

New Voices

Words of Farewell: Stories by Korean Women Writers

by Kang Sok-kyong,
Kim Chi-won and O Chong-hui
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Review by Sara Dorow (Fall 1998 issue)

Korean women are... How does one finish that sentence in a time when generation, geography, education, and class create great diversity among Korean women? The women in this collection of contemporary short stories are a certain reminder of the diversity of these experiences: a prostitute in one of the “camptowns” that exist around U.S. military bases; a middle-aged woman accommodating a green-card marriage in America; a mother abandoned by her elusive husband. If nothing else, one can leave *Words of Farewell* with the notion that both the writing and experiences of Korean women have branched out quite widely relative to just a few decades ago.

But to say there is diversity is not to say there is no common experience. In their introduction to the collection, the translating team of Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton include a paragraph that opens with reference to the ways in which “Korean women have begun to break out of the confines of the domestic sphere and take a more active role in Korea’s rapid modernization” (ix), but then proceed to name the many ways in which tradition has proved resistant to change. This is the conundrum I face in reading these short stories. The women protagonists have a variety of experiences, and perhaps even choices, but limitations and constraints are everywhere and entrenched.

I will take examples from three short stories, one from each writer represented in the book, to illustrate and wrestle with this problem. Kang Sok-kyong’s “Days and Dreams” opens the collection. The opening lines set the stage, as “an ancient palace with forsythias in full bloom” turns out not to be the idyllic setting for the story but a description of last month’s calendar page on the wall of a prostitute who just failed her checkup for venereal disease. Thus Kang jars the reader out of imagining a sweet courtesan fanning on the verandah of that ancient palace and takes us instead inside the social world of prostitutes striving for dignity and survival.

Their dignity and survival are depicted vis-à-vis both Korean men and foreigners, and Kang deliberately confuses the lines between the two. Which, for a Korean woman, is the ultimate source of oppression? When a Korean man kills one of the prostitutes because all he got was “some damned foreigner’s leftovers,” another of the women retorts “Is he the only one who’s eaten leftovers? This whole country’s been living off other countries’ leftovers.” The main protagonist (her name is never used) then connects her childhood experience of eating cornbread made from relief goods supplied by the U.S. after the Korean War to the first time she got paid for sex by a G.I., realizing that she had gone back to where she started. On the other hand, the women discuss how

brutal Korean men can be, some stating preferences for American customers. The one foreigner with whom the prostitutes are sympathetic (and who is sympathetic to them) is a black lesbian G.I. Korean women are up against the power not only of men, but of the white Western world.

A similar issue is raised by Kim Chi-won's "A Certain Beginning," in which a kind of hopelessness surrounds the arrangements of money and relationship made for and by women. This time the setting is urban America. Yun-ja has accepted an offer to marry a young Korean man named Chong-il just long enough for him to get his green card. Abandoned by her first husband and middle-aged, Yun-ja sees the possibility for a better apartment and a change. The reader learns that there could be more to the relationship, and that both Yun-ja and Chong-il entertain the possibility of a "real" marriage. But the mere fact of the arrangement, in which Chong-il feels "as if he were buying an aging prostitute," precludes such a possibility.

Yun-ja is not prostituting her body per se. Nevertheless, selling her status seems to have the same disconnected effect on her mind. Yun-ja feels little if any connection to Korea ("the source of her shame"), and Chong-il thinks that "this woman Yun-ja didn't even seem to realize she was Korean." Yet Yun-ja is fascinated from a distance by a traditional Korean grandmother who roams the streets where she lives announcing how bad things are in America—as if she is a Greek chorus. Is Yun-ja disconnected from Korea because her choices are limited by the circumstances of being a woman? The narrator in "Days and Dreams" remarks: "We women were facing up to life with our bodies as our only asset." "A Certain Beginning" closes with Yun-ja feeling vulnerable as she contemplates her age, divorce, and physical imperfections. Her final declaration that "It's time to make a stand" rings hollow.

"Words of Farewell" makes hopelessness and transience the predictable hallmarks of life. O Chong-hui's story is full of people and moments that fade, leaving behind small traces (melon peelings at a grave site, the smell of a missing husband's cigarette, unique family features that fade over generations). The entire story is woven around the trip the young mother Chong-ok takes with her son and her own mother to the future grave sites of her parents, thus making death and transience into central themes. Chong-ok's husband has disappeared in a way to which we only have scattered clues, and her father is a vague and vacuous figure.

Unlike in the previous two stories, in which the female characters at least have the will to think about actions they might take, O's character floats through her struggle in dream-like fashion. Hers is not a world where choices really seem to exist anymore.

Words of Farewell is certainly about Korea and Korean women, but its overall sensibility is quite universal. It is this universalism that leads one to think that Korean women writers have broadened and grown, lending diversity to their female characters in the process. At the same time, this universalism makes connections between reader and story that have made the experiences of Korean women accessible to a wider audience. This collection of short stories is a case in point, and a good place to start.