

Literature, Loss, and the Surrogate Griever: The Figure of the Factory Girl in South Korea's Economic Miracle

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Abstract

The vaunted development of the South Korean economy during the 1970s and 1980s was “manned” in large part by young female factory workers, women who spent the formative years of their youth enduring inhumane working conditions and gendered violence in the underbelly of rapid industrialization. Femininity and youth was further stripped from them within the masculinist culture of the labor movement as the factory became the site of “*wijang chwiop*,” undercover labor organizing by elite university students in the 1980s. In my thesis, I explore the social construction of young female factory workers as “the oppressed of the oppressed” by performing a historically grounded reading of *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, a semi-autobiographical novel by Shin Kyung-sook, a former factory worker who recounts personally and nationally traumatic events from the end of the 1970s and into the early 1980s. In my analysis, the novel emerges as a sustained narrative of double loss—youth and femininity—as well as a meditation on the complex relationship between loss and writing in which writing serves as a vehicle for mourning that has previously been denied. I locate this text within the history of erasure surrounding the figure of the “factory girl” by engaging with scholarship that seeks to combat the dominant historical narrative which privileges both factory labor and labor activism as quintessentially male enterprise.

Introduction

The tumultuous decades of South Korea's unprecedentedly swift race toward miraculous economic success were ripe with progress achieved through brutal militarism and fierce oppression of all forms of dissidence: intellectuals, workers, and other civilians alike suffered under the burden. The 1970s and 1980s were particularly turbulent as multiple struggles emerged to clash with the military regimes of Park Chung Hee and his successor, Chun Doo Hwan. Violence and bloodshed occurred with increasing frequency and intensity after the massacre of innocent civilians in Gwangju in 1980. Embedded in this chaotic context was a society structured along strict hierarchical lines, wherein status was determined by gender, age, social class, education level, and even one's hometown. The lowest of the low, the so-called “oppressed of the oppressed”, were embodied in the figure of the *yŏgong*, or female factory worker. These

young, uneducated or undereducated women came from poor, rural areas to work grueling jobs in the manufacturing plants that thronged industrial belts around cities like Seoul. They usually sent money home to support their male siblings' tuition and to repay their parents for raising them. These young women endured inhumane working conditions, sexual threats and violence from male management, and the loss of their youthful, formative years; they commonly fell ill or even died from the intensity of factory life, and any survivors emerged with troubled, even traumatic memories. Femininity and youth was stripped from them, and the dominant historical narrative of predominantly male strikes and movements led by student-activists in the later 1980s overshadowed even these women's accomplishments through grassroots movements in the previous decade. Literature and history written by male activists and academics largely erased or reduced them as key figures in the South Korean economic miracle; they were not only out of place in society during their time in the factories but also were further reduced in agency and visibility after democracy surfaced and the labor movement flaunted its achievements in male-dominated industries in the late 1980s.

More recent scholarship has sought to combat this dominant narrative of men and the educated, restoring agency and the groundwork laid by the less-successful and smaller grassroots movements of women factory workers in the 1970s, but forgotten even in that counter-narrative are those workers that shied from activism while still claiming agency and inner complexity. This thesis seeks to illuminate another counter-narrative hidden beneath even the counter-narrative of the women worker activist—that of the young women in factories who were caught between the numerous factions and fronts of the labor and democracy movements, oppressed by a military government and a deeply patriarchal and hierarchical society, and forgotten for their lack of direct involvement in the grassroots movements of the 1970s. Shin Kyung-sook's semi-

autobiographical novel, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* develops precisely this other counter-narrative, its author-protagonist standing apart the recently more commonly acknowledged counter-narrative of *yŏgong* activism by seeking her own path amid personal trauma and societal upheaval. The novel functions as a complicated mix of individual and communal mourning through which the author-protagonist exposes her traumatic youth and engages in novelistic dialogue with herself and her characters-turned-readers, enabling the counter-narrative to take one step further in the restoration of the self-determining, complex identity of the *yŏgong*, a figure which has been oversimplified and even erased within the narrative of men and the educated elite. Throughout Shin's novel, writing becomes her vehicle for reestablishing the lost process of grief that was denied to her and many other *yŏgong* by the dominant narrative; her act of writing serves as her act of mourning. This thesis will provide the historical context for the novel and analyze the creation of the identity of author-protagonist, Shin Kyung-sook, and her gradual transformation, through the grief-filled act of writing *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, into the role of surrogate griever for friends and strangers alike. Through existing scholarship and Shin's counter-narrative, this analysis will piece together a dynamic portrait of an agency-filled and complex identity that offers another way to counter the dominant historical narrative.

The Dominant Narrative and Shin Kyung-sook's *Yŏgong*

The very persons who were raised on the backs of the young women in factories—many of them male siblings whose sisters' factory work paid their university tuition—often reinforced the superiority of men and the educated while denying that these women had any agency to claim, facilitating the erasure of the self-determining *yŏgong* from the dominant narrative. Their form of

sexism can be classified as benevolent,¹ as it is associated with paternalism rather than antipathy toward women; this paternalist form of patriarchal oppression reinforced certain aspects of the multi-layered oppression of the figure of the *yŏgong* and contributing to its erasure from history. The ashamed male gazed with self-gratifying remorse on these “little sisters” represented in the figure of the *yŏgong*, fetishizing their sacrifice while also presenting himself as the agent who failed to prevent this horrible abuse of young women, as seen in Shin Kyong-Nim’s poem, “I Felt Ashamed, Little Sisters”.² This poet who composes verse on the female factory worker experience stands in harsh contrast to the *yŏgong* as the oppressed of the oppressed; he is the paternalistic outsider to their complex experience, a poet who is male, educated, uninvolved in the labor movement, and without factory experience. He asserts his voice over the already dimmed ones of the workers themselves and, failing to attribute to them agency and internal complexity, joins the ranks of those that oppress these doubly-oppressed young women. His paternalistic, brotherly shame is as oppressive a form of patriarchy as the overt oppression that was often practiced by male workers, students, and management in the factories and various movements. “When the streets grew fat by your efforts / and the city grew sleek at the expense of your sweat, / ... We were afraid, we hid our faces...” writes the poet. He acknowledges the failure of a “we”—those above the female factory workers—to exhibit courage and save their little sisters in the factories, simultaneously acknowledging the sacrifice of these women and their immense contribution to the economic miracle—“I felt ashamed, little sisters... when I saw dreams on your gaunt shoulders, / ... when I saw tomorrow within your screams”—while precluding them from agency and reasserting the hierarchy ordained by a patriarchal society. His form of writing is opposite to that of Shin Kyung-sook’s; he strips agency and cements the

¹ For more on benevolent and hostile forms of sexism, see Goh, “Nonverbal and Verbal Expressions”.

² Kim, *Variations: Three Korean Poets*, 140-141.

dominant narrative. By taking blame, he takes away agency from women who exhibited numerous forms of agency: women who chose to enter the factories, to engage in labor activism or to distance themselves from the independent unions, to attend night classes or special schools for industrial workers, or even to become published authors. These agency-filled actions of women workers go unmentioned in this male poet's representation of the *yŏgong*.

Why was reinforcement of the hierarchy so important that it appears even in poetry? These young women working in the factories and organizing grassroots movements threatened societal balance on every level, from the nuclear family up to the iron grip of the militant government. They defied the expectation of men as breadwinners, engaged in dirty, rough work, and received demeaning names tied to South Korea's history of a slave class. Serving in traditionally masculine roles as the main or sole breadwinners for their brothers and parents, these women engaged in hard, physical labor in the factories and were stripped of their youth and femininity: when the poet describes the "strength in your rough hands" or the "true and honest life in your pale faded cheeks," he does not compliment the 'little sisters' that he addresses. Hands made rough and strong by the hardships of menial labor do not signify a proper woman, which is why he expresses shame in noticing these hands masculinized by factory work.³ These women are not allowed to claim pride in their sacrifice, and thus also not accorded the agency that enabled them not only to choose to sacrifice for their brothers and parents, but also to engage in activism and pursue the possibility of a life beyond the walls of the factories. The poet speaks as though his own incompetence resulted in this perversion of societal norms, claiming responsibility through his repetition of personal shamefulness and thus precluding potential for complexity within the figure of the *yŏgong*. His poem serves as an example of the societal effort to remove agency and

³ For an analysis of the bifurcation between lowly laborers and intellectuals and societal perception of laborer's physical features, see Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 248-249.

eventually any complexity in the figure of the *yŏgong*, a figure that to society represents a shameful inability to maintain the traditional hierarchy, but to the women workers themselves, represents something far more complexly engaged and painful, embedded in the foundation of the economic miracle, the labor movement, and their lost youth. The counter-narrative which he ignores in his poem and which more recent scholarship seeks to restore—that of the extensive activism of many female factory workers in the 1970s who laid the foundation of later movements—is presented next.

