

[연구논문]

Hata's Black Sun: The Melancholic and the (Gendered) Morbid Bodies in *A Gesture Life*

Na Young Yang

(Yonsei University)

Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999) opens with the protagonist narrating: "People *know* me here" (1; emphasis added). With a simple and serene atmosphere, this elliptical remark suggests Hata's unreliability as a narrator from the very beginning—along with the manifold layers of names/titles given to him—because the act of 'knowing' is always already deceptive and hubristic. In fact, he assumes that people 'know' him but no one does indeed, including, ironically, himself. As the nature of trauma largely depends on unknowability, oscillating between the never-ending dynamics of remembering and forgetting, Hata's lifelong struggle tells us that he does not know who he is and moreover, that he is traumatized. Hata's narration throughout the novel is an unwitting selection, heavily dependent on his own memories and traumatic experiences that he does not fully grasp. Therefore, the imprints and repetitions

of loss are at the heart of *A Gesture Life*. The novel, however, is acclaimed mostly for its poignant yet lyrical rhetoric and literary sensitivity.¹⁾ Literature reviews show that earlier studies on Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* are bluntly classified into three categories: appreciation of its lyrical rhetoric and literary sentiment, discussion on ethnic identity within the genre of Asian American Literature, and concentration on the figure of a comfort woman. It is almost surprising that there are relatively fewer studies approaching the novel from psychoanalytic perspectives or (literary) trauma studies, though *A Gesture Life* has been read and appreciated widely since its publication.

Despite the lack of measure, a few insightful studies illuminate the significance of the protagonist's traumatic psyche in the novel. In her article "Beyond K's Specter: Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*, Comfort Women Testimonies, and Asian American Transnational Aesthetics," Belinda Kong associates two different yet relevant concepts of Sigmund Freud's 'uncanny' and Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil' to explicate on Hata's traumatic narrative and its relation to the ghostly figure of Kkutaeh. While the younger Hata embodies the banality of evil, the older Hata is repressed, compulsively repeating and returning to his past. The repetitious return evokes uncanniness as much as Kkutaeh's constant ghost-like emergence. Although Kong notices the protagonist's traumatization, what is central to her argument is the political and ethical

1) In fact, most of the blurbs on the book cover (Riverhead edition, 1999) are marvelous exclamations as if it were a fantasy romance novel: "Stunning," "Mesmerizing," "Magnificent," "Beautiful," and "Luminous."

responsibility of literary representations of comfort women and their testimonies. Kong ultimately questions the writer's position to the history represented in the novel. On the other hand, Hamilton Carroll incorporates Julia Kristeva's abjection theory into his argument that Sunny and Kkutaeh's persistent interruption of Hata's narrative reifies the inseparability of the abject, disclosing and threatening his "gendered constructions of [national] citizenship" (593). Both Kong's and Carroll's studies have values in themselves, for not only "identities are tied up with memory and history" (Hunt 106) but also the "relation between narrative, self and identity is central to our understanding of the response to trauma, and links with the social constructions that help to build notions of self and identity" (Hunt 115). As a complementary reading, this article rather observes the protagonist, inquiring his loss and trauma vis-à-vis his identity beyond that of (trans)national politics.

In compliance with the genealogy of psychoanalysis, this study yet differs from Kong and Carroll in that it is critically engaged with discussions on melancholia—in particular, that of Julia Kristeva's. Triggered by the failure of abjection, melancholia is much more complex than involving familial loss or mourning. Examining the Kristevan notion of melancholia, this paper hermeneutically examines Hata as a melancholic. While the protagonist searches for a substitution to replace his unknown loss and lack, female characters—specifically, their bodies—are physically and metaphorically consumed by his symptomatic sexual perversion in need to fill his psychological void. Although female characters are more or less empowered, often nullifying Hata's monopolistic narrative in favor of himself, their

fragmented counter-narrative is eventually frustrated as a whole since their bodily presence is compromised in exchange for merely being a literary trope throughout the novel. Hata deviates from his previous self-disavowals, rearranges values and materials, and finally achieves sublimation. A *Gesture Life* ostensibly becomes a successful case study of the melancholic, who creates meanings out of traumatic memories and experiences, only at the cost of female bodies, usurped and appropriated under his voyeuristic gaze.

