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KIM HYESOON'S INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS: SPEAKING TO ALL THE 'GARBAGE' OF THE WORLD

«Therefore as woman, as poet, I dance and rescue the things that have fallen into the coil of magnificent silence; I wake the present, and let the dead things be dead».
- Kim Hyesoon (in *All the Garbage of the World, Unite!* translated by Don Mee Choi)

Abstract

In the field of literature, poetry is perhaps the genre that, in our contemporary age – where everything tends to be reduced to mere consumption – seems to be most neglected. Yet within this field, a Korean poet has been gaining international recognition, winning prestigious awards in nearly every country where her work has been translated. This essay aims to understand the elements that have enabled Kim Hyesoon's poetic language to resonate internationally, with particular attention to its reception in the English-speaking market. Debuting in 1979, Kim challenged prevailing norms of what was deemed acceptable for female writers. Employing abject, grotesque imagery and a polyphony of voices, she articulates the suffering of

women under patriarchy, the exploitation of people under dictatorial regimes, and the destruction of nature and animals in consumerist society. Through her subversive and provocative language, Kim's poetry forcefully critiques and exposes the injustices and contradictions of the world we inhabit.

1. Introduction

Kim Hyesoon was born on 26 October 1955 in Uljin County, North Gyeongsang Province. She graduated from Kŏnguk University in Korean literature and received a doctorate from the same university, with a dissertation on the poetry of Kim Suyŏng, in 1993. She has been called by professor Bruce Fulton, Young-Bin Min Chair in Korean Literature and Literary Translation at the University of British Columbia, as «Korea's most important living poet and by far its most imaginative writer». For the recent publication of her *Chugŭm T'ŭrilloji* (죽음 트릴로지 / 'Trilogy of Death') – which contains three poetry collections themed on death: *Chukŭm-ŭi Chasŏjŏn* (죽음의 자서전 / 'Autobiography of Death'), *Nalgae Hwansangt'ong* (날개 환상통 'Phantom Pain Wings'), and *Chiguga chugŭmyŏn tarŭn nugŭl tolji?* (지구가 죽으면 달은 누굴 돌지? / 'When the Earth Dies, Who Will the Moon Revolve Around?') – she was presented by the publisher as «a poet now read by the whole world» (이제는 세계가 함께 읽는 시인이다[1]). She was the first woman-identifying poet to win the Midang Literature Award in 2006. She has also been honoured with the Kim Suyŏng Literary Award, Sowŏl Poetry Award, and Daesan Poetry Award[2]. Her works have been translated into numerous languages, including English, Swedish, French, German, Polish, Persian, Japanese, Chinese, Spanish, and Danish, significantly contributing to her global recognition[3]. In addition to her national accolades, Kim Hyesoon has received several international awards, such as the UK Royal Society of Literature International Writer Award, the Cikada Prize, and the Griffin Poetry Prize[4]. Her poetry collection *Chukŭm-ŭi Chasŏjŏn* (죽음의 자서전), translated into German as *Autobiographie des Todes* by Uljana Wolf and Sool Park, garnered the 2025 Internationale Literaturpreis

1 Merchandise Director Kim Hyo-sun (July 11, 2025).
<https://www.aladin.co.kr/shop/wproduct.aspx?ItemId=367050479&srsltid=AfmBOorT-TroMjy5Bs2QrV4SilyFoQmwp9G0cz5jSlocNJkmSj0aX3EbB>

2 Poet Kim Hyesoon Official Site: "Awards and Recognition", Poet Kim Hyesoon Official Website.
<https://www.poetkimhyesoon.com/awards> (accessed October 18, 2025).

3 Griffin Poetry Prize: "Kim Hyesoon," Griffin Poetry Prize.
<https://griffinpoetryprize.com/poet/kim-hyesoon/> (accessed October 18, 2025).

4 Poetry Foundation: "Kim Hyesoon," Poetry Foundation.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/kim-hyesoon> (accessed October 18, 2025).

– Haus der Kulturen der Welt, marking the first time in the award's history that a poetry collection was honoured[5]. Kim Hyesoon's contributions to literature have been further acknowledged with the 2023 National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry, making her the first foreign poet laureate to receive this distinction in the United States.

This essay aims to identify the elements that allow Kim Hyesoon's poetry to resonate with international readers and render her work highly relevant to the contemporary literary landscape. In the following section, Breaking the Rules of the Male Canon, background information is provided on the rise of feminist consciousness among Korean writers and the poetic experimentation of the late 1970s in the search for an *écriture féminine*. Section 3, *From Korea to the U.S.: Kim Hyesoon's Reception among English-speaking Audiences*, examines how U.S. based poets, readers, and critics engage with Kim Hyesoon's poetry through online magazines, forums, and blogs. Section 4, *Abjection and the Grotesque as Stylistic Means for the Critical Representation of Reality*, explains the concepts of abjection and the grotesque, which emerged in the previous sections as key elements characterizing Kim Hyesoon's poetry as a language with international resonance. Section 5, *To All the Garbage of the World: Illustrative Cases of Abject and Grotesque Poetry*, presents examples of how the imaginary of the grotesque and the abject functions in Kim Hyesoon's work. Finally, Section 6 offers the conclusion.

