
Of Bugs and Men: Narratives of Desire and Hatred in Korean Literature from the 1970s to the Present

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1. Nietzsche, Kafka and Korean Literature

In his philosophical novel “*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*”, Friedrich Nietzsche had announced that human beings as mere animals, mere bugs.

“Ye have made your way from the worm to man, and much within you is still worm. Once were ye apes, and even yet man is more of an ape than any of the apes. Even the wisest among you is only a disharmony and hybrid of plant and phantom. But do I bid you become phantoms or plants? Lo, I reach you the Superman! The Superman is the meaning of the earth.”

The way that Nietzsche’s ‘worm – animal – human’ has to evolve is a way to be a “superman”. If human can not become “super-man”, human will regress. For Nietzsche, the process of human evolution is the process from “worm – animal – human” becoming to “human – superman”. However, Kafka’s “*Metamorphosis*” (1915) is a process of the reversed-evolution of “human”, process of regressing from “human” to “bug”.

This article analyzes the works of Cho Se-hee, Kim Young-hyun, Oh Su-yeon and Kim Ae-ran, who have works with the same title, or the same subject, “worms/ bugs” (벌레) since the 1970s. Writers show that human nature is not different from bugs through motif of transformation into bugs themselves, or hatred for bugs. It shows the reality of human beings as a contradiction of their conditions and desires.

Cho Se-hee’s “*The Dwarf*” (1976) is a series of twelve shortstories about dwarf’s family. Although they are the underprivileged in the city and living in very poor condition day by day, they had never stop hoping to live for a better life. One day, however, they received a Redevelopment Notice from the Seoul Metropolitan Government, “Etopia District, Happy Ward”. The demolition simply ended, and apartment will be distributed with the price they can not imagine. Even though they had a right to move in, they did not have enough money. So they sold the right to the leaguers. The dwarves had to work harder, their children had to quit school and worked in factories. In despair, the dwarf father climbed up chimney of the brick factory to commit suicide, dreaming of a

happy world. His children planned revenge, saying that they would no longer live as dwarves.

In Kim Young-hyun's "*Worm*" (1989), the narrator "I" remember a worm-liked experience in a solitary cell called '*meokbang*떡방', a closed-space like Kafka's Gregor's room. "I" left the graduation semester and went to prison because of violation of Emergency Action No. 9. In prison, "I" was confined to solitary cell-room because of opposing Yushin Constitution (유신헌법). With hands were tied up, and mouth filled with the stick, I could not bear urine, but the guards did not concern. "I" felt like a worm himself at the moment of relieving himself in anger and despair.

The novel by Cho Se-hee is a work that shows the real life of workers without dreams and hopes, the deprived life of poor urbans in the constrast of capitalism. While Kim's story recalls the experience in cell where the human had been treated like bugs in the late 1970s, thereby revealing the ruthlessness of dictatorship.

In Oh Soo-yeon's "*Bug*" (1997) short story, the heroine was suffering from skin disease and went to the dermatology clinic. Just as doctor and nurses in the hospital avoid and despise her, she hated the gruesome and unsanitary bugs invading her apartment. She can not live like normal people because her non-treatable disease. On the other hand, her husband is always grumbling that everybody knows how to live like 'normal people' except her, and for that she must change. In the meantime, the bugs invade her apartment. She thought that the keratins covering her body are the scales of bugs. She rushed to the hospital and told to the doctor, but the doctor picked up another patient's chart before her bugs-story over. She decided to get a peels after few days, and turned back home. Then she transformed into a bug and laying eggs. At that moment, her husband came back home, said that he loves her and they can have human-life now.

Kim Ae-ran's "*Bugs*" (2008) is a story about a poor young couple in Seoul. They are a representative of the underprivileged class in modern society. They do not have a house that meets their conditions. It was not until a month after moving in, they realized that the 'Rose Villa' was designated as a redevelopment zone and 'A zone' next to the Rose Villa was already subject to demolition. They had to endure this space filled with all kinds of insects and noises all day. They decided to give birth in a better house 3 years later, but on the first day when they moved into this house, the child life was begin in her. The husband, who is a staff in a confectionery company, is always busy with making a lot of money, and his wife, who is sensitive because of pregnancy, has to confront with sores and bugs all day at home. One day when she was fighting the big caterpillar, she dropped her wedding ring out of the window down to the A zone, and she went down to the 'A forest', looking for the ring at dawn. Instead of finding a ring on the dark night where there is nobody, she found a tree with bugs. At that time, the child being inside her struggled to get out of the world. She can not move, and worry even that she can give birth safely this time.

