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# Is A Lone Room (*Oettanbang*) Labor Literature? An Intellectual Female Writer's Record of Working- Class Women's Sexuality\*

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on Sin Kyöngsuk's autobiographical novel, *Oettanbang* (A Lone Room), in which the protagonist factory girl aspires to become a writer. I argue that the protagonist achieves her dream by escaping from her status as a factory girl, the object of sexual violation and stigmatization, and by becoming a middle-class author representing the sexuality of the "factory girl." At the height of Korean labor literature in the 1980s, the sexuality of women workers was a taboo subject. *Oettanbang* arrived late on the labor literature scene and broke this taboo. There are repeated episodes in the novel where the author's former colleagues (factory girls) plead with her to write about their stories as well. I argue that the repetition of these episodes reveals the discontent of working-class women with intellectuals speaking on their behalf, as well as the author's own anxiety about appropriation in representing their sexuality.

**Keywords:** factory girl, labor literature, sexuality, working-class women, middle-class woman writer, Sin Kyöngsuk

## Introduction

When the English translation of the novel *Please Look After Mom* (*Ömma rül put'akhae*) became a bestseller in 2011, its Korean author Sin Kyöngsuk, already well known in Korea, once again became the talk of the nation. Many who had been tracking the author's literary career from her debut in 1985 congratulated her on her latest feat, as they were reminded of her background as a *yögon*<sup>1</sup> or "factory girl," which the public came to learn of a decade after the start of her successful career as a novelist, through her autobiographical work, *Oettanbang* (A Lone Room, 1995).<sup>2</sup>

Sin was a young factory worker from the late 1970s to the early 1980s from the age of fifteen to eighteen in the Kuro Industrial Complex,<sup>3</sup> an industrial hub for manufacturing and exporting textile and electronic goods. She attended the nearby Yöngdöngp'o Girls High School, a night school for young factory workers like herself. The narrator of *Oettanbang* is a thirty-two-year-old writer who is now a famous novelist. The narrator confesses that she was once a *yögon* and tries to explain why *yögon* had not yet appeared in her work. Thus, *Oettanbang* is the confession of an author who had been silent about that particular period of her

life. It is therefore not surprising that the mainstream media reviews of *Oettanbang* focused mainly on the confessional aspects and reminiscences of the life of a former factory girl, the stereotypical image of which is uneducated, unsophisticated, and far from chaste.

*Oettanbang* was first published as a four-part series in the literary magazine *Munhak tongne*.<sup>4</sup> When the series was completed, it received much acclaim from the press as an impressive transition narrative, with such headlines as “Fifteen-year-old *Yōgong* Country Girl Lived with the Dream of Becoming a Writer.”<sup>5</sup> When *Oettanbang* came out as a book, Sin’s visit to her alma mater, the high school near the industrial park, became news<sup>6</sup> and the book advertisement in one newspaper was accompanied by the sentence “I am head over heels for a certain woman these days.”<sup>7</sup> The book became a best seller overnight.<sup>8</sup> Sin became such a celebrated writer that several years after the initial publication of the book, her meeting with the high school teacher who encouraged her to become a writer also became news.<sup>9</sup> The appraisal of the work by progressive critics like those who spearheaded the labor literature or *minjung* literature movement in the 1980s, was friendly, considering that Sin had not been classified as a progressive writer promoting either labor literature or the *minjung* literature movement. Kim Sain, the editor of *Nodong haebang munhak* (Workers’ liberation literature) commented, “this work is a substitute atonement for the schizophrenia of the Koreans who have lost their own names and faces in the fever-pitched storm of modernization since the 1960s”

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<sup>1</sup> *Yōgong* (女工), a Korean acronym for “woman factory worker,” is a term introduced to the Korean language from Japan during the colonial period (1910–1945). *Yōgong* was a term used to convey either contempt or sympathy. A genealogical study of the term *yōgong* would more vividly reveal the nuances of its usage. For an important work on this topic, see Kim Wōn, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The first edition of *Oettanbang* came out in two volumes in 1995. However, references to the book in this paper are based on the second, single-volume edition that came out in 1999. This book was also translated into English (Sin 2015). Translated passages from *Oettanbang* cited in this paper are all my own.

<sup>3</sup> The construction of the Korea Export Industrial Complex, commonly referred to as Kuro Kongdan (Kuro Industrial Complex) began in 1963 and was completed in 1967 (first and second complexes) and 1970 (the third and final complex). Kuro-dong and Karibong-dong, where the complexes are spread out, were chosen partly because the national railway and a highway ran through the neighborhoods. However, these neighborhoods were formerly suburban agricultural lands and the industrial complexes were the direct outcome of the breakup and disintegration of farms and farming life (Hwang Tongil 1994, 68–69). In the novel, in a room that she shares with her older brother and an older cousin sister, the narrator can see a subway station and cabbage field through a window.

<sup>4</sup> The first of the series appeared in the inaugural issue of Winter, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, December 8, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> *Kyōnghyang sinmun*, “Ije yōgong sijōl saranghal su issōyo” [Now I can love the time I was a factory girl], December 8, 1995, 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Han’gyōre sinmun*, November 23, 1995, 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, Best Sellers (list), November 10, 1995, 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Kyōnghyang sinmun*, “Sosōlga Sin Kyōngsuk kwa munhak ūi killo indohan ūnsa Ch’oe Hongi ch’aengmaūsō 20 nyōn man ūi chaehoe” (Novelist Sin Kyōngsuk to meet with her high school teacher Ch’oe Hongi who guided her to the road of literature at Chaek Maül in “a reunion after 20 years”), March 23, 1999, 20.

(Kim Sain 1996, 114). Saying that writing had transformed the author herself, Paek Nakch'ong commented that the "‘testimonies of the times’ or ‘investigation into social realities’ can bring about significant [social] changes and breathe life into the name of *minjok munhak* [national literature] only when they accompany the true transformation of individuals" (Paek 1997, 240). With Paek's comment, Sin, who had not previously been considered as belonging to the progressive camp, received a nod from the doyen of *minjok munhak* and staunch supporter of "people's literature" who was a known nemesis to the past authoritarian governments of Korea.

