

# READING KIM YUJEONG'S WORKS IN THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO LITERARY ANALYSIS

*Ji-Hyun Hwang*

## INTRODUCTION

*Spring, Spring* and *Camellia Flowers* are known primarily as novels set in rural environments. They were published in the same literary journal *Jogwang* in December 1935 and May 1936 respectively. These works have similar protagonists and antagonists; the son of a rural peasant, a young and poor farmworker who aims to become the son-in-law of a tenant farm supervisor, and the daughter of the tenant farm supervisor in the Japanese colonial period.

*Spring, Spring* and *Camellia Flowers* are classified as iconic literary works and have been included as textbooks for secondary school curriculum in Korea for a long time. Diverse adaptations of these works have served as the basis for numerous TV dramas, cartoons, and animations. Their iconic status in formal Korean literature education and their popularity across a wide range of readers have influenced the interpretations of his works in these spin-off creations.

Many literary reviews emphasise the following characteristics in the works: the beauty of lyrical rural landscapes and natural environments in the spring, the laughter perceptible in the characters' appearance and behaviour, and their interactions with one another.

From a thematic perspective, *Camellia Flowers* is known for its treatment of how the subtle psychological and emotional tension between male and female adolescents develops into a clumsy first love. *Spring, Spring* is widely considered a comical story that deals with the day-to-day conflicts between the prospective father-in-law Bongpil and the protagonist "I". Bongpil forces the main character "I" to work for more than three years on the premise of wedlock to his immature daughter Jeomsoon, and postpones their marriage for a ridiculous reason, namely that his daughter is too short and needs to grow tall enough to marry him.

*Studia Orientalia* 124 (2023), pp. 125–136

Licensed under Creative Commons 4.0  
(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.  
ISSN: 0039-3282

The prominent aesthetics of various types of comedy (satire, parody, burlesque) and the lyricism associated with the seasonal and natural backgrounds of spring and the countryside are undeniable features of these works. Nevertheless, an excessive emphasis on these elements of Kim Yujeong's representative works risks an underestimation of the dynamics of the various creative devices and the multi-semantic structure of profound themes that the author intentionally chose not to bring to the foreground.

This research takes a holistic and integrated approach to literary analysis. Form and content are inseparably linked, and they create a whole that fulfills communicative and artistic purposes. Furthermore, the author of this research suggests that Kim Yujeong made a continuous effort to kill multiple birds with a single stone. As an ambitious and passionate artist, he aimed to achieve the following goals:

- 1) He delivered social messages in a multi-faceted story as a contemporary member of society living in an extraordinary historical period.
- 2) He added aesthetic values to his literary works.
- 3) He became a popular writer by satisfying the readers' needs.
- 4) He protected his work from extreme censorship during the Japanese colonial period.

The objectives of this research are to study what strategy Kim Yujeong chose to achieve the above-mentioned goals and to explore the literary devices the author used to achieve these goals.

The research is conducted based on the notion that a literary work is a living organism with an unlimited potential to create diverse interpretations and discourses. Both the author's contemporaries and readers living in different eras with different cultural backgrounds can relate to what is either openly manifested or discreetly communicated through their knowledge about the past, the eras they have experienced, and their cultural and social backgrounds.

## **DISTORTED HUMAN RELATIONS – POWER-BASED VIOLENCE**

During his life, Kim Yujeong was committed to making society a better place for his contemporaries. He acted for social change. Inspired by the Vnrod movement, with which such well-known Russian writers as Turgenev and Tolstoy were involved, Kim Yujeong established a farmer's association and an evening school in his hometown Sile to lead the enlightenment movement for the eradication of illiteracy.

Many book reviews and educational materials focus sharply on the narrative of the relationship between the main characters, that is to say the son of

the peasant “I” and Jeomsoon, the daughter of the tenant farm supervisor, or between the young male worker “I” and the father-in-law as a conflict between individuals. There has been a predominant tendency to interpret and suggest that the tension between the characters is relieved through humour and empathy for the characters.

However, the relationship between the main characters “I” and Jeomsoon does not simply represent a relationship between individuals. It symbolises the conflict between social classes. Even though “I” and Jeomsoon are both adolescents, they are aware of the socio-economic power relationships between groups in the community. As illustrated in the following section, the seemingly naive hero is conscious of the unequal social status between himself and Jeomsoon. This awareness influences the attitude, speech, and behaviour of “I” and Jeomsoon and motivates the actions that move the story forward and culminate in the conflict between them.