The First Counter-Narrative: Women Workers in Grassroots Activism

In the wake of the immensely unpopular Yushin Constitution of 1972, which “suspended civil rights and strengthened presidential power,” the Park Chung Hee military regime sought to recoup public sentiment through increased economic success and industrialization.⁴ Female workers dominated the export-oriented industries (EOI), their ranks constantly replenished by young women who came from poor, rural areas to support their parents and to pay for their brothers’ high school and university educations. These women packed into dormitories and single rooms in industrial cities and belts on the Seoul-Busan axis, populating areas like the Kuro Industrial Park in southwestern metropolitan Seoul.⁵ Their concentrated quarters and proximity to church groups and university students served as inadvertent vehicles for organizing grassroots movements and engaging in labor activism.⁶

Even before the Yushin Constitution and the expansion of EOI, there were already 600,000 female workers in manufacturing in 1970; a staggering eighty-three percent of the textile

⁴ Weiss, *Student Activism*, 130-132.

⁵ Koo, *Korean Workers*, 42.

⁶ Kim, “Gender, Work and Resistance,” 424.

industry alone was composed of women workers.⁷ Yet women were paid less than half the wages of men while enduring inhumane working conditions,⁸ and many sent almost all their money home to feed their families and fund the education of male siblings even when companies withheld wages or paid less than promised while offering wage-based incentives to quell the grumblings of grassroots movements. Shin Kyong-Nim highlights this additional psychological weight in his poem as he describes the factories and society overall “forc[ing] you to admit that poverty is the only crime”. Ubiquitous overtime work without fairly increased wages, addiction to pills that kept them awake, and a production speed that sometimes kept workers even from leaving their spot to use the restroom—these conditions exhausted workers and caused numerous health problems. Men also experienced harsh work environments but the female factory workers bore the weight of a two-fold oppression: they were young women in a patriarchal society and factory workers in a society that valued education and denigrated labor: “they simply mocked you,” writes Shin the poet. The few men in export-oriented industries tended to be in roles of power over lesser female employees and they enforced the system of militarism and patriarchal oppression to protect their own interests; those that were not in higher positions rarely could overcome their deeply internalized “male pride” in a patriarchal society,⁹ a paternalistic and brotherly form of which permeates the poem by Shin Kyong-Nim.

Some male workers did overcome varying inhibitions of pride, fear of losing status, and internalized prejudices. They may have even been motivated by shame like that of Shin Kyong-Nim in his poem; they observed young women, even young girls as they “fell, were trampled, and rose up again”. These men began to fight for humane treatment for their female coworkers,

⁷ Ogle, *South Korea: Dissent*, 80.

⁸ Nam, “Labor Control,” 332; Koo, *Korean Workers*, 58-59; Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 216. For detailed information on the working conditions for women in factories, see Ogle, *South Korea: Dissent*, 80-83.

⁹ Kim, “Gender, Work and Resistance,” 421-423; Koo, *Korean Workers*, 84-85.

horrified by the conditions that their female peers endured as a “highly exploited and abused workforce.”¹⁰ Chŏn T’aeil’s efforts to bring change for the young girls he worked alongside, which culminated in his self-immolation during the Peace Market Protest of 1970, became a rallying cry for students and church leaders but did not lead to immediate change.¹¹ Moreover, his more privileged status as a male, albeit a worker, combined with his shocking outcry and self-sacrifice, inadvertently drew the spotlight from any agency that may have been exhibited by his fellow female workers and shone it directly on his impressive activism. Yet the government backlash fell largely on a population of workers that was predominantly female. The Park Chung Hee regime could not afford rebellion like this to take root in its armies of female factory workers, upon whose shoulders rested the economic success of the export industries, and so the government dissuaded the rise of independent unions by supporting the establishment of company unions and outlawing any other forms.¹² Despite attempts by both companies and the government to quash labor activism, the 1970s were filled with grassroots movements and spontaneous or organized strikes led by women fed-up with abuse—not women who only “choked back tears of wrath, in place of dreams” as described by poet Shin.¹³ Many of them seized agency in various ways noted both in scholarly work and literature, including efforts to receive an education through special programs for industrial workers or night classes that usually were offered by church groups or student activists. Still others, amid a dearth of male-led labor activism and under attack by an abundance of male-led methods of oppression, rose up and led

¹⁰ Koo, *Korean Workers*, 5.

¹¹ I have utilized Namhee Lee’s romanization of Chŏn T’aeil’s name. For more on his activism, self-immolation, and the effects of the Peace Market Protest, see, among others: Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 218-221; Ogle, *South Korea: Dissent*, 72-73; Kim, “Gender, Work and Resistance,” 418.

¹² Koo, *State and Society*, 140.

¹³ Ogle found that almost all disputes formally registered in the 1970s were registered by women, and the few formally recorded instances of work stoppage were also organized by women. This does not include disputes not formally registered, which implies the number of movements could be much larger. See Ogle, *South Korea: Dissent*, 80-86, for a full account.

strikes to advocate for themselves and their fellow female workers, though they tended to be concentrated in many and much smaller, firms which accorded them less strength in numbers and even less recognition in a historical memory that lauded men as protagonists. Solidarity strikes, for example, were not at all unique to the male-dominated strikes near the end of the 1980s; they also occurred, though on a much smaller scale, throughout the 1970s among women-dominated industries.¹⁴ For the sake of contextualization, a few significant female-led struggles shall be highlighted here to demonstrate the agency seized by these young women workers—struggles not mentioned in poet Shin’s lines of patronizing paternalism.

The Dongil Textile Conflict, which began in 1976 and lasted for several years, arose from a battle for union leadership. Independent women, not men coopted by the company, were successfully voted into leadership roles, beating out company-chosen puppets in consecutive victories that threatened the factory’s control over its female workers. Dongil and other companies attempted to overcome women-dominated union activism by paying male workers to intimidate and physically attack their female counterparts, even smearing union members with human feces and locking union delegates within their dorms while illegitimate voting put co-opted male workers into union leadership roles. The women broke out of their dorms and a sit-in began. On July 25, 1976, the third day of the sit-in, some 500 to 800 women fled to the rooftop of the factory and stripped off their clothes to prevent riot police from touching them and as a challenge to the male management to attack them in public.¹⁵ Dozens were dragged away by their hair and arrested but the uproar halted the company from a full takeback of the union.

The fight continued, however, as the company bribed, threatened, slandered, and attacked union leadership and union members until eventually it succeeded in removing undesirables and

¹⁴ For an analysis on these gender politics and the effect on labor conflicts, see Nam, “Gender Politics,” 95-99.

¹⁵ See Koo, *Korean Workers*, 72-85, for a complete analysis of the struggle at Dongil Textile.

blacklisting them—but not before the lengthy battle had taken on political underpinnings and found external support in churches and dissident intellectuals.¹⁶ Women and male workers sympathetic to their cause organized with increased tenacity. Independent unions that had taken root in the 1970s were stronger and more cunning by the end of the decade; they had learned from their battles with government-backed company management and were augmented by many of the blacklisted workers who had become full-time labor activists. Moreover, the time was nearing for varying movements to join forces in earnest.

Amid this volatile situation, the YH Worker Protest was brewing. The YH Trading Company was a major wig exporter to the U.S. that diverted funds from its wig factory to new ventures as the wig market declined, leading to an announcement in March 1979 that the factory would be closed.¹⁷ The union fought this with sit-in demonstrations, refusing to back down. Eventually, outside organizations were involved, including churches, intellectuals, and neighboring companies' unions. Mobilization of the police against the demonstrations caused strikers to relocate to the headquarters of the opposition party, the New Democratic Party (NDP), in downtown Seoul. This would allow them to “escalate their economic struggle to a political struggle” by causing a ripple effect throughout society regardless of the outcome of their strike.¹⁸ On August 9, 1979, nearly 200 YH workers took over the fourth floor of the NDP headquarters and riot police set up a perimeter around the building. On August 11, about one thousand policemen besieged the headquarters and attacked anyone inside, including NDP party members, reporters, opposition politicians, and of course, the workers. Frightened workers attempted to commit suicide using glass from windows broken in the attack, and one young woman, Kim

¹⁶ Ibid, 84, 94-95, 103.

¹⁷ Ibid, 89.

¹⁸ Koo, *Korean Workers*, 90.

