

# Comparative Research on The Fiction Interpretation of Learning Readers in Heterogeneous Class

Shin-young Woo\*

*Seoul National University*

## *Abstract*

*The purpose of this study is to understand the aspect of gender culture which is reflected in the interpretation of fiction text through investigating the regularity of fiction interpretation of learning readers in heterogeneous class environments. Especially, this research is planned to locate the position where the Korean gender culture operates on the formation of gender identity and value choice of learning readers. In addition, the possible educational prospect is proposed. This study shows the need for a full discussion and the long-term study on gender issue in literary education.*

*Key words: Fiction Interpretation, Gender, Gender Identity, Gender Culture, Learning-Readers*

---

\* Corresponding author (fox11@snu.ac.kr)

## I . Introduction

A literary classroom is shared by individuals having various social and cultural position. Even if they read a same literary work in a same space and time, the resource which is used by each students, not only consciously but senselessly, cannot possibly be homogeneous. Nevertheless, a number of literary study take more interest on building images of abstract reader than practical reader. These images have problems that it might be produced with the experience of researchers themselves.

This research pay attention to learning readers who uses their experience and value as a resource of fiction interpretation and takes the lessons with the literary work and the analytical structure chosen by cultural power at the same time. The root of experience and value of reader is hybridized with various cultural factors such as gender, region, religion, and academic ability. Although these resources usually make the interpretation to be oriented as solid form, some of the resources changes in the influence of text interpretation sometimes. In other words, interpretation is not only performed according to cultural script, but interpretation also has ability to modify the cultural script. This interactive nature of interpretation provide the educational meaning. Interpretation is a method for construction/negotiation of cultural identity and value. Art is one of the imperative intermediary in culture. Particularly, fiction can be estimated as a genre which tells individuals the way to master dominant culture or to resist it.

Gender as an element of cultural factor is the main issue of this study. The majority of children and adolescents acquire desire pattern which is appropriate for their own gender through a fairy tale or a fiction. Gender standard acquired in their youth is closely connected with the identity of reader. However, there is a discrepancy, which is revealed by inventory of literary canon or repertoire of interpretation, between gender image and gender standard in a cultural area. As the meaning of gender is based on a premise that gender difference is rather sociocultural concept than biological one, We don't think that interpretation of

male and female have intrinsic difference. For this reason, this research is indifferent to construct the notion of feminine reading or writing. Nevertheless, it is needed to ask what the meaning of the latent power that makes things different is, because interpretation does not only come from life, but also give influence to life.

Gender performance is the reason why both male and female are able to keep their gender identity, whereas gender difference is not deterministic or innate. The purpose of this research is to figure out how gender performance can be exposed and be controlled in a scene of fiction interpretation. Therefore, this study would rather consider distinction among directivity, pattern, and performance of strategy, than explain the language of male and female in the viewpoint that there is solid gender specificity.

For this purpose, we framed a hypothesis that both male and female readers show tendency or significant distinction of interpretation pattern according to their gender role learned from specific gender culture. This hypothesis is formed from the experience that it cannot be generalized that male students speak about literature differently to female students. Although there are remarkable example of gender pattern, there are also remarkable counterexample. If reading a fiction of female had been persuaded to read masculine text in manly view point, as feminism narratologists claim, these counterexample could be explained. The relation of interpretation and gender become challenging problem due to the fact that the gap of analyses appear vaguely if analyses, even if each interpretation claims different ground, are based on similar view point. In order to reduce ambiguity of conclusion the fiction text that derives obvious view point on gender problem was used for this research.

## **II. Research history**

In former korean literary research academia, the main topics

of feminine literature study contain women writers, women in a literary work, and women as readers. While first two topics have received attention, female as reader is shortly referred in the research on a relation between popular fiction and female reader. The few interest on female reader seems strange because the reader-response criticism and feminism criticism have common points that they pay attention to interpretation derived from the condition of reader. This phenomenon might have some reasons.

First one is that a reader as a female is not always fit to the notion which is introduced from feminism, when a woman reads. Second, it is difficult to define the concept of feminine reading. In many cases, close relationship with other flexible condition such as ethnicity and economical status interrupts interpretation based on gender. Moreover, gender identity of each individual can be floating by person.

