Life is full of dreams, and history is nothing but dreams realized. Yet how many of our dreams darken into nightmares? How many of our dreams snare us into tragedy? In some sense, everybody may be a captive of dreams. If we do see only the rosy luster shed around a dream and do not see the "terror" hidden behind it, we will be arrested to be its captive like Paris, a prince of Troy in Greek mythology, who has dreamt of the most beautiful woman in the world. In the mythology an argument arises among three Greek goddesses—Hera, the goddess of home and war; Athena, the goddess of wisdom; and Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty—as to who is the most beautiful among goddesses. When Paris is chosen to settle their dispute, his dream comes true. He chooses Aphrodite as the most beautiful goddess and is awarded the most beautiful woman in the world—Helen, the wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta. However, what a tragedy is hidden behind his dream! His decision makes bitter enemies out of Hera and Athena and ruins his country. The Trojan War breaks out; he is mortally wounded at the end; and, his country

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falls apart as a result. Paris, a dreaming genius, has spun like a spider his own airy shelter out of illusions. From time to time, our dreamhouses are too feeble to buttress our life.

At the threshold of the modern age, we Koreans, obsessed with a utopia that would never be made of irresponsible daydreams, dreamt a fatal Parisian dream. We thought we could be protected, and even could be civilized depending on the foreign powers that were only anxious about their own wealth and prosperity; that never showed any attention to the neighborly oppression resulted from their happiness. By the latter part of the 19th century, the Chosun dynasty and its ruling elite classes abandoned themselves to every vice, not only economic and political but also moral and spiritual. Corruption and factional struggles were everywhere; furthermore, the inflation of the elite class severely strained the nation's social system, which finally fell apart. In the course of this ruthless history, the emasculated Korea became a bloody arena for the colonial zeal of the big powers—China, Japan, Russia, America, and even Great Britain. One might argue that foreign dependence is the only solution, that creative transcending is impossible in such a situation. Whatever the reason, many Koreans desired to entrust their freedom and well-being to the super powers. It was our woe that we had strong nations surrounding us, it was our fatal dream to think that they could be our savior.

Sang Lee, who was born and lived in the hellish world of the modern Korea, expressed this agony of shattered dream in his short story Wings. Like other Korean intellectuals under the Japanese rule, he was keenly aware of the woe of the colonized people and suffered from the dilemma of self-imposed slavery. For him, a slave
is controlled by his master; works for his master; and does not possess his own world. He can see the outside world only through his master's window; and cannot go out without passing through his master's gate. What's more, a slave can only think with his master's frame of thoughts. In Wings, Lee explores the deep levels of the daydream-and-slavery mechanism. Here, he personifies the national dilemma of slavery in the person "I," whose life is consumed by his tragic engagement to his prostitute wife. As the national life was so in the beginning of the 20th century, his life is battered by his own dream of "a small and beautiful" woman. Through the symbolic figure of the "I," Lee is actually seeking some solution for his dream-stricken times. As the "I's" life is drained of almost all vitality and as his image as a human being disintegrates, the labyrinthine external world looms a wasteland as the ultimate setting for the delirious mind.

Perhaps the question which throws most light upon Lee's story is simply: "How can one restore himself to a functional being, 'a being with wings,' either nationally or individually, amid the disintegrations of the modern Korean world?" At first Lee traces the progress of disablement to a complete nothing, telling a plight of a very young man whose "wings" were shorn due to his naive wish to marry a "little," "beautiful" woman. The author then shows how men construct the dream-machinery that will eventually destroy themselves. The "I" was once a whole being who can dream, imagine, think and feel; he loves and marries a woman without the fear of being emptied. However, it is a prostitute, who can be taken as a manifestation of the moral consciousness of the modern Japanese, that he loves and marries. It is true that no man ever achieves an
integrated moral consciousness and no human enterprise is free from distortion. But the prostitute that the “I” marries lacks it in any sense. The young man is forced to be imprisoned in the prostituting house with no wings to free him from the conspiracies and delusions of his prostitute wife. Confined in his wife’s brothel, the young man’s ego slowly dies, suffering from isolation and paralysis, loss of memory, loneliness, lovelessness, and absence of pleasure. Can he restore himself to a whole being after this bitter ordeal?

