

# Girl-Love and Suicide: Re-reading Shin Kyông-suk's *The Solitary Room*\*

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## 〈ABSTRACT〉

This article examines the factory girl classic *The Solitary Room* (published in 1995) as part of an archive of Korean industrial literature. *The Solitary Room* fixes on adolescent sexuality and suicide to tell the story of individual factory girls who lived through rapid industrialisation of the late 1970s. This article argues that *The Solitary Room* grapples with the elusive subject of ‘factory girl’ at the same time that it addresses the guilt and grief of post-industrial South Korean society over the recent trauma of industrialisation. The story displays

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a fear of both revolution and class immobility, and part of its success as a best-seller can be related to the conventionality of its narrative. Yet *The Solitary Room* is exceptional for signaling the complicity of readers (society) in the violence done to factory girls. The article concludes by arguing that *The Solitary Room* should be read as part of a distinct oeuvre of factory girl literature.

**Key words** : factory girl literature, labor movement, Shin Kyông-suk,  
*The Solitary Room*, adolescent sexuality

“You’ve taken teenage workers as your theme,” Yun-ho said, “and talked for thirty minutes or so. You talked as though you were knowledgeable, but you aren’t. There isn’t one person in our country who can talk about teenage workers without feeling guilty. And that includes me.”

Cho Se-hui, *The Dwarf*

“Sometimes on the evening bus home or walking down an alley I would remember her. Can she really be dead?”

Shin Kyông-suk, *The Solitary Room*

Since its publication in 1995, Shin Kyông-suk’s *Oettan Bang* [The Solitary Room] has been appraised as the pinnacle of factory girl literature. Said to represent the culmination of seventy-five years of radical journalism, proletarian literature and working-class autobiography, it is another in a long line of works that attempts to pin down the elusive subject of the factory girl. Both critically acclaimed and a best-seller, *The Solitary Room* is Shin Kyông-suk’s attempt to write a new subject in modern Korean literature. It takes readers slowly and gently back to the painful recent past of a brutal process of rapid industrialization.

Locating its working-class women and girls in industrializing Seoul of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the book fixes on adolescent sexuality and suicide to tell the story of the emergent subject of the factory girl. Yet throughout the book, the narrator grapples with this loaded identity of ‘factory girl’, a resilient cliché filled with contradictory subtext about poverty, sexual availability, and labour movement heroism. This chapter examines the construction of a working-class female subject in *The Solitary Room*, who comes into being in a homosocial world full of danger and unspoken desire.

This paper is part of a larger project to examine the process by which factory girls became cultural figures of immense political significance in modern Korean literature and its industrialising society. Though I am primarily concerned with the politics of representation, this project’s central argument pivots on the question: what was the process by which a factory girl might become an author herself? I pose these problems of representation and authorship together because the gap that lies between them, the gap between being represented and the ‘representor’, reveals a great deal about the simultaneous suppression of working-class women’s writing and their power as literary heroines. In this presentation I examine *The Solitary Room*, a book that delineates the means by which a factory girl might become an author herself. First published in 1995, and structured by a series of flashbacks that takes readers back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, this is a book about becoming a writer, narrated (and authored) by someone who spent their formative adolescent years in the factories of Kuro Kongdan.

The book begins with the narrator one evening on Cheju Island looking out at the sea and remembering her fifteen year old self “A chubby faced, ordinary looking girl such as you could find anywhere in this country. It was

1978, the end of the Yushin period...” (Shin 5) And so begins the story of a ‘teenage worker’ or ‘factory girl’. Sent along with her cousin to Seoul, the narrator “Kyông-suk” continues her education the only way her family can afford it: as a self-supporting industrial high school student who is a factory worker by day and a schoolgirl by night. The main part of the book is set in the years 1978-1981 and covers four years of the narrator’s life, from the age of roughly 14 to 18. “I am not yet reconciled to those four years of my life,” she declares repeatedly in the narrative. The book also includes the narrator’s adult self, her successful novelist self, struggling to assimilate those adolescent years to her present life, reconcile also Seoul of the late 1970s with the Seoul of the mid 1990s.

The book itself with its ‘I’ narrator is part fiction, part memoir; a deliberate blurring of genres that the author confesses is her stratagem to be able to write about these bleak years. The feminist literary historian Yi Sang-gyông has pointed out the slippage between the “I” of the narrator and the “I” of the author in *The Solitary Room* given the revelatory, almost confessional tone of the text, and the facts that are widely known about Shin Kyông-suk’s life. (Yi 283) In her author’s bio in previous books Shin had recorded along with the barest details of her birth and early life the note that she had attended an industrial high school in Seoul. This one statement alerts readers that she had worked in factories while finishing high school, disclosing a whole world of adolescent hardship. Yet *The Solitary Room* is not an autobiography. In the final lines the author writes: “This story is done and yet it seems to have been neither fact nor fiction but caught somewhere between the two. I wonder if it can be called literature. Or should we think of it as writing. And what is writing? I ask myself again.” (Shin, 424) Right up until the end of the book the author grapples with form and genre and lays before the reader how

reluctantly yet compulsively the book was written. How much peace of mind this book cost her, how it turned her into a negative, angry introvert (Shin 178). So why was this story so hard to write? What is the function of the author's literary strategies? Who or what does she use to drive the narrative back into her past?

