

Kang Kyong-ae and her Novel “Human Problem”

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Svetla Karteva-Dancheva

(Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski)

The rise of Modern Korean Literature must be understood in the historical context of an incipient movement toward the modernization of society, the breakdown of the traditional sociopolitical order and the bitter experience of Japanese colonization.

At the end of 19-th century social and cultural conditions were already in place for the expansion of literacy: books and newspapers using the Korean script, rather than Classical Chinese, became widespread, so that written Korean became more easily accessible to the common reader. Moreover, with the influx of modern western culture and the institutions of a bourgeois society came new ways of perceiving the world and the individual's place within it.

The rise of Modern Korean literature owes much to the resulting, newly found interest in the interiority of the individual and the value of the commonplace.

Throughout the twentieth century Korean society has struggled with the instability of a large social divide. Recognizing the struggles caused by this divide, Korean writers have called attention to it in an attempt to effect social change.

In the period of 1920-s to the middle 1930-s, during Korean colonial occupation by Japan, proletarian fiction in Korea first came to

prominence as a distinct literary category as well. Its emergence in works like Yu Chin-o's "Factory Girl", published in Chso Ilbo in 1931, Kang Kyong-ae's novel of 1934 "Human Problem" and Han Sol-ya's "Dusk" that appeared in 1936 coincided with the appearance of a burgeoning industrial working class and a growing but scattered interest in socialist ideas and strategy.

Innovation of content, form and style marked the works of Korean fiction, composed at the turn of the century. Greater variety not only in the subject matter and thematic content, but also in formal aspects, marked the fiction of the 1930-s. Interest in both rural life, the seat of tradition and emerging urban culture were high.

The group of women writers deserves special attention. They played an important role in the development of Modern Korean literature. In the 1930-s their literary production was greatly elevated not only in numbers but also in quality. The social conditions for women's literary activities improved and women's participation became strong.

Many of them - Kang Kyong-ae, Paek Sin-ae, Kim Mal-bong, Pak Hwa-song, Ch'oe Chong-hui, Im Ok-in and Chi Haryon made important contributions to "women's literature" by sketching compelling portraits of women suffering under the impoverished conditions of colonial rule.

Kang Kyong-ae (1906-1944) is often singled by literary critics as an exceptional realistic woman writer of the colonial period. She was a farmer's daughter, born in Hwanghae Province. At the age of five

she lost her father and moved with her mother from the village of Songhwa to the small city of Changyŏn, Hwanghae-do, where her mother remarried a man with three older children. As Kang Kyong-ae herself recounts it, her life as a child was punctuated by family friction, with the pressures of step-parenting and new siblings taking their toll on all members of the newly merged family. But at the age of eight Kang picked up her stepfather's book "The Tale of Ch'unhyang" and she began to learn the Korean alphabet. By age ten she'd been nicknamed the "little acorn storyteller" by the old men and women in her neighborhood, to whom she would read widely-printed, traditional Korean stories.¹

At grammar school Kang was praised by her teachers for her essay writing. With help from her brother-in-law, Kang would enroll in a Catholic boarding school in the city of P'yŏngyang; however, she was later expelled for being among several students who staged a sit-in against the school's strict regulations and the cruelty of a particular dorm mistress. After meeting a young college student earlier that year, who was visiting from Waseda University in Tokyo, Kang went with him to study in Seoul. The couple lived together for a short time while Kang completed her third year of high school. When they separated, Kang went back to Hwanghae-do for several years, living with her stepsister and then with her mother.

In 1931, at the time of the invasion of Manchuria by the Japanese Kwantung Army, Kang would publish her first works of fiction and

¹ <http://www.feministpress.org/books/kang-kyong-ae>

move to Manchuria with her new husband—a communist who first had to divorce his wife, to whom he had been betrothed as a teenager. In the magazine *Hyesong* she published her first work “Omoni wa ttal” (“Mother and daughter”) which dealt with the conflict between the old and the new generations. While living as a housewife in the small town of Yongjin on the banks of the Tuman River, she wrote prolifically, anything from travelogues and short stories to what would become her serialized novels.

In 1938, the year that Korean was banned as a language of instruction in Korean secondary schools, Kang stopped writing fiction altogether, and her very last essay appeared in July of 1940 in the journal *Inmun p'yŏngnon*, one of the last surviving Korean-language publications.

On April 26, 1944, Kang Kyŏng-ae died at home in Hwanghae Province of a long-standing illness, just a month after her own mother's death. She was thirty-eight years old.

