
Cyborgs, Cyphers, and Feminist Compromise in Contemporary South Korean Science Fiction

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When asked to describe the principle behind her fiction writing, Korean science-fiction author Yun I-hyŏng immediately responded with “I can speak very clearly about that. It’s health. I’m looking toward health.”¹ Yun’s response seems to exemplify the feminine aspect of Marleen Barr’s distinction between women’s and men’s science fiction (SF). The former, Barr argues, embraces a feminist concern for social problems, whereas men’s SF focuses more on speculation about future technology.² While SF has existed in Korean literature for about a century, the rise of women’s SF in South Korea during the past few decades invites us to speculate about the origins of Korean SF’s feminist potential. What draws contemporary feminist authors to SF, a genre that has traditionally framed itself as masculine? To approach this question, I consider two authors’ textual choices while considering their respective writing processes. These texts involve Yun I-hyŏng’s “The

¹ Sin Yŏn-sŏn, “Yun I-hyŏng ‘Nae sosŏl ūn kŏn’gang ūl para pogo itta’” [“Yun I-hyŏng: ‘My Fiction Looks toward Health’ ”], *Ch’aenŏl Yesŭ*, Accessed March 28, 2018.

² Marleen Barr, “Feminist Fabulation; or, Playing with Patriarchy vs. the Masculinization of Metafiction,” *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 14, no. 2 (1987): 187–91.

Sky Walker” (2008) and Kim Po-yŏng’s “Between Zero and One” (2009) alongside interviews and essays in which those authors hint at their affinity for SF as well as their political ambitions. At times, they seem at odds with themselves: Yun claims she writes pure literature (*soonmunhak*), a realist, apolitical genre, but her story features SF’s speculative imagination as well as prominent references to contemporary political debates like national division and the post–Cold War regional order. Kim, on the other hand, makes no apologies for writing SF, but she concedes that her devotion to hard SF alienates some readers. I argue these apparent generic contradictions merely reveal sophisticated authorial strategies when we situate them in the adversarial environment of Korean literature. Indeed, Yun and Kim’s rather ambiguous writing styles reflect the compromises other Korean women have made in order to gain a political platform in male-dominated literary spheres. Thus, while the emergence of Korean women’s SF may appear to SF fans as a masculine genre’s feminist rebranding, perhaps it is better understood as the gradual transition of earlier feminist literary projects into a new generic space.

Yun’s “The Sky Walker”³ occurs in a post-apocalyptic future bearing an uncanny resemblance to the present day. Society is divided between two prominent religious groups: on the one hand, pseudo-Christian followers of the dragon god Drakis; and on the other, those who believe a cosmic being named Prometheans averted human extinction by endowing humans with alien technology and scientific wisdom. Chi-hyŏn, the story’s protagonist and narrator, comes from a family of devout Drakianists who have cultivated her talent for trampolining, a form of athletic worship that honors Drakis by imitating his manner of flight. As she grows up, however, Chi-hyŏn begins to doubt her childhood faith, and in the course of exploring her atheist

³ The story was first published in 2008 in the *Crossroads Webzine* and later anthologized in Yun’s 2011 collection *K’ŭn nŭktae p’arang*. I quote from the forthcoming English translation by Kyunghye Eo. Yun I-hyŏng. “The Sky Walker.” Translated by Kyunghye Eo. Unpublished manuscript, PDF, downloaded from Blackboard March 28, 2018.

suspicions, she ventures beyond the immense wall that separates Seoyong (a pun on *Seoul* and *dragon*) from the nuclear decontamination zone. There, she encounters a ragtag group of Prometheanist athletes who practice tang-tang, a freer form of trampolining that employs multiple trampolines in a larger arena and permits the sorts of daredevil maneuvers banned in Drakianist trampolining. Tang-tang intrigues Chi-hyŏn, and she begins to study its techniques with a Drussian tang-tang athlete named Yuri. However, Chi-hyŏn is undermined by her own ambition. She abandons Drakianism and gets suspended from competitive trampolining, only to discover that she lacks the transhuman gravity-bending ability that enables tang-tang artists to pull off their impressive stunts.

Beyond its title's reference to *Star Wars*, the keen political edge of "The Sky Walker" signals a deeper connection to SF's dystopic tradition of social clash. Drakorea holds an uncanny resemblance to contemporary South Korea. Although hostility is not apparent between the Drakoreans and Drussians nor between the Drakianists and Prometheanists, the social divisions nevertheless rub uneasily against the protagonist's overarching hope for unity. For example, Chi-hyŏn ponders religion:

My tentative conclusion is that neither the Dragon God nor the aliens ever really existed. Humans were just lucky enough to reconstruct a civilized way of life, and then chose to believe in whatever they wanted to believe.

