*. Bruce Fulton highly evaluates the work as “the most important one-volume novel of the post-1945 period”⁶ in Korea. As for its impact, Marshall Pihl remarks, “Indeed, Jo’s [Cho’s] language and form has had such an epoch-making impact on contemporary Korean writing.”⁷ As the most prominent literary critic on Korean literature, Kim Yoon-shik reaffirms its significance, Cho’s “stories demonstrate an unprecedented and revolutionary change in Korean writers’ ways of thinking, enabling us to draw a line between the literature of the “pre-dwarf period” and the literature of the “post-dwarf period”.”⁸

Meanwhile, Cho Sunjak’s merits can be found in other aspects. As a forerunner of so-called hostess literature, he deals with a disabled woman’s sexual labour. The sexual labour was one of the most problematic aspects of female bodies in the proletarian class during the industrialization. He addresses the social problems of women who flocked from rural areas into Seoul to get job. However, they typically follow the routine of being deteriorated from factory labourer to prostitute. This is what Cho Sunjak realistically dramatizes, not symbolically as Cho Se-hui does. By depicting straightforwardly, the work can reflect and convey social realities to the public.

⁵ See Kyeoung-yeol Bae, “Cho Sunjakui daejung soseole natanan changnyeo seosawa seosajeolryak gochal” [Study on prostitute narrative and its strategy in Cho Sunjak’s popular fictions], *Inmunhakyongu* 46, 2013.

⁶ Bruce Fulton, “Literature—Korea,” in *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia Vol. 3* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2002), 500.

⁷ Marshall R. Pihl, 345.

⁸ Yoon-shik Kim, “The Korean Novel in the Age of Industrialization,” in *Korean Literature: Its Classical Heritage and Modern Breakthroughs*, ed. Korean National Commission for UNESCO (New Jersey: Hollym, 2003), 324.

Reified proletarian body of dwarf

The Dwarf is one of Korean fictions that have been most vehemently discussed and analyzed by critics domestically. A large number of critics have analyzed the work from various perspectives, primarily in relation to the industrialization and labouring classes suffering from it. For example, Oh Saeng-keun remarks that the work “delves deeply into the problems of alienated classes and labour, the central social issues that emerged during the period of industrialization.”⁹ This kind of opinion is shared by a number of critics. It is “a dystopian, apocalyptic vision of South Korean society at the height of its industrialization.”¹⁰

This critical trend has helped to elucidate the author’s intention to implicitly criticize the contemporary industrialization and subsequent social problems with elusive literary techniques. Despite the critical contributions, there are undeniable limitations in pre-existing interpretations. What is problematic is that few articles have focused on the body itself of the dwarf. Critics tend to pay attention less to his body than the socio-political aspects of the contemporary Korean society in which the novel was written. Critics generally have regarded his body as a symbol of have-nots in the Korean society. They have rather overlooked the significance of the body itself beyond the symbolizing effect.

There are a few exceptional papers that focus on the dwarf’s body itself. Overcoming the limitations of the pre-existing studies, Lee Cheong focuses on the handicapped body itself. Undeniably, she foregrounds his body emphasizing the illness of him. However, she does not sufficiently discuss the implications of body in detail.¹¹ Thus his body remains to be further explored. His body is interrelated with the socio-political and economic issues of the work. Without exploring the implications of body, it is difficult to comprehend the work as a whole. His body is a site upon which socio-political and economic forces operate. His body is a medium through which the mechanism of industrialized society can be read.

What characterizes the dwarf above all is the deformity of body itself. The grotesque smallness is the determining factor of his identity. As an old man at the age of fifty two, he is 117cm tall and weighs 35kg. The abnormally small body has connotations, not

⁹ Saeng-keun Oh, “Seoul and ‘Seoulites’ as Portrayed in Literature,” in *Korean Literature: Its Classical Heritage and Modern Breakthroughs*, ed. Korean National Commission for UNESCO (New Jersey: Hollym, 2003), 360.

¹⁰ Sunyoung Park, 177.

