

## KOREAN LITERARY MODERNITY, A MULTI-NATIONAL HISTORICAL CONCEPT

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Modernity as an historical concept is very vague; its meaning is neither precise nor single. Indeed, to call something ‘modern’ bears several quite different meanings. This plurality of meanings makes it all the more difficult to discuss the modernity of a particular thing. First, ‘modern’ is often synonym with ‘contemporary’, referring to the present time. Yet there are differences between ‘modernity’ and ‘contemporarity’. For instance, when talking about paintings, there is a slight difference between contemporary art and modern art. Same thing goes with literature. Young Korean writers such as Kim Young-ha for example are contemporary, meaning they are from the same present time we’re living in. Let us here remind that the very term of ‘contemporarity’ is constituted by the two elements ‘con’ meaning ‘with’ and ‘temporarity’ which bears the root ‘tempo’ meaning ‘time’. And yet the very same Kim Young-ha could hardly be said a ‘modern’ writer. There are several reasons for that. The first of which being that we are living a time where postmodernity has overcome modernity as an artistic or literary concept. But more important and more interesting is the *nuance* that separates ‘modern’ from ‘contemporary’; because if both terms refer to the present time, ‘modernity’ does it *as opposed to* the past or ancient times. In History, for example, the modern times refer to the times that came after and *in opposition with* the Middle-Age: the Renaissance, the Enlightenment Period, and the French Revolution. In French Literature History, we know of a major aesthetical debate that lasted from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century called the “Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns.” This shows very well how ‘modernity’ bears a meaning of ‘opposition to an established tradition’. In more recent times, ‘modernity’ as a literary concept in the West has been used throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century when discussing the many formal and aesthetical innovations perpetuated by the Romantic, the Realistic and the Aesthetical (Art-for-Art’s sake) Schools or Trends. And by doing so, the term of ‘modernity’ grew yet another connotation: that of innovation. We then shall bear all that in mind when discussing the concept of ‘modernity’ in Korean Literature’s History.

One misleading thing is that the Korean language has differentiated ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’ with the Chinese characters ‘*kūndae*’ (recent time) and ‘*hyōndae*’ (present time). It is both a good and a bad translation. It is good in the sense that it

makes it clear that modernity and contemporarity are two different things. But its limit comes from the fact that it only stresses out the ‘temporal’, ‘chronological’ or ‘historical’ dimension of the concept. *Kūndae munhak* then refers to the literature produced in a particular period of Korean’s History and is mostly understood as such an historical categorization rather than an aesthetic or purely literary concept.

Furthermore the *kūndae* period is often referred to as the period when Western ‘modernity’ came into Korea. This is where the problem becomes interesting; because by making that link between Korean Modernity and Western Modernity, we have to put in the ‘*kūndae*’ term all the different aspects of the Western ‘modernity’ concept. By focusing almost exclusively on its historical aspect, critic tradition has often been led into interpreting Korea’s entry into modernity as a mere transplantation of Western modernity understood as an historical moment of its development.

It is true that modernity came to birth in Korea after the young intellectuals met the so-called modern Western literatures. But they lacked the distance necessary to understand them as part of a moving concept. To speak more clearly, let’s just say that they received all those literatures at once, as a whole, without seeing that those literatures were part of a progress in motion. This is why, when Korean Literature Historians tried to look at Korean Modern Literary Period, they encountered strange universes that resembled the Western Literatures but in the same time not quite fitting in such Literary Categories. One of the best examples would be that of Kim Tong-in.

When trying to figure out what made Kim Tong-in’s Literature modern, critics have used the Literary Concepts of the West, that is all the *-isms* and schools that made Western Modernity. But then they came up with a Literary Universe that was all at the same time Naturalistic, Romantic, Aesthetic, Modernist, Hedonist, and so on. It was so much that it made it quite pointless to try to define Kim Tong-in’s Literature by using the Western Concepts. Therefore there is a need to redefine ‘modernity’ as a literary concept when approaching the so-called ‘modern period’ of Korean Literature’s History. And since the characterization of modern literature started with the Western Modern Literature, it would be interesting to start from there. The most important thing that we would like to stress out by starting the discussion about Korean Literary Modernity with the analysis of Western Literary Modernity is that Western Literary Modernity does not lie in the Schools and Trends. Korean and Japanese Critics and Literary Historians from that time mistook the trends for modernity itself. Even though it is partly true, the key question lies in why those trends and schools made Western Literary Modernity.

French structuralists such as Foucault and Bachelard see the origin of modernity in a

crisis of the subject. Starting from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, European thinkers and writers awakened to the questions of the self, of the subject as an individual possessing his own personality, his own needs and his own dreams. This is how Romanticism began opening a new era – the modern era – for philosophers, poets and artists.

Starting from that point, they focused on that newly awakened subjectivity and developed ways to pursue its growth. The schools and trends can hence be seen as those ways through which European intellectuals from the 19<sup>th</sup> century searched a way to overcome the crisis of the subject awakening in a society that was not ready for it. Therefore they searched new forms of expression more fitted to speak the self. And being new, those forms opposed themselves to the former established forms of expressions.