Modern Melancholia

Melancholia has a long history, tracing back to ancient Greece where the etymology initially “comes from [the compound of] two Greek words, *melas* (black) and *khole* (bile) ... [and] as its name suggests, [it was] a disorder ... of the spleen ... [that produces] acrid fluid known as black bile” (Radden ix-x). Greek physicians believed that melancholia occurs biologically when the spleen secretes an excessive amount of bile, a symptom today known as polycholia or hypercholia. During the Renaissance, melancholia was newly idealized and hailed as the artistic talent of poets, writers, and painters. It is around the late nineteenth century when melancholia emerges at the fore of psychology along with the increased emergence of psychiatry and “melancholic subjectivity [then became] ... feminine” (Radden 40). Melancholia often indicates a range of conditions and implications; however, Sigmund Freud established a modern sense of melancholia in his pivotal work “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917). Inheriting

the Freudian notion on the one hand, Julia Kristeva introduces melancholia as a deferred grieving condition caused by the loss of Something or the Thing. What is lost cannot be identified otherwise because it is unknown and, therefore, unspeakable. To be more specific, for the primary loss happens at the very moment of its entrance into the symbolic, it is felt but no language can articulate it, from which her book title *Black Sun*²⁾ arises. It is significant to note that unlike Freud, for Kristeva, melancholia is not a psychosis but rather a chance to disrupt the existing sociopolitical structure. Moreover, while Freud focuses on the fear of castration with the Oedipal complex, Kristeva recovers the maternal *body*—that never disappears—back from its “sanctioned ignorance” (Spivak 86).

Before delving into Kristeva's melancholia, it would be valid to scope on the Freudian notion of melancholia first. According to Freud, melancholia is a psychological state where:

... one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but also cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him. (Freud 245)

2) Kristeva explains how melancholia works, by using the allusion of the black sun, cited from Gerard de Nerval's poem. As sunlight in a dream is what can be seen or felt yet, without presence and representation, so does melancholia, not having any concrete determinant for its cause. The Thing, *chose* in French, is indefinite and *inarticulable* but still does exist; see Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1989).

The melancholic's loss, in other words, is unfathomable to the referent, who cannot help but only be in grief and pain. Though acknowledging that there is no clear-cut distinction between mourning and melancholia, Freud does not equate them. Whereas mourning is a natural process for the mortals in continuing their lives after bereavement, melancholia is a psychosis. Freud argues that the loss is entirely conscious in the process of mourning but it is barely recognizable for the melancholic because it is subsumed in the unconscious, repressed and withdrawn from consciousness until it *returns*. Most of all, melancholia is abnormal for Freud in that the melancholic inevitably feels self-hatred, represents himself as worthless while repudiating his own presence, and thus, punishes himself. The introjected aggression often makes the masochistic behavior of the melancholic more complex and complicated.

Kristeva explains that “[t]he depressed narcissist mourns not an Object but the Thing” (*Black Sun* 11). Far from the pain of losing the love object, the melancholic's sorrow is fundamental and archaic so “that no outside agent (subject or agent) can be used as referent” (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 12). In this case, since the object of loss does not exist, the sadness—the affect, the Thing—itself replaces its absence, becoming the sole object of the melancholic and interrupting the metonymy of desire. The melancholic requires yet rejects the Thing; therefore, the loss of the Thing elongates. Kristeva contends that “the Thing is the recipient that contains my dejecta and everything that results from *cadere* [Latin: to fall]—it is a waste with which, in my sadness, I merge” (*Powers* 15) which corresponds to

her own account of abjection.³⁾ For primary identification, which refers to the imaginary moment when a human being enters the symbolic (that is inherently masculine) from the semiotic (Chora) in its infancy, matricide or abjection is inevitable.⁴⁾ As Clare Hanson neatly summarizes the gist of Kristeva's argument, "if abjection fails, and the mother remains ambivalently 'joined' to the body of the self, the matricidal drive may be inverted and turned against the self: it is which produces melancholia" (92). Hanson not only points out Kristeva's focus on the maternal body but also indicates that the suicidal drive of the melancholic is both masochistic and sadistic.