Despite all the reams that had been written about factory girls since the very beginning of industrialization, in *The Solitary Room* we discover that what appeared to be an unambiguous class and gender category demonstrated through empirical data on macro-economic activity, labour market movement, industrial policy, family economic data, consumer trends, education patterns, and etc and etc, reveals itself as having been an inscrutable cliché all along, a much-discussed identity no one had ever truly inhabited. When it was published Shin Kyông-suk's *The Solitary Room* was evaluated by some critics as the culmination a seventy year old relationship between literary and labour activism. (Paek, 453) Yet it is a story racked by grief and haunted by suicide. How did this book, so difficult to write, become a best-seller? How did it seem to some critics to reconcile post-industrial South Korea with its brutal past? Let us now turn to examine how Shin Kyông-suk unraveled the inscrutable factory-girl cliché.

## 1. Writing Oneself

The author blends multiple genres to her purpose in a narrative strategy that seems an open deprecation of the conventions of factory girl literature. Thus autobiography as well as narrative fiction are brought to bear in telling her story, domestic and industrial fiction conventions influence the

characterisation of family and co-workers, and gothic disturbance is interlaced with distant memoir. If, as I argue, Shin Kyông-suk was in the process of formulating a subject that had not yet existed in literature, the impulse that she was writing against was not an invisible, as yet unrealised self that she had to conjure up out of political obscurity, but rather the mass identity of the factory girl who represented in a series of clichés an entire generation of exploited labourers. We have already examined the establishment of conventions for writing about lower-class women, the tropes used to display them to political advantage, and the difficulties this tradition posed for the first women to take up their pens and write of their lives in the 1970s and 1980s. Shin Kyông-suk both deploys and resists these tropes; her book hinges on what might seem to be the genre's ultimate cliché: the death of a factory girl. But whatever pleasure the reader might expect to take in the "aesthetically healing powers" (Wood 36) of a narrative that is set in the poverty and loneliness of Seoul of recent memory is disturbed by the narrator's obsessive grief and anger and the emotions that drive the book: the pain of loss, guilt, and complicity.

To navigate the delicate territory of thinking about how a subject is created in and through literary fiction, I borrow the insights of Nancy Armstrong. In her book *How Novels Think* Nancy Armstrong re-evaluates the history of the English novel as a history of the creation of modern individualism: "the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same," she asserts. (Armstrong 3) Her book examines a body of fictional works as social agents engaged in mapping out the limits of individualism. As writers sought to articulate a subject that had not yet existed in literature they strained to reconcile individual desire and the constraints of the social order. When individuals marked by their excessive (asocial) desire

die in canonical fiction (Maggie Tulliver in *Mill on the Floss*, Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*), it is to preserve the social order that that such desire threatens to invalidate. For Armstrong the act of writing fiction creates the subjects we seek to be, and enlarges the compass of the society we wish to inhabit. Writing, and the sympathy it requires of readers, constitutes a crucial element in subject-formation. Thus the narrator of *The Solitary Room*'s experience of toiling in the factories only marks her as one of thousands, it is when she crafts a literary novel out of this experience that she becomes exceptional, a fully individualised creation.

Concerned with the role of literacy and of gender, and of the repressed, alternative subject of modern novels that competes with individualism, Armstrong covers territory that holds great interest for the reader of factory girl literature. Her final section examines the limits of the human community being outlined in philosophy as well as literature in the nineteenth century and takes readers into the gothic oeuvre of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Rider Haggard's *She* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Here Armstrong uses a history of feminist cultural theory to suggest that the modern individual is defined in terms that require the constant negation of alternative "idiosyncratic, less than fully human, dangerous" (Armstrong 3) subjects. *The Solitary Room*, a book about the suicide of one factory girl and the success of another, is deeply enmeshed in this project of creating interiority and selfhood out of a destructive and threatening past. The capacity of literature to confer individuality is not something easily accepted or endorsed by the narrator of *The Solitary Room*, however. The most important relationship in the book, the friendship between the two factory girls, the narrator and Heejae, slips in and out of the pages in tantalizing references, but we are on p.145 before they first meet.

“I think the first time I saw Heejae was the spring of 1978.” (Shin 145) The narrator recalls one Sunday after returning with her cousin from the public baths, the narrator catches sight of a girl in their cement courtyard washing a school uniform. The crimson uniform is identical to the narrator’s own: they must attend the same school. Their first words are spoken on the boarding house’s roof as they hang up their washing. The narrator describes only Heejae’s face: “a face innocent and unrevealing as sunlight”, before her attention snags on Heejae’s industrial injury:

“Yes it’s from a needle piercing me. When I put my hand in water it soothes it. Which room do you live in?”

“I’m on the third floor.”

“I’ve seen you on the bus. I’ve seen you once at school too... but I didn’t know you lived here.”

“I’ve never seen you before,” I said.

At that Heejae laughed softly again. Whether it was because she judged by my face that I was younger than her but she talked to me as though I was her younger sister and I found myself replying “Yes, yes” politely.

“I like this rooming house... You could die here and no-one would know. Isn’t that so?” she asked me...

(Shin 147-8)

So their friendship begins, shadowed by hints and portents. Here we get a sense of the immense appetite for female friendship, love, admiration, and worship that courses through the homosocial adolescent worlds of factory and high school. “She was gone, walking through the heavy sheets while the afternoon wind flapped and swirled like a curtain heavy with secrets” (Shin 150) In this scene, like the end of Act One, the boredom and thankless tedium

of work and school are swept away in an instant of recognition.

