The Discourse of the *Kisaeng*: "Windows" and the Poetics of *Sangsa* [相思] or "a Lovelorn Heart"*

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This paper attempts to read the discourse of the *kisaeng*—both *sijo* poems and the *hanji*—from a feminist perspective. One feminist concern in literary criticism is the exploration of how the unique feminine experiences of women and gender identity can be transformed into verbal expression. A feminist reading of discourse presupposes that gendered subjectivity gives rise to textual differences.

1. Who are *kisaengs*?

*Kisaeng* refers to courtesans, or "women of pleasure," who were of low social class and status. There were several rankings within the *kisaeng* class ranging from the highest level, those who possessed rich artistic talent as well as great knowledge and intellect, to prostitutes, who merely sold their bodies. This paper focuses on the *kisaengs* who

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* This is a modified version of an article that appeared in the *Goyeonsi dasi ikku* (Seoul Bogo-sa, 1997).
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were of the highest class and who possessed such high intellectual abilities that they were able to compose sijo poems and hansi.

Despite the fact that they were artistically talented as well as intellectually advanced, kisaengs are usually considered as being of the ignoble class due to their low birth. During the Chosŏn period, which was characterized by the strong ideological combination of a rigidly hierarchical social status system and a patriarchal system, the kisaeng existed as one of the most alienated groups in society. In short, they had no choice but to live as members of a marginalized group.

Furthermore, they were not allowed to become mothers as long as they were serving as kisaeng. In this sense, they were a group of women banned from the "reproduction of mothering,"1 a feminist term introduced by Nancy Chodorow as a crucial factor that distinguishes the female experience from the male experience. For this reason, they came to be more attached to their lovers than most ordinary women. This phenomenon provides a good explanation of why there were so many love songs in the kinyeo texts, compared to those of other female groups. Nonetheless, the kisaengs' love was unstable because their relationships with lovers were not official. That is why kisaeng texts speak about love so directly and desperately. These unique group experiences of low social status, the denial of the reproduction of mothering, unstable relationships with lovers, high intellect and artistic cultivation interact to create a unique textuality.

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1 This term is also the title of her book Nancy Chodorow The Reproduction of Mothering Berkeley University of California Press, 1999
2. "Sangsd" as a Central (or Unifying) Theme

This paper surmises that these specific experiences of the kisaeng group played a crucial role in their discourses. With a brief examination of the whole of the kisaeng texts, we readily come to find that there are more similarities than differences among the texts by different kisaeng poets. This fact enables us to read their discourses as echoing a unified voice and theme. A psychological approach as such may be very useful in exploring the relationship between gender and experience.

Holland’s references to the relationship of “text” to “identity” provide a useful theoretical apparatus for better understanding the kisaeng texts. According to Holland, a “central (or unifying) theme” integrates diverse constituents of a text in the same way that “identity” unifies numerous aspects of the “self.”

His theory can be formulated as follows:

Text Unifying (Central) Theme · Self Identity

However, it is evident that, within this formula, Holland did not have the parameters of gender in mind. The formula, therefore, should be modified to accommodate the factor of gender. It seems, then, that Chodorow’s theoretical account of female identity can complement Holland’s theoretical loophole.

Chodorow elucidates that her feminist perspective is based on moving “beyond descriptive generalizations about sexism, patriarchy,

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2 N. Holland “Unifying Identity Text Self” PMLA 90, 1975
or male supremacy."³ She also argues that "the reproduction of mothering occurs through social structurally induced psychological processes"⁴ and explains the process of the formation of gender identity through gender difference as follows:

Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. These capacities and needs are built into and grow out of the mother-daughter relationship itself. By contrast, women as mothers produce sons whose nurturant capacities and needs have been systematically curtailed and repressed.⁵

Re-explained from the perspective of the children, this passage can be understood that, unlike a boy, who negatively defines himself as a male by differentiating himself from his first caretaker, his mother, a girl forms her gender identity positively by becoming like the mother and proceeding forward to reproduce the mother-daughter relationship.⁶

By integrating the two theories, we can elicit a new and more encompassing explanation for the "text-self relationship"

Female Text: Central (Unifying) Theme: Her-Self Female Identity

The next problem to consider might be the matter of how we could locate the unifying theme. As a clue to the answer, this paper

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³ Nancy Chodorow Op cit., p 6
⁴ Ibid., p 7
⁵ Loc. cit
⁶ Ibid., pp 205-209
employs the conceptual lens of "spaciality." Space has been considered to be a crucial factor in investigating the process of how a poem produces meaning and theme in a poet's consciousness.

