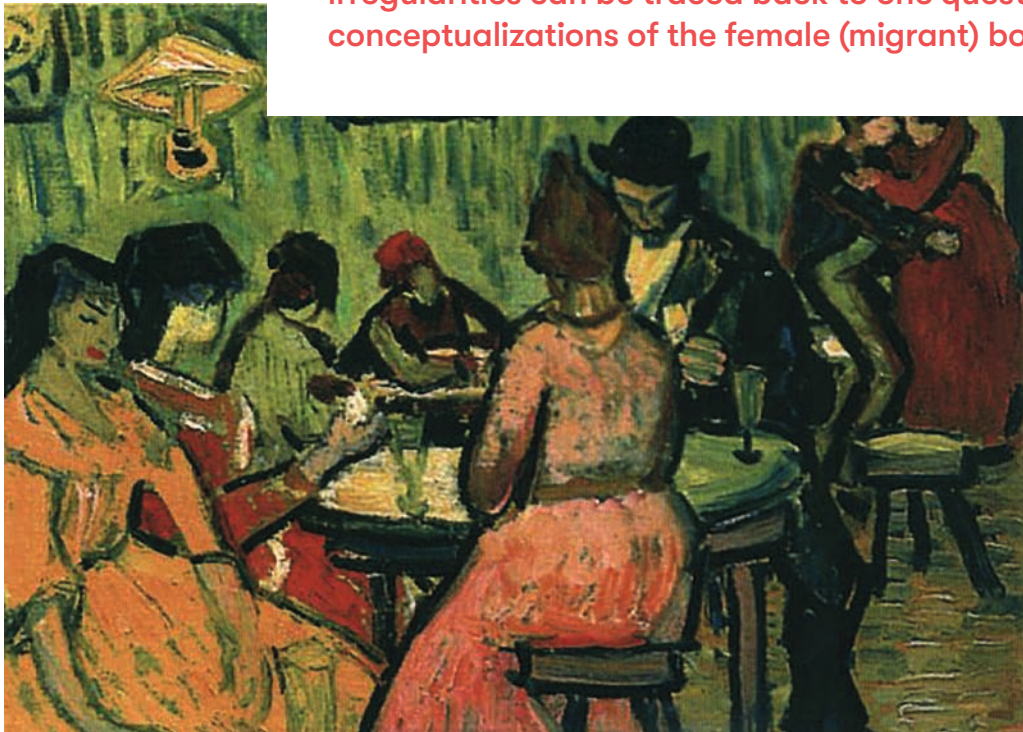


# Strange intimacies

## Reading migration and prostitution

Joo Kyung Lee

What does it mean to have a body, to be in movement and to be female at the same time? I approach two works of modern Korean literature, Kang Young-sook's *Rina* (2011) and Oh Jung-hee's *Chinatown* (1979) with this question.<sup>1</sup> These works demonstrate that the trajectories of migration and prostitution often intrude upon one another. While such convergences and divergences may not form a regular pattern, I observe that such irregularities can be traced back to one question, one that deals with conceptualizations of the female (migrant) body.



The Brothel, 1888. Vincent van Gogh. Image in public domain courtesy Wikipedia.

In Kang's novel, we follow Rina's unidentified journey from her birth country to her final destination, country 'P', via a third country, a trip which greatly resembles that of North Korean defectors, although the novel resists any identification. This journey involves presenting her as a "body in movement", leading an existence of "bare life".<sup>2</sup> In Oh's short story, we peek into the unnamed narrator's analeptic story of her youth in a certain unidentified Chinatown (presumed to be Incheon, Korea), where different forms of migration come together – domestic migration (such as the narrator's family), Chinese immigrants, and US soldiers and military prostitutes/comfort women. In both narratives, themes of migration and prostitution make inadvertent encounters. There exists a perverse relationship between migration and prostitution, which renders movement erotic and prostitution migratory. In this paper, I study this relationship and question why *female bodies in movement* are often 'reduced down' to or represented as prostituted bodies, and how such intersections occur in literary representations, while also taking into account the ethics of representation. E.P. Richards and slum repair.

Notable in the two works are the ways in which representation complicates and obfuscates a clear understanding of migration and prostitution as central themes to the narratives. There are elements of voyeurism and reverse-voyeurism (not-telling and dis-identifying) that resist a rather traditional understanding of migration and prostitution in their representations. In *Chinatown*, the nature of the space, in its seeming immobility as an urban settlement, resists an evident understanding of mobility and mobilization. While people are in complete movement, they are simultaneously under a sedentary guise, as they are considered to be constantly building houses. But the very idea of building new houses is a sign of migration and of an inflow of population into the city. Among the currents of movement are foreigners and the military prostitutes – the former of whom are largely characterized as Chinese immigrants,

with the sporadic apparition of Americans (soldiers) – and more importantly, the latter of whom individually occupy rooms and small parts of houses otherwise occupied by families, as the narrator observes. Moreover, there are complexities attached to that very figure of the military prostitute, in how she is commodified, utilized, prostituted, yet then self-prostitutes and ultimately reclaims the experience. These are comparable to the protagonist Rina, in the way she is trafficked and commodified in the beginning of the novel and how, increasingly, she prostitutes herself, allowing her some agency in the prostitutional schema readily legible in the lives of female individuals such as herself.

Similarly in *Rina*, the protagonist's journey of prostitution-migration resists clear-cut definitions of prostitution and migration. There is something repetitive in her futile migration, as she is forced back to her origin numerous times and has to embark on the same journey again; movement becomes a fundamentally flawed concept for Rina. Her movement cannot be traced according to the common understanding that the longer one travels the further one is away from the place of origin. Moreover, Rina cannot travel directly to country 'P' and has to enter through a third country: her world is one of selective mobility, wherein people can move and/or be mobilized according to nationality, race, gender and class. Nevertheless, her immobility is, intriguingly, precisely what causes this movement, thereby granting a peculiar form of migratory liberty.