Kyōng-sook, died from a fall from the fourth floor. Debates on whether this was a true suicide or murder by the police heated the already boiling public reaction.¹⁹

The significance of the YH incident stems not from any success in the factory workers' struggle, but from its impact on the pro-democracy movement.²⁰ The opposition party had become tangled in the struggle both physically and ideologically, unable to back away after the government took out its anger on party member Kim Young Sam, who had openly supported the YH workers. Overall, this incident sparked demonstrations involving far more people than purely workers, church leaders, and student activists, and ultimately contributed to Park Chung Hee's downfall. Park's assassination came only a few months later as a result of ensuing protests in Busan and Masan and the increased fracturing between political groups and among the president's own aides.²¹

The brief reprieve from a heavy-handed regime ended in May 1980 when the military crushed a civil uprising in Gwangju, massacring about two hundred civilians and creating a memory both bloody and traumatic. This brutal response to demonstrating students, workers, and other civilians inflamed activists and incited fervent student activism, prompting waves of students to enter factories and stimulate revolution as disguised workers in the ensuing decade.²² The bloodbath at Gwangju became a source of national grief and tension in the midst of minjung, the movement for democracy in Korea that gained ground particularly during the 1970s and 80s.²³ Pervasive guilt of inaction and helplessness, not unlike the shame that motivates poet

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ State interference prevented the success of the workers' struggle in YH as in Dongil, but both incidents fostered widespread support in the labor movement and helped combine the labor and democracy movements.

²¹ Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 226; Nam, "Women's Labor Movement."

²² For a detailed account of the increase in student activism in factories after 1980, as well as an analysis of the alliance between labor and intellectuals, see Chapter 6 of Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 213-239.

²³ Koo, *State and Society*, 143. Minjung as a term already existed but was increasingly utilized in a newly politicized manner after the early 1970s, largely in response to the Yushin regime and as a unifying symbol for those who

Shin's writing, goaded hundreds, likely thousands of students and intellectuals to flood factories as "disguised workers" in an effort to awaken the working class and lead Korea toward democracy and away from the brutality of its authoritarian regime in the Fifth Republic.²⁴ Chun Doo Hwan's new, oppressive regime moved on from Gwangju with increased wrath toward the working class, taking special measures to eliminate any threat from workers in the industrial zones and to prevent students from organizing and politicizing labor strikes.²⁵

It would be remiss to ignore the hand that church organizations had in the grassroots labor struggles, as Koo notes.²⁶ Faith-based organizations capitalized on their established positions in society, international connections, and expansive communities to support and protect workers through night schools and group activities. Christian leaders were even involved in helping the YH strikers select the NDP headquarters as a strategic base for their public demonstration. However, Koo identifies a transfer from church groups to students toward the end of the 1970s into the early 1980s, which can be linked to the massive increase in disguised students working in the factories after the shocking and galvanizing brutality in Gwangju. Also, as the scope of the protests transitioned from small-scale sit-ins to increasingly dangerous and large-scale ones, church leaders were replaced by a flood of student activists desperate to commit "class suicide" and be reborn as revolutionary workers.²⁷

opposed Park. Koo describes it as a class-based political movement manifested out of relationships between the state and various social classes. Minns (2001) and many others simply translate *minjung* as "the common people."

²⁴ Gwangju is highlighted as the turning point for student activism by many scholars. For details, see, among others, Lee, *Makings of Minjung*; Weiss, *Student Activism*; Chai, "Intellectuals in the Labor Movement"; Kwon, "How Identities and Movement Cultures Became Deeply Saturated with Militarism"; Ogle, *South Korea: Dissent*, 91.

²⁵ Ogle, *South Korea: Dissent*, 102. The bloodshed in Gwangju may have been partial retaliation for labor strikes like YH that led to the assassination of Chun Doo Hwan's predecessor, Park Chung Hee. Ogle links the massacre to efforts to cleanse union leadership.

²⁶ For a detailed account of the work churches performed in supporting and abetting grassroots movements by female factory workers, see Koo, *Korean Workers*, 69-99.

²⁷ Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 215.

Students saw the potential in linking the movements, as the heavy concentrations of laborers growing in discontent and in willingness and skill in self-organizing was a veritable army that could be harnessed for change. They came from universities large and small, prestigious and less-known, some developing networks that helped funnel more disguised workers into the factories with the guidance of those who had experience; others who lacked this support system, like Sumi Eun, a disguised worker of the mid-1980s and currently an active politician, had to forge their own path to the factories.²⁸ Ultimately, these disguised workers wanted to graft the labor struggles onto the political struggles to transform society and end military rule, but their goals and ideals often problematically reinforced the subaltern position of uneducated workers while their rash methods often undid years of groundwork laid by workers; many quit because they were unable to adjust.²⁹ However, their overall efforts greatly strengthened the movements by spreading awareness and raising class consciousness. By 1987, the path of independent unionization, much of it built by female workers in the 1970s, the clumsy but fervent agitations of intellectuals in the factories, and the shift from light (female workforce) to heavy (male workforce) industries culminated in the Great Worker Struggle.³⁰ This turbulent year of labor activism and numerous large-scale strikes by male workers overshadowed the desperate and heroic grassroots movements of young women in previous years.³¹ Ogle aptly describes these dynamics: “When in the mid-eighties the male workers began

²⁸ Park Sungho, “Eunsumi euiwon int’obyu.”

²⁹ Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 262.

³⁰ Minns, “The Labour Movement in South Korea,” 187. Minns addresses the illegality and violence involved in much of the unionization movement, noting the gender shift in the workforce and its effect on labor disputes.

³¹ Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 264. The June Uprising is attributed to the combined weight of the labor movement, the pro-democracy movement, and the mobilization of previously inactive parts of society. To demonstrate the scale of the Great Worker Struggle, approximately 300 strikes occurred in the year prior, whereas nearly 4,000 took place in 1987. See also Koo, *Korean Workers*, 153-217; and Nam, “Women’s Labor Movement.” Nam notes that “Because democratic labor unions formed by female workers in the 70s were virtually destroyed by the state’s blatant repression in the early 80s, women’s labor activism in the 70s was viewed as a movement that had discontinued and had minor impact on the subsequent democratic movement.” He argues that the raising of class consciousness

to take action of their own, they found that they were standing on the shoulders of women who had been struggling for justice for more than ten years.” Despite their immense contribution in laying a foundation for later victories won by men and student activists, the early efforts of these young women were still seen as inferior to those of men and the educated, and even acknowledgement of their efforts faded quickly, all but erased as society sought to reconfigure the patriarchal system that disallowed agency in these lowly female factory workers. In following years, even literature published by these labor activists among the women workers in factories was often dismissed as less than literature—either too idealistic or not idealistic enough to be “good” labor literature, perhaps lacking the complexity and expected revolutionary spirit required by a society in which men and the educated viewed themselves as better suited to writing these works. Lee discusses the autobiographical works in the early 1980s of female workers who were labor activists as if the workers “wrote themselves into the meta-narrative of industrial growth and modernization.”³² Their act of writing was a direct challenge to the dominant narrative. Oppressed by the rest of society, they had no choice but to create their own counter-narrative of grassroots activism and agency, unwittingly condemning their nonactivist coworkers to a deeper level of erasure from the dominant narrative and this first counter-narrative. Nonactivist women workers—and the writers among them—remained the oppressed of the oppressed.

through women workers’ fierce struggles helped raise the consciousness of intellectuals and religious leaders who in turn increased their efforts and helped foment the labor struggles of the late 1980s.

³² Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 293.

Creating A Second Counter-Narrative

Shin Kyung-sook's novel, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, flows out of and revisits the historical context and the politics of representation described above, with Shin's time in the factory taking place from 1979 to 1981; her interludes of the present-day take place as she writes the novel approximately sixteen years later. The agency and poignancy of the figure of the *yŏgong* may have been damaged by the politics of representation during and following the 1970s and 1980s, but Shin Kyung-sook, as a former *yŏgong*, offers her own story and the act of writing as a substitute for that which has been limited and denied, moving beyond the grassroots activism of many of her peers and focusing on the *yŏgong* who were forgotten even in the first counter-narrative.

In her novel, Shin intermixes the present and past, recounting the trajectory of her youth from age sixteen to nineteen while bookending her recollections through recent encounters with the real characters of her youth. She exposes deeply troubled internal conflict as she explores both positive and traumatic experiences through writing, often pondering the act of writing itself. In this novel, Shin, at age sixteen, moves from the countryside to Seoul with her cousin, a girl only a few years older. The year is 1979, the year of Park Chung Hee's assassination and a year before the tragedy of Gwangju. She and Cousin move in with Shin's oldest brother and train to work in a factory. There, Shin meets other young women in similar situations and bonds with them. While she meets some through the special classes offered for industrial workers, most of whom never completed anything beyond basic education, others she encounters by working alongside them. The most prominent figure in Shin's memory and the main source of her long-lasting pain is an older girl named Hui-jae, with whom she forms a special friendship. Later, the older girl is discovered dead inside her single room which has been locked from the outside; this

traumatic memory in which Hui-jae commits suicide after enlisting an unwitting Shin to lock the door for her is the centerpiece of Shin's grief. Shin spends the majority of her novel battling with guilt, shame, and depression, in constant flux between her desire to return to her youth and undo what happened, and the knowledge that she cannot undo her role in Hui-jae's suicide.

