

THE IMPROPER DESIRE FOR KNOWLEDGE: DE-GENDERING CURIOSITY IN CONTEMPORARY KOREAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

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Female curiosity is here discussed in the context of traditional and modern Korean folktales and proverbs, and the ways in which these conceptualise the issue. These traditional ways of perceiving female curiosity are then juxtaposed with the way it is re-imaged in a contemporary feminist fairy tale. The aim of such comparison is to show how patriarchal ideology is being subverted in contemporary feminist rewritings of traditional Korean fairy tales.¹

Traditional treatment of the theme of feminine curiosity

In the context of analysing the gender ideologies which inform fairy tales, curiosity is a particularly useful trope because of the gender-specific way it is often conceptualised in them. Curiosity is a common theme in fairy tales and folktales in many cultures of the world, and it is telling that many tales of curiosity function as warnings against female curiosity in particular. Laura Mulvey defines curiosity as “a compulsive desire to see and to know” and highlights the difference between the ways in which inquisitiveness in men and women is perceived.² There is a tendency to *gender* curiosity; curiosity in men is portrayed as a positive trait and as evidence of a heroic desire for knowledge; whilst curiosity in women is portrayed as interfering with the domain of knowledge that belongs exclusively to men. Female curiosity is often portrayed as transgressive or dangerous, and it is presented as a potential threat to the stability of existing social order. This point can be illustrated by the story of Pandora, whose curiosity caused her to open the box she was forbidden to touch. As a result, she released all the evils of the world from the box in which they had been securely stored. Another example is the story of Eve who gave in to the temptation

to taste of the forbidden fruit and so caused the fall of mankind.³ Similarly, the story of Bluebeard follows this narrative structure: the curious maiden was saved only at the very last moment by her brothers when, despite Bluebeard's warnings, she was overcome by her curiosity and looked into the forbidden chamber. The common theme in all of these tales is the suggestion of women's inability to heed sound advice because of their incurable desire for forbidden knowledge. Moreover, in almost all of these stories, feminine inquisitiveness is never allowed to go unpunished and hence the moral in these tales is often a warning against female curiosity.

Although Korean traditional fairytales and folktales do not follow exactly the plots of the stories mentioned above, the feminine desire to discover possibilities outside socially defined limits has nevertheless traditionally been perceived as negative. Accordingly, in pre-modern Korea, women were seen as needing protection from their own desire for knowledge about affairs outside the domestic sphere, since this was perceived as potentially harmful to them and their families. In general, it was believed that it was easier for women to lead a harmonious married life if they were ignorant of men's concerns. (We say 'in general' since even during the Chosŏn period there were many remarkable *yangban* women who were particularly well-educated and knowledgeable about political affairs.⁴) This negative attitude toward women's curiosity or interest in things beyond their domestic domain can be seen in proverbs such as:

Yŏja-ga nŏmu almyŏn p'alja-ga seda (여자가 너무 알면 팔자가 세다): If a woman knows too much she will have a hard life.

Yŏja-nŭn sahŭl an tterimyŏn yŏu-ga toenda (여자는 사흘 안 때리면 여우가 된다): If you don't beat your wife for four days, she becomes a wayward woman [keep her under control or you will be sorry].

Yŏja-nŭn che koŭl changnan-ŭl mollaya p'alja-ga chot'a (여자는 제 고을 장날을 몰라야 팔자가 좋다): Keep your woman ignorant of the things outside the home, and she will have a good life.

Moreover, in some well-known folktales, female curiosity and the knowledge gained as a result of inquisitiveness were often portrayed as leading to a negative outcome, as the female protagonists were shown as not fit to be entrusted with the knowledge of non-domestic affairs. Women were perceived as too talkative for their own good, and therefore in many folktales we see an image of a wise husband who manages to keep secrets from his wife, who otherwise would bring the household to ruin. The Tale of the Wise Woodcutter is an example in point. In this story the woodcutter finds gold in the mountains, but knowing that his wife would brag about his discovery should she find out about it, he invents an alternative story to explain his sudden ability to bring more money home. The woodcutter tells his wife that

he has found a tree that grows rice cakes. As he expected, the wife promptly tells the people in their village about the magical tree, only to find that she has become the laughing stock of the village. Having thus outsmarted his wife and dented her credibility in such a clever way, he is free to tell her about the gold, as now no one believes a word she says. Thus the wise woodcutter's secret is safe. Tellingly, in this story the responsibility for not allowing women to share in the 'male knowledge' is shown as women's own fault, as they are deemed unable to deal with it wisely. Even women who otherwise might be perceived as ideal wives and mothers are warned in these proverbs and fairy tales that curiosity about what is going on outside their own domain is likely to lead to calamity and their own downfall. It is significant that the morals communicated through these texts simultaneously denote a sense of male abdication of responsibility of what happens to the female character.