¹¹ See Cheong Lee, “Cho Se-hui soseole natanan bulgujeok sinche pyosang yeongu” [Study on the representations of disabled bodies in Cho Se-hui’s fiction], *Urieomunyeongu* 27 (2016).

merely biological but also socio-political and economic. As the body is subject to socio-political powers, its biological traits are under the sway of socio-political forces. It is generally agreed that his small body symbolizes the powerlessness of have-nots. "The dwarf and his family represented one of the most marginalized groups in Korean society under the Park Chung Hee regime's drive to achieve the 'economic miracle on Han River'."¹² He is not merely an abnormal individual but a specimen of low classes. As a manual labourer, he is representative of the labouring classes in the industrializing period of Korea. A slum neighbour woman, sympathetic for the dwarf, says, "We're dwarfs too. . . we're on the same side."¹³ She senses that the low-class people are identical to the dwarf. Children in the slum area are also characterized by smallness. "The neighbour children don't grow right, so they look real small, but they're cute kids."¹⁴ The class implications of smallness are pronounced. As Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton succinctly remark, the work presents "the dwarf epitomizing the "little people" on whose backs the South Korean economic miracle took place."¹⁵ The bodily condition fixes his position permanently.

What the smallness implies is more clarified in his daughter's dream. In her dream:

"Father looked no more than twenty inches tall. Tiny Father was dragging a huge spoon. . . The copper spoon was too heavy for Father. . . Exhausted, he put down the spoon, which was taller than he, and rested. And then he climbed into the spoon and lay down. . . Father was shrinking in the copper spoon."¹⁶

The dwarf looks smaller than the real size of his own. Her dream might seem merely as an exaggeration. However, it reflects her unconsciousness, which helps to disclose the socio-economic system that drives such a paranoid. The exaggeration of small size elucidates the socio-economic connotations of body. The copper spoon bigger than him symbolizes the heavy mechanical work laid upon him. Furthermore, it is also the metonymy of the mechanized capitalistic system to which he is irresistibly tethered and subordinated. Very small and powerless, he is under the pressure of the socio-economic system. In the huge

¹² Youngju Ryu, "The Neighbor and Politics of Literature in 1970s' South Korea: Yi Mungu, Hwang Sŏgyŏng, Cho Sehŭi" (PhD diss., UCLA, 2006), 181.

¹³ Se-hŭi Cho, *The Dwarf*, trans, Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁵ Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton, "Cho Se-hŭi and *The Dwarf*," in *The Dwarf*, 222.

¹⁶ Se-hŭi Cho, 130.

system of industrialized production, he is a small tool as a component. “Members of proletariat... are abused, neglected, and discarded like disposable mechanic parts.”¹⁷ The dwarf’s body can be considered to be a specimen of proletarian body.

The dwarf’s representation of the labouring class can be verified in the daily lives of his family. In the later part, the burden of labor is unavoidably laid upon the remaining family after the dwarf’s death. His sons and daughter go to work at a factory in the city of Ŭngang, which “is described as a frontier of Korean industrialization and epitome of all its vices.”¹⁸ The city of Ŭngang is modelled on Inchŏn, one of the most polluted industrial cities in Korea. Their factory work exemplifies mechanized labour chained to a grand mechanical system. Yŏngsu, his elder son, feels himself to be mechanized and thus governed by the factory system:

“The workers who were senior to me worked hard. Those on the assembly line regarded me as just another machine. To the factory manager the workers were one big machine.”¹⁹

The assembly line is the epitome of modern factory system, representatively Ford system. As he is aware of the human subordination to the whole machine system, he is degraded into a component of the machine on the assembly line:

“I was both driven and confined by the ceaseless work of the assembly line. Machines determined the pace of the work. Jammed from the waist up inside the trunk of a car, I had to perform my two job assignments simultaneously. When I touched the drill to the sheet of iron in the trunk my small tool recoiled with a bang. Everytime I drilled a hole it shook me from the waist up. I worked with a mouthful of screws and washers.”²⁰

His body as a material cannot but be linked and subordinated to the mechanical system. Receiving the impacts from the machines in operation, he is physically governed by the mechanic system, and, in a larger context, socio-economically by the capitalistic production system.

¹⁷ Sunyoung Park, 177.

¹⁸ Ibid., 177.

¹⁹ Se-hŭi Cho, 133.

²⁰ Ibid., 134.

