

**Globalized Space and its Peculiarity.**  
***Saebyeogeu Nana and Ujupiseui konghwaguk***  
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0. The recent trend of “globalized” literary production in Korea brings forth fictions, in which Korea is no more the exclusive place of the novel’s action as before and, various fictitious places or foreign countries are depicted not only as curiosity, but as a platform for the action. I assume, such a transfer of the plot to the non-Korean space is expected to attract the broader readership, therefore the economic success. From the point of view of the author this transmission can open i) new possibilities of the plot development, ii) broader proposition, i.e. character’s functionality and iii) uncommon message of the fiction. The central question of this paper is how European readers can deal with this Korean trend and, if there are serious obstacles for readability of these fictions.

### 1. Foreign space in modern Korean fiction

Since 20<sup>th</sup> century the stereotype of depicting foreign countries has been established in *sin soseol* genre, where some information about the West appeared (symbolized by noisy streets full of cars, churches and bells, skylines, trains, trams, chimneys etc.). In the same way foreigners are strictly classified (among them rich philanthropic Americans, rapacious and corrupt Chinese, educated and noble Japanese).<sup>1</sup> This typology is uniform, thus universal, and functions more or less in a way cultural symbols do. During the colonial period and postwar turbulent years of Korean existence genres of the modern literature were gradually domesticated. Through short stories and fiction’s plot national literature with its demands has been formulated and proved. Therefore, the national themes, didactic aspects of literature, pure Korean language etc. are stressed. There are not many novels after the WWII which take place outside Korea and very few foreigners act as heroes.<sup>2</sup> Only in the era of the proclaimed globalization foreign countries begin to serve a place of action of the novels, as well as a poetic expression. This trend is connected with the last opening of Korea to the world and with the exchange of generation of writers. What was essential in the formative phase of the national literature, cannot be fashionable during the ambitious period of entering Korean literature the world scene when it aims to integrate into world literature. Therefore, since 1990s the new approaches to the traditional concepts of several literary categories has arisen and, these concern the space perception as well.

### 2. Dealing with foreign space: plot and characters

Every fiction can be perceived as a contract between the author and his potential readers, hence he or she has to be aware, the text has to fulfil readers’ expectations, i.e. it has to be readable (in a sense of Barthes’s “*lisible*”, not “*scriptible*”<sup>3</sup>). For that a certain quantity of “reality” has to be implemented into the text and, this reality has to correspond to the reader’s intelligence (common knowledge).<sup>4</sup> The traditional novel of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Korea largely takes place in a familiar space, i.e. in Korea, heroes are mainly Koreans. Therefore every reader can simply imagine the scene and understand the plot. If other countries, e.g. Vietnam, Japan etc. are depicted, the stress is given to the heroes (Koreans) and the overall plot development. The significance of the place can play certain role, of course, it functions as a place of hero’s *maturing period* or, a *space of alienation*. The transmission of the space may also

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<sup>1</sup> For detail, see e.g. Miriam Löwensteinová, Vladimír Pucek: *Studie z dějin starší korejské literatury* (Studies on the Classical Korean Literature). Prague, Karolinum 2006, p. 271-334.

<sup>2</sup> These are mainly soldiers of Korean War.

<sup>3</sup> Barthes, Roland: *Le plaisir du texte*, Paris: Editions du Seuil 1973.

<sup>4</sup> As Umberto Eco stressed in his *Six walks in the Fictional Woods*, there are many levels of readers’ expectation. A special sort among them is the “*empiric*” reader, whose demands are excessive and obsessive and who calls for the unexpected details and elaborate information that have no direct connection with the process of reading fiction. In this paper we don’t follow such an attitude.

function allegorically, i.e. in a way the author hides the particular Korean reality by replacing it outside Korea due to the censorship (political reasons).

For my analysis I selected two novels which plot takes place outside Korea, though the main characters remain Koreans (or seem to be Koreans). These are very specific in all the above mentioned aspects, especially in dealing with spatiotemporal categories. The first one is *새벽의 나나*, written by Pak Hyeongseo (b. 1972), the second one *우주피스 공화국*, written by Ha Ilji (b. 1955). *새벽의 나나* takes place in Bangkok (partially in USA, Korea and in other countries that have connection with the characters' entering scene), *우주피스 공화국* in a semi-fictitious space of the existing-non-existing republic of Ujupis.

