

# Art vs. Politics

## Criticism on the Novel in Early Modern Korea

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**Jinhyoung Lee**

Center for Asia & Diaspora, Konkuk University

### Abstract

This paper deals with the development of the Joseon literati's understanding of the novel in early modern Korea, from being viewed as a contingent and amorphous mode of writing to becoming an independently privileged modern literary genre with its own determinate form. From an undifferentiated view of the novel at the beginning of the modern era, it began to be considered either as a medium for expressing political ideologies or as a form of entertainment catering to commercial interests. Through the theoretical elaborations on the novel by Lee Kwangsu, Hyun Chul, and Kim Dongin, it emerged as both a sub-genre of modern literature and an autonomous genre with its own identifiable formal features. Specifically, Lee Kwangsu characterized the novel as a sub-genre of modern literature, capable of expressing "new ideas" (enlightening ideologies), and free from pre-modern didacticism or Confucian morality as well as crass commercial interest or vulgar popular pleasure. Hyun Chul argued that the novel was a distinct and independent genre with its own content ("a poetic truth") and its own formal compositional laws. Finally, Kim Dongin referred to it as a privileged genre, and characterized it as a form of writing that was expressive of "the world of truth." Through these critical commentaries, a distinctive set of features began to be attributed to the novel as a genre, but this differentiation would cost the novel dearly under the Japanese colonial regime.

Wrenched away from ideologies now that it was in possession of a distinct aesthetic, it would lose its power as a medium for political critique in favor of its presumed newly minted formal identity.

### **Keywords**

Lee Kwangsu, Hyun Chul, Kim Dongin, political medium, a form of entertainment, new ideas, the world of truth



Lee Kwangsu (1892-1950), a Korean novelist and essayist who had published hundreds of works including *Mujung* (1917), the first modern novel in Korean literary history



Kim Dongjin (1900-1951), a Korean novelist, essayist, and publisher who launched the first Korean literary magazine based on art for art's sake, *Chanjo* (Creation) (1919)

## The Advent of the “Modern” Understanding of Novel in the Early Modern Joseon Era

In pre-modern Korea, the novel was considered an informal style of writing concerned with trivialities. Unlike the properly literary Confucian scriptures which had pursued truth and goodness like a “science,” the novel was conventionally regarded as a secondary and inferior style of writing due to its penchant for dealing with the world of make-believe and its popularity among the masses. But in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such understanding of the novel was altered fundamentally when some of the Joseon intellectuals went to Japan to study modern civilization and modern literature. From reading Japanese and Western literary discourses and works in Japanese language, intellectuals like Lee Kwangsu,<sup>1</sup> Hyun Chul,<sup>2</sup> and Kim Dongin,<sup>3</sup> learned that the novel was a sub-genre of modern literature with its own organic integrity.

In the early modern era, the development of the Joseon literati’s understanding of the novel was conditioned largely by two major factors. The first concerns the literary aspect owing to the Japanese literature’s influence on the novel. The other involves the social aspect in view of the colonization of Joseon by Japanese imperialism. The Joseon literati had learned from contemporary Japanese literary discourses that the modern novel was the foremost genre of the modern literary genres which Tsubouchi Shoyo (坪内逍遙)<sup>4</sup> and his successors had mainly developed. Specifically, his work, *The Essence of the Novel* (1885-86) was one of the most influential books about literature in modern Japan which was known in Japanese literary history to be the first example of a work that applied systematically the notion of the “novel” as “the prosaic fiction in general.” In this book, he argued that only “the novel proper” could contribute to the emotional development of the readers by imitating the complex and sophisticated emotion of civilized men. For him, the task of the novel was to show “the un-shown by describing clearly the secret of the cause-effect relations in the human world” (Tomi Suzuki 52-55). This is to say that the novel was deemed to be the literary genre which was responsible for representation of the invisible truth of everyday life such as in revealing the relationship of contingent facts or inci-

dents. Drawing from his argument, the Japanese naturalist writers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century deemed the novel as “a supreme and ultimate medium for showing the truth of life directly.” After Shoyo’s pioneering arguments about it, the novel acquired a privileged status upon which the lively discussions about it that followed in modern Japan were based (Tomi Suzuki 81-85). As such, the Joseon literati adopted the idea that the novel, indeed, was a distinct and privileged literary genre.

