

BRUCE FULTON

THEY LIKE TO SING AND DANCE: INTERTEXTUALITY IN PARK JI YOON'S *SÖNGINSHIK*

There she sits, a girl with a smile on her face, enclosed in a work space and attending diligently to her sewing machine (a Singer, of course). She's not alone—she has a companion, a cute little teddy bear whose likeness adorns the light bulb under which she works, while the bear itself, grown to a monstrous presence, looks on attentively from outside the window. She looks to the bear for encouragement, then resumes her work. The girl grows serious, she's at a critical point in her sewing, using both hands to position the cloth beneath the thrusting needle. Outside it grows dark, the bear is banging on the window, there's thunder and lightning, the power briefly goes off in the workroom, something is not right. And that's when it happens. Distracted, the girl holds up her index finger, penetrated by the needle and now dripping blood. Once more she looks to the bear, a stolid presence, ever watchful, and we notice the emblem on its chest, a pair of interlocking tildes (~).

The music video of Park Ji Yoon (Pak Chiyun 박지윤)'s *Sönginshik* (성인식) was a sensation when it hit YouTube a decade ago, a celebration of the female body in motion. What has drawn less attention is the story that sandwiches the song-and-dance

of the young woman and her silent chorus. At the front end of this story a naive seamstress, distracted by the watchful gaze of her pet-turned-master, is stabbed by her sewing machine needle and watches her blood gather on the floor beneath her. Thus begins the ceremony, which after the performance culminates with the seamstress in her now barren work space attacking the bear.

The title of the video, *Sönginshik*, has appeared on YouTube as “Adult Ceremony” or, more felicitously, “Coming-of-Age Ceremony (Park 2024).” But if instead we analyze this three-syllable Sino-Korean term as *söng*, ‘gender’ or ‘sex,’ modifying *inshik*, ‘recognition,’ ‘cognizance,’ ‘knowledge,’ then what we have is something like ‘Awareness of Sexuality.’ Either way, the video can be understood as a capsule of the coming-of-age stories (*söngjang sosöl*) that have enriched modern Korean fiction, and in particular the initiation or rite-of-passage (*tonggwa üirye*) stories of Hwang Sunwön, discussed at length in a seminal essay by literature scholar Yi Chaesön (Yi 1977).

Both story and performance are profoundly intertextual, re-creating images of Tan’gun, mythical progenitor of the Korean people (Lee 2020); the weaver girl of one of Korea’s best-loved folktales (Han 1991); Hō Nansörhön, icon of aggrieved, well-born Chosön women; the unlettered wife of Hyön Chingön’s *A Society That Drives You to Drink* (Hyön 1988); and Yi Sang as stuffed genius. As contemporary Korean literature struggles for recognition in an increasingly visual world, it is crucial to remember that contemporary Korean visual and performance culture continues to be inspired by a millennia-old literary tradition that has always relied on voice, music, and motion in addition to brush, ink, and paper.

ACT 1

We begin with a girl, a beetle, and a bear. The beetle is at the free end of the spool of thread placed in the sewing machine as the needle stabs relentlessly at a large section of white cloth spread out on the table. There’s a flash of lightning and the girl rises from her sewing machine to discover the image of the teddy bear in the light bulb, after which the camera shifts briefly to the grown-up bear right outside the window. Returning to her work, she notices with a contemplative smile the beetle, thread in its mouth, approaching the pulsing needle as it penetrates the fabric. With a warm smile she moves it to safety and then uses her fingers to attach the thread properly to the thrusting needle.

The beetle and the bear each have mythical connotations. The beetle resembles *Scarabaeus sacer*, the scarab that the ancient Egyptians held sacred. Tan’gun, mythical progenitor of the Korean people, was born of a god and a bear. To become human, the bear endured a 21-day ordeal in a dark cave, itself perhaps a rite of initiation. (Also in the cave, but unable to endure the ordeal, is a tiger, another iconic creature associated with Korea.) The scarab, in contrast, is associated with the Egyptian sun god,

and therefore with light. It is with the scarab that the girl appears more comfortable and secure. She glances at the bear, still smiling but seemingly to seek reassurance and approval.

The spaces are gendered: the girl works inside, the domain of the *chip saram* (the 'house person,' or wife), while the bear looks on from outside, the domain of the *pa-kkat yangban* ('outside gentleman,' or husband).

From the outset the power in the work space is going off and on. Presumably from the electrical storm—that is, from what is going on above. Traditional Korean society is hierarchical and, since Koryŏ times, patriarchal. Power was centered in the throne and in the *yangban*, the two ranks, cultural and martial, attending upon the monarch, but more generally within the educated men who constituted the uppermost of the four classes of Chosŏn society: *sa* (scholars), *nong* (farmers), *kong* (artisans), *sang* (merchants).

ACT 2

The girl has established a satisfying rhythm with her work, visually punctuated by the needle penetrating the fabric, up down, up down, and with a smile on her face she responds to the bear outside as it paws at the window to gain her attention. *How am I doing?* you might understand her to be thinking. But the momentary distraction results in catastrophe: the spool on the Singer comes undone, the index finger guiding the needle is pierced, and blood flows.

The sewing machine vanishes, and in its place are the girl, her modest white slip replaced by a revealing black top and skirt, joined by half a dozen young women, all dressed like her. They dance in unison, passing their hands up and down their bodies in seeming defiance of a tradition, seen in almost any gendered society and long established in Korea, of the male cooptation of the female body.

ACT 3

The dancing site now oscillates among three spaces; the work space; a space set against a dark background traced vertically with lines that resemble rain (the downpour whose associated lightning bolts continue to fluctuate the lighting in all three spaces?), the dancers in front, with the girl-become-woman in the center, controlled marionette-like by the dancers to the rear; and a room with sets of antlers adorning the wall behind the dancers. The first two spaces are filmed in black and white, but the trophy room appears in color. One brief image captures our protagonist set between a pair of antlers. Has she become a trophy of the bear, and perhaps a future trophy wife?