Kristeva acknowledges how traumatic experiences of the past is pernicious enough to incapacitate oneself, and thus, how the pain becomes either hatred or transferred possessive desire. Paradoxically, according to her, melancholia makes us realize that we do not know how to lose or as Kristeva puts it, the "intolerance for object loss" (*Black Sun* 10). Moreover, Kristeva uses the approach of a linguistic perspective, drawing melancholia into the realm of consciousness, in contradistinction to Freud who submerged it only in the realm of the

3) Abjection refers to the act or process of abject. According to Kristeva, it is "not [one's] correlative, which, providing [one] with someone or something else as support, would allow [one] to be more or less detached and autonomous" (Kristeva, *Powers* 1). In other words, the object to be abjected is never fully separated "but hovers at the borders of our existence, threatening the apparently settled unity of the subject with disruption and possible dissolution" (Grosz 71).

4) It is inevitable because it becomes a dilemma of killing or being killed. Torn apart between being a mother-killer and being the melancholic, the former shall be forcibly chosen for one's own survival and establishment of independent subjectivity; see Tsu-Chung Su, "Writing the Melancholic: The Dynamics of Melancholia in Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun*," *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 31.1 (2005): 167.

unconscious. As aforementioned, the melancholic substitutes the affect for the signifier because no word can signify its loss. The disbelief in the signifier of language later connects to the melancholic's sexual perversion. Revalorizing⁵⁾ melancholia, Kristeva suggests sublimation as the only possible resolution to approach and recuperate the Thing. According to her, sublimation is "the sole 'container' seemingly able to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing ... through melody, rhythm, semantic polyvalency, the so-called poetic form, which decomposes and recomposes signs" (*Black Sun* 14). Kristeva believes in the power of horror within melancholia to question and overturn the pre-existing (sociopolitical) order. Artistic creation as sublimation is highly commended by her because "[t]he beautiful object that can bewitch us into its world seems to us more worthy of adoption than any loved or hated cause for wound or sorrow" (*Black Sun* 100). In other words, Kristeva reconfigures loss and grief as emotions holding the potential to create meanings but not abnormality.

Melancholic Language

Hata's anxiety and insecurity result from a loss without the object

5) Whereas Kristeva imagines the artistic and linguistic potential that melancholia bears, Ewa Ziarek underscores the subversive power that melancholia possesses ideologically, as "melancholic incorporations are more likely to strike those ... excluded from the hegemonic subject positions determined by heteronormativity, whiteness, and Western imperialism" (445).

of loss. His confessional soliloquy at the end implies that he has mourned for his entire life without knowing what he has lost or even that he has lost something:

I have feared [being a social failure] throughout my life, from the day I was adopted by the family Kurohata to my induction into the Imperial Army to even the grand opening of Sunny Medical Supply, through the initial hours of which I was nearly paralyzed with the dread of dishonoring my fellow merchants, none of whom had yet approached me, or would for several weeks. It must be the question of genuine sponsorship that has worried me most, and the associations following, whose bonds have always held value for me, if not so much human comfort or warmth (229).

Hata has incessantly feared disappointing others, grappling with the hope of genuine sponsorship that could comfort and console him. Such lack is symbolic without any specific object or referent for its cause. Though Hata himself assumes his adoption as the outset, it is only what he can remember by far. Even if it did trigger his troublesome psychological state, it is trickier to define what he has lost through his adoption⁶: his family? his mother(land)? his emotional attachment? his self-confidence? his masculinity? Despite the ambiguity of its origin, his trauma is the focal point of his personality and identity. Hata himself acknowledges that “the

6) In her essay, Eunsook Koo focuses on the interrelationship between transnational adoption and the loss of a Mother in both literal and figurative meaning. It is, therefore, significant to note that Hata is an adoptee when “... transnational adoptees inevitably suffer from a loss from which they could never completely recover. Their sense of loss is *doubly* traumatic since the lost object is unidentified” (1039; emphasis added).

alarming fragility of” one’s traumatic past “can affect one’s character and outlook and even actions” (67). At the beginning of the novel, when Hata repairs his own house, he finds that it is much easier to fill the larger holes on the wall than the smaller ones in great numbers (89). This figurative eloquence subtly signifies that it is perhaps meaningless to gauge how big a trauma is than to realize how repetitive it is. Hata has gone through a series of traumas that is hard to mend or track down. In fact, it is difficult to pinpoint what exactly makes Hata live with gestures, a life full of void and dissatisfaction.