2. Desire for human life – "I am a worm"

In history of the world, the 1980s is an important point. It is the same in case of Korean

Literature. From the end of 1960s, Korea has entered into industrialization and modernization in earnest, and since the end of 1970s, the democratization movement raised against the power of dictatorship nationwide. Due to rapid industrialization, urban development and the poor, capital and labor problems became social issues. On the otherhand, under the pressure and control of the Yushin-cheje, people resisted in their own way, even while they shrank to survive.

This tragic experience shows social situation at the time through the proposition “human beings are bugs” in Cho Se-hee’s “The Dwarf” and Kim Young-hyun’s “Bug”.

Two writers wrote about the violent world that 1970s generation had experienced. The novel by Cho Se-hee is a work that shows the worm-like lives of the workers who be deprived of dreams and hopes. While Kim’s story recalls the experience in prison where he had been treated as a worm in a detention place in the late 1970s, thereby revealing the ruthlessness of dictatorship. This phenomenon is reminiscent of Kafka’s “*Metaphosis*”.

Kafka’s bug is not monster, but is something monster-like of human-beings. In this sense, “*Metamorphosis*” accurately diagnoses the realistic world, and open to readers the possibility of interpretation about the conditions of the world in which human beings are living, and the existence of human beings in this world. On the outside, the transformation of Geger Samsa in Kafka’s novel is the transformation of a man turned into a ugly bug that the world rejects. In Kafka’s “*Metamorphosis*”, the main character, Geger Samsa, was transformed from “the wage earner of family” into “a creepy bug” as in the eyes of the family and the surroundings. “Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dream and found himself, laying in the bed, transformed into a gigantic insect.”

‘Dwarf (난장이)’ in Jo Se-hee’s novel is a word that refers to the people who are not treated properly in the 1970s, showing tragedy, underprivileged and violence in Korean society. In short stories titled “Little ball that the Dwarf shoots” and “City of the machines”, people have a (false) notion of “dwarf = worm”. In story named “Klein’s Bottle”, the dwarf father said himself, “I am a worm”. Unlike Kafka’s Gregor Samsa, the dwarves of Cho’s novel has been treated as a bugs from the beginning by the people who are living the human-life.

In “*Dwarf*”, Cho set up the conflict structure of ‘the insiders’ and ‘the outsiders’, ‘the haves’ and ‘the have-nots’, ‘employers’ and ‘employees’, and showed the gap between the rich and the poor, social discrimination at that time. The terms of “dwarf is not human” and “dwarf is a worm” seem to be a binary structure but it actually equipollence. Another binary structure overlaped here is that “the haves are human” and “the have-nots (the dwarf) are non-human”.

“The father said, “The house will be under the redevelopment and you have to go to the factory instead of the school. Do you think I can feel easy with all that things? There is no hope. I am a bug. This is a final chance for me to wriggle out to earn money.””

(“Klein’s bottle”)

“Please do not talk about the dwarf.”

“Why?”

“It makes me thinking of a bug.”

“He is not a bug, but a human!”

“It is the same.”

(“The City of Machine”)

The dwarf father felt “no hope” about a dream of “human-life”. “The death of a dwarf is the end of a generation,” but ‘dwarfs’ world’ still remains around us. The question dwarf left to us is that whether or not ‘the world that all can live together’ can become reality without discrimination and underprivileged, violence and oppression.

The ending of Cho’s worm-like dwarf father and Krafka’s bug-transformed Gregor are the same. The two became losers in the human world (real world) and finally decided to die in despair. However, if the family of Gregor drove him to death and just watched that thing happend, the dwarves’ family did not give up hope after the death of dwarf father. Their struggle agaisnt the “real world” is the contunity of the darwf father’s derise for a better life.