Despite the reified states shared by labourers, there can be raised a question whether the dwarf's unusual deformed body can stand for proletariats in general. Peripherally, his body might not seem like a common labourer's body. His body is not typical of a docile productive body. From a traditional capitalistic viewpoint, his body is not an ideal body for labourers. He is marginalized even among labourers. This is why he is beaten by other labourers who discriminate against the dwarf from other unhandicapped labourers. However, his extremely marginalized state can better represent, rather symbolically, the extremely harsh condition of Korean labourers around the 1970s. His apparently uncommon body can reveal the abnormal condition into which the contemporary common labourers with bodies apparently in a peripherally normal range are coercively put. The abnormality of his body reflects the rife abnormality of working conditions. By foregrounding the deformed dwarf as a labourer, the author demonstrates that the labouring condition of the time in Korea was abnormal. The required load of labour was over the extent that the human state can be maintained. He demonstrates the dehumanization of labourers. This is why he is named Kim Pul-i (金不伊). While Kim is the most common family name in Korea, Pul-i (不伊) implies 'not human.' Thus he represents the dehumanized state of common Koreans, at least the reification of labouring classes in general.

As his body is grotesquely small and dehumanized, it can easily be assimilated into tools, which is not expected for normal bodies. The dehumanization of labourers is accompanied by the mechanization of labourers' bodies. The dwarf's body epitomizes this. As his body is handicapped and thus deprived of humanitarian dignity, it is comparatively apt to be transformed into mechanical tools. His body can be utilized as "[h]is small build enabled him to work bent over inside the cramped water meter hole."²¹ Although handicapped, the dwarf's body is economically worthy. The economic merits of his body ironically lie in its deformity.

The dwarf's body is a specimen of reification. For all his life, he has been working like a machine, as his daughter says, "[o]ver the course of his life Father had done five kinds of work—selling bonds, sharpening knives, washing windows in high-rises, installing water pumps, and repairing water lines."²² He utilizes tools like the following: "pipe cutter, monkey wrench, socket wrench, screw driver, hammer, faucets, pump valves, a selection of screws, T-joints, U-joints, and hacksaw." Being identified with the mechanical tools, his body serves as instruments: "All of it resembled the dwarf. These instruments that resemble the dwarf

²¹ Ibid., 28.

²² Ibid., 58.

probably rest quietly in the shadow of the brick factory's smokestack while he sleeps."²³ Dehumanized, his body is in an inorganic state, as it is compared to metallic objects. "The dwarf fell like a dead stump. He resembled a dead thing."²⁴ The mechanical is equated with the loss of vitality.

His death also can be explained in the same light. He dies when the economic values of his body are lost due to its aging. As the mechanical usefulness of his body expires, his life terminates. As his wife says that he is 'worn out,' his body has been used up like tools, and now its value as a physical tool is lost. Recognizing the worn-out mechanical quality of his own body, the dwarf tries to elicit monetary value from his body in a different way. As his body is now useless for mechanical purposes, he thinks of entertaining purposes as an alternative. The dwarf plans to utilize his body for a circus, where abnormal bodies gain economic value for their grotesqueness. Though he tries to harness his deformity in the sphere where the bodily marginality is visually exploited, he fails in vain. Consequently, one way remaining for him to manage his body in accordance with the capitalistic dynamics is disposing of his useless body. Maintaining such an unproductive body, which is equated with material trash from a capitalistic viewpoint, is not profitable, and thus economically unreasonable. His death is comparable to the disposition of tools out of order. His dead body is found in "the smokestack to the brick factory."²⁵ He died as if his body had been a broken component of the brick factory. The logic of capitalism governs and determines the expiry date of human-machine, namely the death of body.

Young-ja's handicapped body as a sexual commodity

Cho Sunjak's fictions need to be analyzed in the context of popular fictions in the 1970s. Popular fictions in the 1970s were mainly concerned with the secular aspects of humans.²⁶ The wide-spread secularity does not merely mean vulgarity, but draws our attention for its reflection of the real lives of contemporary Koreans. The secularity is an aspect of the verisimilitude in popular works. It has the virtue of representing social reality. For its mean content, such an aspect is not so explicitly dramatized in noble literary works as in popular works. The portrayals of the low classes might effectively disclose the irony of Park Chung

²³ Ibid., 28.