Although their understanding of the novel was influenced by Japanese literary discourse in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the members of the Joseon literati were not mere blind adherents of this discourse. Representative and illustrative of them were Lee Kwangsu and Kim Dongin who had returned from studying in Japan and led the discussions of the modern novel in the early modern era.

Unlike Shoyo’s understanding of novel as the form to use for imitating the real world and depicting the emotion of civilized men, Lee Kwangsu insisted that in the modern novel the “writer’s imaginative world” was more important than “the real world as such.” This understanding was based on the belief that whereas the latter was the uncultivated world to be developed, the former refers to the world of culture, cultivated people, and the reformist ideas. In this context, unlike the contemporary Japanese naturalists who associated the novel with the imitation of reality out there, Kim Dongin called for the novelists’ active intervention inward into the world of the novel itself (Hwang Jongyon 272-273), emphasizing the novelist’s creativity. In this regard, he thought that the main principle or criterion for measuring the artistic value of a novel work was “the creation of the world which he himself could control” (Kim Dongin 20). This difference shows that the Joseon literati’s understanding of the novel developed relatively independently from Japanese literary discourse in this era.<sup>5</sup> In addition, this relative independence could also be demonstrated by the fact that, in the late 1930s, the Japanese imperialists or collaborators demanded loudly the necessity for building a “national literature” based on the unification of Joseon and Japanese literature. This implies, ironically, their separate developments rather than their unification.

Even if the Joseon literati had learned from Japanese literary discourse, their understanding of the novel had taken shape and developed in a different context; that is, in the context of the concrete and specific social circumstances of the colonization by Japanese imperialism. This difference in the context may also help explain the relatively independent development of the Joseon literati's understanding of the novel from Japanese literary discourse. Drawing on this relative independence, this paper deals with their understanding of the novel by the Joseon literati. This will be tackled separately from the issue of the influence of Japanese literary discourse on the Joseon literati's notion, although such influence was notable.

In this regard, the social determination of Japanese imperialism is significant in two ways. One is that it brought the capitalistic relation of production and consumption of literary works into Joseon society. Specifically, after 1910, the year of the forced occupation of Joseon by Japanese imperialism, the capitalistic formation of Joseon society had most of the writers embedded into the commodity production-consumption system, and thus, some of the writers had to acknowledge the novel as a form of entertainment contributing to commercialism. For example, Choi Chansik who was one of the bestselling writers in the 1910s had scarcely dealt with any social or political issues, but mainly with love stories between a man and a woman. Understandably, his first novel, *Chuwolsaek* (*The Color of Autumn Moon*), became the bestselling book by Hoedongseoguan, the biggest book publisher and merchant company by the early 1920s (Nam Seoksoon 96-97). As a consequence, "the new novel" as the representative form of the novel in this era, was criticized due to its excessive popularity and commercialism. As such, even the writers who swore by the dictum of "art for art' sake" in the 1920s knew well that they were not just artists pursuing beauty but also laborers earning a living (O Munseok 98-105).

On the other hand, Japanese imperialism had aroused most of the Joseon intellectuals' resistance against it. Specifically, before 1910, they were primarily interested in discovering political ways for defeating Japanese invasion, and, accordingly, thought literature as the political means for achieving their political end. After 1910, however, their interests gradually