Kim Young-hyun’s “*Worm*” began by referring to the transformation of Kafka. The writer expessed his intention directly or indirectly in the view of narrator while mentioned the mutual text between his work and Kafka’s work. However, unlike Gregor of Kafka, suddenly turned into a bug one day, the main character of Kim Young-hyun’s novel did not transform into a bug but has deluded himself into a worm-like feelings.

The feeling that the narrator changed into a worm has been going on since the last five years in prison and army, and that feeling continues till ‘World War II syndrome’. It is a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder. The symptoms of the mental and physical pain that the narrator suffered in the past are related to the autobiographical experience of the writer’s. “The prison and the army are the space where the national violence of the Yushin dictatorship (the Revitalizing Reforms system) treated people like bugs and worms.” In the age writer has lived, people share “the unpleasant memory that (they) have became worms and bugs in various forms”.

“When I looked around the dark room, it was raining outside the bars, drawing straight lines.

At that time I was surprised to find out that I transformed into a worm.

It was a very surprised discovery. Tightly bound hands was no painful anymore. And now the bit blocked my mouth is no longer a pain to me.”

(Kim Young-hyun’s “*Worm*”)

The dictatorship, the violence symbolized here as a space of prison, made “I” feel like himself transforming into into a worm. But when “I” transformed into a transparent being like “invisible dust” and “a larva is found on the leafs in summer,” I felt “no more pain at all”.

Gregor transformed into a bug refusing to eat food. It was the sound of his sister playing the

violin, grabbing him instead of food. At that moment, Gregor realized that he had a true-human desire from a bug to a human again. Eventually, however, the bug-human Gregor died, leaving only the twisted bark. He did not compromise society until the end.

In the prison, a dirty body (like a worm) that can not speak human's language, just a sound like "Ooooo". On the one hand, the narrator who has become a worm-like existence liked this experiences, a desire to be a small insect that does not stand out from the others, and experiences complex feelings at the same time. The narrator "I" referred to the past experience of "being treated like a worm" and "a painful state that seems to turn into a bulky worm by myself nowadays". However, the feeling of being turned into a worm shows the ambivalence of "very uncomfortable but at the same time a little comfort". This complex feeling is the same with Grego's. After being transformed into bug, Kafka's Grego avoided people and said to him, "The sofa was very comfortable and cozy."

However, Kim ,s narrator, "I" "hide myself completely and observe the word outside" with the "consciousness in the eyes of my torso". Feeling like himself transformed into a worm, then he can feel the freedom for the first time. If Gregor is dead in despair and hunger, "I" tried to survive to the end, fighting against the violence in prison, and now telling about his worm-like experience. By telling the experience of being trapped in prison, the writer expresses the desire to become free from that non-human experience in the past. It is only because he can feel freedom from the world to turn into a worm.

Dwarves of Cho Se-hee and worm-transformed experience of Kim Young-hyun are the stories about the people who struggled to escape from the non-human social structure and was tragically resisting the reality by shouting "I am a worm", showed the complex desire in a humorous way. They resisted the word discriminated them, called themselves worms to oppose discrimination of capitalism/dictatorship (insiders) - labors (outsiders).

3. Hatred of non-human life – "I am not a bug"

In the 1990s, Korean literature shows significant difference with previous period's. Consumption and popularization, information technology and globalization, intensifying competition and individualism have formed a complex variety of environment that human beings had never experienced before. Unlike literature in previous period, this period's literature focuses on daily life and the inside of individual rather than the contemporary problems. Among the writers in this period, female writers such as Oh Su-yeon and Kim Ae-ran show their will to recover women's identity by breaking away from society or family's structure in the point of feminism.

Since the 1990s, there are many literary works have word "bugs" in the title. In previous period's novels, "worm/bug" was used as a metaphor, while the real bugs appeared in this period's novels such as works of Oh Su-yeon and Kim Ae-ran. If in the novels of Cho and Kim, human beings called themselves worms or transformed themselves into worms/bugs to be free in non-

human life, in the works of Oh Su-yeon and Kim Ae-ran, heroines hate bugs but be forced to transform into bugs under the pressure of social environment. There is an irony that they kill bugs to live a human life, but finally they must transform into bugs to survive.