Alexander Galley discusses the efforts of some critics who analyze certain literary tropes in relation to space, and suggests various conceptions of space. Space as the "condition of phenomenal reality," space as "locales depicted in a text," space as a "constituent of linguistic structures," space as formal category, etc. Such notions can be applied to illuminate the discourse of the kisaeng. Taking this into consideration, I would divide spaces in literature into four categories: the first is the space for creation or composition, i.e. physical space; the second is a space that is embodied by the form of language, i.e. literary text itself; the third is a geographical space delineated by language, i.e. the geographical background of the text; and finally, the fourth is a psychological space, in the form of dreams and consciousness.

The process of composition is no more than that of which the outer physical space (category 1) is contained into the space of consciousness of the poet (category 4) to create geographical background (category 3) of the text (category 2).

A "window," a typical type of space encompassing all of the above categories, is the key to generating significance—or a theme—in the kinyeo texts. The window, specifically "a brocade window or a silken window" [紗窓], constitutes a synecdoche of women's rooms. In classical Korean poems, there appear several kinds of windows, such as a mugwort window [蓬窓], a bamboo-screen window [竹窓], a

guest window [客窓], and East window [東窓]. But when it refers to a woman's room, the window is usually depicted as a brocade window or a silken window.

The deep night, a wild goose cries
I am alone unable to sleep
Turning up a low-burning lamp,
I toss and turn in bed,
The clear sound of raindrops outside the window
sounds more desolate.  

This spa poem by Kanggangwol, a kisaeng at Maengsan, is a typical kinyeo text composed around the “window motif.” In classical Korean poems, a wild goose usually evokes loneliness and solitude. From the phrase “a low-burning lamp,” we can readily discern that the time is late at night, and the phrase “I am alone unable to sleep” implies that her lover is not present.

After my lover left,
I have heard nothing from him.
Cherry blossoms outside the window,
how many times did they open and fall?
Every night I sit down under the lamp
and cannot contain my tears.

This spa poem was composed by a different kisaeng, Songdaechun, but we hear the same voice from this poem. The difference lies in

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8 The spa poems in this article were taken from Han-guk yeoryu spa munhak yeonyu (Ed. Pak, Ok-gum. Seoul, 1986), and the hansi were from Han-guk hansi Vol. 3 Yeoryusi pyeon (Trans Kim, Tal-chun. Seoul: Minumsa, 1989).
the fact that the former conveys the speaker's loneliness by emphasizing the similarity between the outer world and her inner mood, while the latter does it by contrasting the two. Thus, "raindrops" in the first poem evoke a gloomy and desolate mood, while "cherry blossoms" in the second poem evoke a luxurious and splendid image in juxtaposition to the speaker's inner mood.

The two poems both convey the sense of emptiness and loss experienced by persons who are left behind. The "window" here functions as a poetic space on to which the sense of absence is symbolically projected. It once was a protective wall separating the speaker and her lover from the outside world and binding them together. However, it now has become a border between the "inside" or "here" where the speaker is and the "outside" or "there" where her lover is. In other words, its function has changed from binding the lovers together to severing them. Windows, therefore, poetically imply the sense of disconnection and separation between the "I" and "He." The inside of the window is always portrayed as a space of tears, sadness, solitude, sleeplessness, and emptiness because the lover is absent. It also signifies the space of longing and desire for the absent lover. In this sense, the inside of the window is not a vacant space, for it is filled with pining and waiting—it is a lovelorn heart.

When the "inside of the window" signifies not so much as a space where the speaker is but as a space where her lover is absent, we come to be able to secure a ground for discussing the theme of "sangsa" [相思] or the "lovelorn heart" as one of the unifying themes echoed throughout the kinyeo texts. The experience of sangsa presupposes the situation of the lover's "absence" and her "waiting" for him. It also implies a sense of "loss" and "emptiness." This fact
establishes a paradox that "an absent lover is not absent," for the absent lover comes to be present in the space of the speaker's consciousness through the act of pining. In short, "windows" can be defined as a space of sangsa, and its connotation comes to be extended from a physical space (category 1) and a background of the poems (category 3) to a psychological one (category 4).

Into the night till day dawns
I twist and turn, unable to sleep
I hear a bell tinkle in the incessant rain,
It tears apart my lovelorn heart
If someone would only paint a picture of me and give it to my lover!

This poem describes an ardent mind of sangsa with direct verbal expressions. We, at this juncture, should note that the theme of sangsa is embodied in various fixed and clichéd words—images and poetic objects echoed throughout the kinjeo texts, such as "sleepless night," "rain," "tears," etc.