A great portion of former studies have accepted the cognitive theory that male and female read same text in a different way as a premise of feminism criticism rather than a result of academic study. Interpretation by maternal nature has also been accepted because strategy of female interpretation is more other-oriented than that of male. But, the concept of female reader is quite abstract and interpretation by maternal nature has possibility that it is not the characteristics of feminine reading but requirement for women. These facts demand as to confirm the reality of difference between two genders, to seek for underlying power that makes the difference, and finally to answer the question of how we can control the power.

While former studies have children or teenager as objects of those research, we surveyed interpretations of undergraduates who have highly accumulated experience of gender culture.

### **III. Gender culture as a code of literary communication**

#### **A. Analysis of fiction text**

This study chose the fiction text that derives obvious view

point on gender problem. The learning readers who are the subject interpreting this fiction text have been lived for long time so that learned the cultural symbol and language that support gender culture. We tried to choose a argumentative text related to gender culture.

<Choice> written by Lee Mun-yol is a fiction well fitted to our intention. This fiction aroused enormous gender discussion right after first publication and some people burned the book with anger.

It is required to analyse the multi-layer of the text activating gender identity or gender standard to be inserted into the field of interpretation. Because interpretation of reader is generated by acception or resistance, study without the analysis of text is hardly meaningful. We did not only use poetics of fiction by S. Chatman as a tool for text analysis, but also element of context of creation and acception, which was excluded from structuralism fiction theory. Consideration of layers of story, discourse and context makes it possible to ask about the text in many-sided way.

### **1. Story layer**

<Choice> is mainly constructed with life story of a noble woman, Ms. Jang who was a real person, resurrected and told her life story to modern women. In the era of Sunjo, king of Chosun which is an ancient korea, Ms. Jang was an only daughter of Jang Heung-hyo, one of the master of Confucian scholar. She tells her story in order of her days as a girl, a wife, a mother and a grandmother. When she was a child, she surprised her family and neighbors because of her outstanding intelligence. She read books of wisdom such as <Myungsimbogam> and <Sohak>, recited chinese poem at 16 years old, and had good skills on drawing pictures. Due to her talent and wisdom, everyone around her loved her.

When she was obliged to marry with a man chosen by her father, she was suspicious whether her academic literary study could be possibly continued after her marriage. She realized a

life as female after sickness of her mother. Ms. Jang realized the sacrifice of her mother and reconsidered a life as female such as marriage, pregnancy, delivery, nurturing, memorial service, treating guests. Finally, she made a choice to maintain the world as a wife and to nourish the future as a mother. After throwing her academic life away, she taught her children including one of former wife of her husband and published the first Korean recipe book <Umsikdimibang>. In the description of Ms. Jang as a real person, her self-justification after her choice is more emphasized than her keen inner conflict. And she beautified young widow's suicide.

*We-ancient lady-feel an impulse of following dead husband to the grave like a religion. Dying in defense of widow's chastity was encouraged. My sister's suicide was sublimely beautiful like a white crane. May be you-all criticize her dead, but I think her dead was beautiful fantasy of love.*

*-Lee Mun-yol, 『Choice』, Minumsa, 1997, pp.127-128.*

Ms. Jang as a character of this fiction does not focus on her worry or wandering and only looks back her choice and role in a proud manner because she tells to modern women in resurrected status.

Contrary to this fiction, a number of modern fiction let their characters to be opened for value conflict or choice of life, show the process of value search, and provide space for reader to join in the process.

## 2. Discourse Layer

Even though gender study in the story layer of fiction has been occupied remarkable portion of feminism narratology, distinct character of fiction might not be considered, unless discussion on fiction form where gender culture is embodied. Actually, only the view of the writer has been referred, not the form of fiction. We need to concentrate on the way how the

fiction utilize fictitious device which was the concept used defend the writer.

<Choice> employed auto-diegetic narrator that Ms. Jang tells her story by herself. In addition, narrator's position and voice is considerably critical in the point that the character educates 20 century women crossing walls of hundreds years.

*Though it is not that meaningful to compare my era to yours, your days are full of warmth and wealth and your house is comfortable. No pressure from a large family system, no sexual discrimination from male-dominated society. But you always mourn loudly in suffer. Feeling sorry to your voice, I am afraid that your mourning gives me suspicion of exaggeration.*

-Lee Mun-yol, 『Choice』, Minumsa, 1997, pp.12-13.