The novel is a complex blend of deeply personal trauma that seeks to rise above the mass trauma experienced by so many in the crux of South Korea's rapid development; yet while attempting to do so, the author undergoes a transformative process by which she first rebels against, and eventually accepts her role as a facilitator of healing for other *yǒgong* who also experienced trauma and loss, and whose complex collective identity was reduced and even erased from the dominant narrative of men and the educated. In this retelling of Shin's tragic formative years juxtaposed with her present-day struggle to come to terms with the past, time is fluid. This allows her to recognize the failures of the dominant historical narrative and offer a complex individual's account of the past and its ties to the present.

To thoroughly analyze this semi-autobiographical work,³³ it is necessary to outline the areas and tools of analysis. Firstly, Shin's actions as a non-activist *yǒgong* shall be examined vis-a-vis the three categories of workers as explained by scholars Keongil Kim and Hwasook Nam. Their scholarship on worker identities categorizes individual experiences into three types based on social identities of passive, active, and politicized, which in turn become categories based on the worker's "views on what should be the vision and strategies of the labor movement and what roles intellectuals and workers must play in pursuit of them," further demonstrating the diverse

³³ At the beginning, end, and throughout the novel, Shin debates the meaning of literature, referring to the work that she is writing as something that "is not quite fact and not quite fiction, but something in between." Scenes also take place wherein characters confront and question what she wrote in a previous chapter, challenging the accuracy of minute details like the title of a movie (see 209-212). Shin also occasionally questions the accuracy of her own memory. Accordingly, this thesis follows her designation of *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* as semi-autobiographical.

forms of inner complexity and agency exhibited by different *yŏgong*.³⁴ Shin's categorization into the transitional identity outside an imperfect binary shall also contribute to the construction of her identity overall as it builds into the role of surrogate griever.

Secondly, close examination of the novel will provide insight on the self-perception and societal perception of workers like Shin, delving deeper into the representation of the figure of *yŏgong* already briefly explored through Shin Kyong-Nim's poem. How did others conceive of their place in society, and how did workers conceive of themselves? This analysis will examine the gendered oppression experienced by Shin and her fellow female workers at home, in the factories, and in the labor movement. It will also consider the shame and inferiority associated with a lack of proper education. Through these means, it will attempt to elucidate how the identity of the "oppressed of the oppressed" was constructed and reinforced in society and social discourse. Understanding this negative identity is instrumental to understanding the psychological pain experienced by Shin and her fellow female factory workers and their need for restoration.

Lastly, Shin's role as an author and the very act of writing will be examined through the lens of Freud's work on mourning and melancholia. The serialization by which this novel was first published is juxtaposed with the lack of proper processing of loss for its real characters-turned-readers, not only the protagonist-author. In this publicization of an individual's lost youth, individual and communal trauma struggle for a space of amelioration. Author Shin is designated as, rebels against, and eventually accepts the role of surrogate griever for the many women who lost their youth, health, and dignity in the harsh working conditions of factories in the 1970s and 1980s, and whose complex inner selves were reduced and largely erased in the dominant historical narrative. Her ability to serve as surrogate griever and this semi-autobiographical

³⁴ Kim, "Alternative Narratives of the 1980s South Korean Labor Movement," 281.

novel's merit as a restorer of lost agency will be supported by examples drawn from both her text and contrasting lines from Shin Kyong-Nim's "I Felt Ashamed, Little Sisters".

The Non-Activist *Yŏgong*

Kim Keongil and Nam Hwasook's "Alternative Narratives of the 1980s South Korean Labor Movement: Worker Identities in the 'Worker-Student Alliance'" identifies a binary between two categories of workers, as well as a transitional identity that defies identification with this binary. The binary exists between small group-oriented action and "area-based movement."³⁵ One part of the binary corresponds to workers who wanted to approach activism on a large scale by keeping the focus on the political struggle and supporting unions across multiple firms; they saw heavy involvement and leadership by student activists as essential to their endeavors. The other part of the binary consists of workers who were proponents for small groups that focused on educating small groups of workers and engaging them in activities to build community and trust; they did not see student activists as necessary or even helpful. Out of this small but concentrated effort of united workers, a single independent union sometimes emerged. Despite the existence of this dynamic binary, Shin, as a largely innocent and ignorant protagonist who witnesses but does not participate in either the fierce labor activism or the political movement, lands in the third category: the transitional identity.

The first category is composed of workers who accepted a need for all struggles, whether the pro-democracy movement or the labor movement, to be led by student activists. Persons in this category often deferred to disguised workers for organizing strikes and often involved themselves in the political movement. They conceded that the importance of the pro-democracy movement was greater than that of the labor movement, and that democracy must come first for

³⁵ Koo, *Korean Workers*, 106.

the labor movement to succeed. An example of a figure outside Shin's novel but cited in various scholarly sources is Kim Miyōng, a young female worker who began studying the ideologies discussed by the students activists.³⁶ She was a fervent believer in the political movement led by students, even giving speeches and joining political demonstrations—until she and other worker-activists were caught in the crossfire of factionalism between different student groups.³⁷ She and other workers in this category commonly became disillusioned with the strife-ridden internal dynamics of student-activist groups. However, within the novel, there are also hints that one of the girls in Shin's classes, Mi-seo, is similar to Kim Miyōng. Mi-seo may be a regular factory worker who has interacted with disguised workers, or she may be a disguised worker herself. Shin remembers her as the girl who reads Hegel, for Mi-seo is never seen without her book, and even others who reminisce with Shin over the phone sixteen years later define Mi-seo by her obsession with Hegel.³⁸ Reading Hegel, a German philosopher whose writings have had a tremendous impact on discourse in the past couple centuries, would be expected of a student activist studying for a circle, or dissident study group. Mi-seo exhibits dislike for the other factory workers, even bluntly telling Shin, "Only when I am reading this book do I feel different from all of you. I don't like you people."³⁹ Mi-seo believes that Hegel is what sets her apart. Whether she has acquired class consciousness is unclear, but her desire to extricate herself from other lowly factory workers through reading Hegel implies that she has interacted with the student movement. This could develop into a desire to participate in student-organized movements; workers like Kim Miyōng sought to join the students and participate in the larger movement after exposure to student activists and illicit reading materials. Mi-seo in her capacity

³⁶ Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 255.

³⁷ Kim, "Alternative Narratives of the 1980s South Korean Labor Movement," 284; Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 255-256.

³⁸ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 139-140.

³⁹ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 140.

as a female factory worker thus is placed in the first category, as it is unclear if she is actually a disguised worker.

A notable example of a confirmed student activist within Shin's novel is one of Shin's own brothers. Her third brother arrives in Seoul to apply to and attend university, clashing with the oldest brother and disappearing for long stints. "Third Brother turns into a hardcore activist," writes Shin.⁴⁰ He reappears only rarely, and usually is injured. One of Shin's foremost worries is that Third Brother is sleeping on the ground in between rallies. Interestingly, this brother does not indicate that he sees his female relatives as potential revolutionary workers, though this was a common mentality that gained strength after the bloodshed at Gwangju; intellectuals viewed the working class as a veritable army to be awoken with revolutionary spirit, and many quit their universities to join the working class and spark a revolution. Hui-jae's boyfriend's similarities to Shin's brother imply that he, too, may be a student activist. If he is, it seems likely is a disguised worker, though he may also be a labor activist without any higher education.⁴¹ However, this lack of information may come from Shin's ignorance or from her effort to focus on the most basic and personal experiences. The latter seems likelier based on her brief response to her third brother's demands, sixteen years after she leaves the factory, that she write more about the military coups and corruption in their youth: her melancholic sentences that follow detail the minor yet harsh realities of living poorly in a tiny, cold room, and she gently replies that she feels that memories of the small difficulties in life matter the most.⁴² This focus on the local and personal experiences while actively ignoring the pro-democracy and labor struggles surging around her strengthens the argument that she exists outside the binary; she did not have the

⁴⁰ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 112.

⁴¹ Hui-jae and her unnamed man both are unusual in their interactions with Shin and others, and it seems that he may be a disguised worker and she may be a worker who has joined the movement because of him. Neither of these identities are confirmed by Shin, however.

⁴² Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 178.

awareness or emotional capacity to also engage in a struggle bigger than the survival of herself and her family.