We here have a new angle to look at modernity. We can then try to define it as a new awareness of the self as a subject and a reaction against ancient or past traditions that impeded such an awareness. Now if we look at the Korean situation, we can find all those elements. Even though it is hard to tell who, where or when modernity was given shape in Korean Literary World, the fact is that it first appeared as a reaction from and against past traditions. Yi Kwangsu's first attempts were clearly made against the Confucian yoke that weighed on Korean society. It is also well-known that Kim Tong-in reacted against the same Yi Kwangsu's conception of Literature as a means of social enlightenment.

Less known is the fact that both Yi Kwangsu and Kim Tong-in's literary attempt did not come out of the blue but followed a trend that started in the early 1900s marked by a pursuit of the inner self. This has been well shown by Kwŏn Podŭrae in her *Origins of Modern Korean Novel* (한국 근대소설의 기원) as well as in the collection of short-stories from that period published in 2005, *Selected works from Korean Modern Confession Novels* (한국 근대 고백소설 작품 선집). In these stories – among which the oldest is dated from 1907 – the authors speak of themselves, of their own worries and personal concerns, in a form (that of the confession) close to naturalistic realism (Kevin O'Rourke was to call it, in his study on 1920s' Korean Short-Stories, a 'hyper-realism').

Recent studies in comparative literature have shown that the confession form of Korean Modern Novels owed a lot to the confession form which was high in fashion among Japanese writers and especially Japanese naturalistic writers such as Tayama Katai who produced the first *shishōsetsu*, the novel of the *I*. What is interesting in those comparative studies is that they showed something completely new to Literary

Historians when discussing Korean Literature's Modern Period.

If, as it has been believed for a long time, modernity came indeed through the literary trends from the West, it has all this time been left out that these very same trends did not come *directly* from Europe to Korea but indirectly *via* Japan. This is why for instance the so-called Korean naturalism is so much different from the French naturalism; the Nature comprised in the term 'Naturalism' as defined by Emile Zola at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is that of the Natural Sciences. Much impressed by the experimental approach and the scientific discoveries of natural scientists like Darwin and Claude Bernard, Zola advocated the same experimental and scientific approach in literature, saying the writer must describe things 'as they are', as 'truthfully' as possible.

This motto of the Western Naturalistic School, when it came to Japan, was interpreted quite differently by the Japanese authors who understood and interpreted 'truthful' as 'authentic'. These two terms may be synonyms, but their slight difference led Japanese naturalistic authors to a very unique definition of Naturalistic Literature; instead of focusing on scientific truth, they focused on personal authenticity; instead of natural sciences, they lauded Nature in a more poetical or Romantic way. Let us here remind that most Naturalistic Japanese writers had first been Romantic poets (it is especially true of Shimazaki Tōson and Kunikida Doppo).

When Zola said to describe things 'truthfully', the Japanese writers realized that the only way a writer could be truthful in his descriptions was to describe as authentically as possible his own experiences. Therefore the Japanese Naturalistic writers began to write novels focused on themselves, on their own personal reality; thus the *I*-novels or *watakushishōsetsu*, and their realism became a somehow personal and subjective realism.

Coming to Korea, this Naturalism led young writers to write about their own private reality in a narrative form very similar to that of the *shishōsetsu* that is the form of confession.

Here we have another explanation for Korean intellectuals' discovery of the inner self.

To sum up what we have said so far, there is first of all the opposition to the past tradition that condemned the expression of the inner self, and then the influence of the Japanese form of Naturalistic and Realistic expression. This mixture had also to compose with other elements that were indigenous.

A former Japanese Romantic poet's reality is not the reality of a young Korean intellectual whose country has just been annexed by the Japanese empire. Therefore by describing their own personal and subjective reality, the Korean authors were

nonetheless led to describe a more general and social reality. If we take a look at Hyŏn Chin-gŏn's representative short-stories such as *The Poor Wife* (*Pinch'ŏ*), *A Society Advocating Alcohol* (*Sul kwŏnhanŭn sahoe*) or *Grandmother's Death* (*Halmŏni-ŭi chug'ŭm*), not to speak of Ch'oe Sŏ-hae's dramatical stories or the later Ch'ae Man-shik's *Ready-made Life*, we are faced with a social reality that shows through the subjective narration of the self. This is why Kevin O'Rourke in his study could speak of hyper-realism; it is a realism made so realistic by the fact that it is both objective and subjective. Modernity as an opposition is then to be understood also as an opposition to a socio-political reality that had to be described 'as it is' in order to be revealed, understood and maybe overcome.

One last aspect of literary modernity that we have left aside so far questions the style, the language of this new literature. We have mentioned that modernity in the West bore a meaning of innovation; innovation of the forms of expression, innovation in the ways of expressing the inner self, innovation in the language itself; from Early Romantic Poets to Baudelaire and Rimbaud, the language used in French poetry has experienced a radical evolution. The innovation is not as much similar as it is more radical in Korea's case since modern literature in Korea goes along with a completely new written language.