However, some critics have distanced themselves from the high praise of others for *Oettanbang*. Critic Kim Yŏngch'an is less enthusiastic, pointing out that the "others" in *Oettanbang*, such as the women factory workers, are invoked only in the context of the protagonist's own suffering and consolation (Kim, 2002). Yi Sanggyŏng also points out that the perspective of the self is too narrow as it is fixated exclusively on the narrator's family relationships and inner self, and that as a consequence the portrayal of "Hŭijae ōnni" (Older Sister Hŭijae) suffers from vagueness; Yi pointedly criticizes the author for using her writing as a basis to claim superiority over others (Yi 2002, 286, 289). Kim Myŏnghwan shrewdly observes that the image of Hŭijae ōnni, who is hinted to be somehow different from other factory girls, is perhaps portrayed so vaguely because of the author's own traditional view of women (Kim Myŏnghwan 1996, 265).

In his recent article, "When *Ch'angbi* met Sin Kyŏngsuk: The reconfiguration of the Korean literary field in the 1990s and the sudden rise of female literature," Ch'ŏn Chŏnghwan suggests a new approach to the scandal of Sin Kyŏngsuk's plagiarism as a matter of literary power. Ch'ŏn points out that Sin's best-selling novels played an important part in helping Ch'angbi and Munhak Tongne become powerful publishing companies that accumulated significant capital in the 1990s and 2000s. Interestingly enough, the relationship between Sin Kyŏngsuk and Ch'angbi began with Paek Nakch'ong's complimentary remarks about *Oettanbang*. In Ch'ŏn's view, Paek's praise of *Oettanbang* as great labor literature restored the superiority of literature (intellect) over labor or justifies a deviation of literature from labor (centrality) based on literarism. Therefore, Ch'ŏn places Sin Kyŏngsuk's literature far from women's liberation literature by agreeing with the criticisms of existing feminist critics such as Yi Sanggyŏng (Ch'ŏn 2015, 279–280, 284, 289). *Oettanbang*'s status and meaning as labor literature will be addressed in this article, with a particular focus on Ruth Barraclough's chapter "Girl Love and Suicide" in her *Factory Girl Literature*.

Ruth Barraclough reads *Oettanbang* as "factory girl literature," that is to say, as a work of literature portraying the trauma of industrialization through the experience of *Yŏgong*. In particular, Barraclough argues that the portrayal of Hŭijae ōnni distinguishes *Oettanbang* from the earlier factory girl literature from the 1970s and 1980s in that while such works portrayed the protagonists steeped in the social causes of organizing labor unions and strikes, Hŭijae ōnni represents new realism in the literary representation of working-class women. Barraclough writes about the character Hŭijae ōnni, "Was she a worker or a student or a seamstress or a bar girl? Was she a teenager or considerably older? Did she kill only herself or

her unborn child as well? And, finally, the narrator becomes the conduit between the reader and the inaccessible past, the remote class, the dead factory girl. Thus in *The Solitary Room* sentimental literature becomes realism” (Barracrough 2012, 118). *Oettanbang* was able to achieve a new realism, going beyond the conventions of factory girl literature wherein factory girls are characterized as exploited laborers by representing the character Hŭijae ōnni as a sexual agent in the form of a factory girl. Barracrough argues that *The Solitary Room* is limited by its moral universe’s being mediated through rumor as well as through Hŭijae who is stigmatized by the brother of “I” as a dissolute factory girl. She states, “the moral universe of *The Solitary Room*” “cannot fully account for the reality of sexual harassment on the factory floor just as it cannot account for a sexually active, and thriving, working-class female figure” (Barracrough 2012, 134 ).

The novel, an autobiographical account of the author who was once a *Yōgong* herself, is about her escape from “a lone room”—the physical and psychological space that the narrator inhabits in or around the Kuro Industrial Complex. Here I wish to focus first on the fact that the narrator’s path to becoming a writer involves escaping from the “lone room,” ultimately settling down in Seoul, and recognizing the industrial complex and its vicinity as a threat to a woman’s body and sexuality. Critics of *Oettanbang* are generally unaware of its subtext—that the narrator is relating in the novel her relief at having escaped what was a threat to her body and sexuality. Unfortunately, she narrates her relief only by way of speaking about the threats experienced by her friends or co-workers, or about their “aberrant” sexual experiences, such as that experienced by Hŭijae ōnni who lived with a man without marrying him and who subsequently had an abortion. *Oettanbang* shows how, for a factory girl, becoming a writer means a transition to a state where one’s identity is no longer defined by one’s body and sexuality, and where one now represents the sexuality of working-class women.

When examining women speaking and writing about their own bodies and sexuality, the socio-cultural taboos that persist in Korean society should also be considered. Recently, the MeToo and WithYou movements have collectively risen in Korean society. This series of movements demonstrates that the sexual violence and harassment that women have experienced but concealed can only be discussed in the public sphere. That is, Korean women who have experienced similar violence and pain and have been forced into silence now support the movements and the survivors’ declarations. The MeToo movement testifies that sexual violence and silence about women’s sexuality itself was part of the male-dominated social structure. Therefore, the MeToo and WithYou movements were events occurring in the semiotics of the social text, which had previously silenced women, hindered them from speaking-out, and subordinated them to male-centered society through stereotypes and misbeliefs regarding femininity. To borrow Gayatri Spivak’s notion of subaltern insurgency, the current MeToo movements lie outside the hierarchy of power and constitute an “insurgency” that resists the dominant narrative of male-centered society (Spivak 1988, 287–288).

The recent MeToo movement is a powerful context that demands a rereading of *Oettanbang*. The author postpones her confession and recollections about her past

in the novel, in large part because the story is about the sexuality of Korean women factory girls. The social taboo that women should not discuss their bodies and sexuality has curtailed women's visibility in the public sphere and fundamentally precluded women from expressing their thoughts. Thus, the following question is key: Did *Oettanbang*—in which the confession of the author, who was herself a factory girl, and the narrative of factory girls' sexuality are interwoven—seek to contradict the male-dominated narrative and disprove the impossibility of speaking-out?

