

Perspectives on Post-Modernism in Contemporary Korean Fiction *

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1

The significance of whether a work of fiction satisfies the category of a literary movement such as Post-modernism should be defined through the relativity of the work itself towards the movement it is being subjected to and from which one may find those traits that may assimilate the fiction and the movement however inconsistent it may seem. Post-modernism is not a simple factual movement that simply denotes traits that can be discerned in a work of literature, but should be seen and understood and comprehended in conjunction with the literary tendencies/movements that have flourished in each society, which is being constantly renewed and redefined.

It is necessary to remember that by stating 'Post-modern' one does not limit oneself to a literary context, but relates the experience and

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the movement to society; in other words the term Post-modern should be understood in relation to the surrounding environment from which the work takes its significance.¹⁾ So, in evaluating Post-modernism in contemporary Korean fiction one has to grasp not only the form but also the content/context of the stated work in question, and categorize why a work could be defined as Post-modern instead of Modern.

Post-Modernism is also the *means* by which one puts into perspective the *identity crisis* that we see in modern literature and its relevant domains. It is a movement that not only denotes the artistic directions that fiction has taken or is taking, but also shows the changing perspective concerning what can be and will be accepted by the society as artistic, 'artistic' in general terms. And so, to define the traits that may be relative to the literary movement of Post-Modernism in contemporary Korean fictions it is necessary to understand the movement of literature within the Korean social context/boundary. It is also important to put into perspective the ideals that define the literary term such as Post-modern in relation to the authors of contemporary Korean fiction.

The contemporary Korean fictional world/context is a suggestive *space*, where there is no definitive or overarching theory that could address the traits of all works. It is a melting pot, similar to what we see in the present-day literary circles all over the world, where all theories of literature and non-literature are considered as being whether

1) 'A doctrine widely accepted at the present time is that the meaning of a text changes. According to the radical historicistic view, textual meanings changes from era to era; according to the psychologistic view, it changes from reading to reading.'

Hirsch, E.D. Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*, p.6.

relevant or non-relevant. In such a context, that which is defined as being belonging to one denomination is actually hard to define in terms of literature and its movement. Accordingly, this paper will not presume to state overtly that such and such work is Post-modern by trait or nature, but rather, this study will try to narrow the perspective of how one may objectively judge and define a work as *belonging* or *not belonging* to a certain criteria, *criteria* being the properties that we associate with the Post-modern movement. For these and other reasons put forward, the paper will try to define the traits of Post-modernism so as to have an objective *cadre* that which may be pertinent in its description so as to judge the works treated in this paper in a more effective manner.

Post-Modernism is a movement that has raised and has been subjected to numerous questions as to its very definition in circles of literature, critiques and scholars alike. The most common question being: What is Post-Modernism?²⁾ Is it related to Modernism? If yes, How? And Why? If not, then how does one define the movement Post-modernism? For the purpose of this paper defining the term Post-modernism and its corresponding artistic values not to mention the

2) 'If postmodernism covers everything from punk rock to the death of metanarrative, fanzines to Foucault, then it is difficult to see how any single explanatory scheme could do justice to such a bizarrely heterogeneous entity ... If there is any unity to postmodernism at all, then it can be a matter of Wittgensteinian 'family resemblances'; and in this sense it seems to provide an instructive example of its own dogmatic anti-essentialism, of which more later on ... One would, for example, be forced to claim that its single most enduring achievement—the fact that it has helped to place questions of sexuality, gender and ethnicity so firmly on the political agenda ... - was nothing more than a substitute for more classical forms of radical politics, which dealt in class, state, ideology, revolution, material modes of production.'

Eagleton, Terry, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, pp.21~22.

*littérarité*³⁾ of the fiction itself will therefore be the major criteria according to which we may judge in a more relevant fashion the two fictions which will be discussed in this paper.

To paraphrase, we may accept the traditional approach in stating that Post-modernism may be simply understood as being relative to modernism and its corresponding theories, ‘modern’ signifying something *new*⁴⁾, but if the definition and the traits of modernism directly or indirectly limited itself to the very subject that is represented in the content of the work in question, Post-modernism as a literary movement could be defined as that which puts importance on form rather than the content of the work. Of course, this does not mean that a work defined as being Post-modern does not have adequate *content* or *context*, but that if the work which correspond to the criteria ‘modern’ can be defined as that as having something new in its content and form, the Post-modern would be and should be defined in a manner in which all aspects of artistic genres are taken in to account, so a broader champ and with a larger connotation than that of modern and its definitions.⁵⁾

3) The term ‘littérarité’ is used for the purpose of defining whether a given literary text could be designated as being literature or not (para-littérature).