Before delving into the transitional identity and Shin's transitional self, however, the second category must be examined. This group consists of the workers who desired worker autonomy and leadership, disliking students who attempted to organize strikes as disguised workers. To these workers, their own workplace was the site of the struggle and their main focus. They saw themselves as the best leaders and spokespersons for their labor struggles. They preferred smaller groups and interaction on a more personal, individualized level, not unlike Shin's focus on small details, and a tight-knit community built out of a strong and stable independent union, rather than a widespread movement, held deeper meaning for members of this category.⁴³ These workers often viewed student activists as more harmful than helpful, as shown in interviews conducted by Seung-kyung Kim.⁴⁴ In *The Girl Wrote Loneliness*, many different people in Shin's youth serve in various activist roles, like Third Brother, a dissident student organizing demonstrations in Seoul, or Miss Lee and Union Chief, both of whom are independent union leaders fighting against company management. However, there is not an identifiable representative of this second category. It seems that this category lacks representation for two reasons. Firstly, as with the first category, Shin often fails to properly explain to readers or perhaps even recognize the roles that her friends played in various movements. This may be because she truly was ignorant at the time, but a second explanation stems from her belief that the smaller, more personal details and hardships matter the most; only those bits of information make it into the text—and perhaps even into her memory. Shin is either truly ignorant or ignores on purpose, which results in ambiguously defined characters—they are

⁴³ As mentioned previously, Koo also discusses the binary between small group versus “area-based movement” in *Korean Workers*, 106.

⁴⁴ Kim, *Class Struggle or Family Struggle?* 138-140.

complex rather than two-dimensional. Moreover, while her focus on the tight-knit community around her is reminiscent of this second category, her lack of involvement in any of the movements and her shame in disappointing those she respects within the movements point to her transitional identity.

Workers like Shin who defy the first two categories accordingly fall into the transitional identity. Those individuals held in uncertainty between the labor and the democracy movements and between the worker-leaders and the student-leaders are placed in this category. This includes those who were sympathetic to the labor struggle but failed to join union activism, and thus experienced recurrent self-loathing and remorse. Shin Kyung-sook and her cousin fit neatly into this ambiguity external to the binary, as their brief membership in the independent union at their electronics company ends with threats from management: they resign from the union or they will no longer be able to attend the special classes for workers, which are funded by the company.⁴⁵ “We had yet to learn what a union is and what it is trying to do, but we did know from a gut feeling that quitting the union would mean betraying Union Chief,” writes Shin as she recalls her ignorance of the greater struggles occurring around her and the man whose kindness they could not repay.⁴⁶ Their immense shame in disappointing Union Chief, who supported their education and always treated them kindly, and Miss Lee, one of the other union leaders, overwhelms them. “This is what shame is,” cries Cousin, who has always been the more resilient, older sister-like figure to younger, innocent Shin.⁴⁷ They buckle under the weight of their remorse, and even in the present day, Shin finds herself wishing that she could remember Union Chief’s name and

⁴⁵ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 88.

⁴⁶ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 85. It is also interesting to note the description of Union Leader given on 222: “He is tantalized by our inability to assert our rights, by our fear, which keeps us from fighting against low wages and low allowances.... We do not know how to cherish ourselves. As he said, we are incapable of thinking that we are being sacrificed.” These brief yet poignant lines demonstrate the dual weight of ignorance and inability in escaping the transitional identity, and point to Shin’s self-awareness, now achieved through the process of writing.

⁴⁷ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 86.

write it as a form of an apology to someone she remembers as “[a] warm soul, but one that I betrayed.”⁴⁸ She mourns the betrayal, writing that “going to school, for me, at seventeen,...is an act that makes me betray people, and makes me look away from them in shame.”⁴⁹ The value and cost of education goes far beyond money; Shin and Cousin sacrifice the trust and goodness shown to them by others, remaining within the transitional identity in order to receive an education despite their factory work. Their bitterness and remorse continues throughout their time in the factory and even after leaving,⁵⁰ revealing deep, internal complexity.

These three categories identified by scholars Kim and Nam—the binary of activism and the uncertain outsider in transition—provide a complex sense of identity formation. The evaluation of Shin’s location in the third category helps demonstrate the depth and breadth of her difficult years in the factory while illustrating one of the forms of loss that burden her. The transitional identity brings pain and remorse because Shin’s lack of commitment to a side does not necessarily come from a lack of desire to fight, but from a position of ignorance and oppression. This lowly position as a poor, undereducated young female factory worker is the epitome of the oppressed of the oppressed. Shin and Cousin choose education over the trust of those they respect in the factory because education is their only chance for improving their lives—but they do consciously choose it. While others who participated in activist movements encountered different forms of trauma and loss, they could take pride in their activism. Left outside this binary of engagement in the various struggles, Shin continues to suffer from remorse and negative self-identity in the present day, unable to overcome her transitional identity of the

⁴⁸ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 75-76

⁴⁹ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 89.

⁵⁰ For an example of one of several short scenes where Shin recalls the gloom that overcame Cousin and her when they saw members of the union, see Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 209.

past. This negativity feeds into Shin's deep despair and sense of loss that she seeks to ameliorate through writing.

Creating the Oppressed of the Oppressed

Alongside scholarly categories for workers caught in the labor movement, one must also examine the basic components of the *yŏgong*, the young female factory worker. The identity of the young female worker arises from the nexus of three negative representations essential to understanding the repercussions of factory life: the factory slave, the subordinated female, and the uneducated worker. By parsing these components of public categorization, an increasingly vivid picture of Shin Kyung-sook's psychological development emerges. Similarly, the novel's characters-turned-readers receive further contextualization for the analysis of their demand for a surrogate griever.

In order to understand the root of negative public and self-perception of female factory workers, it is important to consider the historical lack of an artisan class in Korea; the Korean context crucially lacked the artisan class that was foundational to the development of class consciousness in many other countries, particularly European ones, as they industrialized.⁵¹ Whereas these countries commonly saw their labor movements spring out of a robust class of long-established artisans who valued and loved their craft, no such community existed in Korea. The lowest of the low in traditional Korea were given the tasks of creating the luxury goods: slaves. Out of the slave class, individuals were selected to produce the goods that the rich used, and while they usually then became ex-slaves, their status remained low and contemptible. The work of these slaves was diminished and shameful unlike the boastful pride that their work gave artisans in other parts of the world. Accordingly, a culture of self-respect and mutual pride could

⁵¹ Koo, *Korean Workers*, 11.

not develop into the sort of “positive self-identity” touted as elemental to European working-class formation.⁵²

Out of this slave class and from the rise of factory work, derogatory terms developed: *gongsuni* and *gongdori*, *yŏgong* and *nodongja*.⁵³ While *nodongja* or worker began to shed some of its negative connotations as the labor movement gained ground for humane conditions, dignity, and respect, terms like *gongsuni* and *gongdori* could not be extricated from their crass origins.⁵⁴ *Gong* signifies factory; *suni* and *dori* are demeaning terms for girls and boys respectively—female and male servants or slaves from Korean history. *Yŏgong*, marginally better than *gongsuni*, still emphasizes the subordinate female (*yŏ*) attached to a factory (*gong*). Literature in translation, including *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, fails to reflect the derogatory nature of these words. Comparing the translation with the original⁵⁵ results in a clearer analysis of Shin’s identity as a young female worker.

There are numerous examples of these derogatory terms throughout Shin’s novel, but a few different incidents can be taken as case studies to demonstrate the breadth and depth to which this denigration pervaded society and the individual. Not long after Shin and her cousin arrive in Seoul, Oldest Brother berates Cousin, asking if she plans to remain a factory girl for the rest of her life.⁵⁶ Later in the novel, Cousin weeps that a boy will never like her because he says

⁵² Koo, *Korean Workers*, 9-11.

⁵³ Koo, *Korean Workers*, 62. Koo translates these terms as factory girl (*gongsuni*) and factory boy (*gongdori*), noting that both are labels filled with “a deeply contemptuous attitude toward labor”, which he ascribes to both the lack of an artisan class and the tradition of using slaves for most non-agrarian forms of labor in pre-modern Korea. Also see Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 12, 234. For a definition *yŏgong*, see Louie, “Minjung Feminism,” 418.

⁵⁴ Koo (2001) emphasizes that *nodongja* came to symbolize a collective identity through which a shared consciousness developed; their increased actions of solidarity were both a product of and contributor to this identity as *nodongja*.

⁵⁵ The Korean title of the novel under analysis is *Oettan Pang* (외딴 방), which translates to *The Lonely Room* or *Lone Room*.

⁵⁶ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 70.

that she is a mere factory girl⁵⁷ who does not even have a pretty face; Shin similarly wonders if her factory girl identity has prevented her childhood sweetheart from choosing her.⁵⁸ Years after leaving factory work, Shin encounters a newspaper article that features her and embarrasses her deeply: “Sixteen-year-old Country Bumpkin Factory Girl Dreamed of Becoming a Writer.”⁵⁹ Each instance has been translated as factory girl, but the original Korean word is *gongsuni* for the first two examples and *yŏgong* for the third.

Upon reexamination of these scenes in Korean, Oldest Brother’s words cause Cousin to cry not simply because he is yelling at her, but because he insultingly implies she will be enslaved to factory life forever. Later, Cousin self-deprecates through the usage of the same word used by Oldest Brother: *gongsuni*. Over a decade later, Shin encounters the newspaper article that uses *yŏgong*. Though the term has less negative meaning than the slave comparison made with *gongsuni*, the headline reinforces the crude and demeaning nature of the word by describing her as a country bumpkin. Indeed, Shin had been raised in the countryside, and historically, the majority of female factory workers did come from poor, rural areas, but it was not a background from which they drew pride.