3. The Variations of "Sangsa"

As for variations in "windows," we can give such examples as gates (brushwood gates, twig gates), walls, bamboo blinds, and screens. These objects have the same significance as windows. Meanwhile, "sangsa," one of the central themes of the kinjeo texts, can be paraphrased into a sentence: "(I) here pine for my beloved who has left me and is not present." This sentence can be divided
into two parts according to the agent of action: 1) "I pine for you" and 2) "You (my beloved) are not here." The "I" here is a subject of desire, and the "you" is an object of the desire. The first sentence stresses the strength of the speaker's love and the passivity of her "waiting." The second sentence, on the other hand, focuses on "parting," i.e. the lover's absence. The *sangs* theme may be varied by embodying either the first or second state or, at times, by emphasizing both states.

The series of phrases below are variations of the *sangs* theme, which belongs to the first case.

- I twist and turn, unable to sleep.
- I am awake alone.
- I am playing the music of Gangnam or "Gangnam-gok".9
- to turn up the lamplight
- day and night I am thinking of him.
- how much tears have I shed?
- my burning heart
- I gave love and gained illness.
- I suffer from an illness called love.
- I am reading the poems by my lover

Meanwhile, the examples below might be the variations of the *sangs* theme of the second type.

- the person who filled a cup with wine for me is not here now.
- My love has gone
- It is unbelievable that the blue bird—a bird sending a message—

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9 This is a kind of love song whose content contains longing for the lover.
is trustworthy.

ea golden knife that my bygone lover gave me

All these examples are other verbal expressions for the experience of the ‘sangsā.’ We can say that two kinds of magic are at work here: the magic of similarity, based on the principle that “similar actions cause similar results,” and that of the reverse similarity, based on the principle that a “strong emphasis on the opposite condition (the lover’s absence) of the desired result (the lover’s return) brings the actualization of the wish.” It is in this sense that we can define sangsā texts as “the spell of love.”

Meanwhile, the intense longing for the absent lover is sometimes fulfilled by “dreams.”

While journeying a thousand miles,
I met him—we touched and parted
Now that I dream so far again,
my beloved will stay
Each morning, I awake,
my vision spilling

The large beaked finches have flown away,
and the sky lines of wild geese have ended
Here in exile, behind ocean walls,
only a dream is allowed to exist.
I regret this passage of a dream
will not have left any traces.

The first poem by Kanggangwol describes the speaker’s grief-stricken mind arising from the situation where she can only see the
lover in her dream. The second one by Imniwol speaks of the female author dreaming of her lover who is now in exile and her regret of awakening from her dream.

The above examples show the extent to which “dreams” function as a psychological space (category 4) in which heartache is temporarily assuaged. The dreams, however, presuppose an awakening from them. After awakening, the heartache of *sangsa* becomes more poignant than before. In the end, the dreams fuel the initial desire. Indeed, the “dream” motif in *kinyeo* texts turns out to constitute another variation for the “*sangsa*” theme.

Moreover, in the *sangsa* texts, the dream motif is frequently combined with a “lamp” and the “moon” to strengthen the *sangsa* theme.

A lamplight, flickering onto a red silken window
becomes more reddened
After awakening,
I feel empty in the half of my comforter.

This passage, taken from Yi Ok-bong’s *hansi* the *Chuya* [秋夜, “An Autumn Night”], shows a typical combination of window-lamp-dream with the *sangsa* theme. A lamplight here alludes to the fact that it is night in time—a time of *sangsa*—and the inside of the window in terms of space. It not only physically expels the darkness, but psychologically functions as a filler of vacant space, in which the speaker feels even more desolate because her lover is not present. Going further, we can say the lamplight functions as a “fetish,” a thing that fills a psychic need originating from when a child
experiences separation from a mother—the first object of the child’s desires. When the lover is an object of desire, the situation of his absence or of separation from him brings about the secondary psychic need, and a thing replacing the object of desire becomes a “fetish.” The lamp in the room had been with the kisaeng and her lover before he left, and even at this moment when he is not present, it is still with her. Certainly, it reminds her of bygone memories and takes the place of her lover.

In this poem, the content of the dream is not manifest, but we can surmise from the third and fourth lines that it is a dream about her lover. As mentioned above, a lovelorn heart becomes more ardent after awakening from a dream. Indeed, this poem illustrates a case in which a group of poetic objects such as windows, lamps and dreams converge on the sangsa theme, a centripetal point of the poem.

The same is apparently true in the semantic function of the “moon.”