The value revealed from narrator's view is extremely patriarchal, in spite of the intention of good will for woman and the selection of female narrator. While narrator endlessly emphasize the limitation for the object of criticism as "a few bad women", it is reasonable that she actually considers the most modern women as her listeners. Although Ms. Jang wants her feudalism to be approve in the view of relativism, she never forgive other values which is not coincident with hers.

Problem is that many readers tend to trust the narrator in the process of narrative reception. In addition, as we can find in the fiction <For the sake of Emperor> written by the same writer, the narrator borrowed the formality such as 'haengjang' and 'jeon', which is korean classical and nonfictional genre, encourages the credit to the story, and tacitly underlines the perfection of the character. The expression like a "... quitted because of the thought that it was not suitable for women." is usually used in 'haengjang', however, this expression also shows the conventional notion of ignoring talents of female. This method of narration diminishes the recognitive load of readers and increases interest of the story in the point of gaining the homology between the classical story and the formality and

uniting the tone and the viewpoint of heroine. By citing some sacred books such as <Sohak>, <Yeosasu>, <Yeol-nyu jeon>, it contrasts the notion of old people to that of modern people. The writer is proud of his method of discourse as his special individuality.

Ms. Jang remind her whole life throughout her story. She especially puts efforts into listing social success of her sons using 26 pages. The long list of government posts, losing novelistic tension, implies her passion for maintaining the authority of her family which is preserved by achievement of each family member. She focused on the "free choice" of a wife of dead brother of Ms. Jang's husband to grandly die after her husband.

### 3. Context layer

It is required to study the context around the production and reception of the literary work for understanding the text <Choice>. It is more suitable to consider the situation and time as the reason of politicization than the problem of the story itself. There has been noticeable increase in sales after the politicization and it was exceed the prediction of the publishers.

Reception of literary work does not follow the intention of writer, but the coincidence between the actual group of consumers and the group of readers which was claimed by the author is interesting fact in the view of fiction interpretation or sociology of reading. Lee Mun-yol, the author of <Choice>, said he wrote this fiction to relieve his wife who felt skepticism as a full-time homemaker, and provide right value to the life of great number of housewives. When this fiction was published serially, Korea faced a desperate economical crisis that made the nation apply to IMF for a bailout. Following this crisis, the discourse on conservative familism was rode again as a model to overcome the problems involved to this crisis.

In the mean time, the literature soothing the life of the fathers having sacrificed for family and nation dominate in the market, and feminism was recognized as a dangerous target which make noise when people need integrated power.



The Choice written by Lee Mun-yol is based on the fatigue and hatred about quarreling on feminism. He chose Ms. Jang who was an ancestor of himself as a narrator of fiction. Youngnam, the main stage of this fiction, is a region having specific locality in Korean society and also has big portion of conservative party. Youngnam has strong elitism emphasizing superiority relative to other regions and a regional culture that distinctly contains traditional gender standard. In addition to his talent, cooperation of media, and needs of cultivated fiction, Lee Mun-yol does not hide his elitism in his work made him certificated as a national writer. Actually, many literary textbooks include his work and provide agreed tendency of knowledge and interpretation on Lee Mun-yol.

In this way, <Choice> can be thought as a creation on the basis of cultural power or a fiction securing cultural power through fictional rhetoric. Therefore, the aesthetic quality of this fiction cannot be estimated without un-aesthetic aspect. This property force readers to have ability to reflect cultural script, which dominant discourses in a critical attitude. This cultural literacy is imperative point of literary ability.

### **B. Regularity of analysis of interpretation text**

The discussion on this fiction was conducted in political manner and it was devoted to attack or defend the view of the world of the author rather than a scrupulous process of interpretation of the fiction itself. For this reason, those discussions are not appropriate options as data for this study and this research try to analyze the regularity of gender culture by integrating interpretations of learning adult readers. Using the linguistic reports of practical learning readers as research data, the reality of emotional experience of the learning readers and its level will be reflected in the conclusion.

At first checking the character of the group of samples is required. The constitution of majors of Korean undergraduates has been changed slightly, whereas the educational condition in Korea has been considerably improved. The statistical data says

the female take possession of 36.8% in total undergraduates in Korea. And female undergraduates take possession of 71% in university of education. The humanities, the art follow the education and the engineering occupies the minimal proportion. In reality, students in the university who were inquired for this study have female as a dominant portion. Like this, social environment encouraging female students to choose university of education is partially affected sexual prejudice. Recognition on gender identity and gender culture of the group of samples, who are preliminary teacher of elementary school, deserves to be focused because they could affect children with latent control of education after their graduation.