shifted to reformism, acknowledging the Colonial Government as a reality. With the worsening political oppression and the wide dissemination of the skill-cultivation theory in the 1910's which pursued political independence by means of capitalistic modernization of Joseon society, the view of literature as a political weapon slowly fell out of fashion. In this era, the Joseon intellectuals began to think that the development of capitalist society as a modern and powerful social formation in colonial Joseon could be followed by political liberation giving the Joseon nation the power to overcome their colonial conditions. In other words, the liberation of the Joseon nation from Japanese colonial rule was now considered the final goal which was deemed achievable not by fighting politically, but by being entrenched in modern civilization and the capitalist system, including changing old ideas and conventions (Park Chanseung 134-142). Following such skill-cultivation theory, the reconstruction theory in the early 1920's had presumed the precedence of cultural modernization of Joseon nations ("cultural movement") over the political liberation of the Joseon nation (Park Chanseung 197-208). In this context, the recognition of the novel as a modern literary genre was deemed as participating in that cultural modernization, and thus, the Joseon literati's focus of interest also shifted from questions of political relevance to literary refinement or artistic value. As the shift transpired, the novel became differentiated from any other literary genres and began to be privileged as a genre with a superior value.

### **Three Views on the Novel: As a Political Medium, a Form of Entertainment, and a Sub-Genre of Modern Literature**

It was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that the understanding of novel as a distinct literary genre appeared and gained wide currency in Joseon. For example, Park Eunsik<sup>6</sup> and Shin Chaeho<sup>7</sup> as the representative intellectuals in this era saw the novel from the perspective of "the political novel" which had flourished in the Meiji Era of Japan (1868-1912). Specifically, their exposition can be summarized in three arguments: Firstly, everyone can read and likes to read novels. Secondly, the novel has the power to affect people and change their disposition. Thirdly, the novel is "the soul of nations" which

makes it “a compass for nations.” It may be inferred from these arguments that they wanted to make the novel a political weapon that may be wielded in fighting against Japanese invasion, characterizing novel as a medium for expressing political ideologies in the hope of promoting the Joseon people’s resistance. For Joseon intellectuals who were immersed in the political issues around 1910, the year of the forced occupation of Joseon by Japanese imperialism, the usefulness of the novel for their political struggles was viewed as paramount.

Unlike the pre-modern view of the novel as an inferior and indistinct type of writing which had been presumed merely as a fictive narrative dealing with trivialities of people and society, the Joseon intellectuals’ understanding of the novel as a political medium raised its value and usefulness. From this perspective, the novel was often identified with a form of historical description whose value or usefulness depended on the criterion of “factuality.” (Kim Jaeyeong 27-38). Unlike the pre-modern view of the novel as merely all about fiction, and lacking in “scientific value,” it was now located within the field of literature for its “factuality” and political usefulness, as opposed to its erstwhile pre-modern quality of “fictiveness.” For all the emphasis on the novel as a political medium, however, the term “novel” began to be regarded as a significant type of writing in Joseon.

As shown in the cases of Park Eunsik and Shin Chaeho, the novel had not denoted a specific type of narrative genre with its own composition or grammars. For this reason, many of newspapers had published different types of writing, including narrative fiction, editorial, short stories, historical description under the category, “novel.” In other words, the novel did not refer to an exquisite literary production by professional artists; instead, it broadly referred to diverse types of writing, though, after the publication of Lee Injik’s “new novel,” *Blood Tear* (1907) which was known as the first “new novel” in Korean literary history<sup>8</sup>, many literary works began to be written in the name of the “novel.” Having understood literary genres quite confusingly this way, even the reporters for Maeilshinbo (*Korean Daily News*) had written “novels,” even as, inversely, Cho Jungwhan, the best-selling author, had published his novels in his capacity as “reporter.” In the early modern



era, in short, the novel was not the term referring to a distinct literary genre (Kim Jaeyeong 242-243), but to diverse types of writing, including historical description.

Meanwhile, most of newspapers had incessantly published “novels,” and, in some cases, even put them on the front page. For them, the novel was primarily understood as a kind of popular entertainment useful for promoting sales. In this regard, some novelists had basically shared this understanding of the novel, as shown in the “Epilogue” of *Blood of Flower* (1912) by Lee Hae-jo, the other best-selling writer in this era:

As a reporter says, the prime purpose of novel is the rectification of the conventional customs and the edification of the existing society by writing fiction consistent with human emotions. The believable characters and events in the novel will give true pleasure to the ladies and gentlemen concentrating on the novel, and, with this pleasure, their behaviors might be modified by having them recognize the conventional customs and social manners that must be swept away. Therefore, I, as a reporter, wish you get the pleasure and are well influenced by reading my novel (349).