If it was impolite to refuse the potatoes offered, then why did she have to say, “You don’t have these at your house, do you?”, and all that? As a matter of fact, her father is the land manager, supervising the tenant farms, and as my family farms the land managed by her father, we always kiss up to him. It was Jeomsoon’s family that helped my family find land to build a house and settle down when we first came to this town. And when we don’t have enough to eat, my parents borrow rice from Jeomsoon’s and praise their kindness until their mouths run dry. At the same time, my mother warned me not to hang around Jeomsoon because two seventeen years olds hanging around together might lead to bad rumours. If I were to try anything with Jeomsoon, her father would be enraged, and we’d be kicked out of our land and our house. (Kim Yujeong, *Camellia Flowers*<sup>1</sup>)

For readers of the twenty-first century, Jeomsoon’s aggression can be easily associated with the phenomenon known as Gapjil, which is a Korean neologism that refers to arrogant and authoritarian attitudes or actions of people in positions of power over others. Korean society is highly aware of these issues. Such a phenomenon can occur in any economically polarised society or country with a wide disparity between different socio-economic classes.

The violent nature of the harassment softens due to the reversal of the traditional male-female roles projected in interactions between “I” and Jeomsoon and the narrator’s usage of contextually conflicting words for a sensuous description of the nature of springtime.

---

<sup>1</sup> Translated from Korean by T.I.TIME (2017), a translation/interpretation club in Gimhae Foreign Language High School in Jangyu, South Korea.

The tingling, sweet scent made my head spin as if the ground were caving in beneath my feet. (Kim Yujeong, *Camellia Flowers*)

Criticism of reality in rural society is often veiled or hidden behind the scenes. Nevertheless, there is a moment in the inner speech of the protagonist that is a comment on the social situation and the brutality of the group known as the Marum, who managed the indigent peasant farmers on behalf of the farmland owners during the colonial period. In *Spring, Spring*, the narrator “I” projects the character of the group known as the Marum, represented by Bongpil, by describing Bongpil’s tyranny, his notorious reputation in the town, and how the peasant farmers still must bribe him to get permission to farm the land.

However, if he really lost the benevolence of the townsfolk, it’s not because of his harsh words but from being the supervisor of the town. A supervisor should be someone who curses well, hits people well, and is like a large, hairy dog, and he is just that. If one doesn’t send chicken or money, he is sure to take their land by hunks in the fall. Then the person who showered him with money and drinks in advance slyly takes that land. For this reason, a big-eyed cow wanders around in his stable, and the townspeople take the verbal abuse and crawl around him. (Kim Yujeong, *Spring, Spring*)

## POVERTY, CRUELTY TO ANIMALS, AND DISCRIMINATION

The inequality that stems from the economic power relationship between groups in rural society implicitly pervades the interaction between “I” and Jeomsoon. This issue extends further to the livestock of each family. Jeomsoon openly expresses her anger when the male protagonist refuses to accept her one-sided favour. Feeling rejected, she abuses the powerless animal (a hen) without hesitation or guilty conscience. The scene in which Jeomsoon hits “I’s” hen with her fist symbolises the brutal governance of the Marum over the peasantry. There is an analogy between the power relationship between these unequal social groups and the cockfight initiated by Jeomsoon without “I’s” consensus.

It is worth noting that the male protagonist mentions that it was the actual hen that lays eggs on the farm. This scene is a metaphor for how the economically superior group threatens the survival of underprivileged people by destroying their crucial source of food. Jeomsoon, as a human, encourages cockfights between roosters with a significant difference in strength, which can be interpreted as the privileged group that top the socio-economic hierarchy promoting conflicts between the stronger and the weaker classes within the same subordinated group. These scenes symbolize the depravity and the poverty caused by the colonialism.

Jeomsoon does not hesitate to make a derogatory comment about “I’s” father and falsely accuses “I’s” father of being a person with a disability.

In the end, the protagonist “I” decides to confront Jeomsoon by beating her rooster to death with a wooden stick. Nevertheless, his method of confronting her is still within the rules of the game that Jeomsoon has set, that is the cockfight.