To Oh Su-yeon and Kim Ae-ran, the desire to become “insider” in “the haves and the have-nots”, “male and female”, “employees and employers” of the binary structure in modern the society raises a feeling of strong hatred toward bugs. In Oh Su-yeon’s story, bugs are considered as the reason of her skin ‘diseases’, and in Kim Aaran’s work, bugs are considered as ‘poverty’.

It is more similar to Kafka’s transformation in respect that the heroine in Oh’s story turned into a bug. The story was told in the first-person narrative, a woman who regularly goes to dermatology because of her chronic skin disease.

“There is a war with bugs every night since that day. The kinds and numbers of bugs increase day by day, and the fighting became fierce. I sprayed insecticide in the whole house as much as I could not breathe ... To sleep or to live, I have to kill them all night.”...

“Doctor ... There are a lot of bugs in my house So I think, because of bugs,... the scales just fell off from the bugs’ wings..... my skin is so sensitive, it itches and scales appear all over...”

“It’s always as crowded as a supermarket, but it’s just as quiet as a prayer house. People usually communicate with hand-signal and gestures.... The nurses ask visitors for their address, phone number, and how they are sick through perforated window, with the voices are thin and faint as the sound of an old microphone. Patients sneak up on their heads and lift their hands up and down to explain themselves. They point their finger to the acne on the face, or to lift the forearm and scratch it. The nurse then raises her left hand for a while. It means “You should wait in the waiting room”. If she turns her hand to the right side door, it means “You should go home now”. If she opens her finger and push it downwards, “The medicine is written on the pill. Do not ask”.”

(Oh Su-yeon, “Bug”)

In dermatology clinic, the communication between the patients and the nurse is not a “human-style” but by “hand signal and gestures”. And they “do not feel uncomfortable with or without words” as if this place is a bugs’ world. “their voice is furious”, “point finger at their face”, “lift forearms and scratch their skin”. Like worms and bugs, all their moves are in silence without words. “I” go to this place with desire to live a human life, but here “I” was treated as a bug.

In Korean society, women have to live under the oppression and control of patriarchy. Transformation is required to become a new-being in order to survive in the social binary structure of ‘female (I) / male (husband, director)’. Then “she” in Oh’s novel was always under psychological pressure from her husband and doctor.

“Lets have a life as human beings”, he said. Of course I agree with him. But he insisted that I have to change myself first. When I asked him how to change, he said other women know about that except me.” ... The law of life that all women around me know, except me. The law that not only women but men also have to know after becoming an adult by being married.”

When a man/woman is born and grows up, he/she leaves his parents’ arms and sets up a family, share joy and sorrow together. How should one change when married?

“If you do not know, you are neither a human.”

“Somehow I felt like that I made him (the director of the hospital) disappointed... Maybe he is hatread toward my sickness. While I walked out of the clinic, I felt like I broke up into the pieces.”

(Oh, Su-yeon, “*Bugs*”)

The masculine-world that harasses the heroine, her husband and the doctor, as symbols of “money” and “appearance”, described as “a ruthless money-worm in the workplace”. In other words, image of husband and doctor can be interpreted as symbols of power and capitalism. The “fake” desire that they think they can change their life is to make a beautiful appearance by peeling, and to have a child like ordinary women. This is a forced transformation because of the desire for snobbery which commercialize the appearance in modern society, and cause of the role of the woman in giving birth.

In the end, can not win the male-centered system, husband and director (doctor), the main character of Oh Su-yeon decided to do a peeling operation. Back home, she was transformed into a bug and then her husband return home and said that he loves her.

“I know what I have to do to pass the fate at this time. I try mybest, using all the power inside myself to lay the white and shining eggs in the night.”

He burned into tears and dropped things in his hands. And cried again.

“You are so different!”

My husband rush into me.

“Thanks, thank you very much, you really did it! We can live like humen now.”