2. Breaking the Rules of the Male Canon

> I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write *her self*: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (Cixous *et. al.* 1976)

These opening lines from Hélène Cixous's *The Laugh of the Medusa* encapsulate the feminist manifesto of the seminal French writer who, in 1975, reimagined Medusa as a smiling, subversive figure capable of undermining Western patriarchal culture. At that time, the second wave of feminism (1960s ~ 70s) was calling for the liberation and reappropriation of the female body. For centuries, Cartesian dualism – which established an «unbridgeable gulf between mind and matter» (Gorsz 1994: 7) – legitimized male authority by associating it with reason and rationality, while relegating women to irrationality and instinct. As in all colonial dynamics,

5 Korea Herald: "Kim Hyesoon's Autobiography of Death wins 2025 Internationale Literaturpreis", Korea Herald, 18 October 2025.
<https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10534505> (accessed October 18, 2025).

domination was justified by portraying the other as less human, closer to the animal realm (several scholars have demonstrated this thesis; my main references are Homi Bhabha and David L. Eng). A comparable logic shaped Korea under the austere Neo-Confucian order of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392 ~ 1910), which suppressed instinct in favour of rational control to ensure social harmony. Central to the Confucian ideology was the belief that men must govern over women. This hierarchical gender structure was codified in *sam-chong-chi-do* (삼종지도, 三從之道), or 'The Way of Three Obedience', which dictated that a woman must obey her father in youth, her husband after marriage, and her son in widowhood. Women's self-realization was confined to becoming a *hyŏnmo-yangchŏ* (현모양처, 賢母良妻) – 'wise mother and good wife'. Any deviation from this ideal led to marginalization, with only liminal roles (like *kisaeng* or *mudang*) available beyond it. Public education was closed to women; as Kim Hyesoon notes, «Korean women did not write publicly before the early 1900s» (in Choi 2003: 537). With women finally gaining access to public education, the early 20th century saw pioneers such as Na Hyesŏk and Kim Wŏnju challenge these norms through *Sinjoja* (신여자, 'The New Woman'), a journal placing women's issues at the centre of public debate. In the novel *Chagak* (자각, 'Awakening'), published in 1926, Kim Wŏnju openly criticized *sam-chong-chi-do*, causing scandal before retreating into monastic life. Na Hyesŏk, a celebrated painter and writer, published in 1934 *Ihon kobaek* (이혼 고백, 'My Divorce Statement') in the magazine *Samchŏlli* (삼천리), denouncing the hypocrisy that tolerated male infidelity but condemned women's. The resulting ostracism destroyed her career; she too sought refuge in a Buddhist temple, later succumbing to profound psychological suffering. In her own words: «I was a tiny bird that was shot down by the society… Finally, the bird became soundless and motionless» (Ch'oe 2006: 8).

As Kim Chŏngnan notes in *Echoing Song: Contemporary Korean Women Poets*, these women, along with Kim Myŏngsun, pioneered modern Korean women's poetry, though their works now seem «naïve and not very prolific» (Lee 2005: 15). Women poets of the 1930s wrote more prolifically, yet they lost much of their independence. Their work was produced under male supervision, and their gender was underscored by the label *yŏryu si-in* (여류 시인, 'female poet'), in contrast to the neutral *si-in* (시인, 'poet') reserved for men. The genre of *yŏryu si* (여류 시, 'feminine poetry') demanded delicacy, sentimentality, and grace, echoing the associations of *ryu* with kisaeng. As Kim Hyesoon have observed: «*ryu* was a word traditionally associated to kisaeng… - women who 'drifted around'… imposing the term *yŏryu si-in* on women poets means that women's poetry is regulated and defined as sentimental and gentle» (Choi 2023: 533).

It was only in the late 1970s that poets such as Mun Chŏnghŭi, Kang Ŭn'gyo, and Ch'oe Sŭngja rejected these constraints, embracing what Kim Chŏngnan calls the «invasion of flesh» (Lee 2005: 16). Their work foregrounded the body – particularly through images of flesh (*sal*, 살) – in concrete, existential terms that defied both

patriarchal and authoritarian control. Don Mee Choi links these corporeal images to resistance against President Park's military rule (Choi 2006: xix). According to Choi, Ch'oe Sŭngja's grotesque yet vital imagery erupted from accumulated oppression, while Ruth Williams sees her «grotesque protrusions» (2010, p. 401) as metaphors for the violent suppression of a woman's real self. The result was that this new *écriture féminine* placed the body at its centre, subverting the rationalist language of male-dominated discourse.