If we reconstruct the narrator’s life story from his monologue, we see that he was not born as an idiot. Prior to marrying “Yeonshin,” a prostitute, he has definitely had some sense of reality. In addition, he must have had wings to escape the shackles of reality for at the end he cries out: “Let me fly, fly, fly; let me fly once more/ let me try them once again.” In the beginning of the story, however, he goes out to the streets taking advantage of his wife’s absence; walking till late at night, saying: “Of course I didn’t spend a penny; I could not conceive of the idea of spending money. I’ve completely lost the ability to spend.” He was born not as an idiot but as an innocent romantic dreamer. In Nietzschean terms, he was first born as a “genius” or a “superman” who can feel as well as think.

One day in his past, however, he was captivated into his innocent romantic dream—to marry a “small,” “beautiful” woman. He might have thought that a beautiful woman is also moral and chaste. As innocent people usually do, in their naiveté, he might have shut his eyes to reality, inviting his own destruction. At last, he meets and marries a “small,” “beautiful” woman, not knowing she is a prostitute, a cunning “wolf.” Ignorance here, however, is not innocence but sin. It is an evil weed that dictators cultivate among fools. He soon falls
prey to and becomes a captive of the "smallest," "most beautiful" woman, who can be identified with the Japanese in her "smallness" and "beauty." He turns into an idiot, caught, castrated and stuffed by his cunning prostitute wife.

The narrator insists on remaining in a state of ignorance and bewitches himself into thinking he is happy. He tries to be loyal to his wife, he tries to feel extremely happy in his dark, wet, small room. About his unswerving devotion to his wife he says:

I do not play with anyone in the compound. I never greet anyone. ... I think it would hurt my wife's reputation if I were ever to greet the others. ... I am that devoted to her. I am this devoted because she, like her name card, is the smallest and the most beautiful of all the women in the eighteen families. She shines radiant, even in this sunless spot under a galvanized roof. And I live keeping this most beautiful flower—rather, I live clinging to her. My existence must be an indescribably awkward one.

I like my room very much. I find its temperature comfortable, and semi-darkness suits my eyes. I wouldn't want a room any cooler or warmer, or any brighter or darker. I'm pleased to think that I was born to enjoy this kind of room. ... But I don't want to calculate whether I am happy or unhappy. I don't need to think about that problem.

This unconditionally suitable room is the seventh from the gate—"lucky seven." I love the number seven like a decoration. Who would have guessed that the partition of one room into two with sliding doors would symbolize my fate?

Despite the overt sign of happiness, however, his tone and choice
of words betray the agony of his life in the divided room. He confesses that his existence must seem "indescrivably awkward." He does not want to calculate whether he is happy or unhappy. Repeatedly charming himself into believing he is happy, the narrator loses all sense of reality—all sense of money, property, sexuality, and other elements that make up one's reality. Playing with his wife's magnifying glass and a small hand mirror and smelling "the exotic sensual fragrance" of his wife's perfumes, he becomes numb not realizing what "the tissue paper, which only his wife uses" signifies. When his wife gives him 50 jeon whenever she has a visitor or visitors until late at night, he is at a loss on how to use the money. He acknowledges his chaotic state of mind:

I have no idea how full the piggy bank is now I never pick it up to see how much it weighs. I keep on feeding the coins through the buttonhole-like slit with no volition, no supplication.

Why should she leave me coins is as enigmatic a question with me as why her visitors leave money with her. I do not dislike the coins she gives me, but the feel of one of them in my fingers gives me a brief pleasure from the moment I pick it up till it disappears through the slit of the piggy bank That's all there is to it.

One day I dumped the piggy bank into the latrine. ... Having no alternative, I dumped it into the latrine.

His wife manipulates his sentiment for her, and he cannot break the spell of her enticements. He reveals the truth:

I have no clothes to speak of. My wife does not give me any. The Western suit I wear serves at once as my Sunday best, my
ordinary clothes, and my pajamas. My undershirt for all seasons is a black turtleneck sweater. The reason for black, I presume, is that it does not require washing.

I eat alone and sleep alone. The food has no taste, and there are too few side dishes. Like a rooster or a puppy, I down my feed with no complaints. But deep within me I sometimes feel that my wife is unkind. I became skinny, my face grew paler, my energy visibly weakened day by day. Because of malnutrition, my bones began to stick out. I had to turn my body dozens of times at night, unable to remain for long on one side.