The period, when Kang Kyong –ae creates her stories and novels, was marked by the diffusion of the communist ideas in Korea. In 1934, Communist movements in Korea strove to unite the Korean people, improve social conditions, and ultimately win independence for Korea from Japanese rule. These movements, which were led by intellectuals and students, were successful especially in making Korea's lowest classes realize “political consciousness” (Suh, 1967:113). However, by 1928, four Korean Communist parties had all failed mostly as a result of repression by the Japanese police and factionalism of the

intellectual Communist leaders (Ibid, p.113). After 1928, a national Korean Communist Party could never be re-established during Japanese colonial rule (Ibid, p.127). While political activists worked to organize the proletariat and peasant masses for revolution, Korean writers prolifically produced proletariat literature. Korean socialist literature, which was mostly produced by the Korean Proletariat Artist League (KAPF), was strongest from 1924 to 1934. However, the Japanese police arrested most of its members by the end of 1934, officially disbanding KAPF in 1935.

Thus, under such circumstances, Kang Kyong-ae writes her works of fiction.

In general, she draws the dark side of reality with her delicate, precise descriptions. She depicts objectively the miserable existence of Korean people under the Japanese rule. Her works are simple, sincere and realistic. She incites revolutionary fervor by dichotomizing Korean society into the wealthy ruling elite versus the peasants and proletarians living in poverty.

Some of Kang's works of fiction are cited by critics as best examples of proletarian literature.

Among them most popular are "P'agum" ("Broken Zither" 1931), "Sogom" ("Salt", 1934), the novel "Ingan munje" ("Human Problem", 1934), "Chihach'on", ("Underground Village" 1936). They are regarded as her representative works. Since Kang wrote the bulk of her works in Manchuria, the diaspora community of Chosonjok (Koreans in China) also claims her as one of its own. Chosonjok

scholars and writers praise her “Sogoum” (“Salt”) as a representative work that deals with the province Jiandao, Manchuria. The canonization of her works presents an interesting variation in the canonization of women’s texts. Scholars during and following the colonial period have readily accepted her into the literary canon. The reason for their positive assessment of Kang Kyong-ae seems to be located in her alliance with the left socialist issues – one of the hegemonic movements of the 1930–s along with the cultural nationalism (minjok chu-ui).

Kang’s work concentrates on the plight of the impoverished peasant farmers and factory workers. The story “P’agum” (“Broken Zither” 1931) explores socialist issues through the evolution of the consciousness of the protagonists. Kang also excels in the realistic prose that at times verges on the grotesque, especially revealed in her “Chihach’on” (“Underground Village”) serialized in the *Choson Ilbo* in 1936. In this work she drew the tragic reality of a crippled beggar boy. The boy endures the harshness of his life through his love for a neighbor blind girl. But he finally loses his love and is left helpless destitution. In “Odum” (“Darkness”), published in the magazine *Sin Yosong (New womanhood)* in 1937, she also described the tragedy of a nurse in love with a doctor in a hospital. The doctor, upon learning that her brother was imprisoned and sentenced to death because of his political activities, avoided her. On the other hand her widowed mother waits for her son in ignorance of his fate. The nurse endures the intolerable situation, but finally turns mad when she hears a patient

screaming from the operating room and takes the screams as her brothers. She ends her life in bitterness without finding any meaning in her sufferings.

Kang Kyong-ae published the novel “Ingan munje” (“Human problem”) when Communism was clearly failing in Korea. With this background to contextualize her work, the novel reads like a rally call to the peasants and proletariat that may have been intended to reinvigorate the Communist effort. Kang reminds the reader of the hardships that both peasants and proletariats were equally facing and challenges the reader to take actions.

The book follows the dramatic stories of three main characters – Sonbi, Chotchae and Sinch’ol and their paths from dispossession as peasants from older, waning social structure into a no less exploitative condition in rapidly industrializing colonial cities. All of them become involved with underground activists, fighting the oppression of country and city, as well as their Japanese colonial rulers. Kang discovers the struggles of these young people their impassioned characters as they learn to live, work and love.

For the first half of the novel (published as a series in the colonial journal *Tonga Ilbo*), Kang presents the reader with the oppressive conditions of colonial rural life. The action takes place in a village, in a region which is now North Korea.

It quickly becomes apparent that Tokho, the local insidious and lecherous landlord, contributes greatly to the peasants’ hardships. In one scene, Tokho cheats the farmers to turn a profit while keeping

them in debt. By keeping interest rates high he forces the farmers of the village to borrow millet once they have run out of everything they have grown that season. The farmers pay Tokho with their own high quality millet while he loans them “coarse” one “as though it had been half mixed with chaff”. The peasants are depicted as helpless with “no place they could make an appeal” (Kang,2009: 43-44)