Both fictions are present in their paratext as existential novels and enriched by many fashionable sub-topics like a karmic relationship between heroes and their reincarnation, in *새벽의나나* the plot deals with the world of prostitutes, pimps and drugs. Such a topic cannot be enacted in Korea, though it can attract Korean readers as something unknown thus exciting.

The space in above mentioned novels may use the foreign countries settings for many reasons. However, I cannot indicate this transfer in other way than a means of attracting readers' attention, stressing globalized trends of Korean literature, i.e. the transmission of the plot has nothing in common with the message of the fiction.

i) Both the novels take place in the foreign countries during the whole text except for some pages in *Saebyeogeu Nana* (hero returns home twice). Using this way, the authors may unfold their fantasy in unusual scope as there are not many readers familiar with foreign countries in detail. As for *Saebyeogeu Nana*, the author declares<sup>5</sup> that he has been to Thailand several times, but all the information that he offers to his public are almost available online. Hence, every reader can understand the basic circumstances and complete his basic knowledge.<sup>6</sup> *Ujupiseui konghwaguk*'s settings attracts attention alone by its title that is somewhat mysterious and everybody is curious about the location of this place which is a part of Lithuania's capital Vilnius. The scope of information the author gives to his readers is of the same quantity (quality as well) of reality as in the previous novel.<sup>7</sup> However, readers expect to be enriched by new or fascinating fictitious/real world. These expectations are connected with the common ideas of the places. Thailand in general is apprehended as a destination for entertainment, moreover the destination where everybody can find pleasure and not spend enormous sums. Ujupis can associate not only the northern regions of the late USSR, but something mysterious, dreamy, misty and dangerous as it was fixed as communist country.

The space in both the novels is naturally closely connected with the main characters and serves primarily as a place of *maturing period* of the hero (his initiation), or as an *alienate space*, where the hero mentally or physically dies. These are places of danger, destruction, insecurity, impurity, even perversion. Such a proposition serves like an incentive for other characters' entering scene as prostitutes, transsexuals, deviates and policemen in *Saebyeogeu Nana*, or, the procession of corrupt officers in *Ujupiseui konghwaguk*. It may also emphasize the misty or semi-dreamed narrative of the plot. Therefore, authors can play with their readers the never-ending game of the boundaries of the possible fictitious worlds and the endless plot action. Moreover, in both the novels other places are mentioned briefly, such as USA in *Saebyeogeu Nana* (let us remember the scene of Manhattan where Erik walks his "wiki-walk" culminating by his entering one shop, where the old Jew [sic!] sales weapons), or only enumerated, e.g. as places of exile (Cordoba, Denmark [sic!]) in *Ujupiseui konghwaguk*. All the

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<sup>5</sup> See the afterword of the novel. In: *Saebyeogeu Nana*, Moonji, Seoul 2015, p. 403.

<sup>6</sup> As a person absolutely unexperienced of Thailand reality, I cannot evaluate the trustfulness of the depiction.

<sup>7</sup> The reality is depicted in a way the place can be everywhere in the late USSR, but also in the Eastern Europe during the communist era. It is somewhat shabby, there are no tourists and the place as a whole emanates a strange alienate atmosphere.

depictions are brief insofar, these cannot be substantially distorted. In any case, readers are not able to discover the false information and prove the author's incompetence.

What kind of possibilities this transfer offers? Firstly, foreign space is not the familiar place, hence, there can appear strange situation and unusual stories. Secondly, the author can ask the question relatively uncommon for Koreans. Thirdly, he can leave the stereotypes petrified during the history of modern literature and fulfill the theory of the "possible worlds"<sup>8</sup>. In such a place hero can act in another way without being accused to be heretic in a way of keeping the principles of the narrative. We can state that the novels' space in the analyzed fictions acts purposefully, but without the substantial philosophical or intellectual intention. Hence, the transmission functions as an extension of the plot development potential.