He is as miserable as he can be; he wishes to "tear off his mask," "this meaningless human mask" but he makes every effort to reject the idea that he is unhappy. Instead he makes every effort to understand and explains her actions. His wife gives him food that has no taste but never gives him leftovers; he concludes, then, that she must respect him. He spends almost a month sleeping after he has taken some of the medicine that his wife has given him. He, however, never suspects his month long sleep is because of his wife's sleeping pill, Adalin.

My wife had cheated me into taking Adalin for a month ... Did she intend to kill me bit by bit? ... It might very well be that what I had taken for a month was aspirin. She might have taken it herself in order to sleep away something that troubled her. If so, I was the one to be sorry.

His wife's long intrigue against this sentimental dreamer arouses not only the cumulated suspicions but also stirs some sense of reality
in his mind. He still judges based on his illusions, but he also begins to realize that this is a dream world. The world does not permit him to wake although he refuses to continue sleeping; he wants to wake up. When his wife has visitors, he has to stay in his room, covered with a quilt. He begins to study the nature of his wife's job. At last he perceives the truth that his wife makes money by providing sexual pleasure.

I realized that the money she uses must be given her for doubtful reasons by the visitors, who appeared to me nothing less than frivolous.

But why should they leave money, and why should she accept it? I could never understand the notion of such etiquette.

The conclusion I had reached before I fell asleep was that the subject was unpleasant. But I did not ask her about it.

I resumed my probing—the reason for my wife's giving me coins and her guest's leaving her money. It dawned on me at last that it had no other reason than a sort of pleasure. Pleasure, pleasure. ... Unexpectedly I began to acquire an interest in the subject. I wanted to experience pleasure.

He wants to experience pleasure; and he goes out to the streets, taking along all his coins. But pleasure, it turns out, is at home, not outside. Still it has to be bought. Not until he gives his wife money will she allow him to sleep beside her. Finally he recognizes the one-sided logic of money. "money can buy pleasure." He regrets having thrown the piggy bank into the latrine and wishes to have some money. "Why doesn't paper money—even a small amount of it—rain down from heaven?" Taking advantage of his need for money, his
wife tells him not to return home until midnight, his curfew.

For the narrator, life proceeds as an illusory need and imaginary sensation. It is not until he witnesses his wife’s blatant dishonesty that his illusory life ends. One day, with the money his wife has given him, he goes out onto the streets. Despite the rain and bitter cold, he tries to stay outside as long as possible so as not to interfere with his wife’s business. He catches a bad cold; and his wife gives him a sleeping pill, Adalin, instead of aspirin. After sleeping and for a month, he resumes his play with his wife’s cosmetics when he finds a box of Adalin. Then, he remembers, “I had slept the day before, the day before that, and the day before that. ... I was unable to resist sleep.” He feels giddy and nearly faints. Leaving home, he resolves not to think about his wife. Two days later when he returns home, however, he witnesses something that he “should absolutely never have seen.” His wife reviles him: “Are you spending the night prowling and whoring around?” In his mind, he shouts back: “Didn’t you try to kill me?” At last, he declares his emancipation from his wife’s yoke of suppression. What will his fate be?

As a couple we are destined to go lame. There is no need to see logic in my wife’s behavior or my own. No need to defend ourselves either. Let facts be facts and let misunderstandings be misunderstandings. Limping through life endlessly, isn’t that so? ...

All of sudden my armpits began to itch. Ah, these are the traces of where my man-made wings once grew, the wings I don’t possess today ... I halted, wanting to shout

Wings, grow again!
Let me fly, fly; let me fly once more
Let me try them once again.

Lee's story, *Wings*, lets itself be read as a paranoiac vision of a totally "colonized" man, yet in the story paranoia is only a vehicle that bears a larger significance. Despite its surface sustenance of the paranoiac mode, its ending asserts that paranoia is in fact nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that the self is totally malfunctioning, or even collapsing.

I sat down in the first seat I could find and recalled the twenty-six years of my life. Nothing emerged clearly in my dim recollections. I asked myself what desires have I had in my life? ... It was hard for me to recognize even my own existence.

Bending over, I looked at some goldfish in a bowl. How handsome they were! ... I looked down into the bustling streets. The tired pedestrians jostled wearily, like the fins of the goldfish. Entangled in a slimy rope, they could not free themselves. Dragging along my body which was crumbling from fatigue and hunger, I too must be swept away into the bustling streets.

Coming out, a thought flashed through my mind where would my steps lead me?