Like Ch'oe Sŭngja, Kim Hyesoon also made her debut in 1979 in the literary journal *Munhak-kwa chisŏng* (문학과 지성, 'Literature and Intellect'). She invented a poetic language to articulate the structural violence and social inequalities of postwar South Korea. Male critics often dismissed her corporeal imagery as grotesque or incomprehensible, echoing the Neo-Confucian association of women with the irrational – as with the shamanic practices of predominantly female mudangs. She counters: «I am just writing this reality as it is but people call that grotesque… I am just following the traces of what I see» (Kim Hyesoon's words in Een Yi 2020: 376). As she points out, the fundamental difference between men's and women's poetry in Korea lies in their distinct approaches to writing and language – particularly in the relationship between the body and the act of writing:

> One of the characteristics of Korean men's poetry is that the poets don't handle their subject matters with their bodies. They handle their subjects only with their eyes. (…) Women, in general, let nature and their own natures be, so that both entities continue to exist on their own. And from this perspective they speak about the meetings and interactions between both through the object of their bodies. Women poets oppose and resist their conditions, using unconventional forms of language because their resistance has led them to a language that is unreal, surreal, and even fantastical. The language of women's poetry is internal, yet defiant and revolutionary. (in "Korean Women - Poetry, Identity, Place: A Conversation with Kim Hye-sun [Hyesoon]". (Choi 2023)

Here, the male gaze is detached and observational, while women's poetry emerges from embodied experience. The surreal and fantastical qualities of their language are not lapses into irrationality, but deliberate acts of rebellion – against patriarchy and against the very structures of language that have sought to silence them.

3. From Korea to the U.S.: Kim Hyesoon's Reception among English-speaking Audience

On June 23, 2016, a series of articles by American authors on Kim Hyesoon's poetry were published on the Asian American Writers' Workshop website, a platform that for over thirty years has been dedicated to publishing and amplifying Asian diasporic literary culture. At the time, her works had not yet received the major international awards discussed in the introduction, yet these articles already present her as an influential figure within the U.S. literary landscape. In this collection, titled *The*

Vanishing Point: Writers Speak to Kim Hyesoon's Poetry in Translation[6], contributors reflect on how Kim Hyesoon's poetry, as rendered in English by Don Mee Choi, challenges and transforms readers' perspectives. Joyelle McSweeney notes that engaging with Kim's work involves a «radical re-positioning» from the «imperial center to the vanishing point», suggesting a shift from dominant cultural narratives to marginalized voices. This repositioning draws readers into a space where Kim's poetry, exemplified by the figure of Paridegi – the abandoned princess of Korean folklore, attuned to the cries of lost souls – reveals how vulnerability and marginality can coexist with a powerful presence, reshaping the way we understand both. Jake Levine emphasizes that encountering Kim's poems requires a departure from American identity, advocating for a transgressive openness that allows for a «new illness» to emerge: a metaphor for the transformative experience of engaging with her poetry. Conversely, Ji Yoon Lee describes Kim's work as presenting a «jarring and destabilizing force», with a non-human speaker that manifests in ways that unsettle conventional understandings. These reflections collectively highlight how Kim Hyesoon's poetry, through its unique voice and themes, offers a profound and transformative experience for readers, prompting a re-evaluation of identity, power, and perception. Even before, in 2014, an article by Christine Shan Shan Hou on *Hyperallergic*, an online forum founded in 2009 and headquartered in Brooklyn, New York, published a review of Kim Hyesoon's collection *Sorrowtoothpaste Mirrorcream* (2011). Hou writes:

> *Sorrowtoothpaste Mirrorcream* may end on this bleak note, but there is something liberating about reading poetry this unapologetically vile and disturbed. Hyesoon's fearless poetics suggests a grossly visceral alternative to the capitalist world. These poems conjure both feelings of desire and disgust, awe and repulsion. I want to read more. I need it. Please stop. Don't stop. You make me sick. (Shan Shan Hou 2016)[7]

Hou's review underscores the disruptive potential of Kim Hyesoon's poetry, highlighting its capacity to elicit intense emotional responses while simultaneously opening an imaginative space beyond the constraints of conventional societal structures. Similarly, in *Asymptote Journal* Matt Reeck notes that her work evokes emotionally and imaginatively charged images rather than strictly logical reasoning, creating a sense of prolonged maternal and violent nightmares in collections such

6 Joyelle McSweeney e Johannes Göransson, "The Vanishing Point: Writers Speak to Kim Hyesoon's Poetry in Translation", in «Asian American Writers' Workshop», 23 June 2016. <https://aaww.org/kim-hyesoon-vanishing-point/> (accessed October 18, 2025).

7 Christine Shan Shan Hou, "The Sick World of Kim Hyesoon", in «Hyperallergic», April 13, 2014. <https://hyperallergic.com/120043/the-sick-world-of-kim-hyesoon/> (accessed October 18, 2025).

as *A Drink of Red Mirror*[8]. Reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and the Griffin Prize Judges highlight how her poetry addresses death and collective tragedy through structured elegiac forms that intertwine structural horror, individual loss, and their interconnections[9]. In *The Kenyon Review*, her collection *Autobiography of Death* is praised for giving voice to the mass of unjustly ended lives, linking personal experiences to broader historical and political events in South Korea[10]. Elisa Gabbert, writing for the *New York Times*, describes her poetry as «obsessive and grotesque, without future», emphasizing its capacity to work across both large-scale and minute emotional and formal registers[11]. Pam Brown, featured in *Poetry Foundation*'s *Doing Poetry*, characterizes Kim's work as visceral, theatrical, disturbing, and feminist-surrealist, highlighting the uniqueness of her poetic voice[12]. Even when some mainstream critics in the U.S. have not fully embraced her, numerous blog and webzine reviews have analyzed her formal and thematic breadth, paying close attention to her grotesque imagery and the politics of her language[13]. Finally, in *The White Review*, Joanna Lee observes that Kim's work resists being simplified into a form of cultural explanation of "Koreaness" for Western readers (what some might call poetic "ethnography"), maintaining instead a challenging, autonomous presence within the literary landscape[14].