ii) All the places are related with hero's sentiment or thought, they are helpful in illustrating his behavior: let us mention, that foreign places in both the text are not very pleasant and friendly (in contrast to their home) – e.g. in Ujupis *it snows* during the whole action, in Bangkok *it rains* awfully. Both the situations evoke depression, sadness, mental regress, desperation. In a symbolical way some phenomena function e.g. *buildings* (shabby, old, evoking the absence of the proper morality and danger) *churches and monasteries* (all the scarlet women are visiting churches and monasteries for prayers), *taxi* (going by taxi means not only being rubbed, but also wandering to other world). The important meetings take place in *pubs* (innkeepers are the very guides for entering the other space, the key role in both the novels *soup* plays as the means of recovering and break), at the *market* heroes face the hostile environment etc. Heroes were dragged by this alienate unfamiliar world, they aimlessly wander in space and gradually fall into the state of being (voluntary) victims of it.

As stated before, the basic *aim of the transfer* of the plot to the foreign space seems to be closely connected to the main characters, their functionality and the message of the novels. The main character of *Saebyeogeeui Nana* is a pure Korean whose name is Leo. Leo is depicted as a young, intelligent, not experienced thus innocent boy, during the text development he turned into a man (pure, intelligent, innocent) in contrast to the prostitutes, pimps, drug dealers and others. Hal in *Ujupiseui konghwaguk* is an Asian, handsome, intelligent, speaking all European languages (but not ujupisian). Leo is Korean by his mentality: though the author tries to portrait him as an opposite of the whole surroundings he sometimes acts as a very narrow-minded man, he is thinking as a selfish, self-centered human, coward and miser. Hal, the central character of *Ujupiseui konghwaguk* is not explicitly indicated to be Korean, it is said that he has been living in exile in the Republic of Han (seemingly Korea of the Japanese colonial era). He is not insomuch Korean as Leo is, he is more entangled into the plot, i.e. not very active, his behavior is predicted due to the author's intention. If we try to sum up the heroes' qualities, they are modeled as completely positive, exaggerated characters, targeted to Korean publics (though Leo is smoking *yaba* intensively and Hal has a sexual intercourse with various ladies. The fact that sex is not depicted openly and Leo's smoking drugs is interpreted as a process of calming himself is also a phenomenon attributed to Koreans, not to the world literature). We are aware, these novels were designated to Korean readers, hence, there are many features aimed only to Koreans, therefore they can read it in their own way<sup>9</sup>. We can close this observation by the remark that in the depiction of space and heroes both the authors are not globalized, they remain Korean in every aspect.

### 3. The European reading

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<sup>8</sup> Lubomír Doležel: *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Johns Hopkins University Press 2000.

<sup>9</sup> I.e. the Korean reading.

The reason why we deal with such novels is their recent offer to the international public through their translations<sup>10</sup>. Both the texts are/will be available in Czech language as well<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, I can sum up in a very brief way<sup>12</sup> the main differences between the European and Korean ways of depiction and the subsequent reading of the “foreign”; stress by some examples the strange or unacceptable behavior of characters of both of the novels; show the mistakes that concern the plot development and other obstacles for the successful entering the globalized literary world, naturally, from the narrow point of view of the European.

i) In my opinion, for the reader of European literary tradition, i.e. tradition based on strictly and logically defined structure of classical novel (mainly French and Russian), the *balance between the characters and the plot development* (the so-called *proposition* and *sequences*<sup>13</sup>) is the most important obstacle when reading these novels. It is, characters in their initial position (e.g. Leo in Thailand lives with prostitutes) have to act in accordance with it. Hence, Leo has to profit from this situation as he is a man. Similarly, if Erik or Hal bought revolver they have to use it.

ii) Another obstacle is the distinct *hybridity of genres* and the evident taking off several kinds of motives<sup>14</sup>. In *Saebyeogeui Nana* there are passages as taken from F.S. Fitzgerald or following his style as well as texts sometimes borrow for use the American criminal novel, esp. the character of Phil Marlow<sup>15</sup>. In *Ujupiseui konghwaguk* Kafka's motives taken from his novel *Castle* are evident, but also episodes reminding the movie *The Planet of the Apes* that is other genre and represents other level of culture<sup>16</sup>. This is not only mixture of the high and low literature, but also of the serious and the ridiculous. European reader needs to have the strictly defined genre when reading novels, even by the paratext on the contents-strip.

