

## The Art of Seeing and Being Seen: the poems of Moon Chung-Hee

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### Abstract

I am fascinated by the literary representations of countries that have had to rescue and reformulate their national identity in the wake of post-colonization. In this essay I analyze selected poems of Moon Chung-Hee's collection *Woman on the Terrace* (2007). A contemporary Korean poet, Moon has dedicated her energies to preserving her native language and producing a poetry consonant with the country's modern reality, all in the face of the enormous influence of western aesthetic and internationalist ideas.

*I still love pine trees,  
Standing in strong winds,  
Lonely stars and deserts,  
Wild storms.  
("Grinding Coffee Beans" 10-13)*

When contemplating the tall pines of the Henderson campus, it is hard not to fall into a meditative state. There is something captivating about their omnipresent beauty that leads the mind to contemplation. One autumn afternoon, while resting for a moment from the endless activities of the semester and allowing my mind to wander, I received a text from one of my friends. Her name was Vincenza D'Urso, a professor of Korean language and literature at the Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, in Italy. We share a profound love for literature, despite the fact that she specialized in Korean literature and I in Hispanic America; we also shared a deep appreciation for the culture of the "hermit kingdom," where I was fortunate enough to spend a few months, and where she had been for years. At one moment in our conversation, she suggested that I read a book of poems by a woman named Moon Chung-Hee. She also remarked that during that same semester, her students were translating into Italian one of Moon's poetry collections: *Woman on the Terrace*. Upon returning home, I ordered Moon's book, and in the semester's few moments of quiet, this collection went with me during my reflections among the university pines.

This was how I came to know the work of the poet Moon Chung-Hee; but the impulse behind this article is somewhat different. It has to do with my interest in literary representations of countries that have undergone abrupt social changes; places that have had to rescue and reformulate their national identity in the wake of post-colonization. No country's literature can escape from the national history, and as a result, writers cannot evade their social responsibility. Said otherwise, they must honor their role in society and re-affirm the connection between the texts they create and the world in which they live.

In order to grasp the extent of the changes that South Korean society has experienced and that society's current place in history, we must briefly review that history, along with the development of its poetry, from the late nineteenth century onward. Beginning in 1866 powerful western nations began to pressure Korea, along with China and Japan, to open its ports to foreign commerce. In 1894, a progressive Korean cabinet concluded that in order to survive foreign aggression, it would be necessary to eliminate certain ills associated with their traditional class system. They abolished slavery and child marriage, and opened the civil service to individuals of talent rather than clinging to the Confucian practice of limiting

positions to men of proper class and social origin. However, these reforms proved insufficient, and Japan, now the strongest country in the region, annexed Korea in 1910. In the whirlwind of social reforms that ensued, Korean literature underwent its own transition to a more modern style. Writers and academics of that era demanded national independence, universal education, and the promotion of national pride. They drew upon western values in order to awaken the people's consciousness; and believing that the lives of great individuals would draw more admiration than abstract concepts, they used national heroes to symbolize Korea itself, while employing figures like Joan of Arc, Peter the Great, Otto von Bismark, George Washington, and Horatio Lord Nelson to represent the west. The new Korean poetry began in 1908 with the publication of "From the Sea to Children" (1909) by Ch'oe Namsôn (1890-1957), inspired by the work of George Gordon Lord Byron (1788-1824) and his famous "Child Harold's Pilgrimage" (1812). Among its innovations, Ch'oe's work includes the copious incorporation of punctuation marks (a western convention), along with themes of the sea and children, both fundamentally new to Korean verse.

In 1919, after a failed struggle for independence against Japan, Korea witnessed the arrival of translations of the *fin de siècle* French symbolists, particularly Paul-Marie Verlaine (1844-1896), Remy de Gourmont (1858-1915), and even the Russian symbolist poet Fryodor Sologub (1863-1927). These translations came to Korea through the pen of Kim Ôk (b. 1895). The European symbolists' legacy to Korean poetry can be seen in the adoption of free verse. In 1921, Kim published *Dance of Anguish*, the first complete collection of western poetry in Korea. His translations are infused with a tone of daydream and melancholy beauty, and with expressions of spiritual anguish that young Korean poets as found the ideal vehicle for their own sense of frustration.