Not only does sexuality include sexual relations, desires, and their associated performances, but it also encompasses the totality of perceptions and perspectives surrounding these concepts. In the Foucauldian sense, sexuality functions as a device to establish subjectivity by embodying the regulation of normality in society. Foucault argues that family has become the most important device of sexuality in modern times, wherein sexuality overlaps with the marriage system. In modern society, sexuality establishes heterosexual families in the bourgeois or middle class as socio-cultural normality. In addition, sexuality is a device that internalizes and subjectifies the regulation of normality through the subjects' self-censorship, thereby affecting the proliferation of knowledge of corporeality and how to behave and perform as a member of society (Foucault 1978).

In *Oettanbang*, the narrator shares what women workers experienced, based on her time as a worker in a factory complex. For example, other women workers' experiences, including sexual harassment by male bosses, pregnancy, couples living together before marriage, and abortion, are beyond the norm of the sexuality modeled after middle-class families. What matters is that the females directly involved with the experiences were not given a voice. These stories are told as rumors, sometimes after those women's deaths. Conversely, the narrator in *Oettanbang* reads books by famous writers and eventually leaves the factory complex to go to university and become a writer. This process of leaving was her way of escaping from the threat of sexual harassment and violence that often occurred in the complex.

The democratization and labor movements of Korea reached their peak in the 1980s, and the foundation of these movements was the intellectual elites' critical consciousness toward the socio-economic and cultural gap between the public or *minjung* and the elite. Labor literature as a movement had been invigorated before and after 1987, the Great Workers' Struggle (*nodongja taet'ujaeng*), or the June Democracy Movement, and it was a form of struggle over the meaning of the workers' lives in society.

For our purposes here, I define the narrator in *Oettanbang* as a middle-class female and elite writer. With her advanced literary skills and social success, the narrator generally lives a different life from that of the female workers. She is fully conscious that her higher education and writing ability have made her current life possible, and her awareness makes her a member of the elite. With this presupposition, I examine the autobiographical memoirs of female workers that were considered labor literature at that time, and the labor novels of male writers who had received university education in the 1980s, focusing on whether sexuality

becomes a major issue in their writings, and if so, how the narratives interweave it within the stories. I argue that the narrative of issues of the sexuality of the female factory workers in *Oettanbang* were positioned as a thing of the past that should be abandoned in order to create the narrator's current identity. In particular, I focus on the meaning of the narrator continuously mentioning that her female coworkers made her promise to write their stories and / or criticized her for not writing their stories as expeditiously as possible.

### **The Factory, Women's Bodies, and the Sexuality of the Factory Girl**

The major historical events of the 1970s and 80s set the narrative parameters of *Oettanbang*. That is to say, important historical events are narrated through the experiences and changes in the lives of the narrator's school friends and co-workers. These events include: the assassination of President Park Chunghee (October 26, 1979); the brief "Seoul Spring" following the end of the long period of authoritarian rule; the Kwangju Uprising (May 1980), and the brutal suppression that ended the Seoul Spring, as well as the continued suppression of the labor union movement and the incarceration of tens of thousands of innocent civilians in quasi-concentration camps (like Samch'ŏng Education Camp) by the newly installed junta in the name of "social cleansing" and "eradication of social evils." It was a time when college campuses were abuzz with anti-government protests and anti-establishment cultural activities. For members of the 386-generation, like Sin herself, who went to university during this period, these events were common knowledge. Of these events—again, well-known to members of the 386-generation—the most important in the novel are, of course, those of the democratic trade union movement led by women workers, who are today recognized as having been the leading labor movement in 1970s Korea. In the novel, the events are alluded to as rumors that the protagonist hears about, or as scenes she herself witnessed from a distance.

For example, the novel refers to the "YH Incident." YH was the name of a wig exporter that in 1979 tried to close its factory, citing a downturn in exports. The workers protested, and on August 9, 1979 decided to occupy the fourth floor of the opposition New Democratic Party headquarters building. Kim Yŏngsam, then the head of the opposition party and one of the stalwart symbols of the democracy struggle against military dictatorship at the time, announced his support for the female workers. About a month later, in the early hours of September 11, the government sent about 1,000 combat police into the building to end the sit-in and beat up and arrest the YH workforce. In the process of this violent crackdown, Kim Kyŏngsuk, one of the workers, fell from the fourth floor of the building and died. In the novel, this YH incident comes up as a topic of a conversation when the narrator and her fellow workers discuss the rumors about what happened to Kim Samok, who does not return to night school even after the end of the summer vacation. They had heard that Kim Samok participated in the occupation of the opposition building and "went around limping because she hurt her leg when she tried to jump from the police bus to avoid being arrested;" like many of the other sit-in participants, she was forced to stay at home, but after sitting in her rooftop room for

days, she had simply disappeared.

Another incident, the famous 1976 Dong Il Textile women's nude protest is described in the novel as an incident that the narrator witnessed directly. The novel uses the first-person "I" for the narrator who says "my" cousin came to Seoul with "me" and works in the same factory as "I" do, as they witness the following scene as "we" take a break from work on the factory rooftop:

I see women. Naked. They are standing in a row at the end of the rooftop railing as if they are ready to jump off at any moment. People coming out of the cafeteria are all standing together and looking up at them in the same direction. The naked women seem to be shouting something to the people below, but we cannot hear what it is. A throng of police are approaching them from behind. My seventeen-year-old self holds tightly to the waist of my twenty-year-old cousin with the bad arm [due to industrial injury], and I close and open my eyes. The naked women are being dragged away, with their arms, heads, and necks twisted in the firm grip of the police. (133–134)

What Sin is describing here is a protest incident that occurred when a male supervisor raped a woman worker in the company warehouse in an attempt to frighten her into quitting the labor union. The woman and the labor union subsequently exposed the incident, and the manager filed a defamation suit against the young woman he had raped and the labor union. The union leaders responded by appearing naked in public and shouting, "Don't do it in the warehouse, do it where everyone can see!" Anyone who is aware of the trailblazing struggles of women workers in Korea in the 1970s would recognize the historical incident referred to in the scene above; the women union organizers and activist workers of the 1970s were the true vanguard who ushered in the subsequent democratic labor union movement that became more widespread toward the end of the 1980s. The democratic labor union movement of the 1970s in Korea was characterized by extreme polarity between male workers and female workers. In fact, the women workers at Dong Il Textile went on strike when the company created a company union with male workers and tried to disband the grassroots union, which was led by women. The company then tried to physically break up the strike by sending in police and male company workers. On the third day of the strike, July 23, 1976, women workers tried to fend off the police and arrest by taking off their clothes. This subsequently became a watershed event through which the nation's labor struggles became a part of social discourse and became widely known (Koo, 2001).

