Strange intimacies

Reading migration and prostitution

What does it mean to have a body, to be in movement and to be female at the same time? I approach two works of modern Korean literature, Kang Young-sook’s Rino (2011) and Oh Jung-hee’s Chinatown (1979) with this question. These works demonstrate that the trajectories of migration and prostitution often intrude upon one another. While such convergences and divergences may not form a regular pattern, I observe that such irregularities can be traced back to one question, one that deals with conceptualizations of the female (migrant) body.

In Kang’s novel, we follow Rino’s unidentified journey from her birth country to her final destination, country P, via a third country, a trip which greatly resembles that of North Korean defectors, although the novel resists any identification. This journey involves presenting her as a “body in movement”, leading an existence of “bare life.” In this short story, we peek into the unnamed narrator’s anecdotical story of her youth in a certain unidentified Chinatown (presumed to be Incheon, Korea), where different forms of migration come together – domestic migration (such as the narrator’s family), Chinese immigrants, and US soldiers and military prostitutes/comfort women. In both narratives, themes of migration and prostitution make inadvertent encounters. There exists a perverse relationship between migration and prostitution, which renders movement erotic and prostitution migratory. In this paper, I study this relationship and question why female bodies in movement are often “reduced down” to or represented as prostituted bodies, and how such intersections occur in literary representations, while also taking into account the ethics of representation.E.P. Richards and slum repair. Notable in the two works is the ways in which representation complicates and obscures a clear understanding of migration and prostitution as central themes to the narratives. There are elements of voyeurism and reverse-voyeurism (not-telling and dis-identifying) that resist a rather traditional understanding of migration and prostitution in their representations. In Chinatown, the nature of the space, in its seeming immobility as an urban settlement, resists an evident understanding of mobility and mobilization.

While people are in complete movement, they are simultaneously under a sedentary guise, as they are considered to be constantly building houses. But the very idea of building new houses is a sign of migration and of an inflow of population into the city. Among the currents of movement are foreigners and the military prostitutes – the former of whom are largely characterized as Chinese immigrants, with the sporadic apparition of Americans (soldiers) – and more importantly, the latter of whom individually occupy rooms and small parts of houses otherwise occupied by families, as the narrator observes. Moreover, there are complexities attached to that very figure of the military prostitute, in how she is commodified, utilized, prostituted, yet then self-prostitutes and ultimately reclaims the experience. These are comparable to the protagonist Rino, in the way she is trafficked and commodified in the beginning of the novel and how, increasingly, she prostitutes herself, allowing her some agency in the prosthetic schema, readable in the lives of female individuals such as herself. Similarity in Rino, the protagonist’s journey of prostitution resists pristine cut definitions of prostitution and migration. There is something repetitive in her futile migration, as she is forced back to her origin numerous times and has to embark on the same journey again; movement becomes a fundamentally flawed concept for Rino. Her movement cannot be traced according to the common understanding that the longer one travels the further one is away from the place of origin. Moreover, Rino cannot travel directly to country P and has to enter through a third country; her world is one of selective mobility, wherein people can move and/or be mobilized according to nationality, race, gender and class. Nevertheless, her immobility is, intriguingly, precisely what causes this movement, thereby granting a peculiar form of migratory liberty.

Bodies and motion

This very kind of selective immobility and entry are a direct result of the practice of national sovereignty (if we can give it so much credit), and consequently a migrant has an anxious relationship with sovereignty. In the introduction to his book Homo Sacer, Agamben questions how “the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the point where originary begins to coincide with the political realm, and ... [the two] enter into a zone of indistinguishable violence; and it imagines the ‘sovereign power’ as ‘the production of a biopolitical body.’” Indeed, the migrant body becomes an unimaginable object here: a bare life, yes, because during migration the migrant is considered only as a body and nothing more, and no other wish to utilize the body then to mobilize. The migrant body is imagined with no will to labor nor to entertainment, because migration is of utmost importance (unless labor is forced or necessary). The migrant body is one that is not subject to a singular national sovereignty, precisely it is also where it is untraceable. At the same time, the migrant body is the ultimate biopolitical object; drawing food and water, it is the body upon which the most regulative power is invested, and the most manipulative too. A body in biopolitical repulsion is one that is always in movement, because bodies are treated and consumed as commodities, passed around in the limits of sovereign power.

Rino’s body, on top of this, is a female body, and this makes it the ideal subject for commodification. And how better to commodify, a woman other than as a prostitute? Rino’s forced and willful participation in the prosthetic schema provides evidence that as a female migrant body, Rino is only transitory and ephemeral in her migratory presence, but also that the prosthetic schema is readily legible: the driving force of commodification and prostitution was already prefigured, which is perhaps why Rino is unsurpassed at herself and sold into prostitution is what that is, despite not having lived through such experiences previously, Rino may carry (or may have carried) with her knowledge or even ‘mammy’ of the schema, in her very being as a female migrant. Yet, does a prior knowledge of the schema mitigate or remove violence in any way? In the metaphor of the prosthetic schema, it no longer matters whether she has been prostituted or prostitutes herself. Yet, this ‘indistinction’ poses an ethical conundrum: underlines of trafficking are left untouched as being that being prostituted and prostituting oneself are of the same register. Eventually, this puzzling enigma is traceable back to the language of sex. When we overwrought narratives of sex only through our encounter or the intercourse, the relational aspect of sex ceases to exist, and hence its textures are overlocked. This is more problematic from an ethical standpoint, when we consider cases in which an unjust power is exerted in the metanarrative of sex? It is a moment when the representational quality of these literary works? How do we read them?

Represenational quality of the female migrant

Indeed, this paper is a call to read for these experiences, and especially the less visible migrants in global histories of migration. I argue both works participate in the non-political discourse of displacement and migration. Here, what determines the legibility of certain representations? Or, what is it that is left unnoticed such as these that resist legibility? The two works I read put this paradoxe into question precisely: what do we get from seeing such figures such as Rino, who is either removed and implanted into the realm of the transitory? How do we – everyone engaged in this process of the literary – represent and are they how are they represented in these works of literature? How do we read them?