In conclusion, the critical reception of Kim Hyesoon in the United States positions her as a poet of profound disruptive power. Across multiple reviews, her work is consistently recognized for its ability to provoke intense emotional responses, destabilize conventional expectations, and create imaginative spaces that transcend societal and cultural norms. The analysis frames Kim's poetry as a radical intervention, confronting readers with both aesthetic and ethical challenges, while simultaneously providing a form of catharsis for those who cannot identify with hegemonic or

8 Matt Reeck reviews *A Drink of Red Mirror* by Kim Hyesoon, *Asymptote Journal*. <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/kim-hyesoon-a-drink-of-red-mirror/> (accessed January 10, 2026).

9 *And Other Stories*. <https://www.andotherstories.org/authors/kim-hyesoon/> (accessed January 10, 2026).

10 Ibidem.

11 Ibidem.

12 Don Mee Choi & Kim Hyesoon, *Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/159850/doing-poetry> (accessed January 10, 2026).

13 Mia You, *Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/featured-blogger/73760/context-decontext-a-conversation-with-johannes-goransson> (accessed January 10, 2026).

14 Joanna Lee, *The White view*. <https://www.thewhitereview.org/reviews/scrutiny-consumption-korean-womens-poetry-literary-inheritance/> (accessed January 10, 2026).

pre-given images. Her work gives voice to nonconforming identities and employs grotesque and abject imagery that generates both repulsion and release, opening a space of infinite possibilities. In this space, boundaries dissolve: male and female, life and death, human and non-human, nature and artifact, Koreanness and otherness. Given this, scholarly, journalistic, and web-based commentary underscores the innovative, feminist-surrealist, and politically aware dimensions of Kim Hyesoon voice, as well as its resistance to cultural homogenization and Western expectations. Overall, Kim Hyesoon's work emerges as a sustained intervention in contemporary poetry, one that expands the boundaries of poetic form, emotional engagement, sociopolitical critique, and the conceptual exploration of identity and otherness. The next section examines the concepts of the abject and the grotesque in greater depth, arguing that this aesthetic language is capable of resonating across cultural boundaries, particularly between Korea and the West.

4. Abjection and the Grotesque as Stylistic Means for the Critical Representation of Reality

Starting from his analysis of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988), David L. Eng, in *Racial Castration* (2001), examines the feminization of Asian American men and, more broadly, Asian subjects in U.S. culture. He demonstrates the inseparability of racial and sexual discourse, showing how both shape stereotypes and constrain identities outside the *given-to-be-seen* (Lacan). Eng extends Lacan's concept of the screen, where ideologically coded images in visual media construct and regulate identity, producing both recognition and misrecognition, with the latter generating anxiety, fragmentation, and marginalization. Building on this framework, Kaja Silverman's use of Freud's body ego and Lacan's mirror stage highlights how the self is formed through external images. When subjects cannot identify with hegemonic images – those privileging whiteness, heteronormativity, or masculinity – they risk experiencing themselves as socially devalued or even abject. This raises a crucial question: *in what forms can minorities express themselves when they are unable to identify with hegemonic images?* This question applies both to women in patriarchal societies – whether Western or Korean – and also to ethnic and racial minorities within contemporary multicultural contexts. As I will argue, one such expressive strategy is the use of abjection and grotesque representation. While abjection has been widely theorized as a tool through which many women articulate their *écriture féminine*, it is also increasingly employed by ethnic minorities to expose and denounce the racism embedded in contemporary society. Through abject representations, marginalized subjects make visible the violence, exclusion, and dehumanization that hegemonic discourses seek to naturalize or conceal. In this sense, abjection in contemporary culture functions not only as a critique of patriarchy, but also as a powerful means of challenging capitalist, racist, and hyper-materialistic structures on a broader level. Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject (*Powers of Horror*, 1982) is central here: the

