
Ch’oe Yun is arguably one of the most versatile contemporary South Korean writers, both in terms of narrative style and the subject topics that she chooses to write about. Her solid academic background in French literature and critical theory give an edge to her writing that distinguishes her literary style from most of her contemporaries. She is generally regarded as one of the most important contemporary South Korean writers, and for that reason alone the publication of this collection dedicated solely to Ch’oe Yun is a very welcome addition to existing works of Korean literature in English translation.

The choice of works included in this anthology is descriptive of Ch’oe Yun’s versatility as a writer. While *There a Petal Silently Falls* (*Chŏgi sori ŏpsi hanjŏm kkonnip i chigo*, 1988) opens a vivid window onto the traumatic events and the ensuing mental anguish immediately after the 1980 Kwangju massacre, *Whisper Yet* (*Soksagim soksagim*, 1994) is a more introspective take on Korean trauma literature (sometimes also referred to as ‘division literature’ or ‘unification literature’). As opposed to the first two stories which are powerful in their descriptions of human suffering, trauma and separation, *The Thirteen-Scent Flower* (*Yŏlse kaji irŭm ŭi kkov hyanggi*, 1995) is a more light-hearted and fantastical story about ordinary people who aspire for extraordinary things in a society in which human values are increasingly influenced and driven by consumerism.

The collection opens with the title story, which also was Ch’oe’s debut novella. It caused quite a stir when first published in 1988 because it tackled head on the politically sensitive topic of the 1980 Kwangju massacre. The narrative follows the story of a traumatised teenage girl orphaned in the massacre, and her vain efforts to deal with the enormity of the events. However, instead of offering a simple consciousness-raising narrative about an incident that was not then openly talked about, Ch’oe personalises trauma through her narrative. The story is thus intended to engage with the reader by showing the impossibility of ignoring the legacy of the massacre, since the trauma that followed affects all Koreans in way or another. This all-encompassing nature of the legacy of Kwangju is expressed through the various points of view which each offer different perspectives on the effects of the trauma. The first-hand experience is portrayed through the eyes of the girl-protagonist, who has been not only severely traumatised by witnessing the death of her mother in the massacre, but whose suffering is also confounded by those who take advantage of her disoriented state. A construction worker called Chang presents the point of view of those who come into contact with the direct victims
of the tragedy. Initially, the girl-protagonist appears to him simply as a slightly deranged girl with a broken body whom he both abuses and looks after, but after initial repulsion he comes to pity her and loathe his own indifference to the suffering of an innocent human being. The way in which people can easily ignore or even despise the suffering of others, even to the point of further abusing them, is poignantly made in this story. Finally, a group of young men give an account of their efforts to locate the girl out of some sense of duty toward her brother, who has also been killed some time before. Through their narration the reader gains a more distanced, but concerned, point of view on the girl’s fate. The group’s struggle to understand their own motivations to ‘rescue’ the girl underlines the need to engage with the trauma, or to fix it somehow, even if there appears to be no possibility of actually doing so.

The girl’s intradiegetic dialogues and analepses to her traumatic memories are the most affective sections in the story, as they reveal something of the depth of the trauma that she is trying to come to terms with. Descriptive of the confusion that must have taken hold of the people of Kwangju in the run up to the massacre, the girl’s frantic inner dialogues are confusing and disjointed, but are brought onto a vivid focus when she recalls the last moments leading up to her mother’s death in the city:


Profiles moving forward. Faces with beautiful, shining foreheads. Faces that combine dreams and power. Faces falling sideways. Faces falling backward to the ground. Faces smashed again.

A face with unseeing eyes that was about to call her name. (p. 21)

The way in which Ch’oe uses her narrative to not only remind the readers of the extreme violence that was inflicted on defenceless bodies, but also to evoke guilt in all the characters that the girl-protagonist comes in contact with, speaks against any attempt to present Kwangju massacre as a trauma that affects only those who directly experienced the bloodshed. On the contrary, the guilt that drives the girl-protagonist and in some ways infects all the other characters is a recurring thematic element in the story. The presence of a mentally damaged and physically abused body of a girl thus becomes a metaphor of the damage and guilt inflicted on the collective body of all Koreans on that day.
If *Petals* deals with the raw trauma suffered by an individual in the immediate aftermath of a tragic event, *Whisper Yet* alludes to the trauma of division that continues to haunt the collective consciousness of Korean people. The story centres on a female protagonist’s memories of her father’s orchard caretaker called Ajaebi. When she is only a small girl, Ajaebi, who is a communist activist and an escaped political prisoner, is taken in by the narrator’s father and becomes part of her family. The plot develops at a slow pace, and the peaceful background of a present-day orchard where she is having a holiday and reminiscing about her past, offer a deceptively calm setting which hides an underlying current of unspoken and unresolved sorrow. Here Ch’oe alludes to the existence of the ‘other’ Korean, who in the official rhetoric is portrayed as an enemy of the state, but who is in this story rehumanised as a victim of a shared and unfortunate history. Moreover, while many other Korean trauma narratives touch upon the national division and the impossibility of crossing the thirty-eighth parallel that divides the two Koreas, *Whisper Yet* describes the effects of enduring division within a shared space. As the story unfolds, it is revealed to the reader that Ajaebi’s family lives not too far from the orchard where he is hiding, but that they are unable to reunite or even meet because of the grave consequences that such a reunion might have on his family. As the narrator’s reflections on her childhood memories of Ajaebi intertwine with the enduring trauma of national division, this trauma of the past is presented as a trauma that continues to haunt the present as well, as it seeps down from one generation to the next. As the narrator tells the story of Ajaebi to her own daughter in the form of a fairytale in whispered, hushed tones, it is implied that one day the daughter will also have to embrace this unresolved sorrow, or what the narrator refers to as ‘the energy of tears’.

