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Affiliate School Poems in *A Good World* by Lee Eunbong

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze poems dealing with an affiliate school in *A Good World* by Lee Eunbong. Sardonicly titled, the book contains poems that deal with the daily lives of mid-low classes in Korea that was undergoing industrialization around the 1970s. In six poems, the poet describes the facets of the affiliate school from a negative perspective. In "Affiliate School. Preface" he expresses his skepticism resulting from being faced with the harsh reality of school where normal education is impossible. In "Affiliate Schools. Sound," female students working as factory laborers are reified. In "Affiliate School. Geumja," "Affiliate School. Park Geum-a" and "Affiliate School. Letter," the speaker is sympathetic for the students suffering from hard work in destitution. In "Affiliate School. Opening Day," Lee criticizes the affiliate school system which is improperly run by school owner.

Keywords: Affiliate School, industrialization, reified, destitution

1. INTRODUCTION

Lee Eunbong(1954~) is a poet who has published more than a dozen books. His first published book is titled *Joeun Sesang*(1986), which means 'A Good World.' The title is ironical, for it is mainly concerned with the difficult lives of mid-low classes in Korea. As Baek indicates, "A Good World is possible only for capitalists or dictators"[1]. In "Afterword," the poet himself expresses his thought:

What I intended in this collection is to render the common daily lives displaying actual living of people 'here and now.'

Humbly, I believe in the progress of history. For the history of our people progressing towards equalitarian daily lives and unified nation despite all the difficulties, I hope this book will be widely read and extensively used [2].

The world he presents in poetic forms is filled with adversities of mid-low classes. He is critical about the contemporary society of Korea. However, his poems do not vehemently address it. Jang Youngwoo indicates that Lee's early poems show resistance against the military regime in a mild tone of Chungcheong province,

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yet unbedding [3]. In this light, Kim Sa-in evaluates his poetry, “Lee Eunbong’s poems are mild and warm. . . . Not losing warmhearted attitude in living hard lives is in itself a great help and consolation to others.” Aware of such a mode, Kim points to “common citizen’s warm-heartedness” [4] in his works. Park Dongeok also indicates that Lee’s early poems are grounded on the loss of hope and criticism on urban life where industrial capitalism predominates [5].

The collection actually contains poems formerly published from 1976 to 1985. It is composed of 5 parts, which is arranged in a time order. Several poems feature an affiliate school called *buseol hakgyo* in Korean, which is included in the second part of the book. Six poems include ‘buseol hakgyo’ in the titles: “Affiliate School. Preface,” “Affiliate School. Sound,” “Affiliate school. Geumja,” “Affiliate school. Opening Day,” “Affiliate school. Letter” and “Affiliate school. Park Geum-a.”

The situation of affiliate schools needs to be grasped first. Affiliate schools were set up for industrial laborers to have a chance to get second education, that is middle school and high school. During the later 20th century in Korea, many teenagers, especially rural girls, went to factories without having a second level education. In order to provide a second level education for the young factory workers who want to get education, affiliate schools were set up. By the enactment of law of education in 1976, it commenced in 1977. Such schools were called affiliate school for they were financially supported by industrial organizations.

The school poems were written from 1982 to 1984. After obtaining a master degree, Lee voluntarily worked as a teacher at an affiliate school, thinking that it is a duty for him to be with laborers. It was rare for one with a master degree to become a teacher at such a school with a less number of teachers who have graduated from education college. According to a survey conducted in Pusan, only 2(4.9%) among 41 teachers at an affiliate school had a graduate degree.[6]

Table 1. Education Level of Affiliate School Teachers

2 college	year other than education	Colleges other than education	College of education	of Graduate school	Other	Total
2 (4.9%)		32 (78.0%)	5 (12.2%)	2 (4.9%)	0 (0%)	41 (100%)

These low rates of admirable education for the teachers are admittedly an indicator of the quality of affiliate teachers. The students dealt with in these poems are mostly female laborers. I will analyze these poems.

2. WORKING STUDENTS’ HARD LIFE

The first poem to be analyzed is “Affiliate school preface,” first placed among the six. It begins with the depiction of an area where the school is located.

Near the intercity bus terminal
 Shining ad-balloon floating high above
 Filthy Yudeung stream is seen below
 Below the scene
 Backstreets with dust
 Climbing up the hill

there was an affiliate school
that stirred my love, labor I dreamed of

A bleak image is foregrounded. The environment of the surrounding area of the school reflects its miserable situation. In such a circumstance, female students have hard time working and studying in destitution.

