

Two Women, Two Seas
—A Study of Ishimure and Lee Nam-hui

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This paper will study two works by two women—*Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* (1969) by Michiko Ishimure (1927 -) and *Long Farewell from the Sea* (1991) by Lee Nam-hui (1958 -). The former deals with the Minamata incident which occurred in southern Kyushu in Japan in the 1950s, while the latter depicts the Onsan disease caused by factory sewage and air pollution in the city of Onsan in the Ulsan industrial region in southeast Korea.

Similarities

Though these works are a few decades apart, they have many points in common in their subject matter and what they mean for literary history. First of all, both are pioneering works in calling attention to pollution as a social problem at a time when it was beginning to be acknowledged by society in both Japan and Korea in the era after World War II. Ishimure took up the Minamata disease, which had been evasively called a “rare disease,” as an issue and published precursors of *The Sea of Sorrow* in regional literary magazines before Minamata was recognized as a pollution-caused disease. Lee, however, began writing about the Onsan disease in 1987, two years after it had been reported in the mass media and had become a nationwide social issue in January 1985. Since Ishimure continued to write about the Minamata issue from the beginning of the problem to the present, while Lee made the Onsan disease her subject only after it became a national issue, we cannot say that the two authors’ perspectives were the same. However, when evaluated in the context of the literary history of each country, they are major pioneers in the treatment of environmental issues.

Secondly, they are both works with a feminist significance. Seen as a narrative structure built to focus on an environmental issue, each work has as its central character a woman who is depicted by a woman. This narrative structure, when put in the context of social history, reminds us that, as the Ishimure’s work before the *Sea of Sorrow* indicates, with the limitations posed by Japanese society of the time, it was not as easy as today for a

female narrator to create a female protagonist to tell the story of a “social issue.” Similarly, in Korea, though women writers increased after the declaration of democracy in 1987, we cannot deny the difficulties faced by a female writer who quickly took up a “social issue” with a female protagonist who had a socially critical viewpoint. In short, when we read these works, we should not forget the difficulty they faced in telling their stories in the historical situation they both shared.

Differences

I have discussed the similarities of the two works in their contribution to literary history and as expressions of social dissent. We will now look at their differences. The first point of difference lies in the structure of their fictional world. While Ishimure’s *Sea of Sorrow* presents a first person narrator who can be equated with the author, Lee’s *Long Farewell* is told in the third person objective point of view about a female protagonist named Lee Hae-yun who cannot be equated with the author. The setting also is given a fictional name, such as Danghang, or City O, and a direct connection with the setting of the Onsan disease is not made clear. This may have enabled a multifaceted critical view of the entire society for Lee, not limited as Ishimure’s to a specific attack on the offending industry, Chisso, though critically voiced through the journalistic reportage form of her narrative. However, in the *Long Farewell*, because of the third-person perspective, her social commentary as a narrator is not expressed. The central character Lee Hae-yun is portrayed only as a victim of the Onsan disease and is clearly distinguished from the narrator. This is not, of course, an argument about whether the first or third person point of view is the better form of narrative. However, it should be recognized that by presenting a first person who is not directly involved with the Minamata disease, Ishimure made it possible for her readers to enter into the mind of the narrator and led their imagination to grasp the actuality of Minamata. It cannot be denied that in the *Long Farewell*, the positions of the narrator and characters are fixed separately so that the reader can view the damage made by pollution and its actuality only from the outside.

Connections beyond the Similarities and Differences

There is a reason for having outlined the similarities and differences of

the two works by the two women. This is that in the *Long Farewell*, written more than twenty years after the *Sea of Sorrow*, we find encoded a representation of Japan and its relationship with Korea that had developed during that period. More precisely, the work discloses various connections between the Korean businesses that had caused the Onsan disease and Japanese businesses, either directly by joint venture or indirectly by collaboration. When the central character Kim Gyeong-taek, who is from the Danghang region where the Onsan incident occurs, is introduced to Sin Mi-su, a college student who lives away from Danghang, he is told something he had been ignorant of. "I hear that plants like Han-il Mining that's been built already and in operation [in the industrial complex] are being driven out of Japan and being moved to Korea. Even in Japan, to export polluting plants to the third world was considered unethical and it's said that there were demonstrations there to stop them from moving it to Korea" (82).