4) ‘La contemporain ne cesse de courir après la modernité. Il ne la rejoint pas toujours. Elle n’est pas le contemporain. Semble tantôt en deça, puis au-delà. Irrattrapable.

L’ancien est contemporain du moderne: la sorcellerie en France, aujourd’hui. La magie, dans la publicité. C’est qu’on prend encore le nouveau, le dernier nouveau, pour le moderne.’

Meschonnic, Henri, *Modernité Modernité*, p.13.

5) ‘Modernity is characterized as the era of *Diesseitigkeit*, namely the abandonment of the sacred vision of existence and the affirmation of the realm of profane value instead, that is of secularization. (b) The key point of secularization, at the conceptual level, is faith in progress (or the ideology of progress), which takes

Post-modernism in the contemporary Korean fiction begins with the *form* and ends with the *content* that one sees in modern fiction. In this paper we will be discussing two typical contemporary works of fiction that have graced the literary horizon of Korea in the past twenty years and are very suggestive of the tendencies of Post-modern: *Kung ma jang ga nun gil* (1990 reprinted in 1998)⁶⁾ by Ha Il-ji and *Oak tap bang* (1999)⁷⁾ by Park Sang-woo.⁸⁾ Research in Post-modernism in Contemporary fiction may also serve to *identify* the cultural identity of Koreans through the descriptions found in the work itself. Of course, in defining the two fictions as being in accordance with the description of the term Post-modern, it is necessary to understand how it denotes the movement Post-modern itself through the details that one finds in the fictions themselves.

To conclude this study, we will try to recognize the *problématiques* regarding what effects and bearings the two fictions may have had or will be having on the literary scene of contemporary Korean fiction, whether in a discrete manner, or in a more overt fashion. Also, through the development of the paper I will try to distinguish the changes that are evident in the '*contextualisations*'⁹⁾ of the fictions

shape through a resumption of the Judeo-Christian vision of history, from which all references to transcendence are 'progressively' eliminated ... (3) This extreme secularization of the providential vision of history is simply the equivalent of affirming the new as the fundamental value.'

Vattimo, Gianni, *The End of Modernity*, p.101.

6) Ha il-ji, *Kung ma jang ga nun gil*. Min eum sa, 4th print, Seoul, 1998.

7) Park sang-woo, 'Oak tap bang,' *The 23rd Lee Sang Literature Awards Collection*. Mun hak sa sang sa, 1999.

8) For identification purposes the initials KMJ will be used for the fiction *Kung ma jang ga nun gil* and OTB for *Oak Tap Bang* in the paper

9) 'Pour mieux définir l'objectivité la compréhension du phénomène de la décontextualisation est impérative, le schéma suivant montre ce dont il s'agit:

themselves and how they are related to the on going process of changes however subtle it may be in the Korean society, and thus the dissolution of *national identity* which I believe stems from this problem of application of an overtly social theory in the domain of literature.

2

The Post-modernism movement in contemporary Korean fiction could be suggested as being—and I might be overstating this—mainly based on the questions relevant to the identity crisis that one sees in today's fictions. This point becomes quite evident if we were to contemplate the fictional world in a more structural sense that does not pertain to the main theme line which is suggested however relative to the encyclopedic definition of the term itself. The two works of fiction

« Décontextualisation » ←-----⇒ « Contextualisation »
 (œuvre; auteur) (compréhension; jugement)



Recontextualisation
 (fonction d'interprétation; lecteur/spectateur)

Quand nous voyons l'uvre représentée ou en état d'écriture pour la première fois, nous pouvons dire que nous sommes en face d'une image décontextualisée. En utilisant la connaissance déjà acquise et des symboles du monde réel (actuel), le lecteur/spectateur interprète cette image en recourant à la recontextualisation, et finalement arrive donner une contextualisation l'image en question. Notamment en utilisant les symboles ou en attribuant aux signifiants les signifiés que ce lecteur/spectateur connaît, ou fabrique, par rapport au monde réel. On peut donc récapituler le schéma de contextualisation de l'œuvre comme suit: «l'œuvre (état de décontextualisation) ⇒ fonction d'interprétation; donne le signe au symbole [lecteur/récepteur, (état de recontextualisation)] ⇒ compréhension (état de contextualisation).»