To Kyông-suk, Heejae's intensity and sensuality is intoxicating. Kyông-suk reads Heejae as elusive, "as elusive as sunlight". But perhaps that is her warning to readers: do not imagine that you can comprehend the dead factory girl. Sympathy is not a currency that grants you entry into this world. You need first to understand that I bring you here *at great cost to myself*. That it is not my desire to make Heejae known to you, but to be clearer to myself. To write myself into being as the many things I am, simultaneously: innocent and complicit, grieving and successful, lonely and read by everyone. As the story unfolds the narrator discloses more and more about the pain of remembering and the compulsion to write. She needs privacy, she needs in fact to escape her routine and flee alone to Cheju Island in order to return to this story and grieve and console her teenage self. Here the author relates the enormous cost, the ambivalence, the repulsion for going public with a private grief that she knows will be taken up as emblematic [of women's liberation], as part of the struggle [for workers' rights], as one chink in building "the greater good". Even as she writes the narrator is disconcerted by the process of publishing, of giving interviews, of scraping back this private death to show the world. The voice of Heejae haunts her and perhaps she fears that by telling the world she will lose this "voice that lives on after death, so sweet and full of life and power." (Shin 156) Writing here begins to lose its lustre, and literature feels like a mediocre compromise. How can literature compare with the voice of the beloved dead? After pages and pages in which she searches for Heejae, finally the author reaches for the conventions of the gothic to bring Heejae into her present life. The present-day narrator is sleeping at home when she is awoken at 5am by the loud peal of her doorbell. She goes to the door but hesitates to open it, and starts to wonder if she

had imagined the sound of the doorbell. She returns to her bedroom:

“Suddenly the bell pealed out again. My heart dropped and I felt the presence of a person behind me. I started with fright and turned around. My shawl that had been hanging on the back of a chair had softly fallen to the floor. I collected the shawl and a sigh of relief escaped me.

...Then I felt that someone had come into my room.

...I called out “Who is it?” But the person, this person whom I felt behind me, watching closely the nape of my neck, could not reply: “It is me.”

...I gave up and turned off the light and returned to bed. This shadow of a person followed and curled up next to me.

Heejae?... Is that you? ... You gave me a scare... How did you know where to find me? ... Life has turned out well for me, hasn't it... I'm so sorry. “

“...What did you say? ...Heejae, what did you say? ...I didn't catch it, can you speak a little bit louder?... What? ...I can't hear you. What did you say?”

“...I write so that I might begin to touch you, Heejae.” (Shin 197)

In a scene that is reminiscent of Heathcliff and Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*, Heejae resists death and literature also. Here Shin Kyông-suk invites us to listen to “the past, the ostensibly dead” as an alternative form of evaluating the brutal 1970s. (Armstrong, 152) Throughout *The Solitary Room* the author mediates between one of the dominant clichés of factory girl literature: the death of a factory girl, and conveying the real impact of her friend's death. In factory girl literature it was the suffering of lower-class women that made them politically important. Yet in the suicide of Heejae the narrator as mediator becomes the figure we fix on, the hidden protagonist

set to reveal herself at last. Instead of projecting our own (bogus, bourgeois) emotions onto the act of self-annihilation, the reader must contend with the real impact this death had on Kyông-suk. It does not ask us to mourn (at no cost to ourselves) a distant, inaccessible life rather than show us its effect on the living. The reader's vicarious grief is not solicited. It is the narrator's grief and anger and guilt that reveals itself as having been the narrative engine all along.

Heejae slips through the conventions of factory girl literature to reveal a new realism of female working-class life: was she a worker or a student or a seamstress or a bargirl? Was she a teenager or considerably older? Did she kill only herself or her unborn child also? And finally the narrator becomes the conduit between the reader and the inaccessible past, the remote class, the dead factory girl. Thus in *The Solitary Room* sentimental literature becomes realism.

## 2. Writing, Desire, Identity

*The Solitary Room*, a book about the struggle to become a writer and survive adolescence in the factory districts, raises the question of the disconnect between authority and representation. It is clearly not the case that factory girls were absent in literature prior to the 1990s, we might rather say that they were present in a way that aided in the suppression of their writing. They were represented as literary archetypes, as victims of sexual violence, exposed by poverty to the brutality of colonial capitalism in the 1920s and 30s, and rapid industrialisation in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, in ways that stifled them as creative figures. None of this is glossed over in *The Solitary Room*. When we enter this book we encounter the full force of gender and class discipline

operative in factories in the late 1970s, and the ways that ambition and imagination are swallowed up by everyday labour. But Shin Kyông-suk alone is able to show that one form of silencing is connected to another: that the same trope of sexual availability and suffering that inhibits her narrator's confidence also injects dramatic power into her story. In *The Solitary Room*, as in all bildungsroman, the fate of the characters hinges upon how they manage their social and asocial desires.