However, what do fairytales and folk stories have to do with modern realities and gender issues in particular? Although in modern times folktales are often understood as stories written for children, it is generally accepted that in the past they were also told to adults. Lutz Röhrich points out that both contemporary and historical fairy tales "always reflect the society in which they are told", because they are effective in their ability to communicate beliefs and ways of perceiving the world to their readers.⁵ Therefore, fairy tales were generally written not only to entertain, but also to help their readers to understand the nature of humankind and the historical origins of a society or nation.⁶ This idea reflects Mircea Eliade's theory that myths and mythic events still hold an important place in modern people's consciousness because of their ability to ground identities in 'eternal truths'. Whereas primordial peoples looked for foundation myths to answer any ontological or existential questions they may have had, people now no longer believe that myths contain such concrete truths about the origins of humankind. However, Eliade argues that people still need to have a memory or understanding of their origins: "In the traditional societies it is recollection of *mythical events*; in the modern West it is recollection of all that took place in historical time."⁷ Similarly, in modern Korea, when the original meanings of traditional values that were invaluable for the survival of small communities (for example reciprocal practices and traditions in village communities) are lost or blurred, there is still a need to connect the present with the historical past.

In addition to this, myths, and by extension stories such as fairy tales, can be utilised to reinforce social stability as they reflect prominent values in society. Barthes argued that this is done by presenting the values of a particular society as 'normal', 'natural' or 'real', and therefore such power structures as patriarchy can be maintained without the use of physical threat. The 'naturalness' of a particular social structure ensures that any deviation from the norm becomes socially unacceptable, and those who transgress are banished to the margins of society, often without the need to resort to physical violence.⁸ With regard to women in particular, Luce Irigaray notes that

myths and other such wonder-tales function as tropes and philosophical statements that justify the ontological conditions of women's subordination. Moreover, she observes that in the Western world, people's imaginaries "still function in accordance with the schema established through Greek mythologies and tragedies."⁹ In the words of Margaret Whitford, "myth or fiction is not simply, for Irigaray, a *reflection* of social organisation, it also gives a shaping force to the conceptualisation of rights and citizenship."¹⁰ The 'historical truth' that myths offer is perceived as being rooted in people's primordial unconscious, and is used to justify the imbalanced power relations in society between men and women. For example, Pamela Norris asserts that the story of Eve has been used throughout history to justify blaming and punishing females for bringing evil and death into the world. This portrayal of Eve and her unforgivable curiosity as the reason for the suffering of all mankind has been a useful excuse for the continuing patriarchal repression of women.¹¹ Therefore, the historical nature of myths is used to validate the ideologies that sustain them. In this sense, the moral messages embedded in traditional fairy tales are often still accepted as part of common knowledge that has survived the test of time.

Consequently, although traditional fairy tales change over generations, stories that we have access to today retain basic elements of the ideologies and prominent social values that informed them when they were created.¹² As a result, even in modern retellings of traditional fairy tales, traditional attitudes can be clearly seen. In this way traditional values are discursively recreated in them and transferred to a new generation of readers or listeners, and myths and mythical events are thus presented as evidence of the historical past of a nation on which the existing knowledge is based. This notion is particularly significant in the context of conceptualising gender and curiosity in Korean fairy tales, as it calls for a radical rethinking of what should be perceived as 'commonsensical knowledge'.

Analysis of a modern fairytale

Bearing in mind that traditional fairy tales in Korea have not been significantly adapted to reflect the rapid socio-cultural change in the latter part of last century, feminist rewriting of a fairytale or a folktale can be perceived as an act of challenging the accepted received wisdom of the generations before.¹³ In the case of female curiosity in particular, the issue at stake is who 'owns' or has rights to knowledge. This itself is significant, because branding female curiosity as 'bad' effectively shields male vestiges of knowledge by ensuring that such knowledge remains exclusively 'male'.