Yang, gi chan, *Etude littéraire de Beckett et d'O'Neill*, p.45~46.

in question not only provide a general insight as to what a Post-modern fiction in Korea is, but also show a corresponding signature of how Post-modernism writing is encarded in contemporary Korean fiction. One sees clearly these traits in the two texts mentioned, when one analyzes the difference in the way they are presented and structured in relation to those works that which do not qualify as being in the mold of what has and is being presented to the fictional domain of contemporary Korea as being that of Post-modern work/fiction.

In discussing the subject of Post-modernism and its relations to the society and its environment, it is important to denote the subjectivity of such a theoretical stance, and this from an objective viewpoint. In other words it is necessary to develop and further more try to answer the following questions that follows which may give us a more closer perspective of what signifies the very traits that may be discerned as being those of Post-modern. To rephrase, the nature of the statement, acknowledgement of the following is imperative: How is Post-modern environment described or what defines the Post-modern environment and how can these characteristics if there are any, be defined. It is in this papers interest to take into point one outstanding point from the suggested arguments. Furthermore, in response to the facts, that one may not answer in a satisfactory manner all the questions that make up the Post-modern environment, this paper will take into account the bear knowledge of developing the point on the subject of character representation and how it has deviated from the conventional character description, and from the conclusion gathered will try to define the movement of Post-modern in the contemporary Korean fiction. Of course, in stating contemporary Korean fiction it might be argued that the two fictions developed in this research represent only a partial

view/section of the contemporary fictional scene in Korea, but none the less, the two fictions that are in question in this paper shows, I believe, traits that may not be discarded as being simply an irregularity.

3

The striking aspect of the fiction KMJ is that it is made up of characters who are non-descriptive, such as you might well see in any Post-modern fiction. The non-description of the characters brings into question the validity of the story itself,¹⁰⁾ in other words the fictional world of the story itself is questioned thus putting the whole story in a state of limbo where there are no points of reference for the *reader*, even if it is a world of fiction where by consensus anything and everything is possible. The non-descriptive nature of the characters also problematizes the *acceptance* of the character by the *reader*, because in traditional fiction the description of the character is a leading source for determining the theme of the fiction itself. By depriving the reader of this general perspective on which to base his or her readings on, the fiction deviates from the mainstream understanding of the genre of fiction itself.

For example, to denominate the characters only by their initials one subjects them to an in-human cold approach for the reader, because the

10) 'L'œuvre littéraire nouvelle est reçue et jugée non seulement par contraste avec un arrière-plan d'autres formes artistiques, mais aussi par rapport à l'arrière-plan de l'expérience de la vie quotidienne. La composante éthique de sa fonction sociale doit être elle aussi appréhendée par l'esthétique de la réception en termes de question et de réponse, de problème et de solution, tels qu'ils se présentent dans le contexte historique, en fonction de l'horizon où s'inscrit son action.'

Jauss, H. R., *Pour une esthétique de la réception*, p.76.

reader does not have any basis from which to identify the characters, to rephrase, the *intentionnalité*¹¹⁾ factor is eliminated from the work itself. In a normal literary work, the reader would gain a more detailed comprehension of the story as the fiction progresses. With these points in mind, taking a detailed look into the story KMJ raises certain questions that are suggestive of Post-modern fictions. If Post-modern is considered as destroying the so-called *normal world* or normality as one would have it, KMJ definitively could be considered as belonging to the Post-modern genre. One may also question the fact that the story does not adapt itself to a true logical description of a novel nor its genres. If we were to consider the vast majority of *anti-roman/nouveau roman* and the newer tendencies that have proliferated with the conceptions of the new theories one can dictate what may be considered as being Post-modern.

Because of the diverse explications of what a Post-modern writings are and what they may signify, we will try to establish the bases of this research by taking into account the dissolution of the society as its major factor. In short, how characters are represented in a fiction would be the starting point and the outstanding argument of these hypotheses.

In KMJ and in OTB, as developed in the above, the reader not only observes a society where the moral and ethical values have been subjected to changes but also senses in the description of the characters

11) 'Le terme Intentionnalité signifie donc toujours relation de renvoi, c'est-à-dire qu'il désigne la propriété intrinsèque de certains états mentaux d'être à propos de quelque chose d'autre; le terme intention, de même que l'adverbe intentionnellement seront toujours utilisés au sens de but, dessin.'

