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“Female Poet” as Revolutionary Grotesque: Feminist Transgression in the Poetry of Ch’oe Sŭng-ja, Kim Hyesoon, and Yi Yŏn-ju

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My diary is in two parts—resistance and obedience.
One is an open heart on top of my office desk
and the other is shoved inside a throat, a cold sweat gathers inside.
—Yi Yŏn-ju, “The Dictator”¹

Women poets . . . oppose and resist their conditions, using an unusual or unconventional language because their resistance has led them to a language that is unreal, surreal, and even fantastical The language of women poets is extremely internal, yet defiant and revolutionary. But men see women’s language as utterances of a “crazy bitch.” They don’t think about why our language is so “crazy”

—Kim Hyesoon²

The question I hate most is, “What’s poetry for?” It’s just as meaningless to ask, “What’s poetry not for?”

—Ch’oe Sŭng-ja, “Why I Write”³

In a 2003 interview, South Korean poet Kim Hyesoon lamented, “to live as a woman poet in Korea means to occupy a marginal place, a mere ‘spice’ within a world of poetry constructed by men” (“Korean Women,” p. 531). Kim expresses frustration at the “many demands” placed upon Korean women’s writing, observing, “A woman poet is expected to use ‘pretty’ language and is banned from using any language that may be inappropriate or outside the norm In other words, women poets are oppressed from fully speaking out as liberated individuals” (p. 531). Despite this limitation, Kim claims poetry as an effective site of feminist struggle for Korean women; within their writing women can “create a new language for themselves”—one that challenges the social norms confining their voices and behavior (p. 532). In fact, the marginalized location of South Korean women is an especially rich site for socially transformative work since Kim believes the margin is a place where “everything shifts” (p. 537). Out of this shifting comes the “extremely internal, yet defiant and revolutionary” voices of Korean women poets (p. 536).

The purpose of this paper is to explore one aspect of the transgressive voice that emerges in the work of three contemporary South Korean

women poets. Specifically, I will examine the element of the grotesque as it appears in the poems of Ch'oe Sŭng-ja, Kim Hyesoon, and Yi Yŏn-ju. These poets' poems function like the body of a female grotesque as they seep from the page with images of violence, vomit, trash, bodily decay, and death. The poems' "ugly" images weep an excess, which transgresses not only Korean gender norms but also the strictures of the *yŏryu sŭin* (female poet) literary tradition. Kim Hyesoon explains the meaning of *yŏryu sŭin*:

In Korea, male poets are just called *sinin* [*siin*]"—poets"—but women are called *yŏryu sinin*—"female poets." *Yŏ* means a "woman," and *ryu* was a word traditionally associated with *kisaeng* . . . —women who "drifted around" . . . Imposing the term *yŏryu sinin* on women poets means that women's poetry is regulated and defined as "sentimental" and "gentle."⁴

By writing poems that are neither gentle nor pretty, Ch'oe, Kim, and Yi employ what I will call the poetics of the grotesque to challenge Korean patriarchal gender constructions. These poets embrace the seepage of the abject, subverting the façade of beauty in favor of a grotesque permeability that makes their poetry an opening through which a new language can be voiced.

While some may question the ability of poetry to subvert dominant ideologies, it is important to recognize that language and genre—as an organizer of language—are enactments of cultural values and norms. To adhere to a genre is to accept its "rules" and to speak in a voice that capitulates to established conventions. As Carolyn Miller states in "Genre as Social Action," "What we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have."⁵ Despite our sense that our authored language is an individual, original product, these artifacts are steeped in the cultures from which they are born. Yet, as genre is reproduced over time, the opportunity exists for individual resistance to the rhetoric embedded in the genre through the act of rewriting. In this rewriting, an author challenges not only the genre but also the cultural values expressed through the form. In *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*, Anis Bawarshi observes, "As we write various texts, then, we rhetorically enact and reproduce the desires that prompted them. . . . And as we rhetorically enact and reproduce these desires, we also rhetorically enact, reproduce, and potentially resist and/or transform the social activities, the roles, and the relations that are embedded in these desires."⁶ Thus, in transgressing the tradition of the *yŏryu sŭin*, Ch'oe, Kim, and Yi not only create a new language for Korean women's poetry, they also create a new "genre" of Korean woman poet who is neither passive nor pretty.

The work of these poets transgresses both genre tradition as well as the Confucian-influenced gender norms that define "acceptable" behav-

ior for Korean women within three rigid roles: *ch'yŏnyŏ* (young unmarried woman/virgin), *ajumma* (middle-aged woman/mother), and *halmŏni* (grandmother). Kim Hyesoon observes that each role requires the woman to serve a different master: "She must first obey her father, then her husband when she becomes an *ajumma*, and finally obey her son as a *halmŏni*. Any woman who violates or lives outside of these defined roles is called a *ch'angnyŏ* [prostitute]" ("Korean Women," p. 532).

Kim poignantly illustrates the oppressiveness of such a limited range of female identity in Korean culture: "As a woman living in South Korea, I'm an *ajumma* at the moment. But I'm also at times a *ch'yŏnyŏ*, a *ch'angnyŏ*, and a *halmŏni* . . . And at times, I'm also a *manyŏ* [witch] and a 'crazy woman,' so why is it that only one identity is demanded from me?" (p. 532). With their deployment of the grotesque, Ch'oe, Kim, and Yi reject the *yŏryu sin* genre tradition while also challenging the social roles their patriarchal culture has assigned them. In this way, their use of the poetics of the grotesque can be seen as a feminist action, and I will argue, an effective one at that.

In order to discuss the effect of the grotesque in the poems of Ch'oe, Kim, and Yi, I will use Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body and Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject as a framework from which to explore how the poetics of the grotesque work to trouble Korean gender norms.⁷ To this end, I will first outline the theoretical concept of the female grotesque, followed by close readings of the work of Ch'oe, Kim, and Yi to demonstrate how these poems themselves embody the unsettling power of the female grotesque. Since Western exposure to Korean culture and literature—not to mention Korean women's poetry and Korean feminism—is limited, I will also offer brief historical and biographical information relevant to these poets' work. Through my close readings of the poems, I hope not only to offer insight into the way in which Korean patriarchy has functioned to limit women's writing and their social roles but also to illustrate how Ch'oe, Kim, and Yi's use of the grotesque challenges and transcends these limitations.