The narrator forms her identity and tests it in the world by articulating what it is that she desires. She and her friend Heejae play a game in which they reveal their deepest desires, the desires that will define them. Fantasy and brute economic reality are entwined in the adolescents' longings where ideal jobs as bank clerks and telephone operators compete with fantasies of love and motherhood. Heejae's innocuous question: "and shall I have a pretty child?" raises the stakes of these exchanges. The mixture of fantasy and constraint that characterise these wishes is played out in an intense relationship of *chamae-ae* or girl-love that Kyông-suk and Heejae share. While Kyông-suk is tall, shy, and earnest, Heejae is intense, sensual and elusive. Kyông-suk is sometimes shocked or at a loss for words from Heejae's stories but Heejae is the friend who knows how to comfort Kyông-suk and treats her with sensitive delicacy and care in the great heartbreaks of her adolescent years. Heejae is regarded with quiet suspicion by Kyông-suk's cousin and eldest brother; she lives alone and her age is indeterminate. Heejae is not easily slotted into the conventional markers of her working-class community, and apt to throw herself with gusto into love affairs, yet her sensibility exactly suits that of the chaste narrator, and in their boarding house, and at the industrial high school they attend together, they become intimate friends.

Despite being a new coinage, girl-love or *chamae-ae* was not outside

convention or a suppressed unspeakable form of relating between young women in 1970s South Korea. As Sharon Marcus has shown in her discussion of female marriage in nineteenth century England, homosociality, rather than being a transgressive act, instead can be said to have ordered social and institutional life in bourgeois European culture. (Marcus 13) In South Korea, girl-love in the homosocial world of the factory and the high school is at the heart of normative institutions and discourses about family, love and productivity. In *The Solitary Room* girl-love reinforces the primacy of heterosexual partnerships even as it supplies the most intense relationship in the book. It is with girl-love that we approach a key question of factory girl literature of the 1970s: 'Is the factory girl a sexual subject?' 'What kind of sexual subject?' and 'How do you desire in this environment?' Kyông-suk and Heejae's intense, confiding relationship is an expression of their desire and its limitations. The author gives us characters who connect most deeply in a homosocial environment, yet it is an environment with no concept of homosexuality. This is significant because the author has already eschewed so many conventional markers of working-class subject-formation. Again and again the author/narrator shys away from the factory demonstrations and union-building that has traditionally established the contours of working-class subjectivity in this era. In her intimate turn towards interiority, desire, girl-love, the author presents an enduring homosocial relationship yet without ambiguity: it is completely heterosexual. Same-sex love is both there and not there. It is there in that the relationship between Heejae and Kyông-suk is the most powerful and sensual relationship in the book, and not there in the sense that same-sex desire or satisfaction is inconceivable in this story. While Heejae and Kyông-suk sleep together in Heejae's cramped and chronically untidy room night after night, telling stories of their disastrous relationships with boys, these are characters who do not have the capacity to desire or find

fulfillment in each other. The question for us is why is this so.

### 3. Isolation and Subjectivity

The entire atmosphere of the book: redolent with isolation and loneliness, its protagonist overwhelmed by the poverty of Seoul, appears to be captured in the title. Even as the narrator describes the boarding house they lived in with its thirty-seven rented rooms, she cannot account for why her overwhelming memory is of isolation: “It sat in a labyrinth of streets, in earshot of the station that is a conduit for the countrywide line to Suwon... Its one window opened onto a scene of crowds exiting the railway station, a nearby market with its hole-in-the-wall shops was visible, and the overpass to reach them.” In the centre of a bustling working-class neighbourhood, with the brightest aspect of all the tiny lodging rooms in the building, the narrator is unable to reconcile the reality of her lodgings with the indelible impression it left on her who “never once returned to see it again. Not only the boarding house, not only our room; I had avoided returning even to that district of Seoul, whose streets I can picture in my mind as vividly as though it were a photograph I had gazed upon for years.”

(Shin 47)

The isolation and loneliness that permeates this book is noteworthy for another reason. Demographically the narrator was far from alone. In the late 1970s tens of thousands of country girls were making the same journey to the factory districts of Seoul. The author also introduces plenty of characters who like her are great readers (such as her classmate Miso who reads Hegel), or have artistic dreams (the narrator's cousin whose dream is to become a nature photographer), or thirst for achievement (eldest brother the law student), or who possess remarkable ambition and talent (third brother the

demonstrator). Kyông-suk's loneliness might be attributed to the anomie of late industrialising Seoul and the menace of poverty. Or it might be that in the midst of the long work day and the night classes and the sexual harassment and the miserly wages and the prospect of losing all one's beauty and youth in this cycle of labour there was a writer struggling to emerge. One does not need to elevate writing as a craft to appreciate the threat to the narrator's subjectivity. In the years between when the events in this book took place (or events very like them) and the book was published, a mass labour movement had moved into the working-class districts of Seoul.

So it seems that the author is also writing about being alone in a mass movement. At a time when it appeared that the only way for the working poor to become a subject in industrialising South Korea was via the labour movement project to legalise unions and transform wages and conditions, this story unfolds. Yet the author resists this avenue of subject-formation. The book is structured by flashbacks that again and again resist particular tropes about factory girls, union activism, and a hard-won education. For example the narrator and her cousin, early on in their time in the factory are stuck in the middle of a battle between the company and the union for the hearts and minds of workers. They finally decide to join the union, even as they accept that by this decision they might have to forgo the chance to get an education. It is a section that appears to re-tell one of many dramatic stories about the arduous battles over unions and working conditions at female dominated factories in the 1970s. Yet in the midst of this struggle the narrator appears in flash forward, abruptly breaks off the dramatic tension, and with the security of the present tense looks back to ask: "What of those people, what of those battles. What of the several thousand people in that company? Surely some will have departed the world already by now through some misfortune." (Shin

This paragraph compresses the drama of the previous section into a distant nostalgia, high political stakes are replaced by reminiscence of individuals one never knew. Why does author do this? Is there a trope she is resisting, a way of writing about factory girls and their union battles that appears to define this period and this class to the exclusion of an interiority that encompasses this and so much more?