In the twenty-first century, many societies have a heightened awareness of animal rights. More and more communities and organisations are adopting a zero-tolerance policy which prohibits any form of discrimination. For the readers of our era, Jeomsoon’s actions and words can fuel discussions on sensitive topics, such as new forms of colonialism and their impact on social and economic inequalities in today’s world, cruelty to animals, and discrimination.

## EXPLOITATION OF LABOUR – PASSION SERVICE

In *Spring, Spring*, the protagonist “I” is presented as a naive and ignorant person. He believes he can become a Daeryl son-in-law to Bongpil,<sup>2</sup> the tenant farm supervisor. He works for Bongpil without pay for over three years, hoping to marry his daughter Jeomsoon someday. Meals consisting of vegetables and no more than one bowl of rice are his only compensation for years of hard work. However, this relationship is very different from the original Daeryl son-in-law system that existed in Korean culture a long time before the Japanese colonial period.

My father-in-law has three daughters. The eldest got married in autumn two years ago. Actually, he also had her future husband work for a while before leaving. But he goes through sons-in-law from the day his daughter turns ten until she’s nineteen, and he is famous in Donglee for having lots of sons-in-law. Still, fourteen is too many! He has to drive his son-in-law harsh because he only has daughters. Of course, he could hire a farmhand but that costs money. So, he kept changing son-in-law after son-in-law continuously to find someone who works well. In addition, a lot of them must have run away after the hard work and harsh words. Jeomsoon is his second daughter, and I’m his third son-in-law, so to speak. He’s not looking for the fourth because I’m too naïve and works well. He has to work me hard until his third daughter is at least ten, who is now six, so he can bring another one. So, what Moongtae tells me is to get hold of my senses, lie on my back, and make a fuss until marriage is permitted. (Kim Yujeong, *Spring, Spring*)

---

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Daeryl son-in-law (Daerylsawi) custom had been pushed out of the Civil Law of Colonial Chosun during the Japanese occupation period and moved to a legal blind spot. According to a study that applied a literary-jurisprudential approach to *Spring, Spring* (Kim Kyoung-Soo 2021) the story embodies the severity of the social issues caused by the Marum’s breach of the labour agreement during the colonial period.

During the Japanese colonial period, the Marum often abused this custom as a means of acquiring a free labour force. The Marum would take on an indigent unmarried man without a place to live and make him work on a farm while falsely promising that he would be allowed to marry the Marum's young daughter when she became an adult. To paraphrase this, it was fraudulent exploitation of the labour of men who had become homeless due to rural exploitation and land expropriation during the Japanese colonial period. In fact, during that period, the Daeryl son-in-law system was a blind spot in the law that caused a lot of suffering and many serious social issues.

The main character "I" is a victim who has been gaslighted by Bongpil over a long period, but he still rationalizes that Bongpil is a good person despite being beaten and exploited for many years.

In the twenty-first century, similar phenomena to the Daeryl son-in-law system can still be encountered in different forms. For instance, Yöl-chöng-p'e-i 'passion pay' is a neologism indicating the situation when young people work with something they love without being properly paid. Doing something you love is considered reward enough. Many interns and temporary workers work in the hope of becoming permanent employees and receiving a proper salary, that is to say in pursuit of the illusion of a guaranteed stable life.

There are similarities between the fictional reality in *Spring, Spring* and the current global economic trend, that is to say the exploitation of human capital in countries where the cost of labour is significantly lower than in developed countries by relocating tasks with "less added value" or manufacturing with a negative impact on the environment and human health to developing countries.

## CENSORSHIP

Kim Yujeong's debut in literature, his work *Sonakbi* 'shower', won him the prize of "Chosun Ilbo New Year's Literature". However, he very soon experienced his first traumatic incident as a writer. *Sonakbi* was only serialised six times. The seventh episode was removed and banned by the authorities.<sup>3</sup> According to Joseon Chulpan Gyeongchal Wolbo (the Chosun Publishing Company's Monthly Police Report), the authorities censored the seventh episode and made the decision to ban it due to obscenity of the content. However, the view that the decision was

---

3 Kim Jeong-hwa and Moon Han-byeol (2020) confirm that *Sonakbi*, which was published and has been included in the history of Korean literature so far, is an incomplete work. During their research, the authors attempted to restore the deleted part of *Sonakbi* and investigated to understand its substance and content.

based on the story's background, the interrelationships between the characters that are reminiscent of the tormented lives of impoverished people, and the devastating society due to the structural problems of that time is more plausible.