Contrary to the first two stories, *The Thirteen-Scent Flower* requires much less, if any, previous knowledge of Korean culture or society. The story focuses on the lives of two ordinary people with extraordinary dreams, Bye and Green Hand, and emerges as a humorous narrative which simultaneously offers a scathing critique of the rapid consumerisation of Korean society. Bye is a young truck driver, who in his daydreams is a denizen of the Arctic with telepathic and telekinetic skills, while Green Hands is a suicidal teenage girl with an astonishing ability to enable plants to grow. While their separate lives are described in terms of dull existence in an urban hell, their meeting in most unexpected circumstances blossoms into a relationship that changes both of their lives. As they decide to escape the city and settle in a mountainous countryside village, they begin to grow flowers. Their combined skills soon engender an exquisite flower that they name ‘wind chrysanthemum’. An emblem of their love for each other, they cultivate the flower in a variety of thirteen different scents, each with a mysterious power to
affect the mood of those who smell them. While the two main characters never set out to seek commercial success, news of the amazing flower spreads throughout the country and beyond. What follows is a witty and entertaining description of other people’s efforts to utilise the flower’s commercial value to the extreme. The story also includes some highly amusing sections which critique the often equally value-driven world of the *homo academicus*, as competing botanists slate each other in an effort to publish their research on the unusual flower. It is telling, however, that none of them seem to recognise the inherent value of the flower, as their focus is solely on how they can benefit from its existence. Ch’oe thus questions whether anything of significant beauty and value can survive in the modern world without being marred by greed and ambition.

If one were to pinpoint a common thematic element that would link the stories included in this collection, it would be the traumatic events of modern Korean history and the way they continue to affect contemporary Korean consciousness. Moreover, although these stories are clearly not intended to be read as explicitly feminist texts, there is a strong suggestion that men’s material greed, as well as the wars and conflicts they engage in, affect women in some ways even more profoundly than they do those who do the fighting. In Ch’oe own words, she has ‘never been interested in public heroes—male public heroes, that is. The history of Korean literature is full of such heroes; the rest of us tend to be sacrificed to their cause and end up in the shade, so to speak.’ Accordingly, in *Petals* the girl-protagonist’s father is conspicuous only by his absence, and the brother has died fighting some greater cause that the girl or her mother do not understand but struggle to support nevertheless. To an extent, this is a critique of the way in which a society focused on the exploits of men fails to see how women are affected by the ensuing consequences. As opposed to the critique of destructive (and in some ways, male) energies, women’s ability to engender life within and through their bodies is emphasised in *The Thirteen-Scent Flower* through Green Hands’ ability to make things grow, and through the frequent references to the maternal in *Whisper Yet*.

Finally, the quality of these translations merits no small mention. As a lecturer in Korean literature I am always grateful for any quality additions to a growing number of translations available in English, and translations from Bruce and Ju-chan Fulton rarely disappoint. This book is no exception. The literary quality of these translations is excellent, with a distinct absence of the slight awkwardness of

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expression that you tend to get with some other translators. While at times the
richness of the original language does not perhaps come across in the translation,
this is in some way unavoidable given the many lexical complexities pertaining to
the Korean language. However, the translators’ focus on readability is
undoubtedly the greatest strength of these translations, as they do justice to the
original, but do so without falling into the trap of trying to convey every slight
nuanced expression in the original at the expense of clarity.

*The Thirteen-Scent Flower* is an excellent introduction to the work of this
fascinating writer, who is unapologetic in bringing her readers face-to-face with
the problematic history of modern Korean. However, instead of dwelling in the
past and so evoking ‘the energy of tears’ (or han), she confronts the trauma in an
attempt to dispel its paralysing legacy.

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Compact, accessible narratives of modern Korean history are not in short supply
these days. Several leading scholars in Korean studies, including Michael
Robinson and Bruce Cumings, have in recent years condensed their knowledge
into potent and lively narratives of Korea’s turbulent modern course. Adrian
Buzo’s revised and updated contribution to this genre fortunately emerges as a
valuable, highly organized, and ultimately quite useful volume.

One of the book’s strengths lies in its author’s objective and unemotional
treatment of Japan in Chapter One, where the narrative begins in 1910. Buzo does
not shunt Korean perspectives to the side per se, but he has no nationalistic axe to
grind and accordingly takes pains to contextualize Korea’s role within Japan’s
broader aims and colonial empire, often from the perspective of Japanese leaders
themselves. The author also takes pains to thread through in subsequent chapters
the longer impact of the colonial model, stating that the Government-General of
Korea “provided subsequent Korean leaders with a powerful model for