When the narrator turns to describe the scene on the factory floor, her line, her co-workers and the functions they perform in the factory she uses the term *pungsokbwa* or genre painting. *Pungsokbwa* alerts us to the self-consciousness of these descriptions, how difficult it is to create a straight description of factory girls when artists and writers have made of women's labour a picturesque piece of art. On some level too this is a coming of age story that disturbs so much of sympathetic popular culture about "poor friendless girls" in Seoul that resolved the harsh edges of class difference into romances about gender mobility. Such heroines had their virtue rewarded by escaping the brutish world of factory districts and tiny slum lodgings in a narrative logic that condemned those left behind as the real working-class, those who deserved or were already too hardened by adversity. But *The Solitary Room* in fact sits in the gap between being trapped by factory work and escaping it. When the narrator's old school friend Ha Kye-suk finds her again through reading her novels, she accuses the narrator of wanting to keep her early life spent in the vocation school and factory secret. As the narrator wrestles with this charge that she is able to write about so much that has been painful, but not this, the book unfolds before us. The result of this dilemma is instructive. For the book Shin Kyung-suk does end up writing about her four years working at a factory by day and at night school in the evening, about this

hidden life becomes a best-seller, one of the most critically acclaimed works of the decade in South Korea, and translated and praised over the world.<sup>1)</sup>

Although set in the late 1970s and early 1980s, *The Solitary Room* actually speaks most deeply to the zeitgeist of the mid 1990s. By the mid 1990s many people had a stake in the representation of working-class women, and the book could expect a keen and critical array of readers. Yet the title, the narrative, defined by isolation and loneliness is a story that the guilt-ridden post-industrial South Korea of the 1990s was extremely sensitive to. It is important to recall that this book received favourable reviews in nearly every publication where it was appraised in Korea, and became a mass best-seller in a deeply politically divided society.<sup>2)</sup> What was it about this book that so many people across the political divide were receptive to it? What was the nature of this consensus? People asked very important questions of this book and its reception. Paek Nak-chung posed the question does the narrator's story with its yearning for healing point to a change that has already taken place in Korean society, or the possibility of such a healing (justice)? The question here is: what sort of tale of factory girls can be enjoyed by everyone? What is the story that is being savoured?

#### 4. Class Hybridity

One of the striking features of this book is that rather than conveying a straight narrative of working-class communities, it gives voice to the extraordinary fluidity and hybridity of class in South Korea. The author relates how one might be one class in the village and another in the city; one class

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1) The French translation of 『외딴방』 *La Chambre solitaire* won the 2nd Prix de l'Inaperçu Prize in 2009.

2) Pang Min-ho discusses the critical reception of 『외딴방』 in 'Shin Kyông-suk After 『외딴방』', *The World of Writers*, Vol 13, no 3, 2001, p.114-5.

in one's teens and another altogether in one's thirties. How one might rail against the class one discovers that one belongs to, and indulge in class dreaming or assume a status that you do not own. Characters in this book borrow an imagined identity and try it on for size, an act that Yoon Sun Yang has dubbed 'blasphemous' in another context, for its violation of hereditary status principles around which social relations were structured. Characters hold on to an old self that circumstances have forced them to slough off: such as Heejae wearing her school uniform long after she dropped out of the industrial high school. Other characters wear their disguises to give them comfort, to give flesh to the fantasy, or to gain access to the inaccessible: such as oldest brother in his wig teaching at a *bagwon*.

In this book Seoul emerges as a city where the appearance of class was extremely powerful, where money or a college degree could lift you free from the menace of poverty and drudgery. Heejae continues to wear her school uniform even when she has left school and is working and learning the rules of a completely different social world. She is spotted coming home from her new job as a seamstress at three in the morning, wearing her school uniform. The school uniform signifies that one has a secure place in this heaving, anonymous world of striving and losing. But it also signals the creative potential of anonymity that the new metropolis holds.

This book reminds us of Seoul of the 1970s and 1980s ruled by one military clique after another. A society run on suspicion and paranoia, where connections are everything. In such an environment, where so much is groundless and illegitimate, the ability to assume an appearance of substance becomes all the more important. This is Jacques Rancière's "culture in disorder where the prevailing system was in the process of disruption" (Rancière xi).

Class fluidity has its political sources, but also its internal ones. We might think of the many acts of identity borrowing and performing as a kind of displacement, a “sequence of disguises, substitutes and transfers by which we learn to get along with this self in a complex social world.” (Armstrong 9) *The Solitary Room* snags on these costumes and disguises. The narrator circles them fascinated, searching for clues to the characters’ dreams and lies, their chief weapons in negotiating a class-ridden society.