General Manager Choe is put in charge of putting down the residents' opposition to the Han-il Mining Company which had polluted the water. He meets Kim Pan-sul, the father of the aforementioned Kim Gyeong-taek, who represents the residents and, explaining his side of the situation, tries to put off further negotiations for reparations by saying, "In addition [to my explanations about our view of the case], the owners of this company are not only Koreans but Japanese also. They've contributed the technology and machinery, so we need to tell the Japanese people about this situation" (113).

These two citations show that there is at least a connection between the causers of the pollution and Japanese business. However, we should not view this relationship as particular to the occurrence of the Onsan disease. The "Yatsugi Proposal" made by Kazuo Yatsugi during the proceedings of the Japan-Korea Cooperation Committee, composed of leading members of business and government, is emblematic of the trend in the history of Japan-Korea relations after the 1965 Normalization Treaty between Japan and South Korea. It was a time of great Japanese investment in Korea, based on the overall design to join the economies of Korea and western Japan together to create one great economic region. Simultaneous with this trend, another factor was added to the historical background, as witnessed by the chrome export incident by Nihon Kagaku before and after 1975. After the Minamata affair, Japanese plants using high-density pollutants were moving to Korea from Japan where environmental regulations were

becoming strict. In short, what Lee questions in the *Long Farewell* is not simply a domestic environmental issue but an international one between Japan and Korea that could be seen as a new kind of colonialism without plantations. The two works will then have to be seen not only in the framework of environmental literature but with the perspective of a neo-colonialism.

§ Outline of *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*

Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow is composed of three parts. Published in irregular order, the series include Part I, *The Sea of Sorrow—Our Minamata Disease* (1969), which I have treated, Part III, *The Fishes of Heaven* (1974) and Part II, *The Village of the Gods* (2004). All are set in Minamata and tells the first-person narrator's experience of the incidents of Minamata disease and the interchange between Chisso, whose plant caused the environmental destruction which led to the disease, and the local people. The narrator who was a housewife happens to see Kama Tsurumatsu suffering from the disease in a hospital and becomes involved with the issue.

§ The Minamata Disease Issue

The Minamata Disease is the destruction of health and life of people who had been affected by mercury poisoning caused by polluted sewage from the Chisso plant in Minamata. Symptoms include loss of sensation, limited eyesight, speech loss or impediment. It was publicly recognized as a disease in 1956 but the government did not recognize its relationship to environmental causes until 1968. In the meantime, the local people struggled with Chisso for authorized acknowledgement of the disease as having been caused by mercury poisoning in the sewage and reparations while patients suffered from severe discrimination. About 12,000 patients were publicly acknowledged to be victims of the disease but to get the acknowledgment was naturally a political struggle. In 1995 the government presented a "Final Solution Proposal" and granted 2,600,000 yen to each patient, but problems such as the need for apology and taking of responsibility still remain unsolved.

§ Outline of the *Long Farewell from the Sea*

Set in the district of Danghang, a woman around twenty called Lee Hae-yun who had grown up there and a man a little older called Kim Gyeong-taek are the main characters. One day after graduating from high school, Lee Hae-yun, who had moved from her native Danghang because she wanted to avoid the hated word “pollution,” receives a card from Gyeong-taek. Hae-yun begins to recall the days she had spent in her home town. In the scenes of her memory, the seasons and the sea of Danghang and the peaceful lives of the people blessed by abundance from the sea are disrupted by the building of an industrial complex in the area. The sea is turned into a “Sea of Death” by air and water pollution.

§ Onsan Disease Incident

Onsan disease was caused by the air and water pollution from plants in the industrial complex which had become fully operative since about 1978 in the Onsan district in the Ulsan metropolitan area of South Korea. Since it was not caused by one particular plant, it was hard to locate the source of the pollution. Symptoms of the disease include disfunction of the nervous system and sensations, respiratory disfunction and skin diseases. Even today, the government has not acknowledged it as environmentally caused. As compensation, the government proposed moving about 37,000 residents out of the area but because of budgetary problems only 20% of the people had been moved by 1988. In addition, some residents refused the offer because the sum given them to cover moving costs was too low, so that the plan itself has virtually failed.

Sources

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