Given that melancholia arises from fragmented self-identification, the melancholic often seems lost. Hata is no exception in how “[n]ow and then, [he] sometimes forget who [he] really [is]” (285). He often visits his old store nearly every day, though he retired and sold the place to the Hickeys, which evinces that he is a traumatic figure who literally cannot leave his past behind. Even when he is “beneath the surface of the lightless water” of the “dark battleship gray” swimming pool—a hint of his wartime trauma—Hata suddenly feels alienated and lost that he indeed accidentally swallows some water (22). Instead of taking a warm bath right after swimming, Hata rather makes a fire at the fireplace, willingly looking at the photos taken in the past, which again reminds him of his traumas. Moreover, when a fire breaks out and he finds out “the section of carpet in front of the fire starting to smolder,” Hata is indulgent beyond being calm, listening to Liv Crawford on the phone “even though a burst of flames is imminent” (34). Hata does not do anything, watching (and expecting) the flames to grow, thinking

“[t]he flames are not high, or fierce; they are not spreading, and the whole sight, somehow, is a disappointment” (34). His indulgence is suicidal and masochistic. The melancholic's self-destructive action is more complex than self-hatred because it is both an attack and affection on oneself. In fact, it is hard for the reader to infer why he did not extinguish but let the fire spread in his own house that Hata himself cherished so much because depression cannot fully explain the case. Hata *seems* to have a banal life in the suburb, securing the maintenance of his house with the garden. What seems to be a devoted life is, however, full of gestures of his inverted loss.

Hata's evasive enunciation corresponds to a symptom of melancholia that Kristeva argues. Focusing on how melancholia is revealed through language, Kristeva explains that for one to successfully enter the semiotic from the symbolic, one inevitably needs to abject their own mother because the society is already made to be phallic. Since abjection involves both sides of the conscious and the unconscious, while the loss of the Thing occurs unconsciously, its result comes up on the surface of the conscious: language. Melancholia arises if abjection, the detachment from a mother-figure, fails. This failure is also concealed behind the porous surface of language. The language of the melancholic is placed outside the realm of the norm. The melancholic rejects socially approved language. Instead, they often murmur or fragmentize the narrative, continuously impeding the meaning from being delivered.

Hata often mutes himself, eluding from the required words, which could have helped others and prevented their tragedies if timely spoken. Hata is a hypocrite. For example, he does not tell or share

his sexual experience with a prostitute to other soldiers; he does not tell Liv Crawford that it was himself who called her to pick him up; he answers to the officer that “[he] [knows] [Sunny] is [a good girl] ... wishing all of a sudden for [his] lungs to fill and tear, for [his] skin to burn, for things to fall apart for the benefit of Dr. Weil” (83). In his articulation, the signifier and the signified do not correspond. For those affected by melancholia, according to Kristeva, language is of no use, therefore, they attach themselves to the affect which is also self-deceptive. In Hata’s relationship with his adoptive parents, Sunny, and Mary Burns, he tries to build an emotional model/gesture: “You always try, Franklin, but too hard, like it’s your sworn duty to love me” (95). Thus, Hata’s speech and his obsession with affect(ion) become delayed signifiers and gestures. Suk Koo Rhee also points out that “the concept of a delayed coding is played out in Hata’s account of Kkutaeh’s murder” (100). The puzzling narrative of Hata prevents the readers from accessing to the signified with its unique syntax. Moreover, how Hata denies the negation of Kkutaeh’s death also signifies the belatedness of trauma that later haunts the melancholic.