Within this context, a modern fairytale by a contemporary South Korean woman writer Chŏn Kyŏngnin, entitled *Saebŏnnye myoji, saebŏnnye kyegok, saebŏnnye p'okp'o* (The Third Tomb, the Third Valley, the Third Waterfall), represents an attempt to rewrite such negative portrayal of feminine curiosity in a positive light. She attempts

to achieve this by exposing the root of the masculine fear of feminine thirst for 'forbidden' knowledge. Her story emerges as an attempt to contest accepted ideas of femininity that have influenced women's lives and social roles in the past. In *The Third Tomb*, Chŏn blends myth and fairy tale in order to describe a woman alienated from her 'true' feminine origins through her confinement to the domestic sphere. The story borrows elements from various folk tales, but in general follows the structure of a well-known fairytale of a woodcutter and a *sŏnnyŏ* (a nymph or a heavenly maiden). However, it differs from the original tale in that the female protagonist herself is not a dutiful daughter of a heavenly ruler, but rather a wolf who loses her hide and is transformed into a woman. Moreover, whereas the nymph in the original version remembers her heavenly origins throughout her virtual imprisonment on earth as the woodcutter's wife, the woman in Chŏn's story has forgotten hers. The heroine's origins are therefore in the animal kingdom rather than in heaven, and in this sense it is assumed that for her, metamorphosing into a human would be a beneficial turn of events. Here a conscious reference is made to Korea's foundation myth in which the nation's progenitor was said to have born of the union between Hwan'ung (a son of the King of Heaven) and Ungnyŏ, a woman who was originally a bear but who was transformed into a human by Hwan'ung. As the story unfolds, it soon becomes clear that for the female protagonist her metamorphosis has disastrous rather than happy consequences, unlike as was perceived to be in the case of Ungnyŏ. The wolf-woman's animal origins become all the more significant in the light of other stories by Chŏn such as *Saenŭn ōnjena kūgŏs-e itta* (*The Bird is Always in that Place*), in which the protagonist laments the bear-woman's folly for having chosen domestic slavery over the freedom she enjoyed in the wild, and wishes that she herself could take the animal form instead of being a housewife. It can therefore be said that for Chŏn the animal kingdom represents a metaphor of femininity that is still in touch with itself, untainted by the requirements and roles of male-centred society that have caused women to lose touch with their 'authentic' feminine identities. On the contrary, she portrays the realm of humans as alien and oppressive to women; they exist in it as passive agents, but are not allowed to take an active part in it outside the domestic realm.

Moreover, what is particularly telling about this modern rewriting of a fairytale is the way in which Chŏn uses it to reveal why women are denied access to the knowledge of things outside the domestic sphere. In her fairytale, Chŏn describes how the woodcutter nurses the wolf-woman back to health and marries her. The woman herself does not object to any of this, but often wonders about her origins, which remain unknown as a consequence of her chronic amnesia which prevents her remembering anything about her past. However, she soon becomes aware that the moon is trying to tell her where her origins are. At this point, the woodcutter, worried that the woman's self-discovery might cause her to leave him, confines her

to the house in order to prevent her dreaded self-discovery. The narrator comments that his reasons for doing this stem from his fear of losing his wife, rather than from being uninterested altogether in her affairs, as is often the case in many books of contemporary women's literature. Herein lies the paradox posed in the story: the woodcutter attempts to make her happy *as his wife* and *on his terms*, little realising that this is never possible as the effect on his unfulfilled wife is exactly the opposite. The female protagonist accepts her confinement, but, troubled by her feelings of unhappiness, she remains curious about the moon's knowledge about her origins. She is haunted by a sense of not knowing whence she came, as without a reference point on which she could build her identity, she has simply become the mediator and the means of her family's happiness. Moreover, having no sense of selfhood as such, she accepts the situation of merely fulfilling a function within the family. Without subjectivity of her own, confined to the functions of the domestic and to the reproductive role, the female protagonist longs for what she is shown to have possessed before, a subjectivity albeit an animal one. Her longing is symbolised in her longing for the full moon that seems to beckon to her, wanting to speak to her if only she could understand what it wanted to say. Moreover, the woodcutter also loses his sense of happiness within their marriage in his anxiety of potentially losing her:

"I do not know who I am," she said.

"What does that matter," he replied. "To me, you are just a woman. To me, there is no other woman in the world."