Soon Tokho becomes the mayor of the village. Though Kang Kyong-ae avoids explicitly mentioning Japanese rule, it seems likely that Japanese authorities appoint Tokho to the position. Thus, Tokho represents not only the traditional repressive landlord, but also an extension of Japanese rule. Under the imperial rule, the peasants are told that taxes are meant to help them “enjoy a richer, healthier life” and that they will “all be rich men one day” (Ibid., p.93), as long as the peasants follow the government’s advice. However, hypocrisy Tokho shows to one of them, named Kaettong, difficult time trusting the words of any government official. When Kaettong goes to jail, his mother pleads with Tokho to set him free. Tokho eventually assents to securing Kaettong’s release only because “the rest of the rice still had to be threshed” (Ibid., p.97). By doing so, he is able to serve his own interests, assert his power, and reinforce his benevolent image all at the same time. Through this incident, Kang effectively illustrates a self-serving attitude of contemporary officers that has little regard for the people.

Similarly problematic is the law that cannot protect the farmers from such corrupted officers. This message is reinforced by

Chotchae's character. Previously surviving as a tenant farmer, Chotchae loses his tenant rights soon after he and Kaettong are released from jail. Without a means to sustain himself, Chotchae laments his poor prospects and questions how the punishment could be just for "[breaking] some so-called law by smashing a wagon" (Ibid.,p.104). Kang Kyong-ae juxtaposes supposed progress and government propaganda against a reality of corruption and desperation. She highlights how Koreans are asked to follow "the law" so that they can realize a brighter future that they will not see. Indeed, Chotchae sardonically thinks to himself, "Hell, I'll probably be breaking the law if I don't do what the magistrate said today either," (Ibid.) alluding to the perceived arbitrariness of the legal system at the time.

The 1934 Korean audience would have strongly sympathized with difficulties farmers - tenant farmers in particular - had recently faced. From 1920 to 1932, Japanese officials reported 4,804 tenancy disputes, which involved a total of 74,581 landlords and tenants (Shin,1996: 55). These disputes were most often centered on how crops were distributed between the landlords and tenants as is the case in "Human Problem" (Ibid, p. 54). In 1926, crop prices began to decline, and thus so did farmer incomes . Also as crop prices fell, so did the rate of tenant victories in tenancy disputes. From 1920 to 1926 tenants won 29.3% of disputes whereas from 1927 to 1932 tenants won only 14.7% of disputes (Ibid, p. 68). Global depression in this time period led to a climate in which peasants were driven to debt and starvation while receiving little aid from the legal system (Ibid, p. 95). These

conditions forced many farmers to leave the countryside, and Kang narrates the mass migration of farmers to the cities when falling rice prices ruined them.

Using Chotchae's character, Kang links the peasants to the proletariats. After losing his tenant rights, Chotchae travels to the city and becomes a laborer. As a farmer, Chotchae struggled against a combination of landlords, taxes, and corruption. As a laborer, Chotchae struggles against measly wages and poor working conditions. Workdays can last as long as fourteen hours, and some days, Chotchae is unable to make any money at all. Chotchae's loneliness and miserable lifestyle lead him to "smoke and bottle" (Kang, 2009:227). But after meeting Sinch'ol, Chotchae gives up his vices and is reinvigorated with "something more courageous that glowed" (Ibid.). Indeed, Sinch'ol embodies the efforts of some intellectuals at the time to directly engage and organize Korea's labor class as endorsed by KAPF in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Suh, 1967: 134). Sinch'ol, the well-off intellectual student, turned proletariat leader, has difficulty navigating working life. In addition to the poor conditions and wages, Sinchol encounters corruption as he is "duped out of missing four chon by yet more people who were out to exploit him" (Kang, 2009:189) . But Chotchae helps Sinch'ol adjust to the laborer lifestyle while Sinchol helps Chotchae realize class-consciousness. Together the two introduce political activism to the proletariat in Inchon by handing out leaflets, and Chotchae believes Sinchol as "important" to helping laborers obtain class-consciousness. Chased by

spies and police, Sinch'ol gives the reader a glimpse into the life of the Korean Communist revolutionary that sacrifices on behalf of the working class. Thus the reader clearly sees the connections between the peasant and proletariat struggle. Not only are many of the issues the same, but also a large group of proletariats came from the countryside.

However, Kang Kyong-ae does not only focus upon these populations through Chotchae and, to some extent, Sinchol, but also includes women in defining the proletariat struggle by narrating Sonbi's story. She represents women in both the peasant and proletariat struggle. Sonbi is a beautiful fatherless peasant girl, who works in the house of the wealthy lecherous Tokho. Tokho's wife and daughter Okchom are horrid to Sonbi, because they torment and mock her every day. At the same time Tokho rapes her and forces to become his mistress. Finally, Sonbi can't stand more this situation and escapes to Inchon where she finds work in the Taedong Spinning Mill. However, Sonbi, despite transitioning from the rural, traditional Korean lifestyle to the new industrial centers, still cannot escape oppression. Via the Taedong Spinning Mill, Kang shows the reader some of the inhumane aspects of colonial Korea's booming textile industry such as the "ear-splitting" noise and continuous burns from boiling water. In addition, her character reinforces the idea that little changed for the lower classes of Korean society in the colonial era.