He embraced me and wrote me with his tears in my chest and whispered, I love you, I loved you. I whispered too, bippppppp.”

(Oh, Su-yeon, “*Bug*”)

It is irony that after laying eggs like a bug, “she” can communicate with her husband. The husband see the beauty of his transformed-into-bug wife and think that they can live a human-life now.

In “*Bug*” of Oh Su-yeon, women want to live as a human being should have a child in the family

and have a beautiful appearance when going outside. The main character “I” was transformed into a different identity because her desires to become “the others/the insiders” (that husbands, people request). The heroine who dislikes bugs due to her sickness had to turn into a bug and lay eggs to live a human life. From this point of view, Oh criticizes this social structure pushing women back to the ecosystem, the bugs-life.

Oh Su-yeon’s story shows the process of confirming the female identity that turned into “bug”. Bugs are reason that carry disease, as in Oh Su-yeon’s short story, but are perceived as a sign of fear and disgrace nearest to human. They also have limitless propagation and viability. In Kim Ae-Ran’s novel, bug is applied as a threat symbol of ‘poverty’.

“The border between Rose Villa and Zone A, so the weeds are lush at the bottom of the cliff. These are grasses that have grown up in a land that has not been caring for a long time, and which gives a persistent and greedy impression. There, the bugs that I see for the first time in my life grow into a rose villa. Blue, plump, prolonged, disgusting..... In the darkness, a slight twinkle that feels on your forearms. When I turn on the light and see nothing. Something I feel but can not catch.”

(Kim Ae-Ran, “Bugs”)

She named the smell from Zone A as “the smell of poverty” and despised it, but there is no guarantee that it is not their future. “The people who lived there were poor, aren’t they?” - The husband said. “Are you sure it is not yours’ situation?”. Having trong viability creepy insects appear in the fear of ‘poverty’ that the main character, young couple is facing.

If to Oh’ character, giving birth is the way to live a humman life, to Kim’s character, having a child is a fear of another “poverty”.

“So it was just passing through the root of the tree. I soon witnessed the unfolding scene. A huge amount of insects, worms. The insects were moving in groups. The procession of long-lived insects was spreading as a catastrophe, or as a line of refugees, into the city.... The tree was lying like a woman with a womb extracted. I look the hole in flashlight while holding my chest down and bend my waist. The stump was strangely empty. In the deep darkness, the worms and bugs came out constantly. I tried to move the whole body joints and muscles. But it did not work. I looked across my legs with a dazed face. Water was flowing down like a pee in the groin. Amniotic fluid broke.”

“I grabbed a piece of concrete with my all power. From far distance, Roses villas, motels and churches, apartments still seemed peaceful, I was not sure if this birth could be successful.”

(Kim Ae-Ran, “Bugs”)

Bugs and children are considered as the same thing growing in a harsh environment called 'Rose villa', should be redeveloped in the city, what highlighted poverty and weakness of the heroine. Those who are portrayed as the image opposed to capitalism, but have strong vitality to survive till the end though they are in the same position nothing, just like bugs.

While Kim Young-hyun's worm transformation is a resistance to the world, Oh's bug transformation was forced under the oppression of society. Cho Se-hee's dwarf and Kim Ae-ran's bugs imply the survival power of the poor like bugs that breed in the city. Oh Su-yeon and Kim Ae-ran hate and feel disgust bugs invading human space. Perhaps this hatred derived from their desire to despise their own situation in modern society.

4. Conclusion

In the 1970s, worm-like / bugs-transformed characters appeared in the works of Cho Se-hee and Kim Young-hyun are the transformation of the underprivileged who are '**the outsiders**' / be considered as '**non-human**' in social structure. Said themselves "**I am a worm/bug**", they raise the voice against the violence of capitalism and dictatorship and dream of a free life.

Since the 1990s, the age of democracy and popularization, but women have to transform themselves into '**the others**' to survive in the '**male/capitalism-dominated society**'. Being hated toward the bugs but actually their life-in-identity of 'the others' nothing but like a bug. That is the issue that female writers such as Oh Su-yeon and Kim Ae-ran want confirm true identity and vitality of women under the modern society's oppression.

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