Dragging heavy legs like hanging clothes
Ten past seven, the first night class
Seeing your fragile nerve being broken
without supper
What is school?
And what is teacher?
I was such
a mere grain of sand
a mere thread of clothe
sticking to a skirt

Aware of the harsh reality, he comes to be skeptical about his job. The school can never be same as normal schools. He would not have expected a common situation when he applied for the school. It seems the classroom situation was so worse that he was frustrated. His dissatisfaction is not merely an individual one but generally shared by teachers. According to Seol, whose research cover Pusan area, 39(95.2%) among 41 teachers at affiliate school replied negatively to a question about school facility compared to common schools. The number of replies that mark 'very deficient' is 24(58.6%), which is considerably higher than 15(36.6%) of 'deficient.' [7] This concurs with Yuk's research which covers much more unlimited areas around the country. In such a situation, much less amount of study was required for graduation. Such a low requirement to students are attested by those who attended the schools. A former student recollects: "As the school is not common, the levels of Korean, English and Math were very low. It was around a basic level. There was almost no homework, as many would not do home work." [8]. Another one adds:

There was a much difference between common schools and industry affiliated schools. One third of class was field practice, which replaces on-site working. And class runs for 40 minutes, while common schools lass runs for 50 minutes. As such, it is barely managed. Test method is same as that of common highschools. The levels of tests are low. Can it not be low? [9]

We need to think what the real role of the school was. Basically, its role is to offer a chance for laborers who cannot attend mid or high school. However, teaching them normally is unrealizable. In a sense, the schools serve to respond to the wish of teenage girls and thus appease social discontent rather than genuinely complement their lack of education. Jeong argues that the female laborers' desire for education is associated with the followings: complexity and futile desire for social uprising, and wish to prepare for marry of middle class [10]. Ku further remarks that female laborers had more desire for study: primarily they wanted to throw away the negative image of 'gongsuni,' and females had no other chance of social uprising else than study and marriage. [11] There is a deficiency of study due to physical and psychological fatigue caused by the heavy burden of work. This evaluation is creditable as the researcher Yuk himself have worked at an affiliate school for 2 decades when he wrote thesis. [12] The poem ends with the following couple of lines.

While the sound of church chime bell is being heard
 Factory chimney's smoke is covering the sky.[13]

There is a contrast between the church chime bell and factory smoke. While the bell sound signals a hope to have a better world, the smoke displays the bleak reality of industrialized society. The speaker realizes that the hope reflected by the church chime bell cannot be realized in this harsh situation.

The second poem to be analyzed is "Affiliate school. Sounds." In this poem, the first stanza begins with the sewing machine sounds, "Sewing machine sounds/ sewing machine sounds/ sewing machine sounds" Although the poem's title is about the school anyway, the sound of apparel factory is foregrounded. It seems as if the poem deals with a factory. By foregrounding the sounds of factory, the poet deliberately emphasizes the laboring condition of the school students. The affiliate school is tied up with the factory lives. During the later 20th century, textile or clothing industry was the area where female laborers worked most typically. It was very easy to find female workers operate sewing machines at a factory or smaller working room. The poem closely depicts two female character.

Are Bokdoeg-i's fingers
 Fingers or leather or machine?
 Popsong
 Here here, is Munja's sigh
 Sigh or noise or wind? [14]

Female laborers like Bokdoeg and Munja are reified. Bokdoeg's fingers are identified with leather and machine, and Munja's sigh is so dehumanized that it is confused with noise or wind. The name "Bokdoeg" is poignantly ironical. Though no Chinese characters are written, typically 'bok' means fortune and 'doeg' virtue. However, her situation is miserable. The poet seems to deliberately employ ironical situations.

The third poem is "Affiliate school. Geumja." The name 'Geumja,' which is reminiscent of the famous movie Geumja, sounds rather old styled. During the 20th century, female names often ended with ja. The poem shows Geumja in a nostalgic mode. Hearing the sound of train going away and seeing royal azalea blooming on the schools' hillside, she is reminded of her hometown in countryside. For royal azalea bloomed also in her home. Her nostalgic feeling seems to be not an individual emotion but general one shared by rural girls who left home. Family matter was a main concern for female laborers as many indicator indicate. It is an aspect the poet feels sympathy for the working female students.

The fourth poem "Affiliate School Opening Day" problematizes the school system. In the first poem, the poet expressed his frustration. The reasons for his frustration are detailed in this poem. The speaker is critical about the teachers in the school. The poem begins with the blame on the principal:

Let us not put blame any more
 on the principal, as he is also
 powerless employed idiot as salaryman.