The Morbid Bodies

Melancholia is particularly pertinent to contesting for female subjectivity and body, due to its insidious association with feminine psychosis since the nineteenth century. The maternal body is at the center of Kristeva's theory of melancholia (and abjection), as it is in the novel. Women's bodies play important roles in forming Hata's identity and traumas. As Hanson points out, "[t]he body (dead or alive) is always open to being read, in cultural, aesthetic, medical, scientific and other terms" (88). It is significant, therefore, to examine how female bodies are set up to be read by the protagonist and the reader. More on to what has been discussed so far, this section argues that Hata has sexual perversions towards not only the female bodies of Kkutaeh, Sunny, and Mrs. Burns, but also the effeminized male character Patrick, all of which is another possible manifested symptom of melancholia. Hata transfers his gaze and desire from one body to another to substitute the absent object of his loss.

Hata's voyeurism is shown at the very beginning at his old store/apartment where now the Hickeys stay. With no sign of them at the counter, Hata sneaks in deeper into the house, nearly around the corner of their private residence upstairs. Hata does not let the couple know his presence but quietly overhears their barely audible conversation. The Hickeys are noteworthy in understanding and diagnosing Hata's perversion because the body of Mrs. Hickey is off-limits for Hata to gaze upon. As if in the Oedipal complex, Mr. Hickey literally and figuratively threatens Hata with the fear of

castration. Given that Hata successfully infiltrates into Patrick Hickey's ward later and voyeurs the young boy's fragile body as much as he wants, both scenes are closely involved, suggesting that Hata has issues with love relations and disbelief in the signifier of language, which are inverted to perversion.

Before delving into three major female characters, another event that demonstrates Hata's sexual perversion is when he talks about how he prefers the young helper to the bathing woman in an image he got from a fellow soldier. Hata says that what is interesting is the girl's facial expression which indicates innocence as if she know nothing else going on in the filming scene but her duty to clean her mistress. This reveals Hata's own appetite for voyeuristic pleasure. Indeed, he continues to confess that the picture reminds him of his *own mother*: "Troubling to me was the image of my mother, peering at the photo of the bathers, and so inescapably remembering me, and then having desperately to hide it in her cosmetics chest before my father arrived home from his factory" (155). Hata's imaginary confession reveals his fear of castration, failed abjection, and inverted matricidal drive into himself once again. Moreover, as Russel West points out, "[incest] ... [is] the central [taboo] of our culture ... which, if we are to follow Julia Kristeva's account of disgust, [is] central [site] of abjection" (235). That the pornographic photograph reminded Hata of his own mother insinuates the possibility of imagined incest by the melancholic.

Hata cannot escape from his failed abjection. The possibility of incest is repeated with Kkutaeh and his adoptive daughter Sunny, as "Hata's abjection of K (and his subsequent abjection of Sunny) is, in

reality, a (failed) abjection meant to dislodge his own marginal subject position” (Carroll 606). Kkutaeh tells young Hata that he and her younger brother very much look alike, and Hata is emotionally attached to her after having this conversation. Both of Hata's sexual intercourses with Kkutaeh explicitly disclose his sexual perversion, not simply because they involve the metaphorical possibility of incest. When Hata first makes what he calls ‘love’ to Kkutaeh, he thinks she is asleep; thus, “though someone ... could come by at any moment, [Hata] crawled around and lay down behind her” (260). Let alone his behavior which evidently is sexual assault, how he depicts and treats her is perverse and even creepy. Since Kkutaeh does not move under Hata's gaze, the stillness of her pale body becomes that of a doll, a sculpture, and a cadaver. At this moment, Hata declares his ‘love’ to Kkutaeh: “I said then, I love you, and she didn't answer” (260). The second intercourse is analogous to the former, in which naked Kkutaeh standing still becomes the unlivable. Moreover, it proves that the introjection of his hatred becomes more violent and drastic, because of its ambivalence: “My eyes and cheeks felt shattered but I pressed against her anyway, more than I could bear. I was nearly crying from the pain” (295). He is literally in severe pain from his physical injuries. While he violates Kkutaeh's body, Hata's sadistic behavior is simultaneously converted into masochism.