But the things people believe in end up shaping the world. (290)

Chi-hyŏn's resigned tone stresses the intractability of social difference. Much like contemporary Korea, Drakorea's neoliberal order rests on enduring narratives of regional division and economic stratification.⁴ In a sense, Chi-hyŏn engages in the speculative project of SF through her desire to venture beyond the wall and challenge Drakianism's cramped

⁴ On the neoliberal characteristics of contemporary Korean society, see Cho Hae-joang, "The Spec Generation." For an explicitly feminist examination of similar issues, see Song, "A Room of One's Own."

worldview. She longs for a different frame of reference, or what Darko Suvin calls “a mapping of possible alternatives” to a future that seems predestined.⁵ Yet Chi-hyŏn must accept a more modest victory: The Drakianist priests loosen their rules to allow higher jumps, and Chi-hyŏn returns to mainstream trampolining and starts training for the next Drakolympics. She also begins to yield to her mother’s tireless insistence on reading Dragon Scriptures every day. Chi-hyŏn’s accession to the social hierarchy does not offer readers the sense of political closure conferred by, for example, the young hero’s crisis of complicity at the end of Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game*. But the political references Yun includes along the way connect “The Sky Walker” to canonical SF in that they transform a contrived future into a sandbox for reimagining the contemporary, and Yun reveals herself as an inventive and politically engaged author.

However, when Yun discusses her own work in person, she outlines a strikingly more complex generic position. She admits only reluctantly of her SF influences, instead focusing on the apolitical literary orientation of pure literature (*soonmunhak*). For example, Sin Yŏn-sŏn begins one interview by asking for Yun’s thoughts on the postmodern impulse to overcome genre boundaries.⁶ Yun first defends genre distinctions: “I think [the different genres] should have respect for one another. Back when I didn’t know anything, I used to think that the division between pure literature and genre literature would disappear, should disappear. That doesn’t seem right.” Yun further complicates this response in answering a follow-up question about her own generic affiliation. Despite Yun’s earlier assent that her fiction contains “science-fictional elements,” Yun says, “I think of myself as an author of pure literature. That’s if I had to choose between the two,” with the interpretation that “the two” refers to genre literature and pure literature. Later on, the interviewer asks Yun how she decided to become a writer.

⁵ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 24.

⁶ Sin Yŏn-sŏn, “Yun I-hyŏng.”

Yun answers, “It may be unappealing to say this, but ... I was a Haruki [Murakami] fan.” Even as she acknowledges her creative debt to Murakami’s speculative fiction, Yun situates reading Murakami’s work as a girlhood pastime.⁷ What compels Yun to make these apologies—for wishing genre distinctions would fade, for reading Murakami?

Yun’s noncommittal responses offer a glimpse of an authorial strategy that seeks to incorporate her speculative and political ambitions into a literary scene dominated by realist values. Rather than write off Yun’s disavowal of SF as simple elitism, I believe her half-embrace of *soonmunhak* is a literary example of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls strategic essentialism.⁸ In the interview cited above, after Yun identifies herself as an author of *soonmunhak*, she adds, “For now, I tend to be immersed in the pure-literature system.” Her phrasing suggests that Yun views her standing within the *soonmunhak* community primarily as an avenue of opportunity; once she has secured a publishing contract, she is not afraid to blur the genre’s realist conventions. In other words, Yun sees herself as an author of *soonmunhak* only insofar as *soonmunhak* shares her humanist values (“I’m looking toward health,” she says).⁹ On the other hand, SF’s capacity for dreaming about alterity is what empowers Yun to traverse beyond genre conventions in depth.¹⁰ Yun’s inconsistent genre geography in the interview thus directs us to her innovative genre-bending in the pages of “The Sky Walker.” Indeed, Yun’s reluctant affiliation with *soonmunhak* resembles her character Chi-hyŏn’s return to Drakianist trampolining: by willfully acceding to the given social order, Yun and Chi-hyŏn alike bargain for a measure of creative latitude.

⁷ When Sin Yŏn-sŏn asks Yun what sort of literature she reads now, Yun’s hesitation is palpable: “I like realist literature and genre literature alike. I also like Korean literature. And I also like SF.”