### Bodies and motion

This very kind of selective im/mobility and entry are a direct result of the practice of national sovereignty (if we can give it so much credit), and consequently a migrant has an anxious relationship with sovereignty. In the introduction to his book *Homo Sacer*, Agamben questions how "the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm,

and ... [the two] enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction". He imagines the "nucleus of sovereign power" as "the production of a biopolitical body."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the migrant body becomes an unimaginable object here: a bare life, yes, because during migration the migrant is considered only as a *body* and nothing more, and no other wish to utilize the body than to mobilize. The migrant body is imagined with no will to labor nor to entertainment, because migration is of utmost importance (unless labor is forced or necessary). The migrant body is one that is not subject to a singular nation's biopolitics, precisely because it is untraceable. At the same time, the migrant body is the ultimate biopolitical object; drawing from Agamben, it is the body upon which the most regulative power is invested, and the most manipulative too. A body in biopolitical regulation, is in a way always in movement, because bodies are treated and consumed as commodities, passed around in the limits of sovereign power.

Rina's body, on top of this, is a female body, and this makes it the ideal subject for commodification. And how better to commodify a woman other than as a prostitute? Rina's forced and willful participation in the prostitutional schema provides evidence that as a female migrant body, she is not only transient and ephemeral in her migratory presence, but also that the prostitutional schema is readily legible: the metanarrative of commodification and prostitution was *already* prefigured, which is perhaps why Rina is unsurprised at having been fooled into prostitution. That is, despite not having lived through such experiences previously, Rina may carry (or may have carried) with her knowledge or even 'memory' of the schema, in her very being as a female migrant. Yet, does a pre-knowledge of the metanarrative mitigate the effects of violence in any way? In the metanarrative of the prostitutional schema, it no longer matters whether she has been prostituted or prostitutes herself. Yet, this 'indistinction' poses an ethical conundrum: undertones of trafficking are left unnoticed once we say that being prostituted and prostituting oneself are of the same register. Eventually, this puzzling enigma is traceable back to the language of sex. When we overwrite narratives of sex only through the encounter or the intercourse, the relational aspect of sex ceases to exist, and hence its textures are overlooked. This is more problematic from an ethical standpoint, when we consider cases in which an unjust power dynamic is present (i.e., rape). That is, it is quite striking how often exploitation and agency are confused regarding bodies in movement; modes of violence seem to be retranslated when they meet migrant bodies.

### Bodies, language, and narrative

To return to one of my initial statements, there is something migratory in the erotic. Or, a different way to put it is: there is something of motion in the metanarrative of sex, and moreover of prostitution. When the relation is

represented through the activity and the body, the narrative is composed of the body parts engaged. There is a sense of fleeting encounter between two entities and parts of the body which seem so discrete and detached from the entity; such body parts can also be imagined as replaceable because they are so discrete, and more so with prostitutional relationships. This allows a strange proximity between the two bodies, not yet fused together, and remaining disparate; the proximity is that very realization of the disparateness as well.

Michel Foucault writes in *The Utopian Body* that "Maybe it should also be said that to make love is to feel one's body close in on oneself. It is finally to exist outside of any utopia, ... between the hands of the other. Under the other's fingers running over you, all the invisible parts of your body begin to exist."<sup>4</sup> What becomes of the body in the metanarrative of sex? It is a moment when the "invisible parts of your body begin to exist" – and in way of flipping this argument in another direction, this coming to existence of the unforeseen parts of the body is also a form of discretization, a realization not of the body in its entirety but in a certain myopic way. The sex of the individual may serve as a synecdoche for the entire body, hence the body only imagined in parts only where there is a gaze; the body only comes to be realized, to be physicalized under the gaze.

This transience and ephemerality of the encounter can, eventually, be traced back to the figure of the migrant. Imagining their departure and arrival, and their everyday lives, becomes difficult. The migrant's identity becomes nothing more than a reflection of that very movement (while no real human identity can be so illusory or transitory for that matter). Such 'illusory ephemerality' is also observable in the figure of the prostitute, who repeats a transitory pleasure. Then, what does it signify for figures such as Rina, who are doubly removed and implanted into the realm of the transient? How do we – everyone engaged in this experience of literature – represent them, and how are they represented in these works of literature? How do we read them?

### Representational quality of the female migrant

Indeed, this paper is an effort to read for these experiences, and especially the less visible migrants in global histories of migration. I argue that both works participate in a post-nationalist discourse of displacement and migration. Here, what determines the legibility of certain narratives? What about narratives such as these that resist legibility? The two works I read put this paradox into question precisely by avoiding identification of the narratives. Then, what does it mean to tell (or not tell) a story about migration? In the works' decision to un-tell the story and dis-identify, there seem to be elements of voyeurism and reverse-voyeurism; can voyeurism be a safe space in this case? I attempted to answer these questions through a literary analysis of Kang's *Rina* and Oh's *Chinatown*, through analyzing the representational quality of these literary works, and moreover through an incessant conversation with our understanding of migration and prostitution today.

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### Notes

- 1 Kang, Young-sook. 2011. *Rina*. Kyōnggi-do P'aju-si: Munhak Tongne; Oh, Jung-hee. 1994. 'Chinatown', in *Yunyon ūi ttū*, pp.97-126. Munhak kwa Chisōngsa.
- 2 Agamben, G. (trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen) 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press, p.9.
- 3 *idem.*, p.6. emphasis in the original.
- 4 Foucault, M. 'The Utopian Body', in Jones, C.A. (ed.) 2006. *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*. MIT Press, p.233.