In 1930, modern Korean verse reached maturity thanks to the efforts of a group of writers who freely copied western models in order to enrich their own art. Particularly helpful to these writers were the works of British authors I. A. Richards (1893-1979) and T. E. Hulme (1883-1917), and the modernist compositions of U.S.-born T. S. Eliot (1888-1965). The new artistic preference was a protest against the use of literature as journalism and its deployment to propagandistic ends. Meanwhile, global politics once more intruded upon the peninsula. In 1931, Japan invaded China and destabilized the latter's Manchuria province, home to numerous Korean enclaves. Japanese colonial authorities placed wartime restrictions on the Korean people. The extreme poverty of the Korean lower classes, both within the peninsula and in southern Manchuria, became the principal concern of writers and intellectuals during this period.

In the early 1940s, the Japanese colonial government went so far as to prohibit Korean-language writings, force the adoption of Japanese names, and jail those caught speaking Korean in public. During this time, some writers placed themselves at the service of imperial Japan, while others remained true to the cause of independence. However, the country was liberated from the Japanese on August 14, 1945, leaving a politically divided peninsula: an armed guerrilla resistance concentrated in the north, and a more evenly developed, Japanese-influenced culture in the south. The southern-based Republic of Korea was founded on August 15, 1948. Many leftist writers emigrated to the north (the People's Republic of Korea), while others remained in the south, making every effort to document in their writings the terrible tragedies the people had suffered. Those same southern writers began to recover national identity through a flowering of traditional Korean values; nevertheless, others sought a new

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national vision by invoking western traditions to elevate their art beyond local limits and concerns.

East Asian poetry differs from country to country, but as a rule one might say that the more unstable and oppressive the political conditions, the deeper the artistic sense of identity and social role. Terrorized by the idea of losing their own culture, South Koreans have dedicated their energies to preserving the language, and to producing a poetry consonant with their country's modern reality, all in the face of the enormous influence of western poetry and internationalist ideas. Another dilemma that remains unresolved and still painful is the division left by the Korean War of 1950-1953. Some writers have tended to face the situation by idealizing their people; others have explored the conscience of the war-torn generation; some speak of the loss of a good-hearted, everyday Korean people; while still others write of how individual liberty and identity have displaced the spirit of community justice and the sense of transcendence. Such is the country and the history from which Moon Chung-Hee emerges. She was born in 1945 – the year of liberation – in the southern part of the Korean peninsula, and grew up in the city of Seoul. She is one of today's most celebrated Korean writers, and represents a new generation of artists. Her poems have been translated into nine different languages, including English, German, and Japanese, and have received prestigious international prizes. She currently holds positions in two different Seoul universities.

*Woman on the Terrace* captures the reader by its title, which evokes homonymous works of late nineteenth-century French expressionism, above all a painting by Edgar Degas entitled, *Women on the Terrace of a Café in the Evening* (c.1876). In 1898, Paul Signac (1863-1935) painted a canvas with the title *Woman on the Terrace* too. In these canvases, the focal point consists of women (both seated and standing) positioned on a terrace. Degas's work merits a moment of exploration, given that it is key to deciphering Moon's writings. In the painting's foreground we find four women seated in a café on the boulevard at night. Somewhat more indistinctly in the background, we see a street illuminated by lamplight, and filled with men and women. In his book *Degas: A Dialogue of Difference* (2007), Warner Hoffman observes that in France during that era, women were objects of male consumption. He explains that among the middle and lower classes, the use of women formed the basis of patriarchal society and economy; and that what is more, the practice was supported by a legal system that regulated female conduct in both public and private spheres. In a society thus structured, prostitution necessarily formed a key element binding different social classes in complicity: women of all social levels were objects at the mercy of their husbands: "Our bourgeois, not content with having wives and daughters of the proletarians at their disposal, not to speak of common prostitutes, take the greatest pleasure in seducing each other's wives" (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, cited by Hoffman, 201).