As a Western feminist interpreting the products of a culture that I do not share, I undertake this analysis with caution. Korean literature scholar Cho Dong-il describes in his essay, "Western Impact versus Korean Tradition in the Humanities," how imported Western theories have "acted as an obstacle to the development of the studies of Korean language and literature" due to the fact that "application of Western frames of reference to Korean literature [are] not always successful."⁸ Within this framework, Cho claims, "Korean tradition is nothing but a soil or climate without potentiality for active creation" (p. 134). In employing Western theories to frame these Eastern texts, I seek to avoid treating this work as soil devoid of the power to create, becoming fruitful only through the application of

a Western seed of thought; I do not intend to suggest that these Western theories and my reading are necessary to explain these Korean texts and writers. Rather, I hope to illuminate these texts in a way that fosters not only an appreciation of their socially transgressive properties and the culture from which they spring but also the potential in the poetics of the grotesque as a global strategy of feminist resistance.

I. *The Female Grotesque*

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin describes the subversive energy of the medieval carnival festival. Occurring immediately before the season of Lent, this festival involves the use of masque and other inversions of identity and social order. Tracing the history of the “grotesque” as a crucial element of the carnivalesque tradition, Bakhtin seeks to define the concept by identifying ancient clay figurines of “senile pregnant hags” as prototypes of the “very strongly expressed grotesque” (p. 25). Bakhtin suggests that, in part, it is the pregnancy of these hags that is especially sick: “They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed” (pp. 25-26). As feminist readers of this passage, we cannot help but ask: why does Bakhtin choose *these* women to represent the grotesque?

Bakhtin does not explore the gendered implications of this image; however, his choice of pregnant, senile hags as representative of the grotesque is not entirely surprising given patriarchal culture’s conception of the female body. The female body has long been associated with the grotesque; in contrast to male bodies, the female body seeps and weeps, often overflowing its container. It is both a void that can be penetrated and a dangerous fluidity that threatens to engulf everything. Part of the grotesqueness of these women is that they are dangerously productive; in constant motion, their bodies are unpredictable, unstable containers, threatening overflow. As Bakhtin states, “There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags” (p. 25).

The curious thing about Bakhtin’s women is that not only are they senile but, as he notes, they are “laughing” (p. 25). Certainly, we could assume that these hags laugh because they are insane, but I would suggest that we read their laughter instead as amusement at our shock as we gaze on their grotesque bodies. These women’s laughter recognizes the transgression their bodies enact against patriarchal ideals of female beauty and illustrates their awareness of how deeply unsettling it is to encounter a woman who so completely disregards social norms. Though Bakhtin does not explore the hags’ ugliness through the lens of gender, he does identify the power of the grotesque as a force of reproductive destabilization: “The grotesque body . . . is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished,

never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world” (p. 317). Bahktin’s pregnant hags are at the height of their grotesqueness, “the epitome of incompleteness” (p. 26); soon, they will swell outward, their bodies expanding in “a death that gives birth” (p. 25). Upending the usual process of life coming from life, these hags’ laugh at our fear, knowing that their incompleteness—what we perceive as their “death” or “ugliness”—is powerfully generative.

While fear is engendered by the grotesque body’s lack of boundaries, it also provokes a culture’s nerves with its power to transform that which it ingests into something new. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes the transformative power of abjection: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (p. 4). Here, ambiguity is not a lack of focus; rather, it is an ability to move fluidly across boundaries in a way that disrupts the binary order of the system. The grotesque body is able not only to adapt but also to evolve into something monstrously powerful precisely because it falls into the in-between space, outside of boundary and order.

Given that the grotesque body disrupts the social order, it is no surprise that it becomes a target for repression. As Kristeva points out, “The more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed” (p. 13). The social order, as well as our own self-denial, serves as a watchman who keeps the abject at bay. In her captivating study, *The Female Grotesque*, Mary Russo claims that the consequence of the sublimation of the abject is the donning of a mask. Unlike the carnival mask that subverts normative identity, this mask covers the grotesque with what Russo calls the “classical body” which is “transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek.”⁹ That Russo represents this classical body as a false imposition—a symptom of repression—begins to suggest the transgressive power inherent in choosing to take off the mask.

According to Russo, when a woman strips off the mask of the classical, beautiful body she becomes a “female grotesque.” Eschewing a safe femininity that garners her hollow approval for playing by patriarchal rules, the female grotesque creates within her body a space for “noise, dissonance . . . monstrosity,” a playground in which she can lay claim to the power of being grotesquely productive (p. 11). In fact, Russo claims, “The category of the female grotesque is crucial to identity-formation for both men and women as a space of risk and abjection” precisely because it allows for that which is real to assert itself (p. 12). If one is to create an identity free from the restrictions of normativity—an identity that comes

close to the non-repressed self—then one must embrace the grotesque as a liberating force.

For a woman to enact ugliness, to choose to highlight rather than hide her grotesque body, is to join the pregnant hags in their laughter. Indeed, to laugh at social norms of beauty and acceptability is to reject the half-baked power promised by normative femininity; for to be feminine is to be incapacitated by the need to protect one's beauty through a cultivation of routines, masks, and products that serve to hide the grotesque. Conversely, to reject "prettiness" is to move from acceptability to the margins—a space of incredible risk but also incredible possibility. Russo makes a provocative claim: "To put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off" (p. 70). In the spirit of Russo, then, I would ask: what does it mean for a woman to adopt an excessive grotesqueness within her poetry? If her body is already identified by culture as grotesque and she is required to use a "pretty" voice to mask her ugliness, what can she gain in deploying grotesqueness in her art?