I ask the moon for my beloved’s recent regards
Whenever the moonlight falls onto a silken window,
my sorrow becomes ever-deepening
If a dream path had left its traces,
the stepping stones of my beloved’s gate
might have become sand

10 In Freudian and Lacanian conceptions, this term signifies a symbolic substitute for the mother’s ‘phallus’ that is distinguished from the ‘penis’, male genital organ. Freud argued that fetishism originates in the child’s horror of female castration. Confronted with mother’s lack of a penis, the fetishist disavows this lack and finds an object (the fetish) as a symbolic substitute for the mother’s missing penis. Dylan Evans An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis London Routledge, 1996, pp63-64
In the second line of this *hansi* text by Yi Ok-bong, entitled the *Mong* [夢, “A Dream”], the semantic function of the moon is similar to that of the lamp in that it sheds light on an empty dark space—a courtyard, window, room, etc.—and fills it with its light and brightness. Moreover, it is the very moon that, at one time or another, the “I” and “my beloved” looked at together, and though at this moment “I” and “my beloved” are separated from each other, “He” somewhere could be gazing at the same moon as “I.” The moon, therefore, can function as a fetish combining the “I” with “my beloved” and eventually substituting for him.

However, the stars and the Sun, the same celestial entities as the moon, cannot be fetishes; unlike the moon, stars lack power due to their inherent flickering, and the Sun is, by nature, brightness itself; thus, the Sun lacks the function of illuminating darkness. One more thing should be noted here: not only objects themselves but also the speaker’s actions may be construed as relating to the *sangsa* theme. For instance, the speaker’s actions such as “dreaming” or “opening a window” can be understood as manifestations of the *sangsa* mind—in other words, the lovelorn’s “pinning” and “waiting.”

Along with “window” “lamp (moon)” and “dream,” what should be noted as *sangsa*-related objects are “rain (or frost),” “roosters,” “bridges,” “blue birds,” “boats (ships),” and so on. These objects, which interact to form a net of meaning and contribute in creating the “*sangsa*” theme, fall into two groups: the helper or the mediator, or as the “interruptor” of love. “Bridges,” by nature, function to connect two separate things, and “blue birds” traditionally have symbolized messengers, both of which can be said to play the role of a mediator or helper, bridging the gap between the *kisaeng* and her
lover. On the contrary, "rain" and "roosters" excercise the function of the "interruptor" of love in the sense that "rain" blocks the lover from returning, and "roosters" awaken him and cause him to leave his lover.

4. "Windows" and Yangban Male Texts

In the proceeding sections, we have examined how the window, the primary poetic object—or the primary space—of the kinyeo texts can be combined with the sangsa theme, and examined its variative expressions. From this discussion, a question may be raised. "Can we say the same thing about the texts of the yangban male who were a dominant group both in social status and in gender?"

It is true that "windows" are frequently used in their texts as a major poetic object as well. Yet their significance differs from that of the kinyeo texts in that "windows" in male texts are not connected to the sangsa theme, nor matched with "nighttime"—the time of sangsa. In most cases, the "windows" in the male texts merely refer to a part of a building. We see a typical example in the following passage taken from a sijo poem by Nam Gu-man: "Has the east window brightened yet?/ Already the larks are up and warbling in the sky." In short, "windows" in the male texts do not function as a space of sangsa.

Indeed, such textual differences are ascribed to experiential differences: one is society's marginal group, whereas the other is a dominant social group; the members of the two groups experience and see things in a different way. Moreover, even in yangban male texts, when they try to convey the sangsa theme, the speakers of the
poems disguise themselves as an abandoned woman who is not anyone's wife.

Meanwhile, the kinyeo texts differ from the naebang gasa (whose main composers were the yangban women) both in themes and contents, with the edifying contents comprising the main part of the naebang gasa. While some exceptions can be found, from many of the naebang gasa texts we hear authoritative and opinionated voices. Surely, it can be said, then, that the difference in social status is the underlying source of such textual differences.

5. Conclusion

This article adopts a feminist reading of the kinyeo texts, which were built around a "window" motif as part of a sangsa theme, through the lens of psychoanalysis. For the kinyeos, producing literary texts possessed a special meaning: writing played the role not only of a substitute for the "reproduction of mothering" forbidden to them, but also of a psychic remedy for their pain and longing toward their desired objects.

The unique experiences of the kinyeos in ascribing their own gender identity and the specific situation in which their lovers were absent, is central to understanding why kasaeng texts apparently echo a sangsa theme. Moreover, this perspective provides us with a useful explanation for why in female texts rather than in male texts, and in kinyeo texts rather than in yangban female texts, the sangsa theme resonates so strongly.
Bibliography


<Abstract>

The Discourse of the Kisaeng: "Windows" and the Poetics of Sangsa [相思] or "a Lovelorn Heart"

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This article is based on a feminist and psychoanalytical reading of kinyeo texts, which were built around a "window" motif subsumed within a sangsa theme. A central feminist concern in literary criticism is the exploration of how unique feminine experiences and gender identity can be transformed into verbal expression.

Kisaeng or "the women of the pleasure quarter," possessed unique experiences as a marginalized female group, both in terms of social status and in gender. Examining the specific experiences of kisaeng poets, this article provides some new parameters by which to analyze literary texts with the sangsa theme.