This incident would certainly have made Kim Yujeong more aware of censorship. At the same time, it seems to have strengthened the author's resolve to find safer, more discreet ways of fulfilling his creative mission as a writer and avoiding the risk of his works and his creative activities as a writer being banned due to the extreme censorship of the Japanese occupation period.<sup>4</sup>

The flip side of the crisis coin is often opportunity. As an author, Kim Yujeong seems to have contemplated effective ways of 1) amusing his readers, 2) recording the harsh realities he witnessed and safely conveying multiple messages, and 3) experimenting with literary techniques and devices when creating the characters and situations that had an artistic value in themselves and that could help achieve the goals mentioned in 1) and 2).

The writer conducted creative experiments and applied various devices and techniques to his writing to fulfil the above purposes. Let us focus on a few of them.

## ESTRANGEMENT<sup>5</sup>

The protagonist "I" is portrayed as a clueless and innocent person who does not understand what is obvious to the characters around him and the readers. He is unaware of the fact that Jeomsoon likes him. Hence her behaviour and words seem unfamiliar and strange from the protagonist's perspective, and the way that the protagonist perceives and describes Jeomsoon's behaviour and words makes the readers laugh.

She kept nagging me, then covered her mouth and giggled. Not finding anything particularly funny, I wondered if she had gone nuts due to the warm weather. A little while later, she peeked back at her house and took her hand out of her apron pocket, shoving it below my chin. Three baked potatoes, warm and steamy, were clasped into my hands.

---

4 Lee Sang-Kyung (2008) conducted a study of the extreme literary censorship of the "Publication Police" and its role in the formation of literary canons during the Japanese colonial period. See Jang Seok-ju (2007) for the repression of freedom of expression, assembly, and literary practices, and the overall sentiment during this period.

5 *Ostraneniye* 'estrangement' is a literary device that aims to lead the reader "out of the automaticity of perception". The term was introduced in connection with Russian Formalism by literary critic Viktor Shklovsky. *Ostraneniye* is a method that makes the perception of something more distinct. It is a distinctive artistic technique (Shklovsky 1929: 11–13).

“You don’t have these at your home, do you?” She said patronisingly and told me to eat it up before anyone notices she’s given me potatoes. And then she added, “You know, spring potatoes are the best.”

“I don’t eat potatoes. You eat them.”

Without even turning my head toward her, I pushed the potatoes away over my shoulder. She didn’t leave. Instead, her breathing turned heavier and more ragged. I was surprised at what I saw when I turned around. It’s been about three years since I came to this town; however, I’d never seen Jeomsoon’s face go so red. She glared at me fiercely, tears forming in her eyes. Then she grabbed her basket and ran toward the rice field with her teeth clenched. (Kim Yujeong, *Camellia Flowers*)

As naturalistic authors would do, the writer presents an authentic fragment of the main character’s life and the social surroundings in a rural community without judging it. The protagonist “I” is an ignorant man who neither understands Jeomsoon’s inner motives behind her behaviour nor what she feels about him. For the most part, the male protagonist perceives and narrates the external specifics of her behaviour and facial expressions. He describes her unusual facial expressions and moves as if he has discovered a strange object or phenomenon. His narration mainly deals with her accidental and physiological nature. The author’s voice rarely resonates with the narrator’s voice.

## LINGUISTIC MEANS

The works of the author are widely recognised for their distinctive stylistic characteristics.

The voice of the narrator is characterised by colloquialism and dialect. In addition, the narrator uses onomatopoeia and mimetic words with repetitive auditory. For example, “hal-kŭm-hal-kŭm” ‘a word imitating the appearance of glancing continuously and quietly out of the corner of the eyes’, “ssae-kŭn-ssae-kŭn” ‘a word imitating the sound of gasping because of anger’, and “öp’-ö-chil tŭs chappa-chil tŭs” ‘a word imitating the appearance of repeatedly stumbling and nearly falling while walking along the way’ are used to describe Jeomsoon’s appearance and motion in an exaggerated way.