Given that Sunny makes Hata reminisce about Kkutaeh, her body is another object of his sexual desire. When he *sees* her daughter in a white dress for the prom, Hata voyeurs upon and spies on her bodily presence, presuming that she does not want him to be at the dance because of her ‘feminine beauty’ and “*willful visage*” (62)

which again comes back to the incest motif. Later on, as soon as Hata arrives at Gizzi's house searching for his daughter, it instantly reminds him of the comfort house. In this shady place, Hata peeps at Sunny behind the door, dancing only in her gray tank-top and underwear in front of several men. Instead of interrupting the scene, Hata indulges himself in her daughter's body, reminiscing the time he saw her in a swimsuit: "I knew what her body was like ... when she'd swim or sunbathe at the house in a bikini, which was hardly a covering at all. She was always lithe and strong and sturdy-limbed, never too skinny or too softly feminine" (114). Even after her daughter engages in physical intercourse with a man, Hata watches everything in silence and leaves the scene behind. Hata's behavior is not what is normally expected from a father in his relationship with a daughter. Sunny's body is clearly eroticized in Hata's eyes. In addition to Kkutaeh's and Sunny's body, every female characters' bodies are sexually objectified, appropriated, and gazed upon through eroticism.

Female bodies become commodities for Hata to entertain and display himself. Regarding both materialistic and psychological conditions of melancholia, the male gaze upon female bodies cannot be simply understood as "a mere transaction in eroticism," but rather as "an anxiety deeply seated within the protagonist's psyche" (Rhee 105). Hata raised Sunny as a single father but failed in his relationship with his daughter. Veronica, the daughter of Officer Como, is a foil of Sunny as she grew up without her father. Hata indeed questions to himself: "How did Veronica, from the start fatherless, her family stigmatized, grow into her own fine self?" (67).

In this context, Mrs. Burns's body can be understood. The body of Mrs. Burns is the complex locus where all melancholic symptoms of Hata interlock. It is intriguing that Hata suddenly stops everything in the middle of his sexual engagement with Mrs. Burns when they are in the outfield where nobody interferes. Though he does have sexual intercourse with her later, Hata does not recall the scene in detail but rather abruptly dodges the topic. Hata wants to find a childless widow full of *motherhood* so that she will willingly be a motherly figure to his adopted child. This again symbolizes Hata's own loss of the Thing, the archetype of the mother.

Melancholic Sublimation

Critiques positively read the open ending of the novel and its effect, viewing Hata's relationship with others as improved—his fresh start as a sign that his life is no longer full of gestures—and highlighting that he is no longer a model minority. By saying that Hata has an “epiphany of his past enslavement,” Young-Oak Lee argues that “[h]olding his grandson's hand awakens him to a new sense of life ... thereby obliterating the barrier between the races and annulling his obsession with his national identity” (157). While Lee understands Hata's departure as ramifications of diaspora, the emotional and psychological implications upon the protagonist are dismissed. Diaspora or diasporic sentiment is, in fact, germane to melancholy as Judith Butler comments in her interview with Vikki Bell, “to the extent that the history of race is linked to a history of diasporic displacement it seems to me that melancholia is there ... a

lost and ungrievable origin ... an impossibility of return, but also an impossibility of an essence” (169-170). Probing the relation between a diasporic subject and melancholy, however, accompanies the danger of reverting to national essentialism. This paper continues to argue “that [it] is not a closure, a circular infinity having replaced linear definitude” (Chuh 14) not only in that he is a diasporic subject but more ideographically that the novel finally discloses Hata's hypocrisy to himself, catalyzing him to change and create a new paradigm for his attitude toward life.

Hata's quasi-reincarnation corresponds to Kristeva's notion of art as a constitutive process. While Freud classifies melancholia as a severe psychosis as well as neurosis that mainly occurs in women, Kristeva converts the concept from an infamous disease for deranged women to an epistemological and political catalysis. Kristeva captures the ambivalence within melancholia since it occurs when abjection fails, which is already ambivalent per se. Abjection is the process of detachment and attachment at the same time because abject is inseparable and partly joins the object. Abjects such as blood, corpses, excretion, etc., disgust people because it is indeed a part of themselves. According to Kristeva, abject is deported only because it disrupts the static order. In other words, abject possesses the power to subvert the discipline, the power to disrupt homogeneity. Since melancholia incorporates the failure of abjection, the desire that social norm disapproves and effeminizes is intact for the melancholic, empowering them to orchestrate the power of horror that abject has. That melancholia results in poetic beauty out of loss and pain, as Kristeva suggests, provides a new chapter where the political and

literary praxis intertwine.