abject is what disturbs identity and order, encompassing what is rejected to protect both the self and the social order. In South Korean cultural productions, including films, K-dramas, and webtoons, the abject monster is often depicted as the product of social injustice, corruption, and the failures of those in power. A notable example is Bong Joon Ho's *The Host* (2006). In this film, the monster emerges not only as a consequence of chemical contamination in the Han River, but also as a vehicle for exposing institutional inefficiency in managing crises and the readiness of authorities to sacrifice the expendable. The monster attacks Gangseo, a district west of the Han River, rather than the affluent Gangnam area; in other words, it is ordinary people who are sacrificed. As the narrative unfolds, viewers feel anger toward the Korean and U.S. military, while sympathy for the monster grows: it becomes evident that it is itself a victim of human recklessness, acting solely in the interest of survival. Other examples of this genre of monstrous cinema and K-drama include the popular film *Train to Busan* (2016) and webtoon-based series such as *Sweet Home* (2020) and *Hellbound* (2021). A particularly striking case is the premise of the K-drama *All of Us Are Dead* (2022). Set in a high school overrun by a zombie epidemic, the series first foregrounds acts of bullying, rendering the school itself monstrous in the viewer's eyes even before the appearance of literal monsters. More broadly, not only monsters but also grotesque imagery are widely employed to critique corrupt social systems, as seen in globally influential works such as *Squid Game* (2021) and *Parasite* (2019). Park Chan-wook's recent film *No Other Choice* (2025) offers another example of this tendency. After losing his job, the protagonist, in a desperate attempt to secure new employment and restore his former social status, gradually transforms into a monstrous figure: a grotesque and clumsy killer. Here, social critique takes the form of grotesque parody. Moving from the cinematic screen to visual art, in *Korean Feminist Artists* (2024) Kim Hong-hee demonstrates how contemporary female artists such as Lee Bul, Fi Jae Lee, and Mire Lee employ abjection to represent the body, and in particular the female body. These bodies are frequently rendered through a grotesque aesthetic because, in their works, «the monster is conceptualized as a liminal presence akin to a cyborg, liberating itself from every sort of boundary that constrains the human being – be it class, ethnicity, gender, or age» (Kim 2024: 62). This conception of the monstrous body closely resonates with Donna Haraway's theorization of the cyborg as a hybrid, transgressive figure that destabilizes binary oppositions such as human/machine, nature/culture, and male/female. As Haraway argues in *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), the cyborg rejects essentialist identities and fixed origins, opening up possibilities for new forms of subjectivity and political resistance. In the works analysed by Kim, abjection thus becomes not merely a strategy of negation or provocation, but a productive space in which the female body – reimagined as monstrous and cyborgian – can escape patriarchal, heteronormative, and anthropocentric regimes of representation. This framework can be further illuminated through Mary Russo's theorization of the female grotesque, which conceptualizes the grotesque female

body as excessive, open, and in constant transformation, in opposition to classical ideals of closure, harmony, and decorum. In *The Female Grotesque* (1994), Russo highlights how the grotesque destabilizes normative constructions of femininity by foregrounding bodily excess, permeability, and spectacle. Read through Russo's lens, the abject and monstrous bodies in contemporary Korean feminist art and poetry do not signify degradation or marginality, but rather function as sites of visibility, agency, and subversion. Interestingly, the period in which many Korean women poets were debuting corresponds to the emergence of the *gurlesque* poetic movement in the United States, as documented by Arielle Greenberg in Gurlesque in *The New Grrly, Grotesque, Burlesque Poetics* (2010). Greenberg defines the *gurlesque* as a feminist aesthetic that combines elements of the grotesque, the burlesque, and a deliberately exaggerated "girly" sensibility in order to challenge patriarchal norms and explore female desire, horror, and embodied experience. In this sense, there are striking affinities between the *gurlesque* and the work of poets such as Kim Hyesoon: both mobilize grotesque and abject imagery to destabilize hegemonic representations of gender and the body, amplify marginalized voices, and create poetic spaces in which the boundaries between pleasure and disgust, life and death, and the human and the non-human become fluid. Whether consciously or not, Kim Hyesoon's poetry resonates strongly with the *gurlesque*'s language of rebellion and bodily transgression, a resonance that may have contributed to the reception and circulation of her work within the U.S. poetic field. In this sense, the language of abjection emerges as a shared expressive strategy among Korean and Western feminist authors and artists.

Across different cultural and historical contexts, abjection and the grotesque operate as a transnational grammar through which marginalized subjects articulate resistance to patriarchal norms, racialized hierarchies, and capitalist regimes of control. This is due to the ability of abjection to destabilize existing symbolic and social orders, challenge hegemonic norms, and open up spaces for imagining alternative forms of agency and social justice. In both Western and South Korean contexts, the abject exposes the tensions between cultural norms and marginalized or excluded subjects, offering audiences and readers a means to confront and rethink entrenched systems of power.

The next section examines, through selected examples, how the abject and grotesque imaginary takes shape in Kim Hyesoon's verse.

5. *To All the Garbage of the World*: Illustrative Cases of Abject and Grotesque Poetry

In the interview with the translator Don Mee Choi, published in the appendix of *Autobiography of Death* (2018), Kim Hyesoon states:

> Women's language is a language of death. The body of a woman poet is a form of text. But it's the text of the deaf, mute, and blind. That's because the mother tongue sits on men's tongue (...) At the place

where the body becomes anonymous, disenfranchised, and expelled, is where the language of death, women's language, is born – language that grapples with the language of anonymity, negativity, non-gender specific language. The kind of writing that has definite subjects and objects, that depicts its objects in detail, objectifying them, then adding grandiose aphorisms to them is, of course, masculine writing that has been preserved in Korea by History. But the feminine writing of death begins from a place of emptiness/nothingness, a place that's full with the presence of absence. In that place, there are sounds that are considered embarrassing to the world of meaning, but not at all to the world of body (sound) (Kim 2018: 100).

The sounds she refers to are hiccups, coughs, and phlegm. By foregrounding bodily sounds and functions, her work disrupts the normative, sanitized expectations of language and literature, insisting on the materiality of the body as a locus of expression. In this framework, the abject becomes a generative force: it is not merely expelled or denied, but employed to interrogate social hierarchies, gender norms, and the epistemic authority of masculine discourse. The «language of death» she invokes is thus inseparable from corporeal experience, creating a space where marginalized voices, previously rendered inaudible within the patriarchal linguistic order, can finally emerge. Kim's emphasis on the bodily, visceral, and abject resists traditional aesthetics of refinement and order, privileging instead intensity, excess, and the disruptive potential inherent in what society deems repulsive or shameful. Her approach starts from the very idea that we are made of flesh and bones, that our bodies are in a continuous act of becoming as our organs work tirelessly to keep us alive.