In this world of consumerism, the selling of flesh depended on various types of exhibitions. In the Degas canvas, the four women are seated in a place where it was common to find women of a certain social level: not necessarily prostitutes, but who nonetheless exhibited themselves in public to show their availability. The preferred locations were bars, music halls, covered walkways, and above all the famous French cafés. It is important to clarify that female exhibition happened not only in these places, but also in more blatant circumstances that were more removed from the public eye: in the bordellos, where Degas, like Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and other contemporary artists, found models for their innumerable canvases.

Moon Chung-Hee's poetry collection without doubt bears reminiscences of turn-of-the-century French impressionism. However, while underscoring semantic and thematic similarities, it is important to bear in mind that Moon's metaphor of the terrace is more complex still. First, it offers the double possibility that its figures are simultaneously observers and observed. Second, while female exhibition takes place openly in her poems, it is not the public dimension of the female voice that we hear, but rather the most intimate recesses of the female heart and psyche. Finally, despite the fact that the women are seen on a terrace, they appear there not to show their availability, but rather to explore female perspectives on contemporary Korean events.

Despite the fact that the nomenclature and symbols might seem opaque to those not versed in Korean history, anyone who reads Moon's poetry can recognize that the moments described in *Woman on the Terrace* possess a timelessness and an absence of boundaries that command our attention and force us to reflect. Moon expresses herself openly and with candor, and her poems explore multiple themes: history, nature, and even politics. She pays special attention to a gamut of emotions that includes, among others, desperation and anguish. For our purposes we can focus on three works illustrating these points.

The first poem is "Song for Soldiers," a composition divided into two parts. In the first, the poetic voice speaks of the romantic stirrings that young Korean women feel toward the idea that all men are to be soldiers, ready to defend their country: "Perhaps you don't know this, / but every woman in this land/ once fell in love with a soldier" (1-3). This confession, which is directed toward the reader, expresses the patriotism that was one of the consequences of Korea's late nineteenth-century crisis. It also gives voice to one of those largely ignored female sentiments, given the fact that for centuries women were regarded as little more than a necessity in Korea. The poem goes on to incorporate the theme of a country divided: "All this land's young men/ once went in uniform to the DMZ, / bearing arms against their brothers in the North" (lines 4-6). From this point on, the theme becomes one of social commentary or lament, a theme that is developed in the second part, which denounces not so much a people's division, but rather the perils of a lack of higher ideals in a world more urban and affluent with each passing day:

But love does not always ripen.  
Often, in the passing years, paths diverted.  
When, years later, a woman encounters  
Her old flame – dressed in a business suit  
And in the sunset of his life – shy and embarrassed,  
She silently cries at the realization  
That a barrier rustier than the DMZ blocks the path of life ("Song for Soldiers" 11-17).

A second poem to merit scrutiny is that which bears the same title as the book – "Woman on the Terrace." In it, Moon describes an urban woman in whom traditional Korean values have merged with the western lifestyle, in turn producing a female as postmodern as she is diffuse and universal. In this composition, readers of whatever origin, be it Seoul, Little Rock, or Mexico City, can recognize the subject:

The woman smoking a cigarette,  
Holding it between long-nailed fingers,  
Her eyes sunken—

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Like an archer who's just shot her last arrow.  
The woman with wrinkled lips pouring down red wine,  
Her hair unkempt.  
Marriage came easy to her; divorce even easier.  
But that was fine by her.  
At times she was lonely, so be it.  
She didn't know the flower's name.  
So many scars and confessions.  
Vanished embraces; heartbeats that disappeared like the wind,  
Sentimental and mundane.  
But her life was full of such a pain and agony.  
The woman on the terrace smiled, shrugged her shoulders  
Gazing at the backs of people  
Who avoided her, made their asinine jokes,  
Afraid her thorns might prick.  
I'd never met her before  
But she looked familiar—  
Omnipresent! (“Woman on the Terrace” 1-21)

The poem is charged with images, metaphors, and symbols that in no way hinder its appreciation, but to decode them is to understand why Moon has been awarded as a poet. The delicate equilibrium of her ideas and her exquisite word choice instill in her works a complexity that is not only intelligent, but at the same time elegant.