Experiment	Samples	60 senior undergraduate in two classes, A university of education, Korea (Female 43/Male 17)
	Period of experiment	19~24, March, 2011
	Objective text	Lee Mun-yol, 『Choice』 , Minumsa ,1997
	Activity	Free writing without any constraints or instructions
	Method of data symbolization	Numbering by gender and order of submission Ex) A-41(Female reader-No.41 interpretation text) B-3 (Male reader-No.3 interpretation text)

60 undergraduates handed in their interpretation text after reading a fiction <Choice>. The set of interpretations of the readers has different regularity in male and female. In contrast to 33% of female readers who reminded their family or personal history, only one male reader reacted in similar way. Female readers expressed their uncomfortable feeling, but they also empathized and applied the issues in the fiction to their life.

*I was fascinated by the magnetism of the book even before 5minutes. I just wonder when the book was written because the book described daring woman-belittling attitude without hesitation. The experience was so shocking and attractive (A4)*

*How can I reconstruct the shaky view of womanhood and keep my balance on the conflict between family and self-realization? (A40)*

*I think I had conflict in my mind because some part of the fiction was agreeable and, on the other hand, other part was displeased. (A10)*

69% of female readers shows expressions like "unpleasant, but agreeable and worth of a lesson". In those description of acknowledgement of both contradictory emotion and significance of the fiction, we can find extraordinary attitude of female readers. The experience of contradictory emotions in the process of effort to empathize with the life of the character and the viewpoint of narrator corresponds to the 'immense appetite' and the 'polar reading' which were suggested to explain others-oriented attitude of female readers.

Some female readers were ironically moved at the part where some critics pointed out as arguable expressions. The reason of this tendency is not the poor ability in interpretation, but plural voices of the minds of female readers. According to this tendency owing the plural voices, some expressions somewhat obsessively told that gender identity of the reader is close to neutralism or conservatism. Some deviated the issue or exhibit relativism because of the attitude of seeking excessive balance.

*The fiction had reputation that it belittled women and claimed the male-chauvinism. But I tried not to read this fiction in a view of female because I wanted to understand the fiction in neutral position. (A7)*

*While I was persuaded in some part of this book due to my conservative inclination, the most women who read this fiction might be unpleasant. I could have chance to think deeply a now topic, the choice, that I was moved by. (A33)*

*Like this fiction, I have critical opinions about modern women and I also have patriarchal position. (A25)*

Unlike female readers, 76% of male readers deduced the intention of the author and choose their definite position whether support or attack. They also produced various interpretations by relating to low birthrate problem or obligation of military service.

*It was not the hidden purpose of the author. (B17)*

*In my interpretation, I endeavored to understand the intention of the writer. (B3)*

*I felt that the author might want to hook feminists to run about the fiction madly. (B8)*

*If modern women continually insist to elude marriage and nurturing child, their behavior only imitate the bad convention in the period of male-dominated society. (B1)*

Despite they have diversity of opinions, male readers conducted more controlled interpretations than female readers. They concentrated on the social issues rather than participation in the narrative world and shared the view of Ms. Jang that criticizes modern women. On the other hand, female readers applied the conflict of values which Ms. Jang had to be confronted by to their life, and they delicately depicted conflicting emotions by reading the book.

*During reading <Choice>, I was too shock to be bewitched for a while. Though Lee Mun-yol might wanted to encourage females to*

*concentrate on the assistance for husband and growing children, I thought that I should make an effort for the right and identity of females. Regardless of gender, all we have to choose is to encourage self-realization and self-identity. Thus, we should stop to blame and criticize without reasonable explanation and find right way where our society has to go on with valid grounds. (A22)*

The reader who wrote this text on interpretation confessed that she had strongly shocked, but she retrain from desire of one-sided reproach and tried to make use of the text in positive way. The fact that female students is more open than male students does not seem to be determined by the content of the text. While female readers made considerable effort to admit the speciality of fictional world, male has strong tendency to substitute the issues in the fiction into social problems. When only three female readers referred about low birth-rate problem, 47% of male readers mentioned about low birth-rate problem, the quota system depending on sexes, military service, issues on the ministry of gender equality. This tendency is connected to the overlapped duties of males in Korea society. Meanwhile, discontent about excessive duties of male transferred to discontent about excessive claims on right of women in an interpretation below.