As if watching a silent movie, readers cannot hear the voices of the naked women who might be shouting the demands of their protest; only their naked bodies are vividly shown, as if the fact that they exist in their bodily forms is more important than the fact that they exist in the situation of their struggles, or that their actions have a purpose. The present-progressive tense employed by the narrator to relate the women workers' experiences in the factory is a tool for realizing this intention. In relating her experiences as a factory worker, the narrator denotes her age specifically as "sixteen," "seventeen," or "eighteen." This is the author's entreaty for the reader to witness the events from the perspective of the



narrator as a young girl, not from that of the thirty-two-year-old woman that she was at the time of writing.

As is plainly evident in the passage quoted above, the labor conflicts involving women workers were sexualized and gendered—inherently and to anyone who experienced them directly or indirectly. Paradoxically, the nude protests would have been unimaginable if the women workers were not experiencing the constant threat of actual or potential sexual disparagement and harassment from male workers, as well as from their managers, who were almost always men. Thus, the protest was a form of retribution, transforming the sexual insults experienced individually in secret spaces into a collective bodily emblem in open space. It was subversion, affirming the factory woman's body and sexuality, where the gazes of class and gender discrimination intersected; it was an affirmation that shocked society as an accomplice to those gazes. The workers' protest was a testament to the condition of the women workers' body and sexuality, and to the fact that they were exposed to constant and imminent danger, as they nakedly confronted men in riot gear. However, where these threads lead the stories in *Oettanbang*, in terms of its plot, is another matter.

From the perspective of the narrator's contemporary younger self, the scene of the naked women workers protesting is, first and foremost, reason enough for her to want to escape, even before the reader can dwell on its historical significance or on the eventual victory of this struggle; it is a place where brutal class and gender conditions are imposed on the female body and sexuality. Once again, the plot of *Oettanbang* is fundamentally an escape plot. The cousin hears about the particulars of the event witnessed on the rooftop, and whispers to the narrator, who works on the same production line in the factory, "I will leave here no matter what it takes" (134).

The nude protest is surely one of the most dramatic events in the novel. The novel, however, is filled with allusions to other episodes about women workers' sexuality and the sexual threats that they experienced. For example, a certain Miss Myōng, a factory worker who was once the envy of the young narrator's cousin, was promoted to an office position in the factory as a result of willingly enduring a factory manager's sexual harassment; and the cousin herself almost had an unwanted kiss forced upon her by another manager. The manager who tried to kiss the cousin was a married man who was already infamous and was rumored to have impregnated another factory girl. There are also stories about women factory workers who had their bodies searched by the managers—all men—as well as rumors about some co-workers who left their jobs at the factory to serve as hostesses in the adult entertainment business. These episodes in the novel run the full gamut of, and in many ways reinforce, contemporary clichés and stereotypes about "factory girls."

### **A Lone Room and Hūijae Ōnmi's Sexuality, or Delayed Story-Telling**

We now come to the most important character in the novel, Hūijae ōnmi, and the "lone room." The stories told so far are those the narrator had only heard about, and concern what happened to people who were working on the factory floors. In

contrast, “I,” the narrator, is the only one who knows the story about Huijae *ŏnni*, because “I” is the only person to have heard the story from her. Furthermore, where the story takes place is not the factory floor but in “a lone room,” a private and isolated space. The “lone room” also refers to the title of the book, the room where Huijae *ŏnni* lives; it is in a three-story red brick building with thirty-seven rooms, located on a road that connects two different industrial complexes.

“Here we are!”

My eldest brother gestures us—our cousin and me—to enter the open front gate. I can still hear him saying “Here we are!” as if it were happening now. One of the thirty-seven rooms was our lone room. There were still more houses with many more rooms standing in the front and back. Yet as soon as I opened the window in our room, I could see even more people pouring forth from the subway station. Whether it was the corner store in the neighborhood, the entrance to the market, or the overpass footbridge, the place was always packed with people. But why was it that whenever I thought of that place, the first thing that came to mind was its utter remoteness, loneliness and isolation? We lived in isolation there—just us. Why is it that such thoughts come to my mind first when I think about that room? (47)

Such a house was called *pŏlchip*, or a “beehive.” It typically consisted of many rooms with a kitchen outside the room, a shared outdoor bathroom, and a shared water pump. The three of “us”—“I” (the narrator), “my” cousin, and “my” eldest brother—lived in one of the rooms in the beehive, which the narrator calls a “lone room.” A *pŏlchip* is a place of collective residence; calling it a “lone room” suggests a place that is remote and isolated, and invites many interpretations. There in their *pŏlchip* the narrator had no friends save Huijae *ŏnni*, who was living in another room in the same “beehive,” even though the narrator’s brother and cousin, the guardians of the young narrator, kept their distance from her. The narrator recalls that she only saw the backs of her neighbors standing in front of their rooms as they unlocked their doors. The working poor returned to their beehive neighbors carrying the alienation they experienced outside of the house, and in so doing were silently shouting that this squalid place of their residence was but a temporary abode for them. What catches one’s attention is that the “lone room” has a sharply contrasting image from the labor-intensive mass-production-oriented factories and the collective nature of the labor struggles of the time in which tens, hundreds, or even thousands of workers from one or more factories came together. The “lone room” is not quite the “room of one’s own,” by which Virginia Woolf meant a room where a woman can write uninterruptedly and with economic independence. However, for the author of this novel, the “lone room” symbolizes the writing self: this writing self has a secret which propels her to write, even though the writing of this particular novel was delayed.

Ultimately, the narrator escapes from the Kuro Industrial Complex not by quitting the factory but by leaving the “lone room.” The cousin had left first, to live in Yongsan with her siblings who had come to Seoul. Then the brother had to move to Ch’ungmu, South Kyŏngsang Province, because of his work. But for the narrator,

the room is less significant as a place of refuge than as Hŭijae ōnni's room.