In the above paragraphs, Lee Haejo referred to himself not as a writer nor a novelist, but a reporter, and characterized the novel as a popular fiction, which has the power to rectify the conventional customs, edify the existing society and give pleasure to its readers. Specifically, three arguments may be drawn from his discussion. The first is the lack of self-identification of the novelist. As mentioned above, during this era, the author did not identify himself as a novelist. This implies his apparent undifferentiated understanding of the genres. And, the second is the functionalist view of the novel. The presumed social function of the novel to rectify and edify, however, implies that the novel was viewed as a political type of writing and not necessarily and strictly of a literary kind. As for its social function, there seems to be no perceived difference between the novel and the other styles of writings, for example, the editorial writing or historical description. Finally, the third is the affirmation of the novel’s ability to provide pleasure by being fictive. In this regard, unlike the pre-modern devaluation of the novel for its fictiveness, Lee Haejo had a positive notion of the novel. And unlike Park

Eunsik and Shin Chaeho's understanding of novel as based on the criterion of "factuality," significantly, he characterized it basically as a form of fictive narrative. In this regard, fictiveness became the necessary feature of novel from which emerged its power to provide pleasure to its readers. Despite the undifferentiated understanding of novel as a literary genre initially, the novel began to be used as the term referring to a worthy type of writing imbued with social and commercial values.

Nevertheless, it was Lee Kwangsu's discussions on modern literature that the novel began to be regarded as a distinct literary genre; that is, as a sub-genre of modern literature in Joseon. In his essay *What is the Literature* (1916), he insisted that modern literature had its own distinct domain and value from the others, positing a set of cognitive systems (science, literature, and morality) and psychological trichotomy (understanding, emotion, and reason). Drawing on his cognitive systems, specifically, literature was differentiated from the domains of science or morality, arguing that it pursued the "fulfillment of emotions," and, thus, contained as much artistic value as music or painting. In this regard, he characterized the sub-genres of modern literature as consisting of article, novel, play, and poem, criticizing its detractors who had referred to the novel as a kind of "joke" or "story." He called the writer skilled at writing the novel a "novelist," branding the detractors' opinions as "the cries of ignorance." He insisted that "novel was not a naive kind of writing with no value," but one that is capable of making "its readers feel as if they are seeing their own realities in the world of the novel, presenting this world as the result of the writer's imagination," even as it simultaneously depicts a realistic and detailed description of the pieces of life (Lee Kwangsu 513). He criticized the commercialist view of the novel as a type of writing simply pursuing popularity through fictiveness—just like the way a "joke" or a "story" does. For him, the novel was far from being a kind of writing by individuals with no professional skills or artistic aptitude, and he demanded to substitute such a conventional view of the novel with the new and modern one—a genre of realistic writing created by the novelist's imagination.

In his essay *The Epilogue of the Selection of Novel Award Winner* (1918), then, Lee Kwangsu suggested that the modern novel consisted of the following features: the use of the purely poetic sentence, the novelist's authentic attitude toward the writing, the break from didacticism, the man and world in real life, and the introduction of new ideas. Among these features, however, he strongly emphasized the break from didacticism and the introduction of new ideas. Didacticism around conservative practices like patriarchy was not good for the development of civilization and modernization of Joseon society and therefore, must be overthrown. In this regard, he asserted that the novel as a modern literary genre could be a useful medium for enlightening Joseon nations by expressing the modern ideas.<sup>9</sup> For him, therefore, the novel was defined as the genre that expressed new ideas by means of poetic sentences and the writer's realistic attitude.