## 5. Beauty and Industrial Injuries

Yet making literature out of the suffering and available bodies of lower-class women takes a toll on the narrator. This is clearly a psychic cost to writing these experiences down and opening them up to the gaze of strangers. When so much had been written and spoken about “the workers”, “the proletariat”, “factory girls”, here Shin shows us: How can you fight the conditions yet admire their result? What is a worker away from her machines, her line? What is the writer separated from her books, her reading, her own pen? How does a writer *become* in a factory, in tiny lodgings shared with three other bodies? When so much else is believed to come out of factories: friendship, productive wealth, the stirrings of revolution, why not writers also? Here we come to the difficulty those governesses the Brontës knew about and might be said to have foreseen for later factory girls:

Rather than fill the [post of governess] in any great house, I would have deliberately have taken a housemaid’s place, bought a strong pair of gloves, swept bedrooms and staircases, and cleaned stoves and locks, in peace and independence. Rather than be a companion, I would have made shirts, and starved.(Brontë, 382)

Charlotte Brontë instead shows us the popular middle-class belief that to be a (female) worker, a shirt-waister perhaps, is to be free of concerns about gentility and female propriety. Brontë elevates plain, free, manual labour (starvation) over genteel servitude. The distinction is a dramatic one, but loses its force when we actually enter the female factories where one's labour must be thorough, unstinting, physical but also subservient, quiet, neat. A concern for beauty does not disappear in the factory. Quite the contrary one fears the coarsening effects of welding and soldering all the more when the results of the work appear in the faces and forms of colleagues.

Cousin said "It's lucky we didn't end up in soldering"

"Why?"

"Look at number 13's face."

I turned to snatch a glance at number 13, who had come through the vocation training school with us and joined the factory at the same time. Above number 13's head smoke from the lead curled above the soldering flame. In only a few months her face had taken on a yellow hue.

"It looks like it could be lead poisoning," said cousin.

My fifteen year old self would study my face in the toilet mirror. Our landlady had said "Watch out. Drinking water straight from the yard tap will give your face that pale colour." Above my white face the yellow face of number 13 floated past. I too thought it a blessing we had not been sent to soldering.

(Shin, 73)

Exposure to industrial disease or injury took many different forms. The left-handed girl who sits next to the narrator in class, An Hyang-suk, works in a small confectionary factory:

One day I grabbed her hand but quickly dropped it. It was rigid as a piece of wood. I felt I had released her hand too rudely so I took hold of it again. Left-handed An Hyang-suk appeared to know what I was thinking and she laughed aloud.

“It’s from wrapping all the lollies. My hand has become stiff.”

“How many do you wrap?”

“About 20,000 a day.”

“.....”

Twenty thousand lollies. I could not picture it. An Hyang-suk reached over and took hold of my hand.

“Your hand is so soft. You must have it good in your company.”

Her hand stroking the back of my hand felt like the sole of a foot.

“At first the job interested me,” Hyang-suk said. “I didn’t know there was such a job as wrapping lollies. But after several days of twisting the plastic wrapper around the lollies my hands started bleeding.”

Her fingers were crooked.

“Now my hand has hardened so that it doesn’t hurt anymore. But two years ago I lost the use of my right hand fingers. That’s why I write with my left hand now.”

“You can’t tell anyone that my fingers are bung.”

“.....”

“Okay?”

I nodded my head.

(Shin, 136)

In this beauty economy girls must hide their industrial accidents and mutilations. Not because working-class men will not have them. Men cannot be generalised about with such certainty, and must be presumed to have their

own individual response to young women in their circle. The 1975 film *Youngja's Glory Days* set in Seoul's factory areas and red-light districts is instructive here. Youngja loses her left arm in a road accident when she is working as a bus conductor. When she takes up another job as a hostess/prostitute, she has her own set of clients who are charmed by her as she is. And finally at the end of the film Youngja is married with a child to a working-class man whose body is also injured. Rather than showing them as exemplary objects of pity or charity, the movie depicts this couple as a normal, scarred working-class family.

But the beauty economy is not necessarily primarily about heterosexual interaction. The rules are set and the competition waged in a homosocial community that takes its most assured pleasure in disciplining its own members. Even in the largely sex segregated worlds of factory and school cousin wears her rouge and lipstick. She compares herself ruthlessly with the girls around her: eldest brother's girlfriend, workmates in the factory, the glittering Miss Myong who works in the manager's office. To win the admiration and envy of other females drives her.

When the narrator turns to examine the other industrial high school students around her, she observes how the sobriquet *teenage* was itself a misnomer, a term casually slung over a whole diverse body of women struggling to find a place in the labour and education markets. As the narrator, the youngest pupil in the school, looks closely at the faces of the 'schoolgirls' at Yongdongpo Industrial High School she sees grown women of 22, 25, 26 done up in uniform and bobbed hair, their faces "soaked in fatigue". (Shin, 136) Anxiety over age, beauty and exposure to injury were all intertwined in the factory experience which encompassed the crucial years of growth and

eligibility for adolescents becoming (single) women.

## 6. Sexuality

Shin Kyông-suk has said that she doesn't think of her works as straight "female coming of age stories". "I wrote about time periods. Time periods I couldn't just let go by, that I felt stuck in." And in *The Solitary Room* the narrator's sexuality and her relationship with her sexed body does appear to be overshadowed by forces that defined the times. The narrator's first menstrual period arrives when she is caught up in a cycle of overtime night work. (Shin 189) The pain is excruciating and as she bends over in pain in the factory toilets, the narrator needs to be informed by her cousin that it is not a stomach ache she is suffering from, but menstruation. In fact much of the narrator's understanding of her sexed body is informed by the factory world.