The climactic incident of the novel appears towards the end of the book. One morning, the narrator is on her way, as usual, to a library to study for the university entrance examination. She runs into Hŭijae ōnni, who tells her she is going home to the countryside for the weekend. Hŭijae ōnni adds that she has forgotten to lock her room and asks the narrator to do that for her when she gets home. The narrator returns home that night and locks the room as requested. The man who was Hŭijae ōnni's lover was waiting for her but leaves. Hŭijae ōnni has still not returned after the weekend and several more days pass. The man comes back and breaks down the door—"Because of the smell, of waiting." And then, "[N]obody could enter the room" (383). Hŭijae ōnni was in there, dead. "I, nineteen-years old, am shaking and running to my cousin . . . That is how I ran from that street, from that lone room to never go back again. There was no way I was going back, so Cousin went there to retrieve my book bag and other belongings and brought them to her room" (384). The narrator recollects what she heard the man say that day. "I told her to have an abortion. I wasn't saying goodbye; only that now is too . . . too . . ." It does not occur to the narrator that what the man said might have killed Hŭijae ōnni but only that when she was locking the door Hŭijae ōnni might have been inside, still smiling faintly or crying.

The narrator was thus an unwitting accomplice to suicide, which is highlighted as the decisive factor in delaying the writing. More significantly, the revelation of the reason for the delay parallels the uncovering of the story of Hŭijae ōnni's sexuality. That is to say, a young woman from the countryside—presumably no more than a few years older than the narrator herself—lives with a lover and becomes pregnant. She is asked to have an abortion and when she refuses, she receives a farewell letter and kills herself. Hŭijae ōnni was a "factory girl" too. Although they did not work in the same factory, they attended the same night school. Hŭijae ōnni is the only character in the novel who is not involved in any of the events of the heightened atmosphere of the labor struggles that the author takes great pains to relate to the reader. Instead, Hŭijae ōnni's most distinctive characteristic is her relationship with men; that is, her co-habitation with them.

In other words, the narrative of Hŭijae ōnni's sexuality appeared before she committed suicide. Hŭijae ōnni once told "me, seventeen years old" about a tailor, a man of small build, with whom she had lived when she worked as an apprentice in a small garment factory. They separated, but she said she had almost run away from him. And then, "Hŭijae ōnni, who had been talking in a faint voice as if mumbling to herself, looks me straight in the eye and asks: Can stories like this become a novel too?" (189). Hŭijae ōnni already knew from having heard it from "me, seventeen years old," that "my" dream was to become a novelist.

Chang Migyŏng (2006) interviewed women factory workers who worked in Seoul and the metropolitan area in the 1970s for a study on their sexuality. According to Chang, when they were narrating their own sexual experiences, the interviewees focused on the pressures of the chastity ideology placed on them; however, when they were narrating the experiences of their friends or other women, they spoke of carefree sexual relations. Moreover, they described such women

as those who “gave up on themselves” or “did not take good care of themselves,” reflecting the conventional ideology on female sexuality (Chang 2006, 92).

Ultimately the novel *A Lone Room* is built around two narrative drivers: the control of labor through sexual violence and the loose sexuality of “the factory girl.” These define the discursive parameters of the class politics of women factory workers of the 1970s.

### **Sexuality and Becoming a Writer**

At the end of *Oettanbang*, when the narrator's series of reminiscences ends, the readers encounter the following sentences: “They were nameless: there was no semblance of material abundance in their lives, they had to work and work, moving their ten fingers non-stop. That's who they were. Belatedly, I now call them my friends” (419). *Oettanbang* is perhaps a poignant tribute to the nameless in society. However, before this tribute could be paid, Hŭijae ōnni had to first die and “I” had to escape from the “lone room.” The writing of this book becomes possible due to this irrevocable distance and Hŭijae ōnni's death is decisive in gaining, or establishing this distance.

Only by dying, or only by being cast as a character who dies, does Hŭijae ōnni become a symbol of the pure female comparable to “me.” Furthermore, this purity is symbolized by a white heron, transcending materiality. (Yi 2007, 90)

The white heron appears at the beginning of the novel, on the narrator's first train ride to Seoul; a cousin whose dream is to become a photographer shows her a photography book and points to picture of a flock of white herons sleeping as they lean on each other in the pitch darkness of a forest at night. The narrator thinks the birds look like white stars in the night sky. The white heron image appears again toward the end of the novel when the narrator has finally written everything about the secret of the “lone room.” This time, the white heron and Hŭijae ōnni appear together in an overlapping image. The narrator, now a successful writer, is visiting her parents' home and is reminiscing about the pitchfork that tore a gash in her foot. She was sixteen when it happened, staying home after having completed middle school. Now she looks into the well in which she had thrown the pitchfork. There she sees the phantom of Hŭijae ōnni and hears her say, “Do pity me. I lived long in your heart” (404). The well was a sacred place for the narrator, for it was there, back then, that she vowed to become a writer. There she receives a prediction from Hŭijae ōnni: “The key to the stories of the past is not in my hands but in yours” (409). Now the “I” is returning to Seoul on a night train. As the train passes by Kuro Industrial Complex, the narrator reflects, “Just as I recognized the place, a white heron flapped its wings in my heart” (409). If a flock of white herons leaning on each other in peaceful sleep is meant to be a utopian image that counters the image of the toiling factory girls who were socially and institutionally discriminated against and constantly dehumanized, the all-white avian image can more easily be read as a symbol of female sexual innocence. Hŭijae ōnni lived on in the heart of the narrator long after she died. The fact that she became a white heron

and flew away from the narrator's heart means that her life as a narrative source has finally ended. Like a fresh set of clothes that would make Hŭijae ōnni's "lifeless, maggot-ridden body" clean and flawless again, could it be that the white heron image is the compensation that the narrator offers to Hŭijae ōnni and others like her for having served as the source of her stories?

Paek Nakch'ōng, the critic who was unstinting in his praise for *Oettanbang*, cites the book's conspicuous reticence on relations between the sexes as a minor flaw. In particular, he specifically points to its vague treatment (Paek 1997, 249–250) but this is not a flaw that could have been corrected. The narrator was still sexually innocent when she ran out of the "lone room." When "I, seventeen-years-old," was threatened by a manager who was notorious for sexually harassing young women workers, the cousin pre-emptively reproached the manager by saying, "This girl doesn't even get her period yet." In the summer of that same year, her first period comes but there are no signs of the narrator physically developing into womanhood. The growth and identity of the narrator are focused only on becoming a writer and on completing the novel. With a boy named Chang—a childhood friend with whom the narrator shares deeply tender feelings well into her late teen years—all she does is exchange letters, books, and conversations in walks along country roads.