²⁴ Ibid., 90.

²⁵ Ibid., 90.

²⁶ See Hyun-ju Kim, "1970 nyeondae daejung soseol yeongu" [Study on popular fictions in the 1970s] (PhD diss., Yonsei University, 2003).

Hee regime.²⁷ Poor characters are often trapped in a quagmire, which is often absurd and ironic. Such an apparently ironic situation is an aspect of the chronic problems of industrialization. The industrialization and urbanization led by the military regime could not but generate irresolvable problems. Such problems could not be avoided due to the industrializing process, for the increase in productivity relied on the sacrifice of labour force. Low class people trapped in such a dilemma are often main characters in popular works.

Cho Sunjak is one of the most representative writers of such trend. As mentioned in the introduction to the English translation, he “presented an honest and frank view of Korean society.”²⁸ The writer himself confessed that he made efforts to present a human drama in the changing society, which was on the way of expansion led by the industrialization and urbanization.²⁹ His efforts resulted in a series of secular works featuring low class women whose lives are steered and determined by the social changes. His fictions are termed ‘hostess literature,’ for his works mainly focus on the lives of low class women who earn their living by sexual services. In Korea, hostesses are differentiated from prostitutes in that their main job is not entirely offering sexual service. Molly Hyo Kim aptly indicates that ‘hostess’ is “a euphemism for prostitutes or bar girls in the Korean context of the 1970s and 1980s.”³⁰ Though termed ‘hostess literature,’ his works actually feature prostitutes rather than hostesses. So-called hostess stories or movies were once very popular during the 1970s and 1980s. Undeniably, Cho was at the forefront of this trend, and “Young-ja’s Heyday” is the most representative work. It is probably one of the most known literary works to the public in modern Korean literature. Published in 1973, this story gained immense popularity, and thus was adapted into a film in 1975. Directed by Kim Ho-sun, the film ranked the highest in the year, and 4th in the 1970s, which attests to its popularity. The public interest in the film can be considerably attributed to its realistic reflection of the social conditions.

²⁷ Kyeong-mi Kwon, “Hacheunggyejeup inmului saengseong gwa sahoe gujomang – Cho Sunjagui *Young-jai Jeonseongsidaereul jungsimeuro*” [Formation of low class figures and social welfare system – Sunjak’s “Young-ja’s Heyday”], *Hyeondaeseoel Yeongu*, 49 (2012).

²⁸ Chan Young Kim, and David R. Carter. “Introduction,” in *The Preview and Other Stories*, (Fremont: Asian Humanities Press, 2003), ix.

²⁹ See Se-hŭi Cho, “Jakgauri Mal” [Author’s Words], in *Miss Yangui Moheom [Miss Yang’s Adventure]* (Seoul: Goryeowon, 1989).

³⁰ Molly Hyo Kim, “Film Censorship Policy during Park Chung Hee’s Military Regime (1960-1979) and Hostess Films,” *IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies* 1, no. 2 (2016): 39.

Sardonically titled, the work is centred on the days when Young-ja desperately earns her living as a prostitute with one arm lost. In many aspects, she is a specimen of prostitutes who came from rural areas during the period of modernization in Korea. From birth to death, she follows a typical routine. She was born to a poor family in a rural area. Poorly educated like most rural girls, she came to Seoul most typically in search of a job. In “the 1970s and early 1980s the vast majority of women working in factories were single, and over 90 percent of them were born in the country side or the provincial cities.”³¹ It was the period when the rapid industrialization was accompanied by the immigration of rural workforce into big cities. Especially young girls went to Seoul in search of jobs. In Seoul, she follows a routine, from a housemaid to a manual labourer, then, being physically exhausted, finally a prostitute. Even more stereo-typically, her final destination is 588, which is the administrative address of the most representative brothel in Seoul, and thus a very commonly used expression in Korea. This is the typical path many rural poor girls have undergone in Korea during the period of industrialization coupled with urbanization. The ideology of modernization predestined the change of Young-ja, the daughter of a poor farmer, into a prostitute.³²