In these examples in the novel, cross-referencing with the original Korean yields the context lost in translation, revealing the pervasiveness of the derogatory language used toward female factory workers. The gendered terms *gongsuni* and *yŏgong* reinforce not only inferiority due to performing manual labor, but also the lowliness of women in a patriarchal society. Shin and her cousin are slaves to the factory and women subsumed beneath the dominance of men. Not only does Shin’s older brother utilize the term toward Cousin and by extension, Shin, but Cousin later shows that she identifies with the negative term. She says that it is the reason that a

⁵⁷ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 225.

⁵⁸ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 253.

⁵⁹ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 360.

boy she met in the factory will not fall in love with her. Who could love a girl working in a factory like a slave? Though Shin retorts against the double standard, asking if the boy thinks of himself as something other than a *gongdori*, the male equivalent to *gongsuni*, Cousin is inconsolable. Similarly, Shin herself assigns blame to this internalized identity; she believes her childhood friend and possible sweetheart has not replied to her letters because she left their hometown to become a *gongsuni*.⁶⁰ This self-deprecating mentality is internalized under the constant and inexorable weight of external factors such as siblings, coworkers, and even news headlines.⁶¹ Historically, factory workers like Shin and her cousin were called these derogatory terms even until the mid-1980s, though they began to overcome state-given labels and negative societal tags with the collective identity as workers, or *nodongja*.⁶²

Gendered oppression was an essential tool of companies and the state in subordinating the large female workforce, and this fed back into a female worker's identity as a young woman whose purity was threatened by her rough factory life. Oppression of female factory workers extended beyond derogatory names into sexual threats and attacks. Sexual violence in factories executed by male management and even fellow male workers on their female peers was a common tactic to keep women from voicing or acting on feelings of discrimination and abuse.⁶³ This could backfire, as seen in the novel where Shin witnesses a crowd of women stripping and shouting in defiance of riot police; a rumor spreads that they are protesting the rape of a co-

⁶⁰ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 253. While it is revealed that the letters have been intercepted by her mother, the assignation of blame to her *gongsuni* identity holds merit; her childhood friend Chang becomes a student activist and becomes sexually involved with a girl who is also a student, excluding Shin on multiple levels and reinforcing the undesirable effects of being a *gongsuni*. By the time Shin tells Chang that she no longer is a factory worker and that she plans to attend college, he is too absorbed in his activism to care—another loss for Shin in the form of a lost potential relationship due to her “factory girl” identity.

⁶¹ Kim, *Class Struggle or Family Struggle?* 60. Kim notes that many women workers referred to themselves as *gongsuni* while loathing the term.

⁶² Koo, *Korean Workers*, 13.

⁶³ Kim, “Gender, Work and Resistance,” 421-423.

worker by male management.⁶⁴ Male managers often found it unnecessary to follow through with sexual assault; threats were frequently sufficient.⁶⁵ Women in the factories sought to keep their femininity and purity despite their rough labor, and the merest insinuation of a girl's impurity could be enough to undo her, as demonstrated in the novel when Shin learns of other girls who were threatened by the Foreman of their factory.⁶⁶ Shin and Cousin both encounter this male management figure's sexual advancements and his physical violence when his advancements are refused, but they appear to escape without further molestation from him; indubitably, they must suppress fears of later repercussions for refusing him, but Shin does not elaborate on further sexual attacks. Shin and her fellow workers also endure daily body searches conducted by male workers until the "might of the Seoul Spring" and efforts by the union force management to provide a female staffer instead.⁶⁷ Prior to this, all "Grade 1 Staff" workers like Shin and Cousin—anyone not working in administration—endured the touch of male guards searching their bodies under the accusation that workers were likely to steal parts from the production line, an assumption by management that derides and mistrusts workers as potential thieves. These brief insights into the daily occurrence of male staff violating female workers' bodies demonstrate the ubiquity of sexual threat in the factories as a tool against the oppressed of the oppressed.

Gendered oppression under patriarchal power also may have inadvertently inhibited the effectiveness of female disguised workers long before they even set foot in a factory. Society was dominated by masculinity, and in terms of "national defense and national prosperity, men were portrayed as the real players who would save the nation"—which is why poet Shin

⁶⁴ This parallels the YH Incident, in which women also stripped in defiance of riot police. Shin does not specify if this is the same strike.

⁶⁵ Kim, "Gender, Work and Resistance," 423.

⁶⁶ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 97-98.

⁶⁷ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 213.

expresses such shame at failing to protect his “little sisters”.⁶⁸ Female factory workers’ obsession with maintaining and preserving femininity caused a disconnect between female factory workers and female university students who operated under false identities in the factories. Interviews with disguised workers demonstrate that the dominance of patriarchy worked in opposing ways on the two groups of women. Whereas female laborers sought to regain the femininity they lost in societal representation of them as rough and potentially impure, women in the student movement encountered a strong gender barrier that forced them either to masculinize or to leave fervent activism to men.⁶⁹ “This masculinist culture, however, not only pressured any woman wanting to be involved as a political actor to support violent tactics; it also compelled her to shed all signs of her feminine identity.”⁷⁰ Women’s rights and feminism were put aside in favor of what were seen as more important, wide-reaching goals of the nation, essentially forcing women to choose one or the other.⁷¹ Women had to renounce any form of femininity, from skirts and makeup to even their speech pattern, in order to gain acceptance in the student movement dominated by male leaders. Women were to find rocks and break bricks for the men to throw at violent protests; they were backgrounded while male students held the limelight, fighting physically and thus appearing heroic.

Female students who had renounced their femininity in the hope of acceptance and increased effectiveness in the student movement then entered factories that were filled with a predominantly female workforce—a workforce that sought to reinforce femininity by wearing skirts, heels, and makeup as soon as workers could change out of their work clothes. Both groups were oppressed by patriarchal hierarchy but to opposing outcomes; female students masculinized

⁶⁸ Kwon, “How Identities and Movement Cultures Became Deeply Saturated with Militarism.”

⁶⁹ For a detailed account of the masculinization of female student activists and other transformations required of participants in the student-led struggles, see Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 183-186.

⁷⁰ Kwon, “How Identities and Movement Cultures Became Deeply Saturated with Militarism.”

⁷¹ For analysis of the feminism movement within and denied by contemporaneous struggles of the 1970s and 1980s, see Kim, “Should feminism transcend nationalism?” 110.

while female workers feminized. Female students accordingly had to re-feminize to acclimate to factory life, a conundrum which underscores the lack of increased success that may have been experienced by female disguised workers joining an already active, vibrant community of female workers fighting for their rights. Yet even with attempts to re-feminize, another barrier remained: different levels of education.

Lack of education is the third element that constitutes the negative public and self-perception of female workers. Upward mobility out of factory work comes only from education, and lack of education plays a key role in reinforcing this negative perspective of workers. Encouragement from Shin's family and teachers to educate herself as well as shaming encounters with educated young men and women highlight the importance of education in overcoming the negative identity of a worker. The mixed encouragement and shaming in the novel demonstrates that the lowliness of a female factory worker stems not only from her gender and the nature of her employment, but also from her lack of education in a society where a university degree earns vastly higher income and social status.⁷²

From the beginning of the novel, Oldest Brother pushes Shin and Cousin to attend the special school for industrial workers, constantly reminding them that, "To live a decent life in this country, the first thing you need is schooling."⁷³ The scene mentioned earlier, where Oldest Brother provokes Cousin by asking if she wants to remain a lowly factory girl, a *gongsuni*, occurs when Cousin refuses to apply to the special high school for workers. His lines indicate that education is the only sure way for girls to better themselves. As marriage is a false hope because those of the same class marry, Oldest Brother tells Cousin that she will marry a man of

⁷² Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 18-19. In the 1970s, a university degree was a badge of privilege, and Lee notes the national average of only 5.7 years of schooling; the age group for those between 20 and 29 years old held an average of 8.3 years. This placed university students—with 13 to 16 years of schooling—in a doubly elite group. Those like Shin, who did not have a university degree—yet—and for whom a university degree was unlikely or even impossible, often saw marriage as the only other way to improve their status.

⁷³ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 71.

similarly low worker status unless she goes to school.⁷⁴ Moreover, quitting the factory will not only prevent Cousin from affording her own education, but also from supporting her family and the education of her brother and younger sisters.

Initially, this potential of social advancement through special night classes at the girls' high school makes the school a positive place, one where Shin receives guidance and expands beyond her lowly status as an undereducated *gongsuni*. One teacher in particular encourages her potential as a writer and other teachers even temporarily accept that she chooses to copy down books rather than complete her work for their classes.⁷⁵ However, a few poignant encounters with girls attending the regular day classes shame Shin and her peers. Years after leaving, Shin receives a letter from another teacher at the school that indicates that, while labor conditions in the factories have changed, this superior attitude from regular students has not: "I'd rather die than work as a *gongsuni*."⁷⁶ The female workers in the night classes struggle to overcome the shame associated with their employment in factories and their participation in classes exclusively for industrial workers, in contrast with wealthier girls who do not work. This shame lasts well beyond the end of their classes, becoming another source of the grief that they carry into their thirties. This grief is central to Shin's writing, and it constitutes the third and final area of analysis.