The narrator is writing a letter to Chang from Seoul and tells her cousin, "I am going to write something more than just letters" (41). The process of writing something more than just letters includes reading and hand-copying novels at the suggestion of her night school teacher Ch'oe Hongi who recognizes her talent immediately in a letter of apology. As her enchantment with writing more than just personal letters deepens, the distance between the narrator and Chang grows. In the meantime, Chang has had his first sexual experience with a prostitute and when he goes off to university before she does, he gets a girlfriend. These two events are suggested as having played a decisive role in the two friends growing apart when in fact sexual desire was never supposed to be part of their relationship. However, the plot also acts as a device to make the sexual progression of their relationship impossible. Soon after the incident with Chang, Hŭijae ōnni leaves the lone room in death, and the narrator enters university. Sexually, when she leaves the Kuro Industrial Complex, the narrator is still a girl.

A life different from ours. A person different from me. When I heard those words from Ha Kyesuk, "a life different from ours," my mother came to mind and I became numb. Could it be that I, as Ha Kyesuk had said, was ashamed of my high school years and of my illiterate mother? (70)

Ha Kyesuk is a high school classmate who telephones the narrator and says, "You don't talk about us at all." She continues her reproach, "Are you ashamed of your past?" "You seem to be living a life different from us" (36). Ha's statement reminds the narrator of what her illiterate mother had said. Literary literacy, derived from higher education, distinguishes the narrator from both of them, and the distinction is enunciated through *their* words, not the narrator's. "Miss Lee" was a union

organizer who had been severely tortured in prison. When the narrator visits her with a colleague, Lee pleads with her, "When you become a writer, please write about our stories too" (355).

*Oettanbang* is clearly the author's response to these requests by "factory girls" from the late 1970s and early 1980s who recognized the narrator's ability to write at a level that distinguished her from the rest of them. However, is it solely her literary ability that distinguishes her? Will they, who readily pleaded with her to write about them, be happy with how they are portrayed in *Oettanbang*?

The answer to these questions is relevant to at least two other questions. Why does the story about Hūijae ōnni and her death appear toward the very end of the novel? Does Hūijae ōnni's prediction that "[T]he key to the stories of the past is not in my hands but in yours" ultimately justify the writing of *Oettanbang*? Literary ability was not the only characteristic that distinguished the narrator from other factory girls, the "clients" of this novel. Is it not conceivable that Hūijae ōnni and her death serve as an alibi for writing a novel about the sexuality of women workers? One critic who read *Oettanbang* was reminded of *Ppaeatkin ilt'ō* (Robbed of Livelihood) by Chang Namsu (1984) and opines that Sin's literary achievement is greater than Chang's (Yōm 1995, 278–292). Other critics notably commented that *Oettanbang* is an exceptional work of labor literature, incomparable to other works of the same genre that flourished in the 1980s (Nam 1995, 292; Paek 1997, 239). That then begs the question: is *Oettanbang* labor literature?<sup>10</sup>

### Sin Kyōngsuk's Belated Contribution to Labor Literature

I have a feeling that this book will be neither fiction nor non-fiction but something in between. But could it be called a work of literature? I think about writing. I ask: what is writing for me? (15)

I think this book has become neither fiction nor non-fiction but something in between. But could this be called a work of literature? I think about writing. I ask: what is writing for me? (424)

These are the entire contents of the first and last paragraphs of *Oettanbang*. In the novel, while the then-teenage narrator relates her four years of experience as a factory worker in the Kuro Industrial Complex, the now thirty-two-year-old narrator punctuates her narrative with numerous contemplative comments about writing. The narrator's take on literature differs from the discourse of *minjung* literature of the 1980s, in that the former focuses on everyday personal feelings and

<sup>10</sup> The provocation for this question comes from Ch'ōn Chōnghwan's comment on the preoccupation of the 1970s–80s with "*minjung* writing." Ch'ōn remarked that the aspiration for *minjung* writing took two paths, one traveled by Kim Chinsuk and the other by Sin. Kim started out as the first woman welder ever in Korea at Hanjin Heavy Industries in 1981 and became a celebrated labor activist before becoming a writer. If her words express her desire to speak the language of workers and to represent one's self, Sin's *Oettanbang* is an exceptional case of success where *minjung* writing joined the ranks of "literature," in the sense of a system of cultural appreciation shared by bourgeois (or petty bourgeois) in the modern era (Ch'ōn 2011, 249). Ironically, some feminist scholars have asserted that Kim Chinsuk's self-representation as a worker was carried out in the manner of appropriating the position of a male head of household (Kim Hyōngyōng and Kim Chuhūi 2012, 1–29).

memories, while the latter concerns itself with the developments of major political events, issues of social change, or cause-oriented collective movements. However, the headlines describing the famous author of an autobiographical novel who suddenly revealed her past as a factory girl were sensational. Thus, it is not difficult to guess the nature of the questions that a journalist from a commercial women's journal forced the author to answer when the latter answered the phone early one morning: "Where is the line between fiction and reality? How much is real and how much is fictional?"

The sudden appearance of the diary form of writing at the end of the novel is a device that reveals the author's answer. It was written between "August 8, 1995" and "September 13, 1995"; "I" has just finished telling the story about Hūijae ōnni, and now "I" does not have to go back to the period before "my" nineteen-year-old self; "I" is now awaiting the last installment of her serially-published novel. For the reader who has been travelling with the narrator back to the time when "I" was sixteen, then seventeen, and then nineteen, the sudden appearance of the present-tense diary-like narrative is a gateway from the past into the present. Is what one writes in a diary real or fictional? Here the author herself tacitly sends a message that it is the former and not the latter.