In *Bird Rider: An Essay*, the poet asserts that when she writes, her intelligence diminishes, she experiences a breakdown, and her body transforms into an *WomanAnimalAsia*[15]. Through performing *WomanAnimalAsia*, Kim enacts a form of embodied language in which the poetic subject becomes hybrid and porous, collapsing the boundaries between woman, animal, and Asia: the historically colonized and subaltern body. Performing *WomanAnimalAsia* thus constitutes an act of resistance against hegemonic culture: it is the colonized subject that speaks back, reclaiming agency through linguistic and corporeal transformation. Also, Kim's poetry frequently invokes pivotal historical events such as the Gwangju Massacre, the Sewol ferry disaster, the legacy of Japanese colonialism, and the period of military dictatorship, grounding her verses in a collective memory of violence, loss, and mourning. Yet these historically situated references are articulated through imagery that speaks an international language. Kim's poetic voice can be read as that of the former colony reclaiming its place in the world, a voice that overlaps with that of the woman demanding articulation and visibility, as well as with the voices of nature and

15 Kim Hyesoon translated by Anton Hur, "[Writer's Notes] I Do WomanAnimalAsia", in «Korean Literature Now».
<https://klwave.or.kr/klw/magazines/650/articleView.do> (accessed January 10, 2026).

animals subjected to exploitation under an unrestrained materialism that is rapidly exhausting the planet's resources. The themes Kim engages – oppression, grief, exploitation, and resistance – are fundamentally universal, and they are expressed through an equally universal aesthetic, as shown in a previous sections of this essay: that of abjection and the grotesque. Within this poetic register, readers who fail to identify with the *given-to-be-seen*, and who instead recognize themselves as the «garbage of the world» (to cite the title of another of Kim's poetry collections, *All the Garbage of the World Unite*), find a space of recognition and catharsis, generating a compulsive desire for «reading more», as Christine Shan Shan Hou has observed. In her poems, one can also trace ecofeminist issues that resonate with contemporary debates. For example, in *Anxiety of Words* (2006) – one of the earliest collections through which Don Mee Choi introduced Kim Hyesoon's work to English readers – the poem Song of Skin dramatizes the porous boundary between the maternal body and the natural world. «The open lips find my breasts/Though they weren't told where mine were,/Draining sweet water from my body. […] Trees and plants collapse,/The Naktong River dries up» (Ch'oe 2006).

In this poem, the speaker's body, described as being drained of sweet water, becomes indistinguishable from the Nakdong River, whose drying and eventual explosion mirror the depletion of the mother's life force under the demand of an insatiable child. Kim's imagery collapses the maternal and the ecological, establishing a parallel between the exhaustion of the female body and the desiccation of the natural world. Both the maternal and the environmental are figured as sources of nourishment violently consumed by their own offspring. This conflation of the body with landscape and cosmos – the drying of veins, the cracking of the riverbed, the shattering of the Milky Way – evokes the total collapse of the boundaries that separate self from other, subject from environment. Kim's language, dense with verbs of depletion, enacts the very process it describes: a draining of vitality that becomes a poetic gesture of exposure and resistance. The drained body, stripped of everything but dry bones and skin, is not merely a figure of suffering but a vessel through which the abject – what patriarchal and anthropocentric discourses expel – returns to speak. The poet does not explicitly name the army, yet the image of the ravaged river inevitably evokes (for those familiar with history) the fierce battles fought along the Naktong River front during the Korean War. The water itself became a battlefield, and the surrounding geography was consumed by fire, death, and devastation. On one level, the poem critiques the exploitation of motherhood within the patriarchal system; on a broader level, it indicts humanity as a whole for its cruelty, both in war, toward other humans, and against the natural world in which we live.

When reflecting on some of the characteristics that distinguish Kim Hyesoon's poetic voice, I cannot help but recall Walt Whitman's famous words from *Song of Myself*: «Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)». Indeed, in many of Kim Hyesoon's poems, the unified and