These words add musicality and vibrance to the narrative and intensify the dynamics, liveliness, and comic character in the persona. The author intentionally uses them to bring laughter to the readers and shift their attention to the external details of the extraordinarily described situations from the tragic and serious social issues of his era. Consequently, the latter is pushed out to the background of the story.

In other words, the linguistic methods mentioned above combined with the naturalistic presentation of the characters and situations dilute the harshness of the reality and suffering that the main character experiences. Furthermore, it is worth noting that it is not the diversity or quantity of the vocabulary used in Kim's works that makes his style so rich and unique. On the contrary, many other contemporary Korean writers overshadow him in terms of the variety of vocabulary used according to a comparative-quantitative study of Korean novels conducted in the 1930s.<sup>6</sup>

## NAMING, OR NOT GIVING THE MAIN CHARACTER A NAME

Naming in literary works is a device used to denote the literary character's identity, the ideologies that the individuals cling to, and the relationship between the character and the people who named the character. Benedicta Windt-Val (2012: 273) explains: "Personal names are some of the most important tools of the author in the creation of credible characters placed in a literary universe that gives the impression of being authentic."

Kim Yujeong's uses naming as a device to imply that the characters and their interrelations are products of their social environment. The main hero "I" is the narrator in both works. His name is not mentioned anywhere in the story, and no one refers to him by his name. They call him "yae" 'hey', "neo" 'you', and "i ja-sig" 'this bastard'. The female characters' names in these works are likewise. Jeomsoon is a common name for girls one might come across anywhere in the countryside.

In *Spring, Spring*, the name of the protagonist and first-person narrator "I" is unknown. In both works, the protagonist "I" is a person whose name no one is interested in knowing. Nor does anyone bother calling him by his name. On the other hand, the narrator dedicates a sentence to mention "I's" prospective father-in-law's original name as well as the nickname the children in the neighbourhood use to make fun of his harsh demeanour.

Even small children point at him and call him Shit-pil (his real name is Bongpil). However, if he really lost the benevolence of the townsfolk, it's not because of his harsh words but from being the supervisor of the town. A supervisor should

---

6 Moon Han Byoul (2015) built a corpus using the vocabulary from the literary works of various authors and conducted a statistical analysis of the texts at the morpheme level. This type of quantitative analysis proves that there are measurable stylistic differences between the author's usage of key thematic words and functional words.

be someone who curses well, hits people well, and is like a large, hairy dog, and he is just that. (Kim Yujeong, *Spring, Spring*)

What does the author intend by this? The author makes a conscious choice to use these literary devices to help the readers understand that these protagonists are social figures that mirror the universal characteristics of people who belong to particular social groups. The protagonist “I” is a stereotypical member of the marginal group of impoverished nomadic men in rural communities. Bongpil embodies the typical characteristics of tenant farm supervisors during the Japanese colonial period. None of the personas in these works are individual characters with unique rational qualities or life histories in the fictional reality.

### CONCEALING SENSITIVE SOCIAL ISSUES

The protagonist resists the antagonists, but his resistance does not change the situation. The story ends with unresolved conflict situations.

Kim Yujeong’s works, *Spring, Spring* and *Camellia Flowers*, feature multi-semantic layers and encourage us to contemplate universal issues that are not limited to the rural communities in Korea during the 1930s. The brutal reality and suffering of indigent people living in a society full of contradictions are blurred by the foreground story.<sup>7</sup> From a diachronic perspective, socio-economic power relations between groups as well as their impact on humanity, gender, and cruelty to animals are issues that are relevant in our contemporary context. The multi-semantic structure enables various interpretations and encourages readers to begin new discourses.

### CONCLUSION

For the most part, Kim Yujeong managed to integrate art and life into his responsibilities as a writer.<sup>8</sup>

*Spring, Spring* and *Camellia Flowers* should not be dismissed as mere lyrical rural novels. Characterising *Camellia Flowers* as a juvenile novel full of the intrigues and subtle psychological tensions between young men and women experiencing love for the first-time risks overlooking diverse metaphors and symbols that are

---

7 For an analysis of the narrative of compassion and tragic irony shaped by the actions of the impoverished characters living in the grim realities of colonial life in the 1930s, their choices for survival, and the open-ended structure in Kim Yujoeng’s works, see Oh 2018.