⁸ Spivak’s work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, deals with nationality; I am taking *essentialism* in its conceptual sense of accession to existing social categories.

⁹ In addition to health, Yun mentions to the interviewer the politics of memory (perhaps a nod to the counterhistorical project of *minjung* literature) and the challenges of intergenerational communication.

¹⁰ Per Suvin’s thesis in *Metamorphoses*, as cited above.

Yun is not the first female author to make such compromises in pursuit of broader artistic goals. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar liken women who write in patriarchal contexts to “cyphers,” *cypher* meaning both *null* (because women are assumed to lack literary agency) and *inscrutable* (because when they nonetheless *do* write, they are shunned by the literary mainstream and called nonsensical).¹¹ In SF, already a marginal genre in Korean literature overall, Yun faces the added challenge of working in a male-dominated field.¹² This challenges explains why she describes her relationship to genre as not a choice between literary conventions, but a strategic affinity for one social “system,” articulated through what she calls a “generic code” (*changnũ chōgin k’odũ*).¹³ By packaging her SF as the more respected *soonmunhak*, Yun embraces a strategy similar to those that other Korean women have used to secure a place in Korean literature. For example, Kyeong-hee Choi has framed Ch’oe Chōng-hŭi’s pro-Japanese collaborationist stories as a covert indictment of Korean nationalist patriarchy, while Sunyoung Park has applied Gilbert and Gubar’s notion of palimpsestic writing to Kang Kyōng-ae’s journalistic narratives of women’s poverty.¹⁴ Socialist realism and SF represent opposite literary epistemologies, but in unapologetically embracing her chosen genre, Kang also resembles the next contemporary SF author I turn to, Kim Po-yōng.

If Yun’s authorial strategy involved distancing herself from the SF community while adopting the genre’s literary conventions, Kim Po-yōng bears the SF label with pride and pushes the genre in new

¹¹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 60.

¹² My implication isn’t that the pure-literature community is less patriarchal than the SF community in a normative sense. Rather, it seems Yun herself has found the pure-literature system more receptive to her own literary goals.

¹³ Sin Yōn-sōn, “Yun I-hyōng.”

¹⁴ Choi, Kyeong-hee, “Another Layer of the Pro-Japanese Literature: Ch’oe Chōnghŭi’s ‘The Wild Chrysanthemum,’” *Poetica* 52 (1999): 61–87; Park, Sunyoung, *The Proletarian Wave: Literature and Leftist Culture in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2015.

directions using her rich knowledge of science and literary theory. Kim is also unlike Yun in that Kim makes no attempt to obscure her political ambitions. In the author's note to Kim's story "Between Zero and One," she implies that the story critiques President Lee Myung-bak's education policy.¹⁵ Nonetheless, Kim also inhabits a complex identity. I argue that her enthusiasm for politically charged SF represents a different, but equally strategic, response to the same systemic issues Yun dodges by affiliating with *soonmunhak* instead of SF. Like South Korean factory-girl authors of the 1970s and '80s, Kim may sacrifice some visibility by adopting a marginal genre, but she gains an opportunity to participate in a literary community that shares her political and epistemic values.¹⁶ Thus, rather than disavow science fiction, Kim advocates for literary practices that will broaden the genre's readership and raise its critical standing. In her essay "On Writing SF," Kim asks why SF faces a tepid reception among some readers.¹⁷ Her answer suggests Korean SF is overdue to make a turn toward social, and perhaps feminist, engagement. Kim notes that SF creators must answer contradictory demands: while lay readers complain the science is too hard and distracts from the plot, scientists take a red pen to every scientific error. Kim shares her "workarounds" for appeasing these critics. She writes her stories using a "dual structure" that includes both technological speculation and emotional drama, and

¹⁵ "While I was making up my mind about what to write, one day I had a dream in which the current president appeared as a high-school teacher. And I felt that his every aspect overlapped perfectly with a schoolteacher whom I'd terribly disliked—that while he was a reflection of society as a whole, he was also a self-portrait; that he was someone who'd escaped from one of my childhood nightmares. Instead of being an old story from my childhood, I felt this was a story that continues even now. So I decided to write that story" (Kim, *Chinhwa sinhwa*, 326).

¹⁶ See Barraclough, *Factory Girl Literature*, esp. ch. 3, which argues factory-girl literature bore a unique capacity for expressing the conflicted subjectivity of young women who were the products and producers of modernity but not its beneficiaries.