monolithic identity of the "I" is strikingly absent. Instead, a polyphony of voices shapes the poetic image, allowing multiple perspectives, experiences, and temporalities to coexist within a single work. Like the shaman – whose honorific title *manshin* (만신) literally means 'ten thousand spirits', referring to the multitude of deities that can inhabit the shaman's body, which becomes a mausoleum for the voices she invokes – the poet speaks through and with a multiplicity that is both internal and external. At times, it is the voice of her female ancestors or of other women that overlaps with hers; at others, it is the voices of the pigs buried alive during the 2019 foot-and-mouth disease outbreak that echo those of the civilians massacred during the 1980 Gwangju Uprising. In the collection *Sorrowtoothpaste Mirrorcream* (2014), translated by Don Mee Choi, this multiplicity takes the form of *Kitchen Confidential*, a poem where domestic space, flesh, and violence converge into a grotesque performance of abjection and survival. The title evokes Anthony Bourdain's famous memoir, hinting at a behind-the-scenes exposure – but here, the revelation concerns the hidden violence and oppression embedded in women's domestic labor. The opening line, «The end of summer is always the kitchen of every house!», initially suggests the celebratory preparations for *Ch'usŏk* (추석), conjuring a fleeting sense of festivity. Indeed, the refrain «how could I possibly forget this place?» functions as an ironic intertextual echo of Chŏng Chi-yong's colonial-era poem *Hyang-su* (향수, *Homesickness*), in which the poet nostalgically recalls the bucolic beauty of his homeland. Kim's repetition of the phrase inverts its meaning: the unforgettable place is not a pastoral idyll but a site of abject horror. In this poem, the mother is depicted as worn out by her labor in the kitchen, while the child is constantly asking for more food. This dynamic creates a correspondence with the image of piglets, who are likewise perpetually demanding to be fed («The piglet keeps demanding food, food all day long»). Where we would normally expect to find a baby, a piglet appears once again, as in the line: «So a piglet inside a tummy would fall asleep». At this point, the poem raises an unsettling question: is the piglet the child she has given birth to, or does it refer to the pig she has consumed? Or, even worse, is it still an unborn piglet, waiting to be born into life, destined to consume (restlessly demanding food) and then to be consumed? In this sense, the boundaries constructed by civilization to separate humans from non-humans, and the consumer from the consumed, are blurred. There is also a sense of claustrophobia when the baby asks her mother, «Where is the farthest place in the world?» and she replies, «A place where there is nothing to eat!» The mother feels doomed to feed her children and the other family members who depend on her, while the world outside seems no different: everywhere, people rely on women to bear children and prepare food. As she feels herself rotting away, consumed by this system, the environment around her is also described as decaying, which I read as a parallel to the natural resources exploited by humankind for its own sustenance. For instance, in the following lines, the river seems to plead for mercy, resisting the devouring of its creatures: «The river flowed whispering to my teeth/Don't swallow

that bird/Don't chew that waterfowl» (Ch'oe *et. al.* 2006).

If the river is indeed whispering to the woman's teeth, it positions her squarely within the same consumerist system. She embodies both the consumed and the consumer, reflecting the unsettling logic of abjection, in which the boundaries between what is devoured and what devours become porous and ambiguous. This duality underscores the poem's critique of a world in which all life – human and nonhuman – is caught in cycles of consumption and exploitation. At the very end, the poem moves behind the walls of the kitchen. In the line «The place where teeth line up inside the boiling river beneath the blue knife», the image of a boiling river evokes a boiling pot, while the «blue knife» recalls a kitchen knife superimposed onto the sky, as if the instrument of consumerism is threatening the creatures of the Earth, and the teeth lining up echo this same predatory force. Also, in *I'm Ok, I'm Pig!* Kim Hyesoon claim that the pig operates as a synecdoche for «all the weak in the world in its lone body» (214: 153). Here, the pig's endless hunger mirrors the insatiability of the social order itself, which feeds on women's bodies and labour while masking that violence beneath the veneer of tradition and domesticity. In this all-encompassing voracity one can also read a radical critique of contemporary consumerism and of the human species' predatory attitude, which harbours no moral qualms about devouring anything – living beings or not – both in a literal sense, eating animals, and in a figurative one, exploiting the ecosystem to the point of collapse. In this sense, *Kitchen Confidential* is also an allegory of the global economy, which consumes resources, lives, and habitats with the same blind voracity that reigns over Kim's infernal kitchen.

Reading Kim Hyesoon's poetry is far from simple. The challenge lies not only in her complex and experimental grammar or her grotesque imagery, but also in the dense web of cultural references that shape her work: from the myth of the shamanic princess Paridegi, to her use of elements drawn from Korean folk songs such as *p'ansori*, or even from much older forms like the *hyangga*, as well as allusions to Buddhist thought. Kim's poetry is deeply layered, interweaving myth, history, and contemporary critique. As for the English translations of her works, they are thoughtfully enriched with introductory notes or afterwords written by Kim Hyesoon herself. In some volumes, dialogues between the poet and her translator are included, offering valuable insight into Kim's creative process and poetic vision. Moreover, each collection is consistently accompanied by reflective essays by the translator, Don Mee Choi, whose interpretative writings provide a critical framework through which readers can better understand the political, linguistic, and emotional complexities of Kim's poetry.

In *Bird Rider*, the essay that concludes *Phantom Pain Wings* – the poetry collection that won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry in 2023 – Kim Hyesoon explains that the poems were written after the death of her parents. She recounts dreaming of birds that seemed to foretell their passing. The image of the bird carries deep symbolic resonance in Korean culture: it is a noble creature, once venerated