II. Ch'oe Süng-ja's *Vulgar Grotesque*

Yes, I'll go alone
in my aged body full of blood and poems.
A bright lit high-rise—
every floor fills with radiant water.
Hope cries, "Not yet, not yet,"
and crawls out until the skin of its stomach
becomes the skin of the ground.
Some day I'll reach my grave.
I'll raise happy maggots inside a coffin
until I awake clear-headed
and begin singing to myself.

—Ch'oe Süng-ja, "Sleep Arrives Without a Dreamer," p. 55

This poem is typical of the work of Ch'oe Süng-ja: full of grotesque images evocative of both violence and death yet curiously hopeful and defiant. Since the start of her writing career, the "vulgar" quality of her poetry has caused it to be both celebrated and castigated by South Koreans. In 1979, Ch'oe Süng-ja became the first woman poet to be published in the literary journal *Literature and Intellect* [Munhak kwa jisöng].¹⁰ The journal grew out of the dissent movement of the 1970s, which challenged the repressive regime of President Park Chung Hee. Following Park's assassination in 1979, military commander Chun Doo Hwan took power, increasing the government's level of control through violent suppression of democratic resistance movements.¹¹ Out of this oppressive political environment, Ch'oe's work speaks in a rebellious voice that challenges not

only the political regime but also the restrictive cultural norms that require women and *yöryu sün* to use only passive, “pretty” speech.

Translator Don Mee Choi observes that while Ch’oe “did not consciously set out to be a feminist poet . . . all the oppression that had been building in her simply exploded whenever she wrote.”¹² In Ch’oe’s poems these explosions often take the form of grotesque protrusions, which serve as a metaphorical vehicle for the violent oppression of a woman’s real self. In her poem “Confession,” Ch’oe depicts this identity sublimation as an act of grotesque swallowing:

Puked intestines, I’ll swallow them
right back down, after I swallow the lot.
I’ll cover them with lovely plastic flesh. (p. 35)

In the Confucian-influenced culture of Korea, a woman is encouraged to develop “selfless self-images” as a way of building a “collective identity with her husband and his family.”¹³ Within Ch’oe’s poem, the grotesque represents that which is real, that which must be swallowed down and covered over by the culturally approved sheen of passivity and self-sacrifice.

In his discussion of the grotesque, Bakhtin suggests that social norms of acceptability require “that which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins) [to be] eliminated, hidden, or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable façade” (p. 320). In order to control the grotesque body of women’s untamed desires, society enforces a smoothing out of the woman’s self, suggesting instead that she funnel the whole of her identity into her role as mother and wife. Ch’oe’s poem depicts the consequence of such self-denial: “starting from the roots / I rot, rot quietly” (p. 35). Over time, that which is swallowed festers, creating a rotting from the inside out.

The “Confession” of the poem’s title, then, signals that the text enacts a removal of the mask of feminine acceptability to exhibit the grotesque core that oppression creates. In this sense, the confession becomes not an admission of the poet’s failure to be a “perfect” woman but an assertion of the reality of women’s experience. Thus, in this poem’s poetics of the grotesque, the revelation of the grotesque is a subversive activity because it makes visible the real product of patriarchy: not a “pretty” woman but one whose plastic flesh conceals a rotting core.

Poet and feminist critic Kim Chöngnan locates another challenge to cultural notions of female passivity within Ch’oe’s choice of language: “Ch’oe Süng-ja attacked corrupt society with corrupt language. In her work there is no trace of the gentility and elegance once considered ‘feminine.’ Instead there is rough and urgent breathing, vulgarity, and curses—a far cry from the pretty ‘female (*yöryu*) poetry’ of the 1960s.”¹⁴ Kim’s use

of the term corrupt is interesting when one considers that corruption is integral to the power of the grotesque. In this sense, Ch'oe's tone corrupts the social expectation that women's voices will be easy to digest; instead, her voice confronts readers with a defiant grotesqueness that depicts the harsh reality of women's experience in patriarchal culture. Often, this reality is expressed in images of the "decay and the death of women's bodies," another kind of corruption.¹⁵

What makes Ch'oe's images of women's grotesque bodies especially intriguing, however, is their ability to suggest the victimization of women while simultaneously emphasizing women's ability to transcend this oppression. This mixed state of being—powerless, yet powerful—echoes Bakhtin's assertion that the unique strength of the grotesque lies in its state of social degradation. Though a degraded object would appear to be powerless, Bakhtin claims it holds the potential to bring forth change precisely because it no longer needs to cling to the old, acceptable way of doing things: "To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. . . . Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one" (p. 21).

Ch'oe's poems "Regarding Women" and "Went to the Sea in Winter" offer strong visions of the regenerative power implicit within socially-degraded bodies, while claiming this power specifically for the female body. In "Regarding Women," Ch'oe begins with a statement that evokes Bakhtin's laughing hags:

Women, every one of them has a grave inside her body.
A place where birth and death sweat,
.....
Like the Altamira cave, like the ruin of a great Buddhist temple
women lie down, a rigid dead sea. (p. 49)

While these opening images suggest mostly death, there is also life inside women, for this dead sea

is the home of birds.
Sand blows . . .
Broken shells from the hatching of the birds' first eggs (p. 49)

At the climax of the poem, Ch'oe places the duality of women's bodies at the center of the universe: "The temple of ruins and the dead sea must be crossed / in order for everything to be born and die again" (p. 49).

Ch'oe claims that women, despite their degradation as ruins, are the ultimate genesis of the world; it is through them that everything must pass. This description encapsulates Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque body as "a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible

vessel of death and conception” (p. 318). In an act of feminist challenge, Ch’oe claims the regenerative power of the grotesque as an exclusive quality of the woman’s body, despite its socially marginalized position. Indeed, as Bakhtin claims of the grotesque body, so claims Ch’oe for the woman’s body—they are bodies in a perpetual “act of becoming” (p. 317).