As a result, for Lee Kwangsu, the novel as a modern literary genre belonged to the domain of emotion, which was freed from the pre-modern didacticism or Confucian morality, as well as capitalist commercialism or vulgar pleasure. In addition, it was also defined as a genre of literature which has the power to enlighten readers (Joseon nations) by expressing new ideas, and a political medium for encouraging Joseon nations' participation in the independence movement. Despite his differentiated understanding of novel as a distinct genre, however, just like for Park Eunsik and Shin Chae-ho, his excessive interest on the politics allowed him to pay attention only to its political usefulness, but not to its grammar, style or form. In this regard, even his attention to the formal feature of the novel such as the purely poetic sentences was not for its artistic completion, but its political effect. To sum it up, it was with his understanding of novel as a sub-genre of modern literature that novel became acknowledged as a literary genre within its domain of emotion for the first time in Joseon, though its significance as literature was dependent on its extra-literary purpose, namely, upon the enlightenment of its readers in view of political ends.

## The Novel as an Independent Literary Genre

After the March 1<sup>st</sup> Independence Movement (1919) which was the largest and most important protest action against Japanese Imperialism in the colonial era, significant changes transpired in Joseon society, in general, and the literary world, in particular. One is the change in the Colonial Government's style of governance from being coercive to conciliatory. This made the publication of literary works easier than in 1910s. The other is the change in the Joseon intellectuals' strategy for achieving the independence of Joseon nation from Japanese rule from political action to cultural development. More specifically, whereas, the nationalist intellectuals in the 1910s had insisted primarily on the political liberation of Joseon nation from Japanese rule, the intellectuals in the early 1920s—most of whom had returned from abroad, mainly, Japan—emphasized cultural rather than political independence. If the core of the nation lies not in any social institutions but in its culture, then, they believed that cultural cultivation would bring them true liberation. As a result, along with the easier publication of literary works and greater emphasis placed on cultural cultivation, modern literature and the novel as its major genre, gained a higher stature and began to be considered more important.

Thus, the literati paid more attention to the aesthetic features of the novel as an art—its formal components and composition—affirming Lee Kwangsu's understanding of the novel as a sub-genre of modern literature but ignoring his view of novel as a medium of enlightenment. This point is expressed clearly in Hyun Chul's series of essays regarding the novel in the early 1920's, namely, *Overview of Novel* (1920.6), *Overview of Novel (continue)* (1920.7) and *The Research Methodology of Novel* (1920.8-9). However, as he explains in the introduction of *Overview of Novel*, the essays were meant for a textbook for an intensive course on Art and Play (演藝講習所), which was written on the basis of his notes during his student days at the Tokyo Art Group Affiliated Play School (Hyun Chul 131). As a result, his essays were filled with just the introductory descriptions of the novel form derived from Japanese literary discourses, rather than his own original ideas of it.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, these essays are valuable as early examples of an attempt to identify the components and composition of the modern novel in Joseon.

In Hyun Chul's two essays under the title *Overview of Novel*, the trichotomy of modern literature—the lyric, epic, and play—and novel were the object of analysis. According to him, the lyric is the genre for expressing the writer's ideas, the epic is the genre for describing its external reality, and both the play and the novel are the genres for describing the figures of the outside world while simultaneously expressing the writer's ideas and emotions. In particular, from their compositional aspects, the play and the novel also are differentiated as genres. On one hand, the play as “a composite art” is constituted by diverse elements like the actor's gesture, text, stage background, sound or music, and the likes. On the other hand, the novel is defined as the genre that is made of “the main text” alone. In addition, while the latter is a genre that does not demand from its writer the use of any “extraordinary techniques,” the former is a genre that requires specific “formalities and regulations.” Strictly speaking, such division and characterization seem oversimplified and insufficient for any further analysis, but in the context of the Joseon literati's understanding of the novel in the early modern period, the point now is not to count their errors or problems but to pay attention to the fact that he made distinctions between the modern literary genres such as lyric, epic, play, and novel. Significantly, for the first time in Joseon, such classification of literary genres was based on the composition of formal features.