There's a flashback to the girl in her work space. Again she looks outside the window and now the teddy bear sits there, looking perfectly innocent. But her smile vanishes, replaced by a realization: the awareness of sexuality, one of the ways in

which the term *sönginshik* could be understood? She puts her bleeding index finger to her lips and applies the fluid to them lipstick-like. She looks in the mirror and examines herself, and now the pair of interlocking tildes is imprinted on her shoulder. The camera then returns to the young woman and her sister dancers. The on-and-off of the lights has ended. Among the lyrics can be heard «I'm not the girl you used to know». The girl has come of age.

ACT 4

We're back in the workshop, which has been vacated by the young woman and her sister performers. And guess what? The bear, more gargantuan than ever, is sitting at the sewing machine. Perhaps he has found the young woman incapable and has decided he must take over? But the young woman is no longer subservient. She attacks the bear, beating it and then tearing open its belly to reveal a mass of stuffing, an image recalling the very first sentence of Yi Sang's classic story, written just as imperial Japan's dominance of colonial Korea became even more oppressive during the "dark years" (*amhükki*) that marked Japan's increasing exploitation of its colonies after it launched the second Sino-Japanese War in the later 1930s and transitioned into the Pacific War.

INTERTEXTUAL REFERENTS

The seamstress has long been a gendered icon in Korean cultural history, appearing in the classic folk tale of Chingnyö the weaver girl and Kyönu the herder boy (O 2011), and in recorded literature as early as Hō Nansörhön's *hanshi A Poor Woman's Song*, the speaker of which is by sad irony weaving a silk dress not for her own marriage but for that of a girl unknown (Hō 1990). The needle has in the hands of contemporary writer Ch'ön Unyöng become a subversive object by which a female appropriates the male body: in her story *Panül* ("Needlework"), a mother and daughter are engaged full time in needlework, the mother a seamstress of *hanbok*, traditional Korean attire, and the daughter a tattoo artist who works by hand rather than machine, her clientele all men who struggle with a sense of weakened masculinity but feel empowered by the designs imprinted by her on their bodies (Ch'ön 2023). Both women act subversively: the mother is suspected of being the culprit in the murder of a Buddhist monk, the cause of his death imagined by the daughter to be the result of her mother's cutting tiny needles into shards and surreptitiously adding them to the tea she brews during her visits with the monk. The daughter for her part finds that in the process of empowering men with her work she is able to sexually arouse her clients.

The rain shower that falls upon our principal and her chorus of dancers in the second of the three performing spaces calls to mind the cloudburst that provides the setting for the symbolic rite-of-passage between the boy and girl in Hwang Sunwön's signature story *Sonagi* ("The Cloudburst"; Hwang 1975). This story has become a

modern classic in Korea, for many readers the only one of Hwang's more than one hundred published stories that they can readily recall.

The blood-letting that initiates the girl's coming of age is echoed at the end of Oh Jung-hee's¹ classic story *Chinatown*, in which the narrator, secreted in a storage cabinet while her mother is giving birth to her eighth child, experiences her first menstrual flow (Oh 2025). And in *Sul kwŏnhanŭn sahoe* ("A Society That Drives You to Drink"), an early-modern classic by Hyŏn Chingŏn, a young woman is likewise distracted in the midst of her sewing, but in this case by thoughts of her jobless husband spending much of his time with his educated friends bemoaning their lot in life as young intellectuals in a colonized nation (Hyŏn 1998). In this story, though, the young wife, while having come of age physically, has yet to gain the insight that would enable her to understand her husband's supposed incapability.

The appropriation of the female body suggested by the brief image of our singer confined within antlers in the trophy room calls to mind a practice known as Shunamitism (Shunam supposedly a concubine of the biblical David). This practice appears in Hwang Sunwon's classic tale of transgression, *Irŏbŏrin saram tŭl* ("Lost Souls"), in which a boy elopes with a girl who has been performing this service for a village elder (Hwang 2010), their departure launching a sequence of retribution reminiscent of a Shakespearian tragedy.

In the short finale our leading lady reappears in the workroom, herself an agent of retribution. She attacks the huge bear sitting at her sewing machine and then symbolically eviscerates it, an image recalling the husband mentioned in Kim Hyesoon (Kim Hyesun)'s feminist poem *A Skin-Deep Life*, whom the speaker portrays as a man who removes his wife's life force, leaving her a mere shell of herself (Kim 1987). Etched more deeply in modern Korean literary history, though, is the self-referential opening line of *Wings*, Yi Sang's classic story of the life of an intellectual in colonial Korea: «Have you ever met a stuffed genius?» (Yi 2023).

In the *Sŏnginshik* music video Park Ji Yoon—accomplished in lyrics, composition, and photography—combines strong lyrics, a programmatic melody, and exceptional images to create a tableau of a young woman creating her own identity (*chŏngch'ae*) and thereby gaining agency in a traditional, patriarchal society. That she has managed to incorporate so many classic and indeed iconic connections from within Korean literary history, both oral and recorded, testifies to the potential of contemporary Korean visual and performative culture to reintroduce Korea and the outside world to the riches of Korea's millennia-old cultural tradition.

1 When *Weaver Woman* was published fifteen years ago in my edited volume *Waxen Wings*, I employed the standard McCune–Reischauer romanization system for the author's name (O Chŏnghŭi). However, when *Chinatown* was published last year, Ju-Chan and I chose to adopt the spelling preferred by the author herself (Oh Jung-hee).

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