As for Young-ja’s representativeness, Lee Su-an argues that ‘Young-ja’ is not merely a name of an individual but a generic name for women as Other relying on body for living without education or skill.³³ As Kim Eunjung explains more in detail, critics have regarded Young-ja’s fall as “representing the experiences of many undereducated rural women from poor families whose exploitation fuelled economic growth and industrialization.”³⁴

What draws attention is Young-ja’s disabled body. A disabled prostitute is hardly found in hostess films. Her unique bodily state is the determining factor that differentiates the work from other merely secular works. It is significant that her disabled body is fundamentally the consequence of hard labour, not merely a misfortune that accidentally

³¹ Ruth Barraclough, *Factory Girl Literature: Sexuality, Violence, and Representation in Industrializing Korea* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2012), 64.

³² Kyong-yeon Kim, “Jubyeonbu yeoseong seosa-e gwanhan gochal: Lee Hae-joui *Gang Myeonghwa Jeongwa* Cho Sunjagui *Young-joui Jeonseongsidaereul jungsimeuro*” [Study on the narratives of female marginal figures – Lee Hae-jo’s *Gang Myeonghwa Story* and Cho Sunjak’s “Young-ja’s Heyday”], *Munchang Eomun Nonjip*, 42 (2005): 13.

³³ Su-an Lee, “Momui muljilseonggwa seksyueolriti – irongwa yeongsang jaehyeonui daeeungjeok dokhae” [Materiality and sexuality of bodies – responsive reading of theory and visual representation], *Jendeowa Munhwa* 3, no. 2 (2010): 12.

³⁴ Eunjung Kim, *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* (Durham: Duke UP, 2017), 109.

befell her. Her body demonstrates the vestiges of capitalistic dynamics exerted upon the typical Korean girls from rural areas. As her body bears the indelible mark left by the violence of modernization, it can effectively reveal the destructive mechanism of modernization. By probing into her body, the mechanism by which capitalism governs bodies, especially those of low classes, can be better grasped.

Throughout her career since she left home, her body has never been free from the male-dominated capitalistic system. Her body has been incessantly exploited in typical ways. Her first job in Seoul was housemaid. While working as a housemaid, she was sexually harassed by males frequently in the house, a space where the conventional patriarchal oppression predominated. Sexual harassment of low-class women, especially housemaids, was common during that period when the pre-modern conventions were still rife. Unable to tolerate the humiliating treatment, she went out of there and became a manual labourer. However, she could not maintain the manual job requiring physical strength for a long time. She lost one arm while working as a bus conductor. Falling off from the bus, she was hit by a three-wheeled truck. She lost the ability to work as a manual labourer. In the industrialized urban system, she functioned as a component of the vehicle. Being incorporated into and identified with the bus as a machine, she was in a reified state. Detached off from the bus, she lost the mechanical trait of it. Being hit by the three-wheeled truck, she was symbolically identified with it. Her remaining three limbs are equated with the three wheels of it. Her body epitomizes the victimized by the violence of machinery upon the labouring class. It is not accidental that she was wounded. She was physically damaged like machinery, whose material endurance is limited. As she played the role of mechanical tools, she is destined to lose her physical capacity, for she is a device rather than human.

Now Young-ja has no other way of making a living than prostitution. Thus she cannot but choose prostitution in order to survive. Her monetary value remains only in her body as a sexual object. In the capitalistic exchange system, the bodily merit she can exchange for money is the sexual function. There is the trend that in Cho's fictions, women's bodies as a commodity are an object for trade.³⁵ She is adapted to the capitalistic system in which female bodies are treated as commodity.

This is the backdrop from which the pivotal part of story proceeds. The main axis of plot is the relation between Young-ja and Changsu. Formerly an acquaintance during her housemaid days, he becomes a sex partner of Young-ja. Initially as an unintended customer of her prostitution, he develops an intimate relationship with her. As a main character, he is also the narrator of the whole story. Both as a close observer and narrator of Young-ja, he

³⁵ Kyong-yeon Kwon, 49.

holds a significant position in the work. Before advancing the analysis, Changsu's identity needs to be comprehended. Intriguingly, as a veteran from Vietnam, he now works as a dirt-scrubber at a public bath run by his former military commander. His job is to get rid of dirt from naked bodies at a public bath. Although he wanted to have a flamboyant job, he had "no choice but to settle for the shameful job of 'dirt-scrubber' in a public bathhouse."³⁶ In such circumstances where bodies are explicitly treated, he is an effective device for observing the mechanism of bodily services in the capitalistic society.