"I don't even know where I came from."

"What does that matter? You are a woman of flesh and blood, warm and soft, you are the only woman in the world for me. Please marry me."

He held her hand. She pulled her hand away and pointed at the moon which hung in the sky.

"The moon is trying to tell me something. I will let you know my answer after the full moon."

...

Finally it was the day before full moon. As the evening drew closer, Chông could no longer contain his fear of losing her. As the early evening fell, the woman with her hair done up went out and knelt at the centre of the garden. The yellow moon rose from behind the mountains. Chông was shaking.

"Whatever the moon says, she is my woman. I am the person who saved her and who owns her."

He burst out in anger and threw the woman indoors. He nailed the door shut and covered all windows so that none of the moon's rays could penetrate inside the house.¹⁴

The negation of female curiosity causes the male subject to feel anxious about what the feminine might discover about itself and how this discovery might affect the male protagonist. Within this context, Irigaray argues that such male fear of women's

self-discovery is a common theme in patriarchal societies. She explains that patriarchal societies are based on a system that monopolises culture for the benefit of a positive self-representation of the masculine, at the expense of positive understanding of the feminine. Femininity and feminine sexuality in this system of representation require the feminine to appear as a symbol of lack or as that which simply complements the masculine. As a result, femininity, as it is understood in Irigaray's analyses of Western societies, exists as a male-imagined ideal of man's 'other,' but not his complete opposite. In fact, the feminine is seen as *the other of the same*, a poor carbon copy of the divine masculine which "does not recognise the feminine other and the self as other in relation to her."¹⁵ In the context of this story, the desire to monopolise subjectivity is symbolised in the male protagonist's wish to thwart the female protagonist's efforts at self-discovery, and her curiosity about her origins. Chõn describes how, barred from searching for her true origins through being confined to domestic duties, the woman consoles herself in housework and in having children. She labours for her husband and mother-in-law, who come to expect her skilful services as a matter of course. The narrative intention here is to show how, if allowed to discover her 'true' self, she would threaten the male protagonist's subjectivity by potentially rejecting her established position as a mirror for the masculine, against which the masculine can achieve a positive self-representation. Moreover, for Chõn's female protagonist, the position of being this point of self-reference for the masculine requires her to stifle any desire for knowledge of her true identity and to conform to a role that he assigns to her, effectively defining her selfhood for her:

"You are already my wife. You are already my children's mother. Even if you knew who you were, what would you do about it? No matter who you are, I will not let you go."

...

"I have already let you down. Please do not imprison me, just get rid of me," she said.

Finally, Chõng could not contain his rage, and with his fist hit the woman who seemed haughty like a king's daughter and unfeeling like an animal. When he hit her, he felt all the effort he had put into her had been in vain and as if his life was falling apart.¹⁶

Through this modern retelling of a fairytale, Chõn suggests that it is often the masculine anxiety of losing control that causes a rift between men and women, rather than any innate feminine or masculine qualities that can make the two sexes so incomprehensible to each other. On this note, Neil Kenny has pointed out that representations of women in fairytales might reveal more about men's anxieties about what women might want, rather than what women are really like.¹⁷ Similarly, in her story, Chõn observes that the lack of curiosity in men about women, fuelled by the anxiety of losing control, is what causes misunderstanding of the nature of the

feminine other's true character or intentions, as well as the continual unhappiness of both sexes. It is therefore easy to suggest that Chŏn attempts to write against what could be called a 'discourse of exclusion' through inviting her readers to consider whether women's self-realisation or discovery would in fact be beneficial for *both* men and women.

Accordingly, the ending of the story is somewhat optimistic: the female protagonist eventually discovers her wolf origins and is offered the possibility of rejoining her wolf-sisters and living in a feminine utopia located outside the realm of culture governed by men. However, despite having been given this choice, it is telling that the protagonist chooses not to do so out of love for her husband, sons and even her abusive mother-in-law. Moreover, her husband chooses to accompany her as she roams all night long in the mountain in search of her wolf-sisters:

But he no longer confined his wife on full moon nights. Instead, carrying his A-frame, he silently followed his wife who roamed in the dark forest between graveyards, valleys and waterfalls; and when the dawn broke and she collapsed, he would pick her up and carry her home on his frame down the slippery mountain path ... Sometimes, because the wife was growing increasingly gaunt, there were occasions when he had to stop, unable to move another inch [because he realised how much weight she had lost]. In times like that, Chŏng felt as if his some part of his body had burst and as if blood was dripping from it to the dry ground. That was a moment when the pitiless time was telling him in a way he could not understand that a moment was approaching when he would have to say goodbye.¹⁸