8 Concerning the relationship between art and life, Bakhtin (1994) suggests that art and life are not one, but they must be united in a person, in the unity of his responsibility.

worthy of further analysis and undermining the wholeness of the literary text. Characterising *Spring, Spring* as nothing more than a story that touches on the rural life of a future son-in-law who is struggling with Bongpil, his prospective father-in-law, not only distorts the true picture of the era and the social messages that the author intended to convey discreetly, but it also underestimates the artistry of the work, its universality, which transcends time and space, and its multifaceted thematic structure.

The author experiments with various literary devices to re-construct and re-create the reality that his main characters experience. They are as follows 1) metaphoric and metonymic representations of reality, 2) estrangement situations that are obvious to all except for the main characters are defamiliarized and presented as something unusual through the gaze of the naive and ignorant male protagonists, 3) naturalistic descriptions of the fragments of reality. The narrators in these works exaggerate their descriptions of the physical appearance and external features of the character, 4) specific linguistic resources to add vitality and humour, and 5) the author's conscious choice not to name the main characters and use plain or stereotypical names for the other characters.

With the above-mentioned literary devices, the author tones down the severity of the brutal reality the protagonists inhabit and draws the focus of the readers, including the censorship authority during the period of the Japanese occupation.

The author attempted to integrate seemingly incompatible emotions, such as laughter and sorrow into his works. The disharmony between content and form intensifies these emotions and adds unique artistic effects. His creative experiments bring significant value to the reading process, that is to say laughter for the sake of survival. Laughter makes light of serious situations and eases the burden of miserable life. At the same time, laughter can intensify the reader's feeling of anger at the harsh realities in the fiction due to the sharp contrast between the comic and the utterly brutal. The laughter in Kim's works has invited readers through the ages to experience seemingly contradictory feelings, such as comfort, sorrow, and anger.

## REFERENCES

- BAKHTIN, Mikhail Mikhailovich 1994. *Iskusstvo i otvetstvennost': K filosofii postupka; Avtor i geroj v estetičeskoj dejatel'nosti; Problema soderžanija, materiala i formy v slovesnom chudožestvennom tvorčestve* [Art and Responsibility; To the philosophy of action; Author and hero in aesthetic activity; The problem of content, materials, and forms in verbal art]. Kiev: Next.
- JANG, Seok-ju 2007. *Exploration of Korean Literature in the 20th Century 2*. Seoul: Sigongsa.

- KIM, Yujeong 2016. *Dongbaekkot: Kim Yujeong so-söl-chip 1* [Camelia flowers: Kim Yujeong novel collection 1]. Kwang-chu: Kül-to.
- KIM, Junghwa & Han-byoul MOON 2020. Censorship and Restoration of Kim Yoo-jeong's Novel Sanikbi. *The Korean Language and Literature* 193: 393–418.
- KIM, Kyoung-Soo 2021. A Study on the Story of “The Custom of Labor Contract which Promise to Adapt a Man into his Wife’s Family” (“Deril Sawi custom”) during the Japanese Colonial Period: A Literary Jurisprudential Approach. *Gubo Hakbo* 28: 311–346.
- LEE, Sang-Kyung 2008. A Study on the Censorship of the Korean Literature as Found in Joseon Chulpan Gyeongchal Wolbo “Monthly Report of Joseon Publication Police”. *Journal of Modern Korean Literature* 1–17: 389–422.
- MOON, Han-byoul 2015. Quantitative Studies of the Modern Korean Novel's Style Using a Mechanical Method: Focusing on 1930's Writers. *The Korean Language and Literature* 170: 425–454.
- OH, Tae-ho 2018. A Study of “Narrative of Compassion” in Kim Yoo-jeong Novel: Focused on Martha C. Nussbaum's Theory of Emotion. *The Korean Language and Literature* 184: 187–216.
- SHKLOVSKY, Viktor Borisovich 1929. *O teorii prozy* [On the theory of prose]. Moscow.
- WINDT-VAL, Benedicla 2012. Personal Names and Identity in Literary Contexts. In: B. HELLELAND & C.-E. ORE & S. WIKSTRØM (eds), *Names and Identities* (Oslo Studies in Language 4(2)): 273–284.