This reproductive power is vividly represented by Ch’oe in “Went to the Sea in Winter,” where the poet interweaves the violent degradation of a woman’s body with a kind of grotesque reproduction. Ch’oe begins the poem as a false pastoral, describing a trip to the sea:

Went to the sea in winter.
Seagulls stretched their necks and shat white.
The corpse of a woman floated for three days,
then was caught by a patrol boat.
The woman’s vagina was opened to the sea
(the polluted sea).
Pale and sickly children poured out from her open vagina,
staggering from the sea’s bright sun.
Papery skin, the remains of the dead woman,
floating like plastic.
The children rode the froth of the waves and scattered
among the oceans of five continents.
.....
One long unbearable night they’ll begin a revolution,
an invincible revolution.
Went to the sea in winter
(the polluted sea). (p. 65)

As in “Regarding Women,” the woman’s body is presented as a container of life as well as death; though the woman rots, she also gives birth. If we return for a moment to Ch’oe’s poem “Confession,” with its speaker who dons the “plastic flesh” of self-sacrifice, we can see the woman in “Went to the Sea in Winter” as one who has finally, in death, thrown off that mask. She is literally opened, exposed to the sea. Though she has been entered by the polluted waters, however, what emerges from her desecrated body is new life. The poem’s central figure—the rotting yet fertile woman—encompasses the duality of what Bakhtin refers to as the “artistic logic of the grotesque image” in that she “consists of orifices and convexities that present another, newly conceived body. [She] is a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception” (pp. 317, 318).

Ch’oe communicates this inexhaustible, powerful reproduction when she makes it clear that the children coming from the woman’s polluted body, though sickly, will go on to populate the earth. Though there is no mention of whether this woman’s death is the result of a murder, suicide, or accident, it is easy to assume from the poem’s grim details that this

death was not a happy one. Ch'oe re-vision the violation of the woman's body and its polluted state as a position of power; from this death comes a horde of children who will one day mount an "invincible revolution." What remains ominously unclear at the end of this poem is whether this revolution will be for good. Will these children simply reproduce the pollution from which they were born? Perhaps this poem can be read as a commentary on a patriarchal culture, which, though it may elevate women as reproductive vessels, only manages to produce "sickly and pale" children. Still, Ch'oe seems to suggest these children may not be entirely weak; their revolution will be, after all, "invincible." Perhaps, then, we can also read the poem as a statement of the power of the grotesque mother birthing grotesque children who may, in their own grotesqueness, go on to impose a new, powerful social order.

Like "Went to the Sea in Winter," many of Ch'oe's poems feature the violation of a woman's body or depictions of a painful fracturing of the self; yet, ultimately, she claims for women a profound agency. This work stands in stark contrast to other women poets of the 1980s who published poems that Kim Chŏngnan describes as "present[ing] a feminine self that is acceptable to men" (p. 23). Kim cites a poetry collection published by Pak Nayŏn as an example of a women poet whose work embraces the "traditional female image" at the core of the *yŏryu sŏin* tradition (p. 23). Entitled *Princess P'yŏnggang Who Lives in Seoul*, Pak's collection tells the story of a princess "who marries the idiot Ondal and transforms him into a great warrior with absolute devotion" (p. 23). Contrasting Pak's Princess, an icon of female sacrifice, with the rebellious voice in Ch'oe's poem "Sleep Arrives Without a Dreamer" emphasizes how radically Ch'oe's work departs from the *yŏryu sŏin* tradition of female passivity. In the poem, Ch'oe declares: "Don't hold me back. / I'm not your mother / nor your child" (p. 55). In a culture in which women are encouraged to conform their identity to the roles of mother, wife, or child, Ch'oe's defiant voice stands out. She belongs only to herself.

For Ch'oe's women readers, Kim Chŏngnan notes, the "liberation of rage" within these poems suggest "the possibility of a new, independent feminism different from anything that had preceded it; that of a sorceress on her own; a woman stranded in dignity; a powerful, subjective, unfortunate woman—not a pretty princess who is the object of men" (pp. 20, 19). In addition to Kim's descriptors, I would suggest that the liberated woman of Ch'oe's poems is also a female grotesque. She is a woman who has rejected feminine acceptability in favor of presenting a voice that confidently claims the power implicit in grotesque transformation. Thus, within Ch'oe's poems we can hear the reverberating laughter of Bakhtin's hags, as Ch'oe demonstrates there is power to be had in speaking a language of subversive vulgarity.

III. Kim Hyesoon's Surreal Grotesque

Run, holding, only, your, lit, ten, ta, cle, blue, and, cold. Go, run. Give, your, bodies, to, mag, gots, that, feed, on, bodies, sell, frenzied, your, legs, to, people, who, come, to, buy, legs, and, shout your bids. Vomit, excrete, dribble, give, away, everything, every thing . . . Sick, Body, when, someone, calls, you, shout back, I'm alive.

– Kim Hyesoon, “To Patients with Contagious Diseases,” p. 87

A contemporary and friend of Ch’oe Sŭng-ja, Kim Hyesoon also began publishing in the 1980s; yet, as seen in the excerpt above, her work departs from the straight forward voice most common in Ch’oe’s poetry. Rather, Kim favors experimental forms exploding with a surreal grotesqueness that disrupts the surface of the poems. Kim Chŏngnan describes the work of Kim Hyesoon thusly: “She does not so much present the content of her poem as convey its expression . . . From the first, her poems grasp the conspiracy of patriarchy. This insight does not allow her to settle for monotonous diction. She hits and runs” (p. 21). In her challenge to patriarchy, Kim Hyesoon’s poems present a surreal landscape that skewers social institutions—family, romantic love, and women’s roles—to reveal their grotesque undersides.