*The gunfire for women camp, is so cool and I feel happy. It seems that females have been too much changed. How can 'you-all' contempt the life of Ms. Jang? Women naturally has genes giving happiness in the life like Ms. Jang. (B4)*

*Lately, the women's movement governed by the ministry of gender equality make me sick (B17)*

In case of reader B4 defining himself as a macho who carry out the strong masculinity, he express his feeling of anti-feminism by identifying himself with the author. The naming modern women as 'you-all' was done by the narrator of the fiction and this reader use the word as it is. The bigger problem

is that female readers share the attitude of anti-feminism with males. Especially, both male and female states frankly that they have negative images on feminism.

*I do not agree to radical feminism because my parents satisfy to their life and have happy days. (A2)*

*We can see that some feminists lacking in discretion lead women into wrong way. (B11)*

These sentences remind us to ask which one made the distorted images on feminists between feminists themselves or people who discuss against feminists. Through those tendency of interpretation, we could conclude that the Korean male and female readers accept the traditional gender culture. The phenomenon can be originated from their economical and cultural solidarity with their parents and reception of conventional gender role, a woman listening in warm and good attitude and a man making decision and analysis, as a code of literary interpretation.

It can not be generalized, of course, that this difference between fiction interpretation of male and female is universal property since the fiction as a materials for this study clearly projects a unique gender culture. In other words, the tendency in the interpretation might have possibility that it was discovered due to selection of this fiction. However, reflection on education is required because that is an undeniable fact that a lot of fictions which has status of literary canon perform particular gender consciousness unrelated to its degree.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Possibility of education would become narrow if we do not understand the interpretation process of reader as a main agent in literary education. The concept of male and female author or reader might be artificial and temporary notion composed by

discussion of hegemony. Even though readers in literary education should be the "universal readers" who search for their own values, heterogeneous nature of cultural custom and role learning of each reader in interpretation process clearly interrupt the generalization. Furthermore, it could cause trouble in the life of females who occupy the half of educational objects if the universality of "universal reader" is perceived as sexual neutrality or masculinity.

Because the arguable text, <Choice>, is closely related to the transitional gender culture of Korea and both male and female are also at the transitional gender culture, this research on the culture is expected to grow the cultural literacy of students and to induce the conversation more productive. Moreover, literary education would provide possibility to students to reconsider or expand their identity of which gender occupies imperative part. This experience is expected to expand the possibility to interpret text in a new point of view and a strange place. The main criterion for estimation should be how intensely they interpreted their voices, rather than how rightly they interpreted. This process demand students to be active readers who have ability to transform the power of cultural phenomena escaping from passive readers.

It is not true that everyone interprets text only in feminine or masculine way. The reason is that the concept of femininity and masculinity itself might have polarized the result of cultural agreement. We expect to examine the possibility and the validity of interpretation made by active readers who can produce "negotiated interpretation" or "resistive interpretation" beyond "preferred interpretation" on the gender culture induced by author. Discussions on gender culture is meaningful only when it aims the pursuit of humanity beyond biological sex. This is because male and female should exist as meaningful alterity to one another, not being isolated, in fiction which is a linguistic work for freedom of humanity.

Received in 30th September, 2011

Reviewed in 23th December, 2011

Revised version received in 26th December, 2011

## References

- Abbott, H. P. (2002). *The Cambridge introduction to narrative*. Cambridge ; New York : Cambridge University Press.
- Culler, J. D. (1982). *On Destruction : Theory and criticism after structuralism*. Ithaca : Cornell Univ. Press.
- Deuchler, M. (1992). *The Confucian transformation of Korea : a study of society and ideology*. Cambridge, Mass. : Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University.
- Flynn, E. A. and Schweickart, P. P. ed. (1986). *Gender and Reading: essays on readers, texts, and contexts*. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Herman, D. (2007). *The Cambridge companion to narrative*. Cambridge ; New York : Cambridge University Press.
- Showaler, E. (1970). Woman and the Literary Curriculum. *College English*, 32, 855-862.