In this sense, the primary concern of the author is not paranoia but liberation or the "I's" fate after the discovery of his complete malfunctioning. The narrator has long been confined in his prostitute wife's hellish world. In the end, he wish to have his wings back, to restore him back to life, virility, and freedom, gliding him into a new world where there is no misunderstandings and contrivances. He
describes his room where he “clings to” his wife as follows:

The outer part of the divided room gets some sun; ... I do not need to tell you that I live in the inner part of the room, the half that sees no sun. I don’t remember who decided that I would occupy that sunless part and my wife the sunny part, but I don’t complain.

The structure of the “sunless” room in “this whore house” is highly symbolic. Here the narrator—a stuffed genius—must obey his master and her whims. Although he is her husband, he does not sleep with her because she does not want him to. He can see the outside world only through the window of his wife; he can go out only through his wife’s door. Moreover, he is controlled by his master, he thinks only what she wants him to. He confesses with anger that he is an inevitable slave who has stopped functioning as a human:

In the midst of a contemplative life in bed, I seldom thought about anything positive. There was no need to. If I had, I would have had to consult with my wife, and she would always have scolded me. Not that I feared her scolding, but it bothered me. I sometimes wished to tear off my mask if I could, this meaningless human mask.

Can the narrator, a slave-prisoner, free himself from his serfdom and restore himself to the vision of a basic man, who can feel, think, and act for himself. At the end he realizes that this life is a nightmare from which he should wake up. Probing into his wife’s
job, he once figures out the capitalistic logic of pleasure. But the world that surrounds him does not permit him to wake up—to free himself from the nightmare. At the end, castrated and devitalized, he is just torn by harsh weather. Paradoxically, for him, freedom is unattainable because it is attained only by the way of power and will. He does not have any power in any sense—money, anger, youthful insight, resistive will, and so on. He despair of the contemporary situation but he has nothing to release him from his despair except his wish for "wings."

The story of Wings expresses despair, an emblem of his age. However, the strength of the work is not only the narrator's mood of despair in regards to his powerlessness against his situation but also the endless vibration and resonance of the two different kinds of despair felt in the story, or the ironic discrepancy between the despair of the narrator and that of the author. That is to say, the primary theme that dominates the story is not the process of the narrator's disablement but the impossibility of the narrator's restoration due to his lack of virility, action, and will. For the author, the narrator himself is responsible for his subjugation to his prostitute wife. Without any internal pressure resulting from the ensuing feeling of guilt or the anxiety arising from the uncertainty of his own identity, subjugation is inevitable and freedom is strangled.

From the author's point of view, which is revealed in the story's rich ironic tone, the narrator's version of reality—the formula of romantic dream-happiness-despair—is too naive and simple. The narrator has some tragic flaws in his character. He is an inborn Dionysian idler. He shows no interest in any practical things He says, "... idling like a lazy animal suited me better. I sometimes
wished to tear off my mask if I could, this meaningless human mask.” This is a mean heritage from his ancestors, who sold their country for a illusionary moment of well-being, a vaporous moment that is completely dependent on foreign states and powers. Moreover, he is a moralist and a still-born intellectual, who is rarely judging and not looking for living. When his wife’s visitors give her money, he just wonders whether giving money for sexual pleasure is morally right or wrong. He is sensitive enough to perceive that his wife’s income decreases when his wife has a pimple on her face, but he clearly has no common sense about money-related issues, for he dumps his piggy bank into the latrine.

Most of all, the narrator is a sentimental dreamer in this corrupted Apollonian world. Unlike Faust who exchanged his soul for scientific knowledge, the narrator exchanges his soul for an illusion of beauty. In short, he is a “genius” in one sense, in the sense that sentimentalism or amateurism can be identified with the state of being a “genius.” In the very beginning, he poses himself a rhetorical question: “Have you ever heard of the ‘genius’ who became stuffed like a bird?” Then he supplies the answer:

My spirit shines like a silver coin, only when my body is so tired my joints creak. My mind prepares a blank sheet of paper whenever the nicotine filters into my roundworm-ridden stomach. On a blank sheet I spread out my wit and paradoxes, as if placing the pieces in strategic positions in a game of chess.

His “genius” is ironic because it makes him dream in a world where he should not dream, because it makes him a moralist in an
amoral world. His “genius” is, in a sense, that of an idiot. Because of this, he does not learn the logic of money and power, for which he is “stuffed” and subjugated.