A member of the Korean feminist organization, Another Culture, Kim Hyesoon is a prolific author of not only poetry but also scholarly work on women’s literature. In 2000, she was the first woman to receive the prestigious Kim Suyŏng Contemporary Poetry Award, an indication of how well regarded her poetry is throughout Korea. Though she views this award as a sign that the male literary establishment “can no longer ignore the presence of women poets,” she still feels there is much work to be done to dismantle the “highly patriarchal nationalism” of South Korea (“Korean Women,” pp. 534, 537). Nationalism is an important target in Kim’s work, as she destroys the rosy vision of an industrialized, globally superior post-war Korea by describing instead a landscape where “rats and dogs roam . . . everything breaks and everything gets eaten.”¹⁶

This depiction of the grotesque landscape of Korea, what Kim’s translator Choi calls the “Father’s broken landscape,” is evident in Kim’s prose poem, “Seoul’s Dinner.”¹⁷ This poem envisions Seoul as a giant mouth into which object after object enters. Within the poem, Kim represents Seoul as a “she”: “Pigs enter. The pigs oink and suck on Seoul’s lips. She dips the meat from the pig’s neck in pickled shrimp and eats. Her squirming throat is omnivorous. Mudfish pour in like a muddy stream.”¹⁸ In this poem the city’s appetite looms large; yet, midway, a new “she” seems to enter the poem’s gaping mouth, “Bulls charge the path inside the body of someone who lives in Seoul. Tonight she drinks too much soju” (p. 58). The poet conflates the body of the woman with the body of Seoul, describing a similar entering happening simultaneously in both:

The tunnel where the liquor is poured is long and dark. White milk that could overflow Lake Soyang pours out of the tunnel into the night's intestine. (p. 58)

After this blurring of city and woman, the poem moves into its last lines:

Having left the party, I begin to vomit as soon as I step outside. Seoul eats and shits through the same door. My body curls up like a worm. It seems that every few days a big hand descends from the sky to roll out cloud-like toilet paper and wipe the opening of Seoul, which is simultaneously a mouth and an anus. Tonight, fat flakes fall as the last truck leaves the tunnel. I let the snow collect, then shove it in my mouth. (p. 58)

Here, the division between the clean (mouth) and unclean (anus) is deliberately broken as the poem reaches a climax where images of emitting and engulfing come together in a state of defilement. In Kristeva's study of the abject as a force of social organization, it is the abject's ability to cause defilement that requires the imposition of a boundary between clean and unclean: "Defilement is what is jettisoned from the 'symbolic system.' It is what escapes that social rationality, that logical order on which a social aggregate is based" (p. 65). It is worth reiterating here that the abject, that which is grotesquely defiled, escapes from the organizing principle of the social order. It is an unclassifiable, uncontainable force that overflows the container of normativity. In "Seoul's Dinner," the social order has been deliberately troubled by Kim's assertion that the great urban hub of Seoul is in fact a city that "eats and shits through the same door." Those who might prefer to believe that the city represents the great triumph of Korean post-war industrialization and wealth are confronted with a new, grotesque vision.

Furthermore, the last lines of "Seoul's Dinner" seem to suggest something about the female grotesque as the "I," who one assumes is the same as the "she" who lives in Seoul, chooses to merge with the city's defilement by ingesting the snowflakes of Seoul. In a poem that lacked the grotesque images of this one, these snowflakes might be imagined as snowy-white, but here they become flakes of waste falling from the mouth/anus of Seoul. The speaker, then, defiantly ingests these flakes in an action that inverts the turning out of the real seen in Ch'oe's poems; here, the real is ingested, accepted in a breakdown of bodily boundaries that allow the abject to pollute the speaker with its ambiguous power. As Kristeva says, "filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a *boundary* and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin" (p. 69). In this poem, the "she/I" is not only alienated from the national "Father's" façade of progress, she also chooses to marginalize herself further in a defiled communion with the waste of the "real" Seoul.

This double-marginalization is interesting given Kim's observation con-

cerning Korean women's literature: since Korean "women did not write publicly before the early 1900s . . . their location did not exist" ("Korean Women," p. 537). Consequently, Kim views Korean women as writing from a state of "diasporic" identity, an identity formed on the margins. Kim goes on to say that women "live a kind of existence that drifts, that floats . . . Their language is difficult for people in a fixed location to understand, but I believe that their language provides an alternative" (p. 538). Here, Kim expresses one of the core tenants of the poetics of the grotesque: there is power to be had in embracing a marginalized position. Though it may be a place of social exclusion, the margin is a space from which one can more easily do the work of transforming culture because it is there that one can more easily construct alternatives to the norm. Thus, Kim often uses the grotesque to deform institutions that patriarchal culture holds dear, offering an alternative view that undercuts these institutions' façade of power. In particular, many of Kim's poems deform the domestic landscape—conceived as the territory of women—into something horrific.¹⁹

Kim's alteration of domesticity is especially apparent in her poems on maternity such as "Song of Skin," which inverts the usual preciousness of a breastfeeding woman into a commentary on the sacrifices required by motherhood. As the woman in the poem feeds her child, it leeches her energy:

First, the saliva evaporates inside my mouth,
tears vanish from my eyes,
veins shrivel,
.....
My whole body is pumped out. (*Anxiety of Words*, p. 69)

The child, though it has sucked the mother dry, is not satisfied:

Even though you vomit what you've just eaten,
your open lips still hang onto my nipples
.....
till I can think of nothing
and my soul withers and dies. (p. 69)

Rather than describing an intimate mother/child bond, Kim shows the child as a succubus who leaves the mother bone dry.

This image is a far cry from the beatific vision of motherhood that Korean patriarchy constructs for women. Traditionally, the role of a woman was to produce sons; though son-bias has lessened in Korea, childless and single women of advanced age are still considered to be social anomalies.²⁰ Furthermore, after childbirth, the ideal Korean mother is expected to leave the workforce to care exclusively for her children. Kim's poems concerning maternity personify the difficulty of this self-sacrifice while also questioning the overvaluation placed on motherhood in Korean culture.

In “Memories of Giving Birth to a Daughter,” Kim seems to comment directly upon the institution of motherhood by presenting the act of giving birth as opening a mirror in which a “mother is inside a mirror, sitting” (p. 89). The speaker, entering the scene, “open[s] a mirror and enter[s] again,” to find a grandmother (p. 89). This scene repeats for the first few lines as we see the women and mirrors open up like a set of Russian nesting dolls. The “ancestral mothers” in the mirrors sit calling to the speaker, “Mother, Mother” (p. 89). The effect of this calling is frightening rather than poignantly reassuring, for “their mouths pucker, crying for milk” but the speaker has no milk to give (p. 89). This scene depicts a surreal initiation rite into motherhood in which one mother’s life becomes sustenance for the next mother and the next.