in ancient Korea for its capacity to bridge heaven and earth (De Benedittis, 2016: 138). The very title of Kim's essay, *Bird Rider*[16], refers to a spiritual entity: a spirit that a shaman may host within her body. This particular spirit is said to be that of a dead baby, rejected by its mother, who takes the form of a bird and communicates through chirping. In this context, Kim's poetic act becomes an act of mediation and transformation: she decides to give voice to the visiting birds through her poetry. As she writes, «Bird returns, carrying the essence of the between in its beak, to build its house in the terrain of dislocation, between the imaginary and the real, between language and reality». For Kim, «literary ventriloquy is not about imitation, but entanglement, impregnation of one another» (2023: 168). Through this metaphor of the bird, Kim articulates her poetics of interconnection – between the living and the dead, the human and the nonhuman, the real and the imaginary – a space where grief, memory, and creation coexist in the act of poetic utterance. *Bird's Poetry Book*, the first poem of the collection *Phantom Pain Wings* (2023), epitomizes Kim Hyesoon's aesthetics of transformation and excess. Here, the act of becoming a bird is inseparable from pain, bondage, and rupture, but also from a paradoxical sense of freedom: «Woman-is-dying-but-bird-is-getting-bigger sequence/She says, The pain is killing me/When my hands are tied and my skirt rips like wings/I can finally fly» (Kim 2023).

The body's breaking point becomes the condition of its liberation. Flight here does not symbolize transcendence but rather an ecstatic, visceral freedom achieved through bodily disintegration. The transformation from woman to bird exposes the instability of identity and the porousness of bodily and symbolic boundaries: precisely the territory of the abject. The poem's structure unfolds as a ritual sequence: the recurring refrain «I-do-bird» functions like an incantation, suggesting the cyclical, performative nature of suffering, death, and rebirth. Kim Hyesoon stages the female subject as both creator and creation, the one who writes and the one written. The speaker ultimately realizes: «I-thought-bird-was-part-of-me-but-I-was-part-of-bird sequence». This reversal of agency resonates with Kim's own reflections in *Bird Rider*, where she describes literary ventriloquy as «entanglement, the impregnation of one another». The poet functions as a medium through which the unspeakable can be articulated: as rationality is suspended, that which pertains to the realm of imagination and sensation comes to the fore. In this sense, *Bird's Poetry Book* operates within the logic of the abject: it gives form to what culture seeks to expel – pain (both physical and emotional), decay, transformation – and turns it into a space of poetic creation. Kim's «I-do-bird» sequences transform the abject into an act of shamanic ventriloquy, a ritual of possession and release through which the female

16 The Korean name varies from province to province: 새타니 *Saet'ani*; 명도 *Myŏngdo*; 태자 *T'aeja*; 태자귀 *T'aejagui* (Kim 2023: 167).

body, fragmented and wounded, reclaims its voice against the oppressive systems – patriarchal, capitalist, or linguistic – that attempt to silence it. The poet becomes the medium through which what is unspeakable can be voiced: rationality is silenced, and something belonging to the realm of imagination and sensation comes forward. Kim Hyesoon reminds us that we are beings of flesh and blood, reinforcing our sense of corporeality and, through her imaginative power, placing us in intimate relation with other living beings who share this world, each firmly anchored in their own bodily existence. In this way, the concept of *WomanAnimalAsia* resurfaces, standing in stark contrast to a consumerist society that increasingly alienates us from our essential needs and from the raw, visceral reality of life.

6. Conclusions

In a 2010 academic article, Ruth Williams defines Kim Hyesoon's poetry as a «revolutionary grotesque», highlighting its capacity to expose the hidden realities of marginalized subjects, particularly women oppressed by patriarchy. As shown in the previous section, Kim's work, rendered into English through the exceptional translational skill and creative vision of Don Mee Choi, amplifies a polyphony of minoritarian voices – including women, animals, and exploited ecosystems – using abjection and grotesque exaggeration not as mere aesthetic excess but as deliberate strategies to dismantle normative representations and reveal structural injustices. U.S. critics, poets, and scholars recognize Kim not only for the cultural specificity of her work but for its ability to unsettle dominant aesthetic, ethical, and epistemological frameworks. Her poetry dissolves stable subjectivity, presenting a multiplicity of voices that resonates with posthumanist, decolonial, and feminist-critical concerns. By foregrounding bodily excess, visceral imagery, and grotesque forms, her work mobilizes abjection as a generative force, revealing the violence embedded in patriarchal, capitalist, and anthropocentric systems. Her poems also bridge historically specific Korean traumas (such as the Gwangju Massacre, the Korean War, and contemporary social disasters) with forms of suffering intelligible across cultures, creating an autonomous poetic presence that resists ethnographic or didactic framing. Importantly, Kim offers readers an alternative to the *given-to-be-seen*, a space where marginalized subjects – human and non-human alike – can be recognized in their suffering, as they are exploited and oppressed by hegemonic forces. This capacity for identification, combined with the intense affective experience of repulsion, desire, and catharsis, explains her resonance in the international literary landscape. Ultimately, Kim Hyesoon demonstrates a remarkable capacity to address pressing contemporary issues, including the challenges posed by consumerist societies and extractive forms of capitalism that exploit animals, the environment, and human beings alike—particularly women within the domestic sphere. Her work reveals a clear alignment with the concerns and principles of ecofeminism. In this context,

Kim Hyesoon's poetry expands the boundaries of contemporary poetics. Through the interplay of visceral affect, historical consciousness, formal experimentation, and ethical force, her work challenges, unsettles, and transforms readers, offering a radical reimagining of voice, body, and agency while asserting the value of marginalized perspectives within the global literary landscape.

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