The world that tortures the narrator is an amoral jungle, a boisterous sea of entrapment in which a man of passion, creative energy, or desire of rebirth drowns. Yeonshim, the narrator’s prostitute wife, embodies the corrupted spirit of a capitalist-imperialist. She, who makes money through amoral prostitution, is characterized by the profit motive of a capitalist. Thus, she buys her husband a piggy bank to save money but takes away the key. She is thoroughly indifferent to other’s suffering and death; taking advantage of her husband’s catching cold, she gives him sleeping pills instead of cold medicine. She provides minimum everyday goods to her servant; her husband has no clothes to speak of and is fed like a rooster or a puppy. She is also a representation of the imperialist’s ruling motive. She controls him completely, sometimes with money and sometimes with cruel laughter. To satisfy her lust for money and power, she uses rhetorical or physical violence: when the narrator resists her attempt to emasculate him and challenges her authority, she swears at him: “Are you spending the night prowling and whoring around?”

In the end, the narrator finally recognizes the vanity and falsity of his sentimental dream and wishes to escape the extremely unpleasant totalitarian world of his wife.

All of a sudden my armpits began to itch. Ah, these are the traces of where my man-made wings once grew, the wings I don’t possess today. Torn shreds of hope and ambition shuffled like dictionary pages in my mind.
However, shall the "wings" which will secure his escape really grow again? This question leads the author into considering the individual's ethical-political responsibilities in a world that he has been thrust into and with which he must somehow cope. Judging from the fact that the narrator "I" never grows in his moral-political consciousness, the author seems to answer the question in a full negative. The wings do not grow themselves but must be forged of "wax" by one's creative imagination, something which the narrator lacks.

Apparently it is a silly plot that the husband is not to recognize earlier her wife's prostitution for it happens right next door. Such plot is reasonable only when Wings is interpreted as a moral-political allegory, and not as a novel of manners. Indeed, Lee himself draws on a significant literary allusion—the Greek myth of Daedalus. The narrator is a captive genius, like Daedalus, who is the builder of the labyrinth. However, he is a negative version of the legendary artist-inventor. The narrator is also the creator of a labyrinth in the modern world and is captivated by it; but, he does not have any psychic force, or imagination that will enable him to escape from the labyrinth that he, himself, has made. He just wants the "wings"; he does not know how to make "wings" of "wax." Lee is clearly concerned not simply with the narrator's frustration and bafflement but with the lack of psychic forces which the author suspects lie within the protagonist but which he can neither fully anticipate, understand, nor control. Without the psychic force reinforced by the power from within, the narrator's "genius" can only turn destructive. Thus, the narrator will never be free from his self-imposed subjugation.
Through the allegorical characterization of the narrator and his prostitute wife and through the symbolic structure of the narrator’s room where he is confined, Sang Lee presents the process of the Korean people’s entrapment in colonization and his own disillusionment with their feeble efforts for emancipation. In the story, the narrator remains alien to revolution and naive as a romantic dreamer; his wife is still a flourishing amoral capitalist-imperialist, whose logic is cruel and inexorable. Spiritual paralysis, preposterous dream, imprisonment, and slavery were the Korean dilemmas during the early decades of the 20th century. Touching these darkest aspirations of the Korean people, Sang Lee reveals bravely what our recent past has been like, wishing we had not been such “geniuses,” but rather that we had been more sophisticated and practical. Going to the root of our nihilism in our colonized time, he questions the correlation between our “genius” and unfreedom. The narrator’s last words—“Let me fly once more”—echoes the dread and terror that had been hidden behind our rosy dream of foreign-dependent modernization long after we close the story. The author seems to be crying, “There is a spirit of freedom in you, a soul unconfinable by any means, but you don’t know how large it is. Now, rise up and catch it.”

To interpret Lee’s work as a mere explication of the Korean scene in the early 20th century—of the despair hanging over the darkness of the Korean colonial past—is to mistake his intention and his achievement. Like most Korean writers of his generation, he has shown in Wings a preoccupation with certain basic themes, of which the dark tracing of the Japanese colonial rule is the central core. It is true that the story reveals its destructive consequence; however, it is not displayed for its own sake. Tragedy is there because it arises out
of a manifested psychic flaw and caprice of our people. In this sense, his preoccupation is much more than a simple despair with our own dark past. Lee is essentially a pragmatist who is concerned with considerations of life or death of our people rather than a moralist who is concerned with that of right or wrong. In this story Lee explores self-delusion as the very root of our plight in the world characterized by the laws of the jungle and wishes that our people would wake up from their delusions.