In this world, the birth of a baby girl happens when the “mirrors shatter . . . / and one mother is vomited out”:

People in white, wearing gloves
collect the bits of mirror and hold up a small mother
smeared in blood with eyes still shut—
mother of all my mothers—
and say, “It’s a ten-fingered princess!” (p. 89)

Given the sarcastic tone of the poem, we know better than to read these last lines as a confirmation of the woman’s identity as mother; rather, they suggest that when a woman gives birth to a girl, she gives birth to a woman who is in turn expected to become a mother. In re-visioning these scenes of motherhood as a gruesome factory line of maternity, Kim calls into question the patriarchal idea that women reach their greatest potential through motherhood; these poems invert the “normal” image in a grotesque mirror, illustrating the inescapability of the role of mother in Korean culture.

If we turn to the poem “To Patients with Contagious Diseases” that began this section, Kim’s assertion of grotesque power becomes clear. She enjoins the patients to

Run, so, that the, needles, can, slip out, white, beds, can, crumble, bloody
shit, can, splatter, and, dead things, and, stench, can, fly, high up, in, the,
sky. (p. 87)

If those who are marginalized by society seize the power to defile, the normal order of things will be reversed and “dead things” will rise up. Kim ends the poem in a declaration that harkens back to Bakhtin’s hags with their bodies’ grotesque mix of life and death:

Life, leavesthenreturns, departsthenarrives, and, the, sick, body, burns, up,
then, takes, on, life, and, runs, out, again! . . . If someone, asks, Is anyone
alive? Break, your, head, open, and, show, your, ten, ta, cle. (p. 88)

In Kim’s poem, exposing one’s monstrous nature is a gesture of revolution;

indeed, in this poem, Kim encourages us to overflow our boundaries, to let the real seep out.

Overwhelmingly, Kim's poems resist the pressure to beautify; instead, they take the subjects deemed appropriate to Korean women—family, “pretty” voices, and “pretty” landscapes—and defile them with garbage, vomit, and the violent expressions of oppressed identities. In describing Kim's poems, Choi notes that they depict women's oppressed condition but emphasize that transformation remains possible: “For Kim the blackened space is not only the space of oppression but also a place where a woman redefines herself, retranslates herself.”²¹ In this retranslation, Kim taps into what she calls *hyōnbin*: “She explains *hyōn* as ‘closed eyes therefore everything is black’ and *bin* as ‘a signifier for a woman's reproductive organs, a mouth of a lock, a valley, a mountain spring . . . Inside this dark womb the possibility of all life is held. At that place patriarchy, the male-centered thing breaks, the universality of all things breaks” (p. 10). In Kim's surreal landscape, the female grotesque removes the mask of feminine acceptability imposed by patriarchy to reveal the black space of *hyōnbin* from which a powerful alternative to dominant culture can be born.

IV: Yi Yōn-ju's Witness to the Grotesque

She lifts up her disheveled bed sheets each morning
and throws out her dead body,
a world where there is nothing left to fear.

.....

If salvation is becoming a mental patient and getting locked up
then the existence of worn-out rags trampling on cesspools is . . .
Ah, vicious wind.

—Yi Yōn-ju, “Prostitute 1,” p. 133

A “vicious wind” blows through Yi Yōn-ju's poems, bringing with it gusts of despair and violence. While her work is similar to Ch'oe Sūng-ja and Kim Hyesoon in its depiction of the oppression suffered by women, Yi is not as well known in Korea. Tragically, shortly after publishing her first collection of poetry in 1991, *A Night Market Where There are Prostitutes*, Yi committed suicide.²² Prior to her death, Yi asked her brother to keep the details of her life a secret; however, it is known that she lived in several economically depressed areas rife with prostitution, including areas surrounding United States military installations in South Korea.²³ While many of Yi's poems feature distorted images and horrific despair, her poems depicting the lives of prostitutes are especially compelling examples of the poetics of the grotesque. Yi's poems could be best thought of as a kind of grotesque witness, rendering the lives of prostitutes in a graphic and disturbing level of detail that ultimately incites readers to interrogate the systems leading these women to such lives.

The poem “Prostitute 4” is a typical example of the way Yi uses grotesque images. In the poem, a prostitute is “taken in a government jeep / to a white brick house” where she “mechanically takes off her clothes / from the waist down” (p. 135).²⁴ Once stripped,

Both of her legs open,
yellowish discharge mixed with pus
is rolled up in gauze
and placed inside a glass coffin. (p. 135)

The woman’s diseased body literally leaks onto the scene in the precise and disgusting detail typical of Yi’s images. Peter H. Lee describes them thusly: “Chosen to attract attention, [Yi’s] images include decomposing corpses, putrid smells, rotting blood, and pus—all associated with corruption, sickness, and death.”²⁵ Yi’s poems express themselves from a state of abjection that is the exact inversion of the *yōryu sim* tradition with its emphasis on beauty and passivity. Conversely, Yi’s poems reek with things gone wrong; indeed, like the body of the female grotesque, the figures in Yi’s poems overflow their containers, seeping out from under the mask of social acceptability.

As the prostitute lies on the table, “Outside the hard frozen window / small tree branches blanketed in snow / cackle, cackle at her” (p. 135). A cackle is neither a kind nor peaceful sound; it evokes harsh judgment and cruel amusement at this woman’s pain. In the next line though, Yi empathetically relates: “Fat snowflakes also fell / the day father left home shattering the half-broken door” (p. 135). These spare lines are telling; this woman is the child of poverty and a broken family. Yi’s mention of this fact hints at a claim of causation that strikes at the heart of a patriarchal system that predicates itself on the glories of the father. Here, it seems the father’s abandonment directly contributed to the woman’s debased condition.

Yi further elicits readers’ empathy by starkly blending the sorrow of the woman with her sickly, grotesque condition:

Once she had long shiny dark hair.
Memories clot around the phlegm
she spits after several dry coughs. (p. 135)

As if to speak on behalf of this woman who cannot speak and cannot be heard by respectable society, the poet says: “She wants to rest from the / stench of her vile existence” (p. 135). While some might wish to dismiss the woman’s suffering as a consequence of her own behavior, Yi’s emphasis is on the woman’s lack of choice. She wants to rest, to stop, but she cannot.