When the company's notorious sexual harasser, Yi Kyejang sets his sights on Kyông-suk, Miss Lee the union delegate has already warned them of his reputation: "If he wants you he tracks you down like a dog on a scent. And if you try to avoid him or brush him off then the abuse really begins. He's a real arsehole. Be on your guard." (Shin 113) Although Yi Kyejang had initially targeted cousin, unaccountably he switches his attention to Kyông-suk and one day she finds a present addressed to her with a note. It is from Yi Kyejang asking her to meet him at a *tabang* after work that day. Kyông-suk is walking home from work that day with her cousin when the following exchange occurs:

"What's wrong with you?" [asks cousin]

"Me? Nothing."

“Yeah, right,” retorted cousin and the suddenly she lost her temper.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What did I do?”

“Are you saying you’re not acting strange? You’re following so close behind me that I can’t even walk. Is someone chasing you? And look, you’re shaking! You’ve been like this all afternoon.”

“...”

“What is it?”

I pulled out the present that Yi Kyejang had given me...

When she had seen the stationery set and read the note Yi Kyejang had written asking me to meet him at Unha Tabang cousin found a bin near the markets and hurled it all in. “What a bastard. Well, he can wait there for you till his heart’s content.”

But then cousin has a better idea and decides to confront the harasser. Dragging Kyông-suk with her they go to Unha Tabang where cousin declares they will insist that he buy them tea and dinner and beer. This is what cousin ends up saying to Yi when they see him waiting for Kyông-suk in the tabang’s interior, sitting in a dim fog of cigarette smoke:

“Do you know how old she is?”

“...”

“She’s fifteen.”

“...”

“And she hasn’t started menstruating yet.”

My fifteen year old self lurched in shock.

“Kyejangnim, do you have a younger sister?”

“It’s because Kyông-suk goes to school like my sister that I just wanted to buy her a dinner, what’s the shame in that Miss Pak?”, said

Yi Kyejangnim.

“Our eldest brother is the one who buy us dinner, not you.”

With that cousin grabbed my hand and we walked out.

(Shin 115)

On their walk home through the evening market cousin enlightens Kyông-suk on how the factory she works in is also Yi Kyejang's quarry. Kyông-suk, who had taken Yi Kyejang's protest that he was “just buying her a dinner as she reminded him of his younger sister” at face value, needs to be dragged into this new knowledge that transforms her understanding of the factory floor. But Kyông-suk appears to deliberately prefer to live in the fantasy world where women disappear from the factory floor for a reason one need not enquire into. Kyông-suk's gullibility, or deliberate ignorance, is itself a kind of compliance with the code of silence around sexual harassment. Kyông-suk's sexual curiosity is extremely circumscribed by a longing for ignorance, and she expresses the dominant tropes of the era. Thus, when we encounter in the book fictionalized accounts of the Tongil Dispute and the YH Dispute, and other demonstrations and strikes that in the popular imagination characterized the factory districts of the late 1970s, we find the same linking of political activity and rape that was used to intimidate politically active young women. Instead of enquiring into why political activism exposes women to rape, the author appears to validate this fear of the strike, the sit-in, the protest, as a moment of extreme sexual vulnerability.

## 7. The Death of Heejae

When Heejae stops attending school her life begins to slide, and soon after an old boyfriend reappears in her life. We next encounter her when eldest

brother returning home early one morning sees her in her school uniform, her mouth twisted in a snarl. It is 4am. At once the narrator's cousin and brother jump to the same conclusion – there is only one conclusion if you have slipped free of the institutions of school and factory: the *sulchip* [bar].

Even when Heejae explains that she is working at a dressmaker's shop cousin and brother (and reader) wonder if she is telling the truth. With all their doubts, the protests of naive, willfully-blind Kyông-suk seem to frame Heejae as guilty of sex and evasion. Working-class sexuality is so over-determined in this watchful neighbourhood that innocuous signs can be read as downfall. When Heejae perms her hair her identity as a schoolgirl is lost for good, and her social world reads in the curls her downfall, so starkly is sexuality and its signifiers encoded into hair styles. Heejae stands in for the problem of young women floating loose in Seoul, unable to be constrained by either school or factory. The need to make money drives them. A drive whose desperation others more snugly placed in the economy cannot grasp. To be desperate does not mean to lose one's ambition or dreams, it is rather that those dreams begin to allow for some degree of degradation along with the triumphs.

Heejae's death demonstrates also the randomness of tragedy. Her mistake is sleeping with a boy, the same act that in many other working-class districts would identify her as typical, in this context marks her for destruction. This is the moral universe of *The Solitary Room* that cannot account for the reality of sexual harassment on the factory floor just as it cannot account for a sexually active, and thriving, working-class female figure. A sense of doom overshadows Hee-jae as soon as she is spotted late one night and named by eldest brother as a fallen woman, a *sulchip* girl.

Here we are re-acquainted in a slightly different form with the lack of a language of sexual desire in factory girl literature. Given that the 1970s and 1980s, the decades of the worst excesses of the military dictatorships, were a dangerous time for lower-class women (coded as available), it appears that to operate in society as a desiring woman was difficult in the extreme. The language of desire is amputated and attenuated by a larger script of innocence and virtue. It struggles to emerge but when it does, in *The Solitary Room*, it exposes Heejae to slander on the one side and self-loathing on the other. The innocence (ignorance) of Kyông-suk allows the reader to suspend judgment, or rather to assess with impartiality Heejae's part in her own death.