He has been criticizing the principal. However, it is not wholly his faults, as the principal has no power to make decisions due to his role as an employee. He is also critical about teacher Chung, who seeks a way to gain money through an illegitimate process. However, he suggests not blaming him anymore. It can be partly understood, considering the low salary of affiliate school teachers. However, he does not merely forgive Chung's faults, but ironically satirizes the situation where Chung is driven to chase money.

The speaker is also critical about teacher Kim and teacher Kang. Kim is a timid type, while Kang is a violent type bullying Kim. They represent some typical types of teachers, or salarymen in a larger context. They are worn out by the system, and thus victims of society in an aspect. There is a crucial reason why he suggests stopping blame them.

The bigger enemy, the bigger foe

Who is the one to fight?

It can be conjectured that the bigger one to fight against is the school owner. "Schools were subordinated to companies. In case of factory school, the owners of companies often took the position of principal." [15] In a larger context, it may refer to the dominant classes. Actually, teachers at affiliate schools receive lower salary compared to ordinary school teachers. It is usually 70 to 90 % of the standard salary of ordinary schools. It is because the companies instead of the government pay for them. For these reasons, 94.4 % of the surveyed teachers of affiliate schools expressed their dissatisfaction about their treatment. Among the 90 teachers who participated in the survey, only 2(2.2%) were satisfied, while 3(3.3%) took a neutral position. While 20 (22.2%) were classified as 'dissatisfied, 65 (72.2%) were classified as 'very dissatisfied.' [16]. With this notion, the final part needs to be examined.

Let's really detest, put blame.

Let us pray for God with hands. [17]

We can know that the poet suggests criticizing the powerful one who is actually responsible for the school management. Lee's frustration is not merely a personal failure of getting adjusted to the system of affiliate school, but a common feeling of teachers working at affiliate schools.

"Affiliate School Letter" is in the form of a letter sent by a student to the poet. The speaker writing to the poet is a student who was ejected from the company. As Yuk indicates, students often suffer from struggle at both job and school [18]. The adversities they suffer from are reflected by the poems. In the third stanza, the speaker says:

Thoughts of the ending

sadden me, teacher

Nothing got better

I was ejected from the company, teacher

The bulletin I wrote

The pira I wrote

were ejected together, teacher.[19]

The speaker was ousted due to her anti-company acts. By an agreement between company and school, those who retire from the company also had to quit school.[20] Although the causes may differ, many students failed to graduate. According to the statistics of Ministry of education, in 1986 only 58.8% of them graduated, that is 9,483 among 16,134.[21] The pira refers to pamphlet. Usually the content of pira was generally against the dominant system. By expressing a sympathy for her, Lee implicitly criticizes the dominant system. Through the form of letter, the poet gives her a chance to voice her thoughts. Park indicates that Lee is willing to become a voice to represent the marginalized classes who cannot voice their own thoughts.[22]

The final poem is "Affiliate school. Park Geum-a." Similar to Geumja, the name is also an old type. In the poem he recollects some episodes associated with the poor sickened girl. As a sickened one, she is representative of students suffering from bad health. According to Kang, more than a half of surveyed 490 students in the early 1980s answered they were unhealthy. While 212 students (43.2%) replied they were unhealthy, 42(8.5%) answered they were cared for by hospital or taking drugs. The rest 236 students (48.1%) answered they were healthy.[23] By employing Cornell Medical Index, Lee Suk substantiates that the difference of unhealthy rates between common school students and affiliate school students is statistically significant.[24] The poem is filled with his sympathetic feeling for her. An important situation is that he brought her to a hospital. This exemplifies the bodily states of students who are worn out the system.

3. CONCLUSION

By analyzing the poems, we could observe the miserable lives of young female laborers enrolled at an affiliate school. The poet expresses sympathy for the miserable students. We could see his critical viewpoint on the affiliate school system.

Along with the depictions, a number of statistical data were examined in order to check whether the poet's stance and viewpoint is generally acceptable. The data can substantiate his opinion and idea. His viewpoint is never uncommon but representative of general ideas and feeling about affiliate school and students. At least, he is representative of a large portion of the whole population. Of course, not all the relevant data could be retrieved. However, the data quoted in this article reflect the general trend of data used in a large number of social research. Other unquoted data also show similar patterns.

With their reflection of the social reality, the poems are significant in that they show how the young girls strived for work and study, which are incompatible admittedly. The work reveals that the education project purportedly beneficial to female workers was ineffective indeed. The problems of the school are those of the contemporary society in a larger context. The poems shed light on the marginalized types in the system undergoing the industrialization.

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