There are other women writers who were formerly factory workers and wrote autobiographical novels dealing with factory life and the experience of organizing a labor union in the 1970s. Works by such authors include *Kongjang ūi pulbit* (Factory lights, 1984) by Sōk Chōngnam and *Ppaeatkin ilt'ō* (Robbed of livelihood, 1984) by Chang Namsu; here one needs to pay attention to the role of diary-style narrative. In the case of Sōk, the author debuted as a writer when a magazine carried autobiographical essays on her experience as a factory worker; in the case of Chang, her work included her actual diary entries of the author. The diary is a form of writing where readers are assured that the writing is that of the writer herself and that what is being described are true to experience in real life. Interestingly, in *Kongjang ūi pulbit*, in the section entitled "Konggaedoen ilgi" (Diary disclosed to the public), the author describes how in real life, in 1976, her actual diary was published in the magazine *Taehwa* (Dialogue).<sup>11</sup> Here the reader learns that in 1976 Sōk was a worker at Dong Il Textile, the factory that two years later became infamous for historic labor-management confrontations and the intervention of state authorities. She heard from a co-worker that a male poet with the same name as her was interested in the Dong Il Textile labor activities and wanted to see her diary. Upon hearing this, Sōk "flatly refused the request, thinking that the diary cannot be made available for anyone to read, and that it is mine, and mine alone." When she met with the poet in person, he once again begged to see her diary, and she once again refused, thinking that the wretched life described in her diary

<sup>11</sup> When Sōk published "In'gandapke salgo sipta" (I want to live the life of a human) and "Pult'anūn nunmul" (Burning tears) in *Taehwa*—a historical monthly magazine published by Academy House, a grassroots Christian organization—she was working at Dong Il Textile. The two pieces appeared in the November and December 1976 issues of the magazine, consecutively, under the section heading "Ōnū yōgong ūi ilgi" (A factory girl's diary) along with a photograph of the author, then twenty years old, as well as full biographical information that included her place of birth, address, education, and experience.

was too embarrassing to reveal. Then the poet challenged her, asking, “Why? You probably have boy stories in it, don’t you?” Sök vehemently denied this and decided then to prove it to him by showing him the diary (Sök 1984, 54–55).

This episode reveals the complex nature of the socio-cultural context of a “diary” in Korea. There is a long tradition of teachers checking students’ diaries in elementary schools there.<sup>12</sup> The demand to see a diary can only be made by teachers and parents, never the other way around. In other words, such a demand was possible only in the hierarchical context of a censor-censored relationship. Diary writing presupposes a truthful account of reality and honest self-reflection; the practice of checking a diary in the name of cultivating the habit of good writing and providing life guidance contradicts the very premise of writing a diary. At the same time, the notion that diaries should be truthful and honest seems to have been internalized as an established norm. Sök’s initial reaction that her diary was only for her own reading reflects this. On the other hand, when a diary is published, for whatever reasons, what the author might wish to hide would often be what the readers find most interesting—oftentimes love and sex.<sup>13</sup>

In July 1976, the editors of Taehwa wanted to raise public awareness of the Dong Il Textile labor struggle and publish women workers’ own accounts of their struggle. It is natural, then, that what they chose to publish was a diary. Ironically, Sök, then twenty-years old, broke her vow to keep her diary private and escaped from the notion that her diaries belonged to her and to her alone, because of a male poet’s taunting accusation about her affairs with the opposite sex. On one hand, one could say that the male poet’s behavior toward Sök was similar to that of a teacher or parent supervising his student or child against possible sexual misconduct. On the other hand, such taunting, albeit in jest only, was possible because the woman, whom he had just met for the first time, was a “factory girl.” In a culture that forced women’s silence on the subject of sexuality, a diary had to be a proof of her sexual innocence. One could further argue that Sök handed over her diary to prove herself different from, or innocent of, the common notions held about the sexual behaviors of “factory girls.”

In fact, Sök’s book, *Kongjang üi pulbit* is extremely reticent on the subject of romance and the sexuality of women workers. The memoirs of other former women factory workers who published their experiences of organizing democratic labor unions in the 1970s and 1980s, such as *Ppaeatkin ilt’ö*, are equally silent on the subject (Yi Chönghui 2004, 131–153; Barraclough 2012). Yi Chönghui believes that

<sup>12</sup> The practice of inspecting student diaries by homeroom teachers in elementary schools became a subject of major social controversy in Korea in 2004, after the National Human Rights commission of Korea made public its position on the issue. It announced that the practice may infringe on the student’s rights guaranteed by the Korean Constitution as well as by relevant international laws and that therefore recommended remedial measures (see It’agak’i Ryut’a and Chöng Pyönguk 2016).

<sup>13</sup> In the literary history of women’s diaries, sexuality has been a taboo subject as well as a focus of intense public interest. A newspaper in Korea recently introduced a *New York Times* report on the revelation of two pages of previously unpublished material from Anne Frank’s diary. The two pages, which had been covered up with brown paper, reportedly contain sexual materials. “Anne üi ilgi, sumgyöjin yahan nongdam pokkwön” [Ann’s diary, restoration of off-color jokes formerly concealed], *Kyöngnyang sinmun*, May 22, 2018, [http://news.khan.co.kr/kh\\_news/khan\\_art\\_view.html?artid=201805162222005&code=970100#csidx6bcd8bc643be6b7bc74298e7a349dce](http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=201805162222005&code=970100#csidx6bcd8bc643be6b7bc74298e7a349dce) (accessed July 6, 2020).



the “silence” in women’s labor literature on the subject of romance and sexuality is imposed from without; she speculates that the repressive mechanism of Puritanism and virginity discourse is operating within the progressive discourses. But I beg to differ. I believe the silence was rather an explicit form of expression. That is to say, “factory girl” was a label that bore the double brunt of class and sexual stigma in Korean society. The writers of women’s labor literature were thus on guard and sensitive not to tread in any waters that might further entangle their identity in the stigma-filled discourse of the time.