In their final scene together Heejae stops Kyông-suk as she is walking up their alley and asks for her help. Heejae is going away, "to the countryside, to visit my family", but has forgotten to lock her room. As Kyongsuk shares a key to Heejae's room she asks Kyông-suk to lock the door when she returns home from school that evening. "She looks at me and asks can I please lock her door when I return. Latch it from the outside. It's not difficult. I ask why doesn't she run back and do it herself now? She says oh it can wait. There's nothing worth stealing. Those are her last words to me." When Kyông-suk returns that evening she turns the key in the lock in Heejae's door on her way up to her own room she shares with cousin. She waits for Heejae to return from her holiday. The days pass. Heejae does not return. The room remains locked. Kyông-suk can still feel in her fingers the pressure of turning the key. She takes to sitting outside Heejae's locked door. No sound comes from the room. Sometime later the door is broken down and Heejae is discovered dead in her room. The police cannot work out how she killed herself and avoided detection with the door locked from the outside. The narrator

remains silent.

And with this scene it becomes clear that the narrator's long struggle to tell this story, the long silence in the book, the haunting by Heejae, is not from the 'fall', the pregnancy, the death, but from the pain of complicity, the "fingers that remember", the author's entanglement with death and the fact that she lived to build a world of opportunities when her beloved friend died at the height of their shared poverty. In trying to grasp the success of this book, how it resonated with so many readers, we discover the consensus at last. It is not the politics implied by a literature of the working-class, it is the suicide, the death by self-loathing. This is the shared grief, the collective complicity. And traces of the moral universe that condemned Heejae remain in the social world we ourselves inhabit. We understand enough about our times, we share enough of the same moral lexicon to know we should fear for a sexually active factory girl presented to us in literature.

By contending with death but refusing to die the narrator appears to be enacting Luce Irigaray's injunction "Staying alive seems to me to be a part of liberation" (Irigaray, 79). The narrator does not hide her difficulty with staying alive in the society she has helped to create. Rather than endorsing the world of South Korea's democratising mid 1990s society into which she publishes her history, the present day narrative relates the relentless silencing (by her brothers and friend) or shallow and manipulative "celebration" (by women's magazines) of the narrator's earlier life which cannot help but stand in for the lives of an entire generation of teenage workers.<sup>3)</sup> Juxtaposed with this mass endlessly available identity of 'factory girl', Heejae remains elusive

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3) See for example the interview with Shin Kyông-suk in the Kyônghyang Sinmun entitled 'Now I Can Love Those Factory Girl Days', 1995.12.08, p.12.

even in death. Perhaps this was the only protection that author can offer in the face of an obliterating cliché.

*The Solitary Room* also speaks to the cultural moment when, to paraphrase Nancy Armstrong, class sympathy stopped being an action and instead started to be a feeling. (Armstrong 14) If the 1990s were for historians and writers the era of revelations about the past, when people had won for themselves the capacity to look back on history and the traumas they had lived through, Shin Kyông-suk looks back to find her reading, writing, and striving adolescent self. In doing so she makes visible for us the exclusions that constitute a literature about factory girls. It is a work of “literary solitude,” a term I borrow from Jacques Rancière, (Rancière 2004, 110). The book shares the same fear of class conflict exhibited by the great nineteenth-century industrial novels, even as it accomplishes the most complete interior portrait of a factory girl in literature that this writer has ever encountered. Displaying a fear of both revolution and class immobility, Shin Kyông-suk’s book navigates the rupture between sympathetic literature and its object. But even as she does this, Shin insists that we understand the source of the power of her story. She writes not only about her own youth but signals an entire cultural archive lost to labor, illiteracy, and self-doubt. By at once highlighting and questioning the value of writing, the burden of ambition, and the wake left by suicide, Shin Kyông-suk allows us to partake of a classed knowledge painfully acquired. Yet by underscoring the solitude of this literary project, whose success relies on readers’ intertwined sense of guilt and curiosity, she never ceases to question the nature of writing and the exclusions that constitute its power.

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## 소녀들의 사랑과 자살: 신경숙의 『외판방』

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이 논문은 한국 노동문학의 한 사료로서 여공문학의 고전이라 할 만한 신경숙의 『외판방』을 탐구하고 있다. 『외판방』은 1970년 후반 급속한 산업화 시기를 살았던 한 여공 개인의 자살과 사춘기의 섹슈얼리티에 대해 포착하고 있는 소설이다. 이 논문은 『외판방』이 후기 산업 사회로 들어선 한국 사회가 산업화라는 최근의 트라우마에 대해 갖는 죄의식과 비탄에 대해 언급하면서 동시에 ‘여공’이라는 불가해한 주체를 고정시키고 있다는 점을 밝히고자 했다. 이 소설은 또한 혁명과 계급 이동이 주는 불안감도 그려내고 있는데 베스트셀러로서 성공할 수 있었던 것도 부분적으로 그러한 서사의 관습성과도 관련이 깊다. 그러나 『외판방』은 여공들에게 자행된 폭력에 독자(사회)가 연루되었음을 증거하는 예외적인 텍스트이다. 결론적으로 이 논문은 『외판방』이 여공 문학의 탁월한 작품 가운데 하나로 읽혀져야 한다는 점을 말하고 있다.

**주제어** : 여공 문학, 노동운동, 신경숙, 외판 방, 사춘기의 섹슈얼리티

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