Schaeffer, Jean-Marie, 'Littérature et intentionnalité,' *Littérature et théorie: Intentionnalité, décontextualisation, communication*, p.12

a feeling of limbo and of dissolution. The main theme lines of the fictions tend to define themselves as that of misunderstanding that we see in the complicated lives of the modern man (which is very evident in fictions that are qualified as being modern with modern characters) but to state that this is the only point of interest would betray a limited perspective on our part. The theme, as stated, not only rests with the difference in the characterization of the characters one sees in the novel, but also of the economics of the society which in turn forces the characters to change and to adapt. While this change can be represented as a trait of a Post-modern writing, by itself it would not be very much insufficient: Society in modern times has changed and the values that one related to society itself has changed with the coming and proliferation of the ideas and ideals.

The interaction of humans (main characters) loses the importance in a world dictated by money, and where money is the gauge of success in life, this trait is one of the essence that which makes the understandings of a fiction categorized as Post-modern so difficult, because while it seems to be an *unimportant trait* it is the main focal point around which the story itself progresses and revolves around. In considering this fact, the economic element is a question directly related to the *dehumanization* or rather *denaturalization* of the society itself¹²⁾, and when viewed in a retrospective view this problem, which seems to be minor, takes on grave importance when one considers the

12) 'Postmodernism may be a response, direct or oblique, to the Unimaginable that Modernism glimpsed only in its most prophetic moments. Certainly it is not the Dehumanization of the Arts that concerns us now; it is rather the Denaturalization of the planet and End of Man. We are I believe, inhabitants of another Time and another Space, and we no longer know what response is adequate to our reality.' Hassan, Ihab, *The Postmodern Turn*, p.39.

society that one sees in today's Korean society. And thus, one might suggest that all and everything is related to and refers to the economics suggested in the fiction itself.

In KMJ and OTB, the description of *dehumanization* stems from an economic theme. All the minor themes are subordinate to economic values, and so normal human warmth is discarded as soon as economic values and their importance comes to surface, and so one could say that all the interactions, whether traditional or not, depend on economics. In the KMJ the main character R is from a poor family and has studied in a way to finish his degree by using another character J to fulfill his economic needs, where as in the OTB the principal character Min-su dreams of escaping the present and the reality to find a safe haven not subjected to the principles of economics, but fails utterly because in his search for the perfect love and thus an escape from the present and the reality he falls in love with a woman who represents the society and its inhabitants. Even though, he might be satisfied with his surroundings, it is not an option for the woman, to stay there and so the main character is discarded for the benefit of the reality, which is dictated by the pipe dreams of economical welfare. It is also important to mention about the difference that one notices in the two main characters of the two narratives, in KMJ we find the main character R as being an highly intelligent and highly educated character with a PhD in literature while the main character Min-su in the OTB is a simple sales person though he is a graduate from an university system. From this denotation one can safely conclude that the Post-modern and the problems that are inferred by the economics does not distinguish itself through the personal status/accomplishments of the main characters, but is

distinguished by the movement that which encompasses the society and its values. From these observations, one can with moderate accuracy state that the problem of Post-modernity in contemporary Korean novels revolves around the theme of *Identity crisis* and its consequences, not just the *dual motivation* or that denoting traditional values but more so to a certain degree the resounding question of *self-consciousness* of the characters being portrayed.

The post modern era is a demanding age where the natural aspects of characters take on importance rather than that of the social values, thus one see the nomadic values of society brought to forefront of the cultural aspect of each and every society. The nomadic situations that can be seen in the two fictions can be drawn from the understanding of the main characters that the fictions present. The characters in the two fictions does not seem to have any relative roots as to the values that are traditional, they do not correspond to the ethical or moral values that which would have been a necessary bases for a traditional hero. In considering these facts, one has to identify what actually is different and also what actually makes the characters different from the traditional modern character.

The traits as we have designated as that of '*nomadic*' refers to and is relative to that which is non *status quo* of the society and its corresponding values. In the fiction KMJ the main character is represented as someone having trouble adapting to the values that has till today regulated society. The character is somewhat from outside the societal boundaries, thus one sees, a personage completely different from what is defined as a mold for a traditional hero (he constantly refers to the life in Paris, France as being ideal though it is not his culture of birth, this difference might be the reason for his

non-acceptance of the Korean customs when he comes back, but it is to be noted as well that however R might have been described in the book by the author and with what special purpose, the reader only sees someone who does not fit into the present Korean society). The character could be defined as a *parasite* of the society, and he represents to a certain degree no moral or ethical values. He lives off J, with whom he has been in relation with and this relation when taken into perspective is a relation of economics or one might say that of consent for the better welfare of the two, in this perspective the reader senses that all the codes that which govern the society and its inhabitants have become non-significant, since traditional moral values such as marriage, discipline or happiness is regulated and is submissive to the economic welfare of oneself, a change from traditional to overtly westernized values.