The taboo against expressing sexuality in female labor literature was to a certain degree mirrored in male labor literature that began to appear around the time of the 1987 Great Labor Struggle; the focus of these works was typically on the camaraderie and solidarity of male workers. However, their silence on sexuality had quite different aspects. For example, in *Soenmul ch’öröm* (Like molten steel, 1987), a much talked-about work of labor literature, the protagonist is a male worker in his mid-30s. He is the object of confidence and trust among fellow workers, both senior and junior, as he is good at building brotherly solidarity with men of all different age groups; he is also a father whose son is proud of him. One could say that Chŏng Hwajin, the author, portrays the family as an enlarged version of the subject of struggle, a co-participant in the struggle of the protagonist. On the other hand, the suggestion of a working-class family modeled after a middle-class nuclear family was a device to confer on the working-class family membership in a society where workers were stigmatized and where they were not granted full membership; at the same time, it also shows that from the perspective of cultural politics, it was now acceptable for the working class to become a part of the socially dominant class and adopt its norms. In the novel *Naeil ŭl yŏnŭn chip* (A house that opens the future, 1990) by Pang Hyŏnsŏk, the leading author of labor literature, the male protagonist is the head of the household. When he is fired from work because of his involvement in union activities, he takes over domestic chores at home and looks after the children while his wife obtains a job in a factory and works until he is reinstated. The context of this plot is similar to that in Chŏng’s novel, but in Pang’s novel, the flexible change of gendered roles between husband and wife and a childcare center for children of low-income families reflect contemporaneous issues of the women’s movement too. Nonetheless, such a plot also has the effect of rendering unmarried female factory workers invisible.

Enter Sin’s *Oettanbang*. This novel arrived about a decade late on the labor literature scene in comparison to the labor literature works mentioned above. Its arrival summoned to the foreground the women workers rendered invisible in previous works of labor literature, both male and female, and unlatched the narrative taboo placed on “factory girls” sexuality. However, while the departure point for *Oettanbang* was the author’s courage in revealing her background as a factory girl, the novel did not break the episteme that had forced her into a decade of silence; that is to say, it did not break with the conventional prejudices against working-class women which accompany class and sexual degradation. As a result, *Oettanbang* unwittingly takes on the effect of supporting sexual mores of middle-class women. When compared to women’s lives portrayed in works published by

Sin's peers in the 1990s,<sup>14</sup> this effect is all the more pronounced. Of course, sexual repression is not something inflicted on working class women alone; however, at least in some of the leading works of her peers, it is possible for women to divorce their husband and commit other acts of sexual transgression as an exploration of self-identity or as acts of resistance against patriarchal repression. For example, in the cases of the novelists Kong Chiyŏng and Kim Insuk and poet Ch'oe Yŏngmi, the central motif in their work from this period is often the romantic and sexual experiences of the woman protagonist who is a former student activist from the 1980s. In the cases of Kim Hyŏnggyŏng and Ch'ŏn Kyŏngnin, their protagonists are often middle class women in their 30s for whom marriage is a death knell, and adultery is suggested as a means of discovering their true selves. The narrator in *Oettanbang* is a single woman in the city. Her silence on her own sexuality is a true sign that she was a factory worker, much like Sök and Chang of the 1970s.

### Conclusion

*Oettanbang* is an autobiographical novel based on the author's experience of having worked as a factory girl for four years, from age sixteen to nineteen, in the Kuro Industrial Complex area. The narrative whereby her personal growth could only be measured by her escape from the factory neighborhood, and the confessional narrative of that development, elicited great sympathy from readers. However, the important question of the author's representation of the "factory girl," whose social identity was shaped by the double stigmatization of class and gender, has not been fully explored. Of course, the narrator-cum-author was an "insider," an eyewitness to factory life, and the readers' sympathy could have been the effect of unconsciously conferring authority and authenticity on the experience of the insider. What the novel shows is that the stigma against women workers is so taken for granted that the narrator, with all the authority and authenticity of an insider, is oblivious to it. The narrator speaks of her struggles in terms of her desires for "writing" and "literature," and going to university to make those dreams come true. However, her acknowledgment of her desires is also an acknowledgment of the social stigma against the "factory girl," and her struggle to separate herself from the other factory girls was a way to remove the stigma from herself.

Nonetheless, *Oettanbang* still offers a lesson; when intellectuals speak on behalf of the working class, or when middle class women intellectuals speak on behalf of women's experiences in feminist discourses, such representation can be problematic in and of itself. In the novel *Oettanbang*, the narrator is asked repeatedly, first by the factory girls around her, then by women who are no longer factory girls, and even by Hŭijae ōnni from beyond the grave, to write their stories; sometimes it is as if she is granted permission by them to write them. One needs to look no further than this plot to know that there is a problem and dilemma with representation here.

At the end of the novel, the narrator states: "They were nameless and there

<sup>14</sup> For example, other 386-generation writers such as Kong Chiyŏng, Kim Insuk, Kim Hyŏnggyŏng, Ch'ŏn Kyŏngnin, and the poet Ch'oe Yŏngmi. For further reading on this topic, focusing on Ch'ŏn Kyŏngnin's novels, see Sim Chin'gyŏng 2018.

was no semblance of material abundance in their lives; they had to work and work, moving their ten fingers non-stop. That's who they were. Now, belatedly, I call them my friends. . . . I will never forget how they infused me with social willpower" (419). While this statement suggests that Shin was at least conscious of (if not a slave to) the influence of the labor movement and the labor literature movement that had developed under the influence of Marxism in the 1970s and 1980s, the narrator reminds the reader once again that her writing has been requested, and that permission for her to write has been granted by the women workers, whom she now calls friends. I prefer to read this repeated reminder of the entreaties as a sign of the author's anxiety regarding possible appropriation of lower-class experience by a member of the elite class. In the social movement of "scientific socialism," for example, such anxiety is easily covered up under the banner of vanguardism, or with the claim that the party is the historical and political representative of the proletariat; if anyone becomes aware of one's own anxiety, it is easily dismissed as a problem of individual ideological corruption or laxity in commitment. In *Oettanbang*, the fact that the narrator is asked, again and again, by her former factory friends to write their stories is Sin's way of indicating that the *minjung*, or the people, are discontented with the way they are represented by the elite, or that at least she is privy to the problematic nature of the representation.

However, the narrator has become an intellectual herself. Could it be that Sin is inverting her own anxiety about appropriation and claiming that she bears "their" collective hope to tell their stories? Despite the worry and insecurity of the author, appropriation becomes real. Hūijae ōnni is a neighbor but we do not know her family name. She is a working class woman and is dead. It is not an overstatement to say that she has been crucified on the cross of sexual stigma. By writing in this manner, the narrator reveals not only a painful secret and wound that she has kept to herself, but also her status as a middle-class woman writer who is now out of the range of stigmatization. If an evaluation is allowed, this writer would like to suggest that Sin's *Oettanbang* be re-read as a work that reminds us of the dilemma of representing lower-class women in a feminist discourse led by women intellectuals.

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