Moreover, in his essay of *Overview of Novel*, Hyun Chul listed and explicated on the five components of the novel as plot, figure (character), setting, sentence, and writer's view of life (universal truth). Drawing on his explanations, the plot as an indispensable component of “a complete novel” is the element by which the novel can prompt the readers to feel like watching the events in the real society unfold before them. In other words, it is by means of the plot that the novel can present “the true reality of life” or “the true meaning of life” by providing coherence to seemingly disparate events. Moreover, the characters in the novel should appear as dynamic figures through gestures while the text should suggest imaginative ways of

presenting figures, instead of describing them just literally or anatomically according to their psychology. In addition, he states that the setting should establish the time and place for the action and the characters while for the “sentence,” he posits that it is the better to use “dialogue” between characters rather than “narration” of a series of events for the purpose of plot development. Finally, the writer’s view of life should be embodied in the novel’s “poetic truth” which is not a universal and immortal truth, nor a simple morality; it is “the true reality of life.”

Despite his attempt at distinguishing between the play and the novel, the distinction he made seems confusing because the basis for the opposition between the play and the novel, as well as with the lyric and the epic was unclear. Moreover, he seemed to have assumed a parallelism between novel’s five components and the play’s basic elements. This, because he seems to have assumed that the play and the novel were similar genres based on “the line of narrative”<sup>11</sup>, in the sense that he considered them to be both narrative genres meant for expressing the writer’s view of life through the plotting of the characters’ actions and the dialogues. In fact, he asserted that “most of modern novelists had the tendency to utilize the composition of play” (Hyun Chul 132) defining the modern novel even as “a kind of simple play” and “the seeable play in the car or on the desk” (Hyun Chul 138).

For all its ambiguity, Hyun Chul’s explanation was definitely distinct from the understanding of the novel developed by the preceding intellectuals such as Shin Chaeho, Park Eunsik, Lee Haejo, and Lee Kwangsu in the 1910s. He insisted that the novel was a modern literary genre that should explore “a poetic truth” which was a kind of unification of scientific truth and everyday truth (Hyun Chul 128). Moreover, contrary to the literati in the 1910s who had regarded the novel as a modern literary genre mainly from the perspective of political medium or commercial interest, Hyun Chul suggested that its final goal is the narration of “a poetic truth” by utilizing the components of plot, figure (character), background, and sentence (mainly, dialogue). Consequently, the modern novel as a complete novel must not express any political ideologies or pursue popularity for commercialism but try to narrate “a poetic truth,” that is “the true reality of life,” although this

is insufficiently discussed in his essays. Consequently, it could be said that, with him, the novel began to be considered a distinct and independent genre with its own content (“a poetic truth”) and its own formal composition in Joseon.

### The Novel as a Privileged Literary Genre

Compared with the ambiguity of Hyun Chul’s introductory explanations of the novel, Kim Dongin’s discourse of novel had earned its precision and depth from a critical study of contemporary novels and drawing from his own writings. From around 1920, he had written a series of essays about novel such as *On Joseon Nations’ Ideas of Novel* (1919.1), *The World Which I Created* (1920.7), *The Composition of Novel* (1925.4-7), *A Study on Modern Joseon Novel* (1929.7-8), *A Trend of Novel World* (1933.12), *From the Library of Student Studying Novel* (1934.3), *The Victory of Modern Novel* (1934), among others. As this paper’s aim is to deal with Joseon literati’s understanding of novel in the early modern era, his essays after 1925 would not be examined in here.