iii) *Theme* is not strictly introduced and fixed. *Saebyeogeui Nana* can deal with reincarnation, with the reality of prostitutes in Bangkok, with the disappearance of masculinity, with Korean superiority etc. *Ujupiseui konghwaguk* can be interpreted as an encounter with the alienate world, as an attempt of returning home, as an allegory of the structure and functionality of repressions etc. Stressing the mysterious and the uncertain brings confusion. We are not able to distinguish if the hero finds himself in the past, in reality, if he is speaking about his dreamy vision or, vision induced by drugs etc. Also reality relying only on the encyclopedia sources like Wikipedia cannot be sufficient for Europeans pampered by the great narrators like Alexander Dumas. The other “faults” are of the “technical” character and depend on the individual writing abilities of every author, but these are mainly caused by the weak structure of the novel<sup>17</sup>.

iv) *Characters* are not believable in their *proposition*. Heroes are of exaggerated purity, abilities, but of immature thoughts. They stress money, payments, they like sensations (as Koreans do). They do not fulfil the idea of the common European man. Sometimes they are defending morally incomprehensible viewpoints. Ridiculous are some notes of self-evidence that look like racial overestimation.

v) *Very complicated plot* without the distinct sequences, not carefully established *proposition* (hero and his function does not correspond the action), furthermore, the frequent changes of the time levels and thematic layers result into the *disturbed and limited readability* for Europeans.

vi) *The thematic subplots* are beyond the borders of traditional European taste and conventions. In these novels there is the absence of the distinct borders between reality and dream, past and present and, reality is mixed with the culturally not common topoi like reincarnation, stressing the fate, bombastic romanticism as a positive value (main heroes are tiresome by their love forever that does not correspond to the situation). At the same time, authors try to implant into the texts some “cool” insertions that, as

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<sup>10</sup> Novels are on the list of works desirable for translation and supported by LTIK.

<sup>11</sup> *Ujupiseui konghwaguk* was translated into Czech in 2015, *Saebyeogeui Nana* this year (not published yet).

<sup>12</sup> as a translator of one of them and a close reader of the second one

<sup>13</sup> In this paper, I follow mainly A.J. Greimas's terminology.

<sup>14</sup> I am not speaking about plagiarism, but about the unconscious copying of style, motives, characters etc.

<sup>15</sup> This can be non-conscious, as this character influences already the Japanese literature (esp. novels written by Haruki Murakami).

<sup>16</sup> Hybridity is strictly prohibited since the first works of literary criticism, i.e. since Aristoteles's *Mimesis*.

<sup>17</sup> Those are mainly enumerated above, but not in detail.

their opinion, belong to the “European” (the best examples are Leo’s two encounters with the “philosophical” lizard). Tiresome and ridiculous is also the stress and hyperbolizing of the stupidity of hero’s surroundings and his own (i.e. Korean) coolness (e.g. discussion about idea of Christmas meaning, Yon’s disability of using medicine etc.).

vii) *Humor* cannot be always acceptable for Europeans (it is not acceptable as humorous that somebody smells, that all the Thai people speculate about Uwe’s excrements, somebody’s bottom etc.).

viii) What is repulsive is the *absence of sympathy* with dying or persecuted people (heroes are present only as spectators without the basic effort of help).

ix) Not very common are some imagination that arise from the *little experience* with some globalized phenomena, e.g. with prostitutes (humble are more moral), using drugs, exploiting somebody, hypocrisy etc.

4. Reading such novels and being aware of the situation LTIK offers such titles for translation abroad we can only hope that this trend is only a temporary phenomenon and, in the near future Korean writers will deal with less fashionable and less global motives in a more elaborated form. Korean writers have their own tradition, they have their big but dormant themes and last but not least, they are excellent narrators. The “postmodernists” have to understand it is a Korean story that is told and using a foreign setting does not make literature more global. Moreover, there are other components incomprehensible for the global readers, e.g. the note of harmony in the end, by which also the dirty behavior can turn into a kind of homage and then a means of survival. This can be attributed to the “young” genres as a thriller, western, adventure literature and other fictions intended for entertainment and not aspiring to immortality.

## Literature

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