¹⁷ Kim Po-yŏng, "SF rŭl ssŭntanŭn kŏt."

she does as much background research as possible while also accepting the inevitability of occasional scientific errors.¹⁸

Kim's offers a virtuosic demonstration of dual structure in "Between Zero and One,"¹⁹ a story whose commission request read simply "unconditional hard SF."²⁰ The story is propelled by an eccentric informant named Thick Glasses, who travels through time to console Mrs. Kim after her daughter, Su-ae, committed suicide. Mrs. Kim blames herself for her daughter's death, precipitated by an escalating series of arguments over the girl's declining academic performance and her involvement in a youth protest calling for the end of "old-fashioned education" (239). We learn that Su-ae's rebelliousness stemmed from a suspicion that her schoolteachers, rabid anti-communists who teach "obsolete physics like Newtonian mechanics" (263), had created a time-travel device and were abusing it to implement their conservative ideology.²¹ As Thick Glasses reveals, this conspiracy theory was entirely true, and Thick Glasses is herself the accomplished scientist whom Su-ae, had she survived, would have grown into. Moving back in time, Thick Glasses visits Su-ae and tries to vindicate her, but she fails to avert the girl's suicide, leaving the reader to speculate about Thick Glasses' true identity and the implications of editing the past. As Kim explains in her essay on SF authorship, the primary structure in "Between Zero and One" is this thought experiment about the paradoxes

¹⁸ Kim jokes, "A criticism often made of authors is, 'If you just Googled it once, you would've known.' But in order to Google, I'd first have to know what I don't know. And if I Googled everything, it'd really take a 'Google' (10¹⁰⁰) hours" (ibid.).

¹⁹ The story is anthologized in Kim's *Chinhwa sinhwa*; I quote from the forthcoming English translation by Eunhye Jo and Melissa Chan. Jo graciously provided me her digitized version of the Korean text as well as the editor's comments on her translation.

²⁰ Kim Po-yōng, "SF rül ssūntanūn kōt." Elsewhere, she quotes the commission as reading, "as hard as your heart desires" (*Chinhwa sinhwa*, 326).

²¹ Note Kim's reference to Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, in which Nazi scientists plot to invade and racially purify parallel universes. In a literal sense, these fictional characters fulfill Jameson's fear that utopic literature is a covert "attempt to colonize the future, to draw the unforeseeable back into tangible realities" in Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), 228.

of causality inherent in time travel. However, Kim decided to heighten the story's political and emotional drama after recalling her own mother's reaction to "Beneath the Earth," one of Kim's earlier, nerdier stories: "But child, what does the whole thing mean?"

Kim humbly maintains that most SF creators employ the dual-structure technique, but I argue Kim's use of it lends a political potency to her text that could not exist in either conventional SF or the rarefied environment of *soonmunhak*. As Marleen Barr observes, feminist fabulation, her preferred term for women's SF, features a concern for social justice absent in the technological hyperfixation of men's SF.²² In "Between Zero and One," the fictional technology of time travel enables productive intergenerational conversations. Thick Glasses endears herself to Su-ae by disproving the girl's assumption that "grown-ups don't understand quantum mechanics around here" (261). Mrs. Kim, in contrast, finds Su-ae's rabbit, a social-networking device, and worries that it will distract her daughter from schoolwork. In fact, Su-ae has been using the rabbit to practice English with peers around the globe (262), and her adult counterpart Thick Glasses works as a sort of intertemporal diplomat who fields calls on her holographic phone from the Secretary of Health and Human Services (246). For present-day readers, such images spotlight changing expectations of young people and the pitfalls of a rigid education system that lags behind technological development. Consider the critical role of social media in 2008's youth-organized "Mad Cow" protests of Lee Myung-bak's free-trade policy: in Donna Haraway's sense of the term, Su-ae's friends and the 2008 protestors alike can be called "cyborgs" whose transhumanity empowers their ironic, postmodern style of protest and endows them with the political vocabulary needed to combat a system as intractable as technocapitalism.²³ Barr sets feminist SF apart from men's SF with

²² Barr, "Feminist Fabulation."

²³ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In *The Cybercultures Reader*, edited by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 291:324. On the role of irony, pastiche, and internet memes in the 2008 protests, see Kang, "Internet

its incorporation of more elements of social engagement in feminist SF. On the other hand, Haraway sees feminist SF as improving on feminist realism by speaking to our contemporary transhuman ontology.²⁴ It seems that Kim threads the needle of feminist SF by passing both “tests” of incisive political commentary and a speculative vision of a society changed indelibly by technology. Despite the genre’s marginal status, Kim chooses to write within the genre of SF because she knows no other genre can carry her message with such force.