Starting from the first novels of the *shinsosŏl*, Korean writers have turned their back on the Chinese-based written style inherited from the confucian system, a style very far from the language spoken by the people in their every day conversations. As the confession form developed and as the young writers became aware of the necessity to write a language as 'truthful' and 'authentic', as 'realistic' as the reality they claimed to depict 'as it is', they worked to somehow oralize the written language, making it closer and closer to the one used in reality. In order to do that, they were led to invent a whole new language with new codes and new uses. One famous example is the systematization of the use of  $\text{그}$  and  $\text{그녀}$  for 'He' and 'She' inspired by the Japanese words 'kare' and 'kanojya'. The use of  $\text{그}$  had first been introduced and used in Korean translations of the Bible in reference to God. It was Yi Kwangsu, then Kim Tong-in, who made a more general use of this pronoun in Korean prose writing.

But beside these linguistic innovations, the point worth mentioning in a purely literary point of view is the fact that the need of such linguistic innovations was dictated by a will to make a more faithful and authentic description since they needed a language that fitted their ambition to speak the inner self 'as it is'.

A same reform of the written language had been undergone in French realist literature,

especially by Flaubert and Maupassant. They too made a lot of researches on the different levels of speech, on dialects and tone rendering to fit the reality they were describing as faithfully as possible.

In a similar way the Korean writers from the 'modern' period began to make use of the different dialects (사투리) especially in spoken dialogues between characters to enhance the effect of reality produced upon the reader.

It would be absurd to say that the Korean writers were influenced by the French Realist novelists in their pursuit of a new written language; all we are trying to say is that might be one of the many aspects of literary modernity.

From modernity to modernism, there are only a few steps. Our subject is not to discuss modernism in Korean literature which is part – we believe – of the so-called 'Modern Literature' of Korea; yet it is interesting to notice that modernist writers often put forward that research on language and the same search for new forms of expression – even though modernists tend to be more radical in their experimentations.

All of this leads us to a very specific characteristic of modernity in Korean Literature that we already have mentioned: realism. Realism is the key notion to define Modernity in Korean Literature, but we must understand that realism as a trend specific to Korean intellectuals. Even though it is derived from French and Japanese naturalisms, the Korean realism is characteristic in the sense that it is manifold. From the French naturalism, it took its experimental approach of describing reality but the Japanese version of naturalism also taught them the limits of pure objectivity and the merits of subjectivity. The Japanese naturalists with their confession novels made Korean writers aware of the issue of the inner self but by pursuing it they were led to approach their selves not only as subject, as ego, but also as social individuals, parts of a society in motion with a history. In that sense, Yöm Sang-söp's stories such as *Before the Hurrahs* (*Mansejön*) is characteristic.

We are not to say that Korean Modern Literature as a realistic literature is political; but we do mean to show that Korean Literary Modernity reflects the political reality of Korea in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The existence of a strong censorship from the colonial government made it impossible for Korean writers to be openly political in their writings; but in a sense this is what made their Realism so literary because they had to describe a reality without being allowed to describe it as plainly, as faithfully and as truthfully as they wished. Their Realism hence became somehow more metaphorical or even analogical, making it all the more literary.

To sum up and conclude our discussion, we would like to stress the fact that ‘modernity’ is not to be regarded as merely historical in its Korean translation of ‘recent time’. If it is indeed recent, what makes it modern is not its historical situation but many other and more important things that we shall list as follows:

- modernity is the creation of new forms of literary expression in opposition with the old traditional chinese-based confucean conception of literature (following the precept of promoting virtue and reprovig vice – the so-called *kwõnsõnjing’ak*);
- modernity is the self-discovery of one’s own interiority (the so-called inner self); its form of expression hence shall be the form most able to truly express the inner self in its authenticity;
- modernity is also modernity of the language since language is the outer form through which modernity is expressed;
- modernity in novelistic literature is realism since realism is the most accurate way to express authentically and truthfully the self as part of a larger reality: society as a whole. In that last point, we do fall back to the ‘recent time’ we were mentioning since the social reality the modern writers are describing is the reality of that precise time of Korean History, but again they were contrived to express such a reality not straightforwardly but with roundabout means that enhanced its literary quality.

This is how, even though described as mainly Realistic, Korean Modern Literature can be at the same time Romantic and Lyrical (as it is shown in the works of the members of the Group of the Nine - *Kuinhoe*).

It is then obsolete and somehow vain to reduce Korean Literary Modernity to the mere transplantation of Literary Trends from the West. Those trends were absorbed and digested, sometimes even mixed together to produce the most accurate form for each personality.

We mentioned at the beginning the case of Kim Tong-in. We can now say that all the chaotic association of *-isms* was part of the search for the most appropriate form of expression to describe one individual’s inner self in a castrating reality. No matter how harsh reality can be on us, there will always be the remains of a soothing tune whispered by the wind to remind us of our inner self. Isn’t it exactly what the ending paragraph of Kim Tong-in’s *Paeddaragi* is talking about?