Changsu's narrative of Young-ja begins with his unexpected re-encounter with her at a brothel. When they meet each other after long years, their attitudes toward each other are quite different. Surprised at seeing her in a miserable state, Changsu approaches her with pity, which is oriented toward a humanitarian inter-relationship. Meanwhile, Young-ja wants to make their relationship that of capitalistic exchange. Having already adapted to the capitalistic exchange mode, she feels uncomfortable with his humanitarian attitude. This is why she retorts, "Where in the world would you find a girl crazy enough to desert a client willing to pay for her service?"³⁷ She not only says so but also acts greedily for money. Her attitude towards money can be found in her struggling to catch paper money he threw upon the floor:

"Then Young-ja picked them up hurriedly like a starving person scooping up rice to put into their mouth. And I started to feel strongly an agreeable sensation of cruelty, as I had when killing. I said in an aggressive voice: 'I've paid for you with my money. So take your clothes off. And I mean: take them all off.'"³⁸

Her identity as a prostitute is disclosed through the eyes of Changsu. Young-ja cannot help doing so greedily as she is deeply in debt. Changsu finds that her bodily state and movement are those of an experienced prostitute.

What is intriguing is that she reminds him of the Vietcong he has attacked in Vietnam. "From beginning to end, the short story is structured by a thorough interweaving of the veteran's recollection of Vietnam War with Yǒng-ja's experience in the prostitution

³⁶ Sunjak Cho, "Young-ja's Heyday," in *The Preview and Other Stories*, trans. Kim Chan Young and David R. Carter (Fredmont: Asian Humanities Press, 1989), 209.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

quarters of Seoul.”³⁹ From the beginning, he has never been disconnected from the Vietnamese War in that he works at the public bath run by the former commander. Also psychologically, he is obsessed with the war.

The obvious parallel between the war and brothel hints at the mechanism of prostitution, not as an individual behaviour but socio-historically constructed custom. Through the war, the massive political power violently exerted influence upon Vietnamese. In parallel to it, the prostitution of Young-ja was led, or, at least, conditioned by the operation of political power, that is the industrialization of Korea initiated by the military regime. Prostitution has never been legal since the emancipation from Japan. However, it has been actually allowed or even proliferated to the varying degrees. It was even promoted under certain conditions of time and space by the governmental policies. Though apparently determined by an individual choice, the play of her body is manoeuvred by the socio-political power as well as the economic mechanism.

The early stage of their relationship exposes the mechanism of sexual service at a social level. Through Young-ja’s body, he wants to be released from the bodily stress that captivates him. His body is also a device with monetary value. He exchanges his body’s energy for money. In return, a physical burden is laid upon his body, which places him under heavy stress. To resolve it, he resorts to Young-ja’s bodily service. As both a customer and provider of bodily services, in a wide sense, he is incorporated into the circular economic system of bodily services.

Though their relationship has started from the typical one based on the exchange of sex and money, it develops into an intimate one with affinity. Even though Changsu cannot afford to pay for her during an off-season, she wants to retain an interactive relationship with him. It is because he full-heartedly helped her. His act for her, which was motivated not by monetary interest but humane sympathy, rekindled her innate human mind. He protected her from a threatening rogue and made a prosthetic arm for her to earn more money. She comes to dream of establishing a family by marrying Changsu. She wishes to restore the humanitarian situation prior to her present way of living, which is governed by the predominating capitalistic system. Although her early life in the countryside was not happy, it was at least better than the present one. She hopes to be freed from the present situation that binds her body to the capitalistic trade relation of sex and money. She desires to return to the traditional private sphere, which is safe from the brutal society that utilizes her body as a sexual object. Her wish implies denying the

³⁹ Jin-kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 55.

socio-economic configuration of her body as a sexual commodity. In order to prepare for a room for their new life as a family, she saves money by prostitution. She plans to escape from the bondage of prostitution by relying on it. This is ironic in that she relies on the capitalistic method to escape from the capitalistic chain.