Neither Yun I-hyōng nor Kim Po-yōng can be fully appreciated under the conventional hierarchy of literary genres. Instead, both authors in both their stories and in the way they describe their writing processes move between generic identities in a way that reflects continuity with the strategies other women have used to achieve visibility in the literary mainstream. This analysis reminds us that like gender or womanhood itself, genre is a kind of performance, “a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end.”²⁵ Thus, in her interviews, when Yun downplays her political edge and takes a bashful tone in citing Haruki Murakami, she associates herself with the apolitical, realist canon of *soonmunhak* even as her stories like “The Sky Walker” stretch *soonmunhak*’s political and empirical horizons. On the other hand, never apologizes for writing SF, yet her formal innovation of the dual structure can also be read as a genre-bending project that recasts SF in heightened political terms. While women’s SF is a relatively new genre in Korea, such authorial strategies recall those of Yun and Kim’s predecessors. For example, Hye-Ryoung Lee suggests the case of labor activist Kwōn In-suk as prototypical of *minjung* feminist authors. Kwōn was sexually assaulted

Activism Transforming Street Politics.” On technocapitalism, see Wajcman, Judy. “TechnoCapitalism Meets TechnoFeminism” (also discussed below).

²⁴ In other words, Haraway seems to agree with Park’s observation that for the (Korean) SF authors of the ’90s, “science fiction was akin to a new ‘realism’ for an advanced society in which science was no longer the exclusive domain of government” (“Between Science and Politics,” 19).

²⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 45.

by police interrogators and later “emphasized that the violence committed against her should be regarded as the oppression of a worker rather than the violation of a woman ... in order to avoid her gender identity overshadowing the cause of labor activism.”²⁶ Yun and Kim make different trades, but the underlying strategy of feminist compromise (or patriarchal bargain²⁷) remains.

Yun and Kim are both contemporary authors. Further research may contextualize them and their peers in the larger history of Korean SF. In her genealogy of twentieth-century Korean SF, Sunyoung Park traces the genre from its positivist embrace of technology in the 1960s, through the dystopian, *minjung*-infused anxiety of the '70s and '80s, to a renewed hope in the '90s for liberation through connectivity.²⁸ This periodization agrees with Judy Wajcman's history of feminism's relationship to technology: Whereas early radical feminists concluded that technology was a tool of the patriarchy, in the 1990s, a wave of cyberfeminist activity arose thanks to the early internet's anonymity and freedom. Wajcman, writing in 2006, called for a technofeminist approach to scholarship that would challenge cyberfeminism's technological determinism by centering feminist actors instead of the technologies they use.²⁹ In a sense, Yun's and Kim's work answers Wajcman by offering a more complex appraisal of the relationships among technology, capital, and feminism. In “The Sky Walker,” Chi-

²⁶ Lee, Hye-Ryoung. “Bright Constellation: The Rise and Significance of Women's Liberation Literature in 1980s South Korea,” Translated and edited by Sunyoung Park, Unpublished manuscript, PDF, downloaded from Blackboard March 2, 2018, 239.

²⁷ Kandiyoti, Deniz. “Bargaining with Patriarchy.” *Gender & Society* 2, no. 3 (Sept. 1988): 274–90.

²⁸ Park generously allowed me to consult her forthcoming article, “Between Science and Politics.”

²⁹ Wajcman, Judy. “TechnoCapitalism Meets TechnoFeminism: Women and Technology in a Wireless World.” *Labour & Industry* 16, no. 3 (April–May 2006): 7–20. Haraway's “A Cyborg Manifesto” is a representative example of what Wajcman calls cyberfeminism. In Korea, the anonymous (but widely regarded as lesbian) author Djuna, who rose to prominence in the 1990s, is perhaps the prototypical (dis)embodiment of Haraway's cyborg activist; see Park, “Between Science and Politics,” 31–35.

hyŏn's hopes of escaping the rigidities of Drakianist trampolining are thwarted by the Prometheanists' technological and genetic advantages, and we are reminded that technology is just as likely to compound inequality as it is to transcend social division. Meanwhile, in "Between Zero and One," even the power of time travel isn't enough to protect Su-ae from her suicidal impulses. In these instances of contemporary Korean SF, technology embeds a range of potential futures, and not all of them are positive. But, as the narrator of "Between Zero and One" wryly observes, "Was there ever a time when probability didn't rule?" (260).

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