In this sense, rather than the story reading as the woman's decision to conform to the Symbolic Order at the expense of her animal origins, it represents a rewriting of a myth that allows a space between the two main characters to develop, within which they can approach each other on an equal basis without having to deny themselves. Instead of a women-only utopia, Chŏn fantasises, therefore, of a world where men can allow women to discover their feminine identities that might well differ from those defined by patriarchal society. Furthermore, female curiosity in *The Third Tomb* is presented as a desire for self-discovery that will ultimately benefit both sexes, because it enables both men and women to live harmoniously together and removes the need to feel anxious about what might happen if women were to discover different roles and femininities to existing ones. In this sense, Chŏn's work suggests that female curiosity might not be as dangerous or destructive as the old wisdom would have us believe.

To conclude, the importance of this rewriting of a myth lies within its effort to create a new symbolic representation of the feminine. Ilmari Leppihalme asserts that writing against myths, uncovering forgotten feminine myths or even creating new myths can be a way of creating counter-discourses to the symbolic locations

that traditional myths provide for women.¹⁹ In this sense, such activities can be seen as a useful way of reconceptualising femininity. From this perspective, Chŏn's *The Third Tomb* suggests a de-gendering of curiosity in the context of contemporary South Korean women's literature, which in turn allows women to reach their literary imaginations beyond the known feminine roles and images: a tendency that is all the more evident in Chŏn's own works.

Editor's note: All translations of quoted passages are by the author.

Notes

1. The term 'fairy tale' is used here loosely, as some of the stories discussed resemble folktales or wonder-tales.
2. Laura Mulvey 1996:64.
3. *Ibid.*:56–62.
4. It is probably worth mentioning here that this stricture applied mainly to non-*yangban* women, as most of these stories deal with working-class women who would not have had access to education, whereas many high-class women did in fact receive acclaim for their high level of educational attainment and knowledge of the Confucian classics (see John Duncan, 2004. 'The *Naehun* and the politics of gender in fifteenth-century Korea':26–53). However, it is telling that Queen Sohye, who herself was familiar with Confucian classics, admonished women in the *Naehun* not to ignore the teachings of scholars—an indication that the knowledge of men was not to be questioned. Moreover, she also advised that women should not take an interest in matters that did not directly concern their duties within the domestic sphere and should not "stealthily look into the secret place". The knowledge of women was acceptable if it mirrored that of men in defining womanly virtues, and women's power was seen as emanating from the "wisdom" of adhering to the rules that upheld the present social order, which in turn favoured men. (See Kim Chi-yong, 1986. 'Women's life in the Yi dynasty as reflected in *Naehun*':238–41.)
5. Lutz Röhrich, 1986. Introduction to *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion and Paradigm*:5.
6. Jack Zipes, 2001.'Cross-cultural connections and the contamination of the classical fairy tale':848–9.
7. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask, 1998:138. In discussing modern mythologies, Eliade argues that 'mythical behaviour' can still be observed in the modern world (see p. 183).
8. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, 2000:137–9.
9. Luce Irigaray, 1991.'The bodily encounter with the mother':36.
10. Margaret Whitford, 1991:185.
11. Pamela Norris, 2001:111–34.
12. Jack Zipes, 1988:136.

13. See Ross King, 2004. 'Traditional Korean fairy tales and contemporary Korean fiction: a case study of "The Woodcutter and the Nymph":1
14. Chŏn Kyŏngnin, 1997. 'Sebŏnjje myoji, saebŏnjje kyegok, saebŏnjje p'okp'o':237–38.
15. Luce Irigaray, 1991. 'Questions to Emmanuel Levinas', trans. Margaret Whitford, in *The Irigaray Reader*:178–81.
16. Chŏn 1997:241, 244.
17. Neil Kenny, 2004. 'French stories of female curiosity, 1582–1813'.
18. Chŏn 1997:251.
19. Ilmari Leppihalme, 1995. 'Penelopen urakka: myytin käytön ongelmia ja strategioita naiskirjallisuudessa' [Penelope's task: problems and strategies of using myths in women's literature]:22.

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