However, more importantly, Kang ties what many people probably already knew about industrial working conditions to commonalities

found in other struggles. While Tokho and the country magistrate tell the farmers that all their actions are in the best interests of the farmers, the supervisors tell Sonbi and the other textile factory workers that they give “special consideration” to the workers’ “everyday convenience”. This way, as the supervisors assert, the workers will have the “easy life” and will “have cash in the bank to pay for [their] weddings” (Kang, 2009: 214). Yet at the same time the factory owners feed their employees cheap imported rice that cause diarrhea, similar to how Tokho gives the farmers millet mixed with chaff. The owners do not actually give the workers any money, but instead keeps it in savings accounts where they can deduct penalties for any kind of “slacking” (Ibid., p. 216). Kang ensures that the reader sees past the “wool” that the higher classes try to pull over the proletariat’s and peasants’ eyes. By drawing these parallels between the difficulties that different working populations face, Kang effectively shows how peasants and workers, male or female, can unite under a common cause. The original title of this novel – “Human Problem”, supports this interpretation of the universality of social injustice in colonial Korea.

Mirroring her own society, Kang ends the novel with a completely failed revolution. Sonbi dies, and Sinch’ol settles down with a wealthy wife after renouncing Communism. Kang may be criticizing the failing revolutionary intellectual class because Cholsu – one of the proletarian workers, responds to Chotchae’s surprise when learning of Sinchol’s conversion by asking, “What do you expect from the so-

called intellectual class?” (Ibid., 268). Of the revolutionary characters, Chotchae is left alone to contemplate society’s injustices. Abandoned by Sinchol, Chotchae stares at Sonbi’s body and wonders how “human problems” can be solved when nobody has yet to solve them after so many years. Finally, Kang asks, “which human beings will actually solve these problems in the future? Just who?” (Ibid., 269). While it could be argued that Kang’s ending depicts the hopelessness of the Korean peasant and proletariat situation by 1934, it seems plausible that Kang is actually challenging the reader to become a new leader in the political arena. By writing the failure of her revolutionary characters, Kang acknowledges the defeats that Korean Communists had been suffering from the late 1920-s to 1934. She does not try to mislead her 1934 readership into thinking that Communists held a strong position at the time. Instead, she reminds the reader of all the hardships that peasants and proletariats face, while arguing that their causes are essentially the same. By thus blurring all class divisions, Kang challenges and pushes her audience to political action.

It should be necessary to mention some shortcomings of the novel as well.

Maybe because the text that has come down to us, had to get through the Japanese colonial censors, there seem to be leaps in the narrative: after parting company with his father for not having the gumption to marry Okchom, we find that Sinch’ol suddenly has become an activist communist intellectual highly regarded by the comrades. Quite by chance he ends up living in a squat in Seoul next

door to Sonbi before being sent by the party organisation to Incheon to raise the workers' consciousness. And by coincidence, one of the workers whose consciousness he raises is none other than Chotchae, who has escaped from the countryside after clashing with the yangban.

In the squalor of the factories and docks, where excruciatingly hard labour brings little security, it's not hard to see how the activists find a ready audience – but the conversions of some of the characters have been excised from the text: in particular Sonbi goes from being a timid downtrodden worker to being a champion of the revolution virtually overnight.

“Human Problem” is a memorable novel which vividly portrays Korean life through the eyes of its characters. Kang Kyong-ae recognizes some of the major problems plaguing the Korean society in the 1930-s. She describes the issues in terms of a peasant and proletariat problem. In her society the capitalist regime suppresses the proletariat and peasant populations.

Bibliography:

- Kang, 2009: Kang, Kyon-ae. *From Wonso Pond*. Trans. Samuel Perry. New York: The Femiist Press at the City University of New York, 2009
- Shin, 1996: Shin, Gi-Wook. *Peasant Protest & Social Change in Colonial Korea*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996.

Suh, 1967: Suh, Dae-sook. *The Korean Communist Movement 1918-1948*. - Studies of the East Asian Institute, Columbia University. Princeton University Press, 1967.

Кан Кён Э. Проблема человечества. Перевод с корейского А.А. Артемьевой. М.: Художественная литература, 1955.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kang_Kyeong-ae

<http://www.feministpress.org/books/kang-kyong-ae/wonso-pond>

<http://www.amazon.com/Wonso-Pond-Korean-Novel/dp/1558616012>

<http://hompi.sogang.ac.kr/anthony/20CKoreanLit.pdf>