The poem ends in a climactic moment of conviction: “People whose lives drift in the right direction, / who are these people? / Fat snowflakes are falling” (p. 135). Yi’s readers are presumably those whose lives have

luckily “drifted” into social success and security; yet, in stating this as a question, Yi compels her readers to ask if they are blameless enough to sit in judgment of this woman. In a culture that permits such degradation—indeed, a degradation tacitly supported by the government—can there be anyone who is truly innocent? Yi asks her readers to suspend their usual judgment of prostitutes and examine the social forces compelling this woman into prostitution. Furthermore, she asks us to relate to this woman’s pain while we ask how we contribute to it. In a later poem in this series, “Prostitute 6,” Yi describes the social judgment that colors a prostitute’s life:

 this life
 lived naked in front of the rocks thrown at you is . . .
 The dim light flickers as if it’s about to go out. (p. 139)

In effect, the witness of Yi’s poem causes readers to become aware of their complicity in this woman’s degradation; in other words, to feel the weight of the rocks in their own hands.

Yi’s prostitute poems also starkly depict the consequences for women who live in a patriarchal system that rigorously enforces female purity while simultaneously encouraging the sexual license of men. Kim Chǒngnan notes that in Yi’s poems, “the ‘city’ is not only the pinnacle of patriarchal cultural glory but also an evil setting . . . The prostitute is a product of urbanization and one of the most brazen contradictions of a patriarchal civilization whose double standard of monogamy is only a façade” (p. 20). Yi transgressively “identifies with the prostitute—an unfortunate woman, at the city’s periphery, who cannot be incorporated into the system” (p. 20). In choosing to identify with the socially degraded bodies of these prostitutes, Yi makes visible those whom patriarchal culture seek to render invisible, challenging readers to see the “real” products of patriarchy—women whose bodies are treated as objects to be used and discarded.

Discussing Yi’s suicide attempts and eventual death, Choi says, “Yi’s anguish was not only personal but societal. She doubted the worthiness of life under such conditions.”²⁶ While Yi’s death suggests she could not overcome her sense of powerlessness in the face of South Korea’s nationalistic patriarchy, her poems linger on as vessels in which the grim reality of women’s oppression, the actual product of patriarchy, is preserved. In “Dusk in Winter,” Yi asks:

 Life’s end, does anyone
 really live beyond it?

 Let’s start again.
 Power of
 filthy
 memories. (p. 145)

Knowing the nature of Yi's end, it is easy to read this poem as a meditation on how to continue to live despite the lure of death. The poem depicts a speaker choosing to restart her life, consciously choosing to live it. What seems to compel this new beginning is the recognition that there will be no transcendence after death. While the last phrase of the poem could yield up any number of readings, I choose to read it as an encapsulation of the poetics of the grotesque: "filthy memories" have the power to force culture to "start again," the power to offer a new way of living. Filthy memories stay in our minds, they call for us to revise what we have seen, to question what we are told not to see, and finally, to apply this knowledge to change what we will see.

In reading the poetry of Ch'oe, Kim, and Yi within a framework that focuses on the way their work employs the poetics of the grotesque, we begin to see how these texts function as a powerful critique of patriarchy. Not only do they articulate a new, empowered voice for Korean women that challenge Korean gender norms, they also suggest provocative possibilities for women poets who choose to use distorted forms and gruesome images in their work.

V: *The Revolutionary Poetics of the Grotesque*

While Ch'oe, Kim, and Yi write in direct response to Korean culture, I would claim that their use of the grotesque has global implications. In an introduction to her work written for *Echoing Song*, a collection of English translations of Korean women poets, Ch'oe writes: "Here's a small stone—my poem. I pick it up and throw it straight to you across the ocean, hoping it will reach you and be returned to me."²⁷ I might ask then: what message do we, as Western readers, glean from this collection of small stones? What message will we return?

While the mechanisms of patriarchy may vary across cultures, there is a similarity between the cultures of the United States and Korea in their encouragement of a kind of "powerless" beauty in women. Ch'oe's, Kim's and Yi's poems respond to this impulse by creating the problematic body of the female grotesque: a body that does not follow the "rules" but claims the transgressive power inherent within the abject. Thus, the grotesque elements in these poets' work serve to rip off the façade of perfection, beauty, and acceptability imposed by patriarchy as a way of controlling women. Once the mask is removed, the rotten real explodes into the poems; their interiors overflow with blood, sweat, vomit, decay, and death. Breaking down the boundaries between clean and unclean, these poets force readers to confront the true product of patriarchy: the woman whose body and self are monstrously distorted.

These poems are not simply expressions of victimhood, for they con-

tain clear assertions of the revolutionary power inherent in the bodies of women. As Kristeva says, “The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth” (p. 9). Within the grotesque we find the dual forces of life and death, both the products of oppression as well as the power to speak in a language that transcends oppression. The disturbing images these poets employ are much more than mere poetic window-dressing; rather, they actively create a new genre of both poem and woman poet. Korean feminist poet and critic Kim Sŭng-hŭi describes such literature thusly:

Women’s literature is a literature of laughter.
A literature of white breast-milk.
A literature of a rift.
A literature of abomination.²⁸

It is telling that this definition of Korean women’s literature invokes not only laughter but also an abject female bodily fluid and a rift—a motion which returns us to Kim Hyeseon’s vision of the margin as a place where everything shifts, allowing a new alternative to emerge. Recognizing the power they possess to unsettle culture with their abomination, the “ugly” poems of Ch’oe Sŭng-ja, Kim Hyeseon, and Yi Yŏn-ju offer us a poetics of the grotesque that reclaims the laughter of Bakhtin’s hags as a subversive feminist action.