⁷⁴ Kim, *Class Struggle or Family Struggle?* 17, 57-96. Many women believed that factory work was temporary despite the fact that they were significant contributors and even sole breadwinners for their families. They envisioned marriage as their escape from factory life but others became disenchanted and recognized the difficulties that factory work presented: they were seen as less respectable, often could not quit because their families needed the money, and they frequently met men of a similar socio-economic class.

⁷⁵ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 151.

⁷⁶ I took the liberty of replacing the English translation "factory girl" with the original Korean "*gongsuni*" for full effect. See Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 248. For the original sentence in the Korean context, "나 같으면 공순이 하느니 차라리 죽는다...", see Sin Kyöng-suk, *Oettan pang*, 282.

Author as Surrogate Griever, Writing as Mourning

Freud famously observed the similarities and contrasting qualities of mourning and melancholia, noting the extensive damage caused to the individual after a great loss.⁷⁷ Lack of ability or time to process this loss exacerbates the pain, both physical and psychological, and often results in aggravated symptoms. The sudden loss of a beloved person or object can cause a person to redirect their feelings and needs onto the ego, transforming itself into the object that which has been lost and transposing associated hatred, love, and other attachments. This and the process of overcoming the loss are immensely draining and the person does not always overcome the loss completely; fluctuations and temporary moments of liberation from the sense of loss can occur as well. Shin Kyung-sook's writing, both in her semi-autobiographical novel and her other works, all of which contain pieces of her lived experiences, is her method of mourning and at times, the manifestation of her melancholia. Writing this novel serves as a substitute space for processing loss disallowed by the severe circumstances of her youth; she grieves through her writing and writing can either drain or liberate her. Yet the very mode through which this novel became public made undisturbed personal mourning difficult. The chapters of *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* were first serialized, with most chapters published before the next was finished. In the novel, recollections of Shin's youth as a factory worker are interspersed with more recent memories and confrontations with characters from her past; these characters are real people who read her writing and find healing, *han*, or both.⁷⁸ Shin includes her reactions to these confrontations, exposing a novel-long shift in her perception of those who demand she write about and for them. Many of them, like Shin, were young women working in factories who were denied the necessary time and space required for processing loss; they thus entrust their grief to

⁷⁷ Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.*, 243-258.

⁷⁸ Ogle (1990) poetically describes *han* as expressing "the accumulated suffering and anguish of a people, or a person...the miseries of a generation past and a generation yet to come." 75.

her, their chosen surrogate griever. Furthermore, Shin's writing gives birth to the figure of the *yŏgong* as a dynamic, internally complex individual, combating the history of erasure as demonstrated in the paternalistic simplification of the *yŏgong* into a passive recipient of injustice in Shin Kyong-Nim's poem. As novelist Shin Kyung-sook writes both past and present in *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, she processes personal grief and eventually comes to terms with the task that her characters-turned-readers have given her while simultaneously providing a non-activist *yŏgong* counterfigure filled with agency.

Though in her early thirties at the time of writing this book, Shin does not merely look back on the past through her writing but constantly lives within it, with past and present nearly indistinguishable. Time is fluid. Through this fluidity, she alternately attempts to avoid or approach her lost youth. "One can go from sixteen to thirty-two in one day. It was that day at the restaurant that I, then sixteen years old, suddenly turned thirty-two...the age that I am now," she writes about her arrival in Seoul and the beginning of her work as a factory girl.⁷⁹ When she considers the act of writing and thinks of literature between moments of exposing the past, she contrasts literature with history. History, as demonstrated by the dominance of the male and educated elite narrative that largely reduced the figure of the *yŏgong* to lack agency and lasting effect, often attempts to organize the past in a way that agrees with societal norms, such as poet Shin Kyong-Nim's relegation of young women workers back to a lower, sisterly role rather than acknowledging their rise to breadwinner status and the effect of their grassroots activism. According to novelist Shin Kyung-sook, history hides the truth behind an orderly surface that is acceptable and understandable, but literature defies the order, "throwing into disarray what has been defined...to make it flow anew for those in the back of history, the weak, the hesitant."⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 36.

⁸⁰ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 57-58.

She wonders if this, too, is not order as well. History as Shin conceives of it here is what scholars have termed the dominant historical narrative and what men and the educated elite cemented through their own scholarship and works of literature. This dominant historical narrative fails to challenge stereotypes and relegates women workers to the bottom of the enforced societal hierarchy through poem, prose, and public memory. Yet Shin's conception of literature's potential opens the door to a counter-narrative beyond even that of female labor activists. The subjects of this form of memory, this agented act of writing an autobiography, can be the weakest and the most oppressed—women like Shin who were stripped of youth, femininity, agency, and a proper space to mourn these losses. While previous literature has denied them that space, Shin begins to comprehend that her semi-autobiographical novel can serve as a substitute for that place. She recognizes that literature in the hands of those erased from history has another potential: a second counter-narrative, one that her act of writing can provide.

As the quote from Shin above acknowledges, the literary formation of this second counter-narrative does throw many things into disarray, such as time, making it fluid and the distinction between the past and present thoroughly ambiguous. Time becomes irrelevant in writing because the trauma of sixteen years ago can be relived and ongoing events can be written in the past tense. Shin grapples with this, rising above the very act of writing even as she utilizes it to examine how writing can help her ameliorate the pains of the past, which, to her, are ever-present. The novel, as a fixed autobiographical product of fluid time and mixed memories, preserves Shin's transitional state and her internal transformation in a way that allows readers to revisit any part at will, and to undergo a complex process of grieving and eventual acceptance with and through her. Moreover, her novel as a semi-autobiographical work mixes the historical with the literary, as a meditation on writing and her emphasis on its nature as *semi*-autobiographical. Through this

complex relationship, her novel serves to unite the past and present. Contrastingly, Shin Kyong-Nim's poem stays firmly in the past tense because he views those shameful days as gone; his shame of the past has stayed in the past, whereas the pain of the *yŏgong* is ever-present in Shin Kyung-sook's novel.

The loss of youth and its many associated experiences as delineated in previous sections serves as the primary cause of pain for women like Shin who worked in the factories during the 1970s and 80s. One of the women from Shin's industrial high school admits to her in a phone call that she has lived in quiet shame, unable to chat with her husband or friends about high school experiences.⁸¹ This confession holds weight in that high school experiences are considered foundational to one's youth, serving as a wellspring of alumni connections that become a social network and fodder for boastful conversation later in life for many Koreans. Shin's present-day caller and fellow alumna, Yi Jong-rye, is deeply hurt by her husband joking that she never truly attended high school. Her husband participates in the erasure of the dynamic *yŏgong* albeit on a shallow level by teasing her for lack of proof of a life outside the factory when she was young. Admittedly, the stigma of factory work has made fellow graduates unwilling or unable to form connections with each other after leaving, reinforcing this form of erasure, as Yi notes in a teary voice, "since nobody keeps in touch..."⁸² Yi has no proof of this crucial part of her youth. Upon hearing in the news that Shin Kyung-sook, her old classmate from the industrial high school, is a published author, she recovers a piece of her youth and finally can boast like others. The very knowledge of Shin's act of writing inadvertently facilitates healing for Yi.

⁸¹ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 10-11.

⁸² Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 10.

This and other phone calls from people in Shin's past send her into spirals of self-doubt, despair, and rebellion—a phenomenon that, in this context, Freud would describe as melancholia as Shin's conception of herself has also lowered because she is incapable of expressing herself to the women whom she once called friends. While her fellow alumnae are grateful to reconnect, Shin is reminded of the loss that she has yet to process and attempts to retreat from everything, including herself. A comment from another classmate from the industrial high school, Ha Hye-suk, cuts the deepest: "You don't write about us."⁸³ Over the next hundred or so pages, Shin battles with this comment, which becomes an accusation and a challenge. Her internal strife spills into her writing, breaking up anecdotes of beginning factory life at age sixteen with her struggle to write them sixteen years later, at age thirty-two. She wonders if she could tell these people of her past:

That I had not been able to write about them because just the thought would fill my chest with pain? If I had told her that I was sorry, that I was only sixteen years old then? It was not that I was ashamed of them. It was that I had not walked out of that place in a natural manner. I had run from the place, aghast at the turns of a fateful life.⁸⁴

Shin speaks cryptically of her loss of a close friend, Hui-jae, to suicide. This is the central feature of her lost youth, but it takes time for her to recognize that her own trauma and loss and the trauma and loss experienced by others constitute a single, elemental grief.