As a melancholic, Hata successfully transforms and creates his new world. With the money earned at the expense of his house, Hata plans to pay off Mr. Hickey's mortgage on the store and building, buys them back, and funds Patrick's hospital bills. Sunny and Thomas will inherit the store and building. Hata himself determines to leave with the remains for an unknown designation:

Let me simply bear my flesh, and blood, and bones. I will fly a flag. Tomorrow, when this house is alive and full, I will be outside looking in. I will be already on a walk someplace, in this town or the next or one five thousand miles away. I will circle round and arrive again. Come almost home (356).

Mark C. Jerng explains that without following the typified narrative of searching identity, the novel “forces to dwell in the uncomfortable space of being ‘almost home’” (63). Moreover, Hata’s confession that he has never felt more pleasure than holding Thomas's hands after the traumatic experience of almost losing him demonstrates his restoration through sublimation. Kristeva opens possibilities to refute the precedent order via melancholia, only when it becomes or achieves the allegorical sublime. With sublimation, as if an artist,⁷⁾ Hata finally starts his journey of breaking out of gestures.

7) Kristeva’s expectation of melancholia esteems the aesthetic value of creative creation, which results in giving gendered privilege to male melancholics: “For the male melancholic, melancholia is more a blessing than a curse. ... More than just an undesirable disease, the Kristevan melancholia has become an eloquent and dynamic form of mental disturbance ... at the expense of the mother” (Su 189).

Conclusion

For its inevitable coalescence with chronic depression, melancholia has been often considered rather as a feminine concept. Kristeva indeed acknowledges that women are more vulnerable to melancholia but she has never excluded men from being melancholics. Moreover, it is significant to examine the novel following Kristeva's theory because it provides an opportunity to disclose what has been subsumed under the layers of fragmented narratives. In conclusion, *A Gesture Life* is a successful case study of a melancholic, who creates the meaningful out of traumatic memories and experiences. While demonstrating Hata's accumulated trauma, female bodies are exploited in the therapeutic and artistic process of the male melancholic. As Rhee keenly analyzes in Kkutaeh's murder scene, "the delayed decoding not only obscures but also transforms dead bodies into items for aesthetic contemplation" (101). To replace the missing object of the loss, Hata transfers his desire from one woman to another: the substituted motherly figures. Meanwhile, Hata manifests a perversion, secretly savoring and exploiting sexualized female bodies, dramatized the most in his depiction of Kkutaeh. As most readers appraise, the narrative romanticizes their relationship. However, Rhee criticizes how Hata's narrative rewrites "in a melodramatic style, emphasizing love, incarnation, rescue, escapades, and the dilemmas of passion and duty" (96), which resembles chivalric romance.

Through the obsessive concentration of sensual bodies, eventually the novel loses its reader, turning the deferred relay of meaning into mere fragmented bodies enjoyed by the pathological male gaze.

Though Kkutaeh is a subject/agent with her own voice, her confrontation is not strong enough to emasculate or voice over the female bodies exploited throughout the story. Carroll contends that “the abject status of Asian women in men’s writing is a direct result of a prior abjection and serves to recuperate Asian American male subjectivities, feminized by US racial logics, within the realm of a constitutive national logic” (600). In *A Gesture Life*, those bodies are what should be comforted, and only in that sense can the novel be called a story regarding the issue of comfort women.