NOTES

¹ Yi Yŏn-ju, “The Dictator,” in *Anxiety of Words: Contemporary Poetry by Korean Women Ch’oe Sŭng-ja, Kim Hyeseon, and Yi Yŏn-ju*, ed. and trans. Don Mee Choi (Brookline: Zephyr, 2006), 159. This paper would not be possible without the work of Don Mee Choi, whose translations of Ch’oe, Kim, and Yi have made these poets available to English-speaking audiences. Undoubtedly, her efforts suggest that translation work itself can be a feminist action. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the poetry of all three women come from *Anxiety of Words* and will be cited parenthetically.

² “Korean Women—Poetry, Identity, Place: A Conversation with Kim Hye-sun [Hyeseon],” by Choi, *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 11 (2003), 535-36. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³ Ch’oe Sŭng-ja, “Why I Write,” in *Echoing Song: Contemporary Korean Women Poets*, ed. Peter H. Lee (Buffalo: White Pine Press, 2005), 118.

⁴ “Korean Women,” 533. *Kisaeng* were women during the Goryeo (935-1394) and Joseon (1394-1910) Dynasties who were trained in musical, visual, and literary arts in order to entertain high-ranking male officials. At times, *kisaeng* were required to offer sexual favors to their clients. Among their entertainment skills, *kisaeng* excelled at the poetic form *sijo*, a three line poem similar in style and theme to Japanese haiku. Despite the renown of select *kisaeng* during their lifetimes, *kisaeng* officially held the lowest rank in society. See *Songs of the Kisaeng: Courtesan*

Poetry of the Last Korean Dynasty, trans. Constantine Contogenis and Wolhee Choe (Rochester: BOA Editions, 1997).

⁵ Carolyn Miller, "Genre as Social Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70 (1984), 165.

⁶ Anis Bawarshi, *Genre and the Invention of the Writer: Reconsidering the Place of Invention in Composition* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2003), 45.

⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), 317; and Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4. I will be using the terms grotesque and abject interchangeably within this study to identify elements of these poems that challenge both genre and social conventions. This interchangeability of the grotesque and abject is not to suggest that Kristeva's and Bakhtin's theories are one and the same; rather, it is to emphasize their core area of commonality in conceptualizing the embrace of the grotesque/abject as a way of troubling normative behavior. Subsequent references to Bakhtin and Kristeva will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁸ Cho Dong-il, "Western Impact versus Korean Tradition in the Humanities," *Korean Literature in Cultural Context and Comparative Perspective* (Seoul: Jipmoondang Publishing, 1997), 133, 130. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁹ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 8. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁰ Choi, *Anxiety of Words*, 3.

¹¹ Ch'oe and Kim began their writing careers during this period of political unrest and mass activism. The most violent and famous suppression by the Chun Doo Hwan regime took place in May 1980. The Kwangju Uprising began on 18 May with a protest of 500 people demanding an end to martial law, eventually growing to encompass hundreds of thousands as citizen groups wrestled control of the city away from the military. By 27 May, the rebellion had been suppressed, resulting in an unknown number of civilian deaths; the Chun regime claimed 200 died, but recent Korean National Assembly investigations claim no fewer than 1,000 died. Ultimately, South Korea did not have a stable democratic government until 1992. Ch'oe and Kim took part in the intellectual dissident movement of this time. Much like the American second-wave feminist movement, which grew from the Vietnam activism of the 1960-70s, the Korean feminist movement gained momentum during the 1980s, becoming most visibly active in the 1990s. See Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: Norton, 1998), 382.

¹² Choi, *Anxiety of Words*, xix.

¹³ Hwa Young Caruso Choi, "Art as a Political Act: Expression of Cultural Identity, Self-Identity, and Gender by Suk Nam Yun and Yang Soon Min," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 39, No. 3 (2005), 73.

¹⁴ Kim Ch'ngnan, introduction to *Echoing Song*, 19. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁵ Choi, *Anxiety of Words*, xix.

¹⁶ Choi, introduction to *Mommy Must Be a Fountain of Feathers*, by Kim Hyesoon (Notre Dame, IN: Action Books, 2008), 10.

¹⁷ Choi, *Mommy Must Be a Fountain of Feathers*, 10.

¹⁸ Kim Hyesoon, "Seoul's Dinner," in *Mommy Must Be a Mountain of Feathers*, 58.

Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁹ The collection of Kim's translated work, *Mommy Must Be a Fountain of Feathers*, features what Choi describes in the introduction as Kim's "rat poems" (p. 9). These poems depict rats "copulating, raising a family, mommy rats gnawing at baby rats, surviving hell" (pp. 9-10). In casting the "traditional" family as grotesque rats, Kim skewers the façade of domestic bliss that hides a rotten, dysfunctional core.

²⁰ Shim Young-Hee, "Changing Status of Women in Korean Society," *Korea Focus*, March/April 2000, <http://www.koreafocus.or.kr>.

²¹ Choi, *Mommy Must Be a Fountain of Feathers*, 9.

²² Choi, *Anxiety of Words*, 129.

²³ In her introduction to Kim's collection, *Mommy Must Be a Fountain of Feathers*, Choi states, "The U. S. presence translates into about one hundred U. S. military bases and installations in South Korea, a land that is only one fourth the size of California" (p. 9). Due to this presence, both Choi and Kim consider South Korea to be a "neocolony" that is "culturally and politically subservient to the U. S." (p. 9). While Yi's poems do not directly consider this reality, their condemnation of government organized prostitution surrounding American military bases is clear.

²⁴ The specific mention of the "government jeep" reflects United States and Korean government involvement in systematic prostitution in "camptowns" surrounding United States army bases both during and after the Korean War. Procedures organized and facilitated by both governments included identity cards for prostitutes, regular medical check-ups, and treatments for sexually transmitted diseases. See *Women Outside*, directed by J. T. Orinne Takagi and Hye Jung Park (New York: Third World Newsreel, 1995).

²⁵ Lee, *Echoing Song*, 239.

²⁶ Choi, *Anxiety of Words*, xx.

²⁷ Ch'oe, "Why I Write," 118.

²⁸ Quoted in Choi, "An Overview of Contemporary Korean Women's Poetry," *Acta Koreana*, 9, No. 2 (2006), 128.