Yet long before Shin begins receiving phone calls from these women who share her past and the pains of loss, she is confronted by those who ask her to write on their behalf. Some ask her to write about them as individuals, such as Miss Lee, a labor activist whose legs are broken as punishment for her unrelenting efforts to protect other workers. "When you become a writer someday, you should write about us, too," Lee says.⁸⁵ Even in the midst of their activism, these

⁸³ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 21.

⁸⁴ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 52.

⁸⁵ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 310.

individuals are desperate for someone to memorialize their agency. Others, like Shin's third brother, demand that she write her novel about the big picture as they see it, focusing on assassinations and massacres of their youth: "Try writing about that kind of thing.... If you're a writer, you must not look away from such things. That coup in the end caused what went on in Gwangju."⁸⁶ These characters-turned-readers beg and berate her with voices that both exist within and transcend her writing. Shin then responds through her novel to her brother's tirade about political machinations with a series of melancholic moments from the past—describing the cold forming ice on the table, the anxiety of keeping a fire going, and the worry that her third brother was sleeping on the streets between bouts of student activism. She is not simplifying her representation of the *yŏgong* but rather acknowledging her value for personal memory as different from her brother's both in her youth and in the present day. He, privileged as a male, perhaps cannot recognize what her writing accomplishes as a form of restoration. This unique form of dialogue occurs throughout the novel, not entirely one-sided as it is a conversation that crosses time and different iterations of Shin's reality. She muses over this multifunctional dialogue much later in the novel: "While writing this, from time to time I would be filled with a feeling that someone was watching me.... I realize that the person watching me was none other than myself. That I was trying, awkwardly, to have a conversation with myself."⁸⁷ Near the end of the novel, Shin recognizes the nature of this externalized internal dialogue. She also bids farewell to Hui-jae, finally having processed the grief and acceptance of loss that life had denied her: "Let us say good-bye now. We didn't get to do so back then."⁸⁸ Shin, who first struggles to discern reality and distinguish past from present, gradually accepts that time must flow on,

⁸⁶ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 178.

⁸⁷ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 338.

⁸⁸ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 357.

though she still wonders if she might use writing to return to her lost years and restore them—for herself and for others.

This is particularly evident as Shin writes her current emotions and reactions, reflecting on a past that is as real and present to her as the space in which she writes. She begins to change, persuaded by these forces internal and external, acknowledging herself as a part of the community that suffered together, and moving toward acceptance of the role of surrogate griever. Shin first looks inward, always questioning what writing means to her. “Writing, in itself, allowed me to dream about things that in reality were impossible to achieve, things that were forbidden.... I consider myself a member of society. If I can dream through my writing, doesn’t that mean the society can dream, too?”⁸⁹ Writing restores agency to her past and her autobiography as a literary work allows her to rebuild parts of a history that has been erased: the personal, complex narratives of the *yǒgong*. She starts to see her writing as a process through which others can undergo a similar substitute process of grieving, even confessing that she desires to provide that space for others but emotionally is unable to do so yet. Early on in the novel, Shin longs for the day when she can make peace with the past, addressing her beloved Hui-jae in her writing, “...when I can call them my friends, I would like to make a place for them, and for you—a dignified place of your own. A dignified place, socially or perhaps culturally.”⁹⁰ She recognizes her potential ability to restore agency to the figure of the *yǒgong* even on a small, novelistic level. However, this process taxes her immensely, making her physically and psychologically ill to the point that a beloved professor calls her as she works on the novel, warning her to write less. “For you, to write is to dig up your own flesh to eat,” he says. “If you

⁸⁹ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 179.

⁹⁰ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 170.

dig up too much, it will make you ill.”⁹¹ Shin first is consumed by feelings of loss and inability to grieve, and then consumed by the act of writing, the substitute grieving process that she seeks to complete for herself—and eventually, for others. Contrastingly, Shin Kyong-Nim’s poem, short and filled with self-gratifying shame, serves not to restore agency to the figure of the *yōgong* but rather to assuage personal feelings of guilt. His poem may provide a space for airing feelings of shame for others who were not female factory workers, but its effect is limited, reinforcing the history of erasure by offering a problematically paternalistic apology for his inability to prevent his “little sisters” from experiencing a rough life. His writing is self-serving, whereas in novelist Shin Kyung-sook’s writing, she loses control but accepts it as a necessary forfeiture: “I am the one writing it but I cannot do as I intend....But I start thinking that now, whichever story I choose to tell, the story should not be aimed solely at myself.”⁹² Rather than seeking solely her own agency, she strives to include others, facilitating a new possibility in which the unnamed masses might free themselves from being objects and become subjects in their own stories. It is her ultimate sacrifice for those she once loved. Her book becomes an act of love and an apology.

Shin wonders in the very first and last lines of the novel what writing truly is. “I ponder the act of writing. What does writing mean to me?”⁹³ Her method of processing personal trauma and loss as an individual is indisputably a public one: she is a writer who publishes works based on her lived experiences. Moreover, her lived experiences as a girl sacrificing her youth and health in a factory are shared with numerous others, both those that she encounters in her formative years and those that she will never meet. Characters-turned-readers expect her to restore the mourning process through her writing; they expect her to restore their erased agency

⁹¹ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 230.

⁹² Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 339.

⁹³ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 369.

and dignity as well. As a population whose efforts in organizing grassroots movements were largely overshadowed by later efforts, whose femininity, youth, and access to education was diminished or precluded completely, these female factory workers had long been denied a space to mourn these losses, as well as inhibited in forming a community in which to find solace. Shin realizes that the answer is in writing. Writing, which Shin loves, both torments her and releases her from that which torments her: “When this writing is complete....Could I be released from the violence and savagery, the chaos and frailty, which, by fits and starts, had been tormenting me from inside?”⁹⁴ Shin’s personal identity and public status transforms her into the ultimate surrogate griever, one who can paint with words what has been lost, and provide a medium through which time becomes fluid: a book written with “[t]he past in present tense, the present in past tense.”⁹⁵ By the time Shin reaches the end of the novel, she has come to terms with this responsibility:

Only now I call them my friends....they, my anonymous friends, have given birth to a piece of my inner world....And that I, on my part, must give birth, through my words, to their own place of dignity in this world.⁹⁶

Conclusion

This novel stands as a personal testament for the hundreds of thousands of young female factory workers who endured inhumane treatment and sacrificed for their families during the rapid industrialization of the Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan regimes of the 1970s and 1980s in South Korea. It provides a structure and focus through the lived experience and emotional depth of author-protagonist, Shin Kyung-sook, that personalizes the sacrifice and

⁹⁴ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 174.

⁹⁵ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 28.

⁹⁶ Shin, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, 365.

suffering overshadowed by the accomplishments of students and laborers in later years, oversimplified and erased in various forms of public memory such as Shin Kyong-Nim's poem, "I Felt Ashamed, Little Sisters", and forgotten in the semi-restoration of agency to those *yŏgong* who were involved in grassroots activism. In Shin Kyung-sook's novel, the oppressed of the oppressed find a voice that they recognize and that resounds with them rather than an imposition from a society that demeans every aspect of their identity—their lost youths as factory slaves, subordinated women, and the undereducated of society; these same facets of Shin's own identity combined with her location in the transitional category of uncertainty and shame bring her close to becoming the perfect vehicle to restore their agency and convey their grievances and grieving. *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* is a book wherein memory is in flux with time, in which present and past are one and the same. In this way, Shin brings back to life her own lost youth and the lost youth of so many other women, though she first seeks solely to heal herself and to undo the loss of her close friend, Hui-jae. Hui-jae is the ultimate symbol of lost youth, having died in the midst of hers, crumpled under the combined weight of doubled oppression and a young relationship gone awry. Shin's very process of writing her novel, which is exposed to readers through her musings and present-day encounters, as well as the novel itself, together become a replacement space through which loss can be processed; an enormous need for grieving, which has been denied its proper time and space, finally finds a substitute through writing. By the end of the novel, Shin Kyung-sook has sufficiently processed her own loss and at last can accept the role of substitute griever. However, this does not mean that the processing of loss is complete simply because the novel ends. The process continues because there will always be encounters that stir up losses of the past. This has been made clear through Shin's manipulation of the past and present in her writing. The key difference at the end of the novel is that Shin accepts and

promises to strive to use writing to ameliorate the losses of others and to recreate the narrative that has been erased, though she still ponders the same question with which she opens the book: “I ponder the act of writing. What does writing mean to me?” In this repetition, the narrative of *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* finally completes itself. Yet her question repeated on the final page now carries the nuance of her novelized transformation from a victim of loss to a restorer of that which has been lost by the many *yŏgong* denied agency and complexity in a public sphere dominated by patriarchy and oppression. Through her own life story, Shin Kyung-sook, the girl who wrote loneliness, becomes surrogate griever and restorer of the complex, non-activist *yŏgong*.

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