Her dream, however, cannot be realized in the end. Despite her wish to perpetuate their intimate relationship, their close relationship comes to the end, seemingly abruptly. What awaits her is a tragic death. What triggers the unfortunate ending is the governmental policy to close off the brothel. The local government makes a decision to close the brothel, which demonstrates that bodies of low classes are under the control of government. Bodies are inherently subordinated to the dominant system. The political system operates behind the capitalistic system. Changsu contemplates: "They were going to clear them away completely, just as our company had cleared away the remains of Vietcong in an area to be subjugated. It was a so-called bull-dozer strategy."⁴⁰ The plan to close off the district is comparable to the military action of clearing away Vietcong. It is similar in that the authority determinatively controls their lives by employing physical force. The police control over the brothel area becomes stricter:

"And a formal warning in the name of the mayor of Seoul also landed in the brothels, notifying everybody that they would be demolishing the legally built buildings. The prostitutes dashed obsessively this way and that, trying to find some loophole through which they could escape. But all the entrances to the alleys were completely blocked by policemen with truncheons, so that the prostitutes were caught like rats in a trap."⁴¹

Young-ja is confined there like a rat, a common animal metaphor used for Other. Changsu decides to rescue her. Changsu and Young-ja manage to escape from the labyrinthine brothel by climbing over a roof. Policemen chase but fail to catch them. Her escape is a deviant escape of the abnormal body from the official control over illegal bodies.

Although she succeeds in escaping from it, she cannot be wholly separated from the trapping space. In the end, she dies in fire at the brothel. She had to go back to the brothel to get back the money she had lent, which demonstrates that she cannot easily break the tie with it. She has been associated with it economically as well as physically. The economic tie leads to her death. The spot where the fire started seems to be the

⁴⁰ Sunjak Cho, 230.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 230.

house of a pimp called 'Nylon,' who borrowed the money from Young-ja. The pimp whose nickname bears negative implications also died by the fire. The cause of the fire is unknown exactly. However, it is presumably related to a conflict caused by the borrowed money. Seeing three burnt corps found at the site, Changsu thinks: "The three dead bodies were burned completely black just like those of the Vietcong burned to death by flame-throwers."⁴² He compares the dead bodies with the Vietcong. Although different in many aspects, the three dead bodies share one factor with the Vietcong. Their deaths were triggered by governmental control over Othered bodies. Of course, the direct cause of the fire is different. However, it is undeniable that what determines their condition of existence is the grand governmental power. This is why he is reminded of the Vietcong.

Among the three bodies, he can distinguish Young-ja for her lost arm. Seeing her burnt corpse, the narrator feels as if she were saying, "I started the fire myself."⁴³ It is possible to conjecture that Young-ja set the fire herself in despair. With the closing of the brothel, she has lost the path to sell her body for sexual exploitation. Worse, she lost the saved money with which she can restart life. There is no hope anymore. Hopeless, she probably chose a way to destroy the space of which she formed a part.

Conclusion

By observing the two marginalized characters' miserable lives towards tragic death, we can perceive how bodies of low classes were abnormally exploited by the dominant capitalistic urban system. As their bodies are disabled, they can effectively demonstrate that the low-class bodies were treated very harshly. Being tethered to the system, their bodies cannot be emancipated from it until the end. Although they dream of living outside the present world that has constrained them, they ultimately fail in vain. Even upon the moments of death, both are inseparable from the material circumstances their bodies relied on for survival. They lose life within the economic space of which they constitute a part.

What determinatively precipitates them into death is their unrealizable hope of living outside the given circumstances. While Young-ja wished to restart a life of a common family detached from the brothel, the dwarf even had the dream of living in the space. The disillusionments prove that the Korean society oppressively governed bodies as economic devices. It tightly controlled bodies without allowing emancipation

⁴² Ibid., 233.

⁴³ Ibid., 234.

from the economic system. When they lost their sole means of earning money, they could find no outlet. Thus they were driven to death, self-consciously or not. It can be said that as the unprofitable bodies, they were disposed of from the capitalistic system. By dramatizing such deaths, the two works resonate with the messages of subversiveness to the dominant system.