These same traits are discerned in the fiction OTB as well. The main character Min-su seems at a loss and is an outcast of the society and its inhabitants. In OTB the relation of the main character to the outside society is at a permanent loss, he does not adapt or he cannot make himself become a part of the society that surrounds him. The story starts out as a love story but ends all correlation with that type of progression once it journeys into the dilemma of how to adapt and to survive (He falls in love with his dream counterpart only to feel safe-haven outside of normal values, the corresponding story falls out as the woman of the dreams becomes more and more materialistic in a world governed by ideals, where the main character tries to implant himself, this signifies the clashes between the moral and ethical values that we have denoted in the above). His fall is the very definition of *nomadic values* and that of the *modern hero*,¹³⁾ whether he himself

choose to be in limbo or not.

4

The nomadic values of these themes (the inability of the main character to adapt to the world in which they must survive in, and thus their desolate search for comprehension in a society which at the same time rejects them and offers no escape hatch for them) that which make up the two stories can be regulated by stating that the two fictions are in relative connection to each other. The destruction of traditional values, whether it be beneficial or harmful, tends to relate the world of fiction that is described in the two fictions to the present realities that can be noted in the present Korean society. In this sense, the two works not only infringe on the border of influencing the fictions of today but also by representing the changes in the society denotes that the space of fictional world is not only based on reality but also forms the present reality.¹⁴⁾ This aspect although seemingly insignificant should be taken into account if and what aspects are discussed in the forum of Post-modernism and how the movement itself has deviated from that of social theory to accommodate the theories of fiction and arts.

13) 'L'entrée dans la modernité entraîne donc une double séparation : la création divine éclate en nature objectivée et en intervention humaine subjective, et l'homme se sépare en genre humain, responsable de l'organisation du monde, et en individu qui ressent cette organisation comme étrangère à lui.'

Bürger, P., *La Prose de la modernité*, p.21.

14) 'Ils ne visent pas à donner au spectateur l'illusion du réel, mais à l'entraîner dans un espace imaginaire qui donne accès à l'âme humaine et aux vérités générales.'

Gliksohn, J-M., *L'Espressionnisme littéraire*, p.118.

The prospects of a fiction in relation to the reality as being formed through the generalities of the fiction corresponding to the reality of the society itself seems to be the major categorization of Post-modernism work as we have noted in the two works cited in this paper. To accommodate these types of circumstances, the fiction must be reflective of the society from where it is issued. Although the story line and its links to the reality might be suggestive due to the characteristics of fiction and its world of make believe, if the fiction is not correlative with the reality, it loses the basis, which makes the fiction acceptable to the reader and the society. The relation that is denoted by the tendency such as Post-modernism and its relative theories becomes more interesting since the link between the fictional world, the world of hypotheses derives its identity through, and only through, the acceptance of the work by the general public.

The general public is, I believe, what these two works of fiction in question derive their *littéarité* from. Korean society now accepts the fact that not all fictions are inclined to be traditional in nature, because the society itself is also going through great changes that have influenced it in a direct manner. Even though the story line in the two narratives or the values that are denoted in the novels themselves may be different and hard to comprehend for the general reader, one can safely state that the two narratives are 'literature' because of the *relativeness* that the two narratives shows to today's Korean society itself, thereby opening up a new era of Post-modern literature in Korea.

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Abstract

The Contemporary Korean fiction today to a certain context infringes on the outskirts of mainstream literary theories diversified to an extent that anything and everything that are printed are defined as literature. The two fictions that the study is based upon, probably, shows the effects of postmodernism in Korean fictional 'space' in that the representation of the said fictions veers clear from that with which one might associate in contemplating the traditional Korean fiction. The study, though it seems, based on a more of a societal perspective rather than traditional literary perspective is to be noted in reference with the postmodern theories that we identify with today.

The paper takes look at the changes that can be noted in the fictions: *Kyung ma jang ga nun gil* by Ha Il-ji and *Oak tap bang* by Park Sang-woo. The main objective of the paper is that it tried to *identify* the cultural identity of Koreans through the descriptions found in the two works. While concluding as to why these two fictions can be categorized as belonging to the genre of postmodernism the research also tries to formulate what and how postmodernism can be discerned in fictional genre and this especially in today's Contemporary Korean fiction.