In a study entitled, “Marital status and smoking in Korea: The influence of gender and age,” Dr. Hong-Jun Choa and his co-authors conclude that South Korean culture still discourages women from smoking; divorced women, however, are excused from this rule. A Korean reader understands that from the first line of the poem (“The woman smoking a cigarette”), we are dealing with a divorcee, while non-Koreans will have to reach line seven to understand the same point: “Marriage came easy to her; / divorce even easier.” Moon intensifies the cigarette image in subsequent lines, when she mentions: “long-nailed fingers” (2) and “arrow” (4). The reader realizes that she is divorced, but also comes to understand that this is not a person who works with her hands; rather, she is an urbane individual, a member of a class able to retain long fingernails that can be as dangerous as the “arrows” that she shoots through her glances. At the same time, it is also likely that she is not terribly young, since her lips are already wrinkled, whether because of age, or for lack of care (as with her hair), or from too many long nights and too much make-up, or perhaps for all these reasons combined: “The woman with wrinkled lips pouring down red wine, / her hair unkempt” (5-6). We should note that Moon does not associate the color red with her lips, as is the tradition in western poetry, but rather uses it to describe what the woman is drinking: red wine. In Korea, this wine is called *bokbunjajoo*, and is made of raspberries. It bears an intensely red color, is dry, has an alcoholic content of 15%, is delicious, and is considered a wine for women (even though either sex can drink it). Koreans firmly believe that it enhances sexual stamina.

In only the first six lines, then, we have a well-developed understanding of this woman on the terrace: a person of dissipated life. In the second half of “Woman on the Terrace,” she employs a stylistic (rhetoric) device quite similar to *captatio benevolentiae* to predispose the reader in favor of this woman: “but her life was full of such a pain and agony” (14), while also

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commenting that “she didn’t know the flower’s name” (10). The lotus flower is not only omnipresent in Korean culture, but also strongly associated with the Buddhism that so permeates the country. This flower represents purity and spiritual Paradise; if someone does not know its name, it is to be assumed that the person has committed many errors in life, errors that have caused pain and suffering. Abruptly the woman on the terrace changes from perpetrator to the victim of a modernity that has caused her to lose sight of her culture’s richness. Moon insists on defending her, however, and to make her case states that she is “familiar” and “omnipresent” (21).

When reading this poem, we should avoid the temptation of drawing too close a link with Degas’s women of nineteenth-century France, despite the curious similarities. The main difference is that Degas painted his fellow citizens without analyzing the reasons and consequences of their behavior. In Moon’s case, we have closer access to the woman’s thoughts, emotions, and even biography; she represents a contemporary protagonist, perhaps one of the many clandestine prostitutes who inhabit Seoul, despite prostitution being officially outlawed in Korea. Moon asks that we neither celebrate nor condemn her; rather, she invites us to reflect on the present and future values of our successful but highly consumerist societies.

The last poem to merit attention here is “Who Are You?” In this composition, we can appreciate Moon’s humorous vein when we realize that her narrative, so charged with mythical features, concerns a modern object: the automobile. Mythic heroes are the repositories of the values which a culture admires. Today’s Korean is affluent, modern, urban, and cosmopolitan, all the more so since the great majority of its population has migrated to Seoul. At the same time, and as a visit to the Hyundai plant in Ulsan will attest, South Korea is the fourth-largest exporter of automobiles in the world, a place that it has held since 2004.

An aerodynamic built for supersonic speed  
No man has ever loved me  
Or been as faithful to me as you.  
You are never jealous or restless.  
While I mingled with others  
You wait for me, calmly, where you were left.  
Perhaps I better marry you  
And I can transport my 130 pounds body  
With your 3500 pounds hulk.

Wherever you go, streets are clogged like veins.  
Cud-de-sacs and labyrinths are everywhere.  
People blindly love the way you rush forward.  
As the unknown monsters in primordial woods.  
You live with us. You’re found everywhere.  
Who are you?  
Where are you from? (“Who are you?” 1-16)

The poem opens with a line about the physical characteristics of the mythical hero/object: “An aerodynamic built for supersonic speed” (1), then adds other descriptions that contribute to the same idea: “With your 3500 pounds hulk” (9), “People blindly love the way you rush forward” (12). But mythical heroes also possess moral virtues, and the poem stresses the virtues all too uncommon in modern urban culture. The first is fidelity: “no man has ever

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loved me/ or been as faithful to me as you” (2-3). Others include perseverance and steady temperament: “you are never jealous or restless” (4). Finally, there is patience “You wait for me, calmly, where you were left” (6). The poetic voice concludes that maybe should forever dedicate her life to her hero through some sort of ceremony: “Perhaps I better marry you” (7).