As the novel corresponds with Kristeva’s theory, it also shares its shortcomings. Kristeva sheds a new light on female bodies which have been trivialized and neglected in the history of psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, Kristeva’s theory reiterates patriarchal subordination by reducing women to maternal space and love. Likewise, female bodies are significant in the formation of Hata’s identity; however, they can only exist as a mere backdrop passing by the window on his psychological journey. Given that Hata is an adoptee, portraying him as lacking motherhood is both literally and metaphorically an assertion that archetypal motherhood is necessarily essential for one’s subjectivity/identity. By returning to the origin of belongingness, the novel attempts to abject women from its narrative. *A Gesture Life* may be criticized for lacking female voices within its narrative. On the other hand, the lack and concealment rather reveal the insecurity. With or without knowing, the novel reflects male anxiety behind the poignant, fragmented narrative of an Asian American man who suffers from his own identity.

Works Cited

- Carroll, Hamilton. "Traumatic Patriarchy: Reading Gendered Nationalisms in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 51.3 (2005): 592-616.
- Chuh, Kandice. "Discomforting Knowledge: Or, Korean 'Comfort Women' and Asian Americanist Critical Practice." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6.1 (2003): 5-23.
- Bell, Vikki. "On Speech, Race and Melancholia: An Interview with Judith Butler." *Theory, Culture & Society* 16.2 (1999): 163-174.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. and Trans. James Strachey. Vol.14. London: Hogarth Press, 1959. 243-258.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989.
- Hanson, Clare. "Bestselling Bodies: Mourning, Melancholia and the Female Forensic Pathologist." *Women: A Cultural Review* 19.1 (2008): 87-100.
- Hunt, Nigel C. *Memory, War and Trauma*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2010.
- Jerng, Mark C. "Recognizing the Transracial Adoptee: Adoption Life Stories and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*." *Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 31.2 (2006): 41-67.
- Kong, Belinda. "Beyond K's Specter: Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*, Comfort Women Testimonies, and Asian American Transnational Aesthetics." *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 3.1 (2011): 1-29.
- Koo, Eunsook. "History, Trauma, and Motherhood in a Korean Adoptee Narrative: Marie Myung-Ok Lee's *Somebody's Daughter*." *English*

- Language and Literature* 55.6 (2009): 1035-1056.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Black Sun: depression and melancholia*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.
- _____. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982.
- Lee, Chang-rae. *A Gesture Life*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1999.
- Lee, Young-Oak. "Gender, Race, and the Nation in *A Gesture Life*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 46.2 (2005): 146-159.
- Radden, Jennifer, ed. *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Rhee, Suk Koo. "Consumable Bodies and Ethnic (Hi)Stories: Strategies and Risks of Representation in *A Gesture Life*." *Discourse* 34.1 (2012): 93-112.
- Su, Tsu-Chung. "Writing the Melancholic: The Dynamics of Melancholia in Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun*." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 31.1 (2005): 163-191.
- West, Russell. "Abject Cannibalism: Anthropophagic Poetics in Conrad, White, and Tennant – Towards a Critique of Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection." *Gender in Modern Culture* 9 (2007): 235-309.
- Ziarek, Ewa. "Towards a Feminist Aesthetics of Melancholia: Kristeva, Adorno, and Modern Women Writers." *Critical Horizons* 11.3 (2010): 443-461.

- 논문 투고일자: 2018. 05. 15
- 심사 완료일자: 2018. 06. 11
- 게재 확정일자: 2018. 06. 21

Abstract

Hata's Black Sun: The Melancholic and (Gendered) Morbid Bodies in *A Gesture Life*

Na Young Yang
(Yonsei University)

This study approaches the novel from psychodynamic perspectives, where the narrative is woven into the strands of traumatic memories and past. Deriving from Julia Kristeva's discussion on melancholia, this paper discreetly examines Hata as a melancholic, who is unaware of what he has lost and even *that* he has lost. Racially abject but in defiance of his separation from 'the mother,' Hata introjects loss as his own subjectivity. The insoluble void causes him to wander through the bravado of belongingness, which he eventually transforms into Sublimation. This paper reads that Hata finally faces his own *black sun*, deviating from his earlier gesture life; thus, the novel becomes a successful case study of the melancholic. However, female bodies are at stake, subsumed under Hata's sexual perversion. The novel renders trauma behind the fragmented narrative of an Asian American man *at the expense of* consuming morbid 'feminine' bodies physically and psychologically.

Key Words

A Gesture Life, Julia Kristeva, melancholia, trauma, gendered bodies