In the second part of the composition, the poetic voice speaks of the task the hero must perform to demonstrate his worth, a task that she situates in a sort of underworld, a place where the road is filled with pitfalls: “Wherever you go, streets are clogged like veins/ Cud-de-sacs and labyrinths are everywhere” (10-11). Both lines repeat the idea of confusing places with paths that recall the labyrinth of Daedalus, a place with no exit, and where death awaits. The hero does not perish in this poem, but rather is transformed: “As the unknown monsters in primordial woods” (13). On reaching this state with echoes of nirvana, the poetic voice continues to root itself in the mundane, and the material can no longer recognize the hero as she did before, but rather exclaims in astonishment: “You live with us./ You’re found everywhere./ Who are you?/ Where are you from?” (15-16).

In an interview with Eduardo Jaramillo, South Korean author and poet Byong-Sun Sung remarked that, “Art is imposture.” He tells us that Korean is difficult to translate, not so much for its vocabulary, but rather for its syntax and absence of punctuation marks. To be able to read Moon Chung-Hee’s poetry collection in English is indeed a privilege because we lack the linguistic dexterity necessary to read it in its original language: *Hangul*, or Korean. It is also a joy to read non-western literature, for it helps us to know ourselves a bit better by reason of its observations and reflections over the very nature of life and death. Finally, we learn that despite differences, at the end we have much in common. Even if we cannot claim to be multilingual, we can begin to develop our cultural intelligence and to appreciate the diversity and richness of our own culture and of others, and the similarities that link those cultures together.

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### Biographical Sketch

Dr. Margarita Peraza-Rugeley is a Lecturer of Spanish at Department of English, Foreign Languages and Philosophy at Henderson State University. Her scholarly interests center on colonial Latin-American literature from New Spain, specifically the seventeenth century. Using the case of the Spanish colonies, she explores the birth of national identities in hybrid cultures. Her second field of study is the genre of Latin American colonialist narratives by

modern-day female authors who situate their plots in the colonial period. In 2013, she published, *Llámenme «el mexicano»: Los almanaques y otras obras de Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora* (Peter Lang). She has also published short stories. During the summer of 2013, she spent time at Seoul's National University, and in summer 2014, in Kyungpook National University, both in South Korea.

### Statistical Analysis of Evergreen Invaders

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#### Abstract

The reproductive status, height, and distribution of seven types of invasive evergreens were analyzed. In Arkansas, about 23–26% of the flora consists of non-native species (Arkansas Vascular Flora Committee 2006). Some of the most invasive plants in the southeastern United States are woody ornamentals like the ones studied in this paper. This was a collaborative effort with Dr. Brett Serviss.

#### Introduction

The number of cases was 5765 and the variables were area (Arkadelphia, Hot Springs), site (1–46), species (*Elaeagnus pungens*, *Ilex cornuta*, *Ligustrum japonicum*, *Ligustrum lucidum*, *Mahonia bealei*, *Nandina domestica*, *Photinia serratifolia*), reproductive (yes, no), and height in centimeters. It was assumed that it was unnecessary to consider the site variable in any analysis. When a genus like *Elaeagnus*, *Ilex*, *Mahonia*, *Nandina*, or *Photinia* is mentioned in this paper, then it is referring to precisely one of the species listed above.

Figure 1: Non-reproductive



An evergreen is considered reproductive if and only if berries are present. Figure 1 shows an example of *Nandina domestica* that is not reproductive; Figure 2 shows an example of the same species that is reproductive.

Figure 2: Reproductive



Height versus species was graphed in Figure 3 in order to visualize the center, spread, and shape of the distribution of heights. Because the height for most of the species have outliers or are skewed right, nonparametric procedures will be favored in subsequent analyses.