First of all, in his essay *On Joseon Nations’ Ideas of Novel*, Kim Dongin keenly drew the boundary line between types of novels by establishing a dichotomy between the popular novel and literary novel. He also asserted the need to modernize the notion of the novel, which is understood conventionally, positing its superiority over any other kinds of writing. Drawing from his arguments, the Joseon nations’ ideas about the novel had been dominated by the notion that the novel was a type of writing that was both popular and decadent—a misunderstanding that needed to be corrected. But if viewed as a popular writing, the novel was merely a form of entertainment, full of “base and trivial ideas for attracting readers,” a reading matter filled with “vulgarity, coarseness, dirtiness, and ugliness.” If so, therefore, it should not be called a novel in its strict sense (Kim Dongin 33). The novel as a modern literary genre—the literary novel—should be involved in the work of creation of the world of “a true self, a true love, a true life, and a true living” (Kim Dongin 33). The novel is able to do so by excluding all of the factual selves, factual loves, and factual lives with the kind of “vulgarity,

coarseness, dirtiness, and ugliness” associated with the popular novel. In short, distinctly viewed from the point of view of its creation of the “true” world, the literary novel was not only differentiated from the popular novel in terms of reflecting the “factual” and decadent world by suffering from its lack of creativity, but it became privileged as the one and only genre with creativity as its essence.

Apparently, Kim Dongin’s notion of novel as a form of writing for creating “the world of truth” does not seem very different from Hyun Chul’s view of novel as a genre for representing “the true reality of life.” That is, for both of them, the modern novel was considered a distinct and independent genre for narrating or realizing the truth of life within its world. Unlike Hyun Chul’s ambiguous understanding of genres, on the other hand, Kim Dongin thought that, by means of its own composition, only the literary novel could complete the task of creation of “the world of truth,” which was not dependent on any political ideologies or commercial interests, but only on its own internal unity and self-integration. For demonstrating its relevance and exploring its composition, he examined the western novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the contemporary Joseon novels including his own works. To illustrate this from the perspective of the creation of “the world of truth” based on the literary novel’s internal unity and self-integration, he concluded that Tolstoy’s composition was superior to Dostoevsky’s:

The greatness of Tolstoy is here. It is not a matter of whether the figures of his creations are true or false. Art is not concerned with the distinction between the two. Besides, it is not a matter of whether the world of his creation is true or false, because this is his original creation. ... No matter how wicked Tolstoy’s idea is and how admirable Dostoevskii’s idea is, the authentic artist is the former because he ruled it by his own hand. Tolstoy was satisfied with the world of his creations, whether true or not. This is the great value that Tolstoy’s art contains (Kim Dongin 23).

In the above paragraph, there are two things worth pointing out. One is that art does not distinguish between fact and fiction. This invalidates factuality as a criterion for evaluating art-works because the world is in the art-work itself as the novelist’s creation from the outset, no matter how real



or not real. The other is that conventional morality or political ideology should not be the criterion for evaluating novels; instead, what is relevant is writer's power to rule over the world of his creation in the novel. Therefore, the literary novel is not the medium for expressing conventional moralities or political ideologies. As an independent and privileged genre creating "the world of truth," the novel was separated from the real society.

Furthermore, in his essay *The Composition of Novel*, he articulated the historical development and composition of the novel for the purpose of demonstrating its generic independence. Except for the chapter, *Something Like an Introduction*, this essay consists of three parts, namely, "The Origin of Novel and Its History," "Conception," and "Styles." Among them, in the chapter of "The Origin of Novel and Its History," he describes, in general, the history of development of novel from legend to myth, to the story of knights, and, finally, to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. "Conception" offers a detailed explanation of novel's basic elements such as event, character, and atmosphere, examining contemporary Joseon novels such as Lee Injik's *The Sound of Ghost* (1906-1907), Lee Kwangsu's *Mujung (The Heartless)* (1917), and Kim Dongin's own work *Those Who Lacked Love* (1920). From these works, the novel is characterized as a form of writing for realizing "the simplification of life," namely, "the unified and simplified parts of life" (Kim Dongin 42) by harmonizing events (a unity of story, plot), characters (figures living in novel), and atmosphere (an element embracing the events and the figures, namely, circumstance or setting). Finally, in "Styles," he delineated closely the three styles, namely, a single viewpoint, a multiple viewpoints, and an entirely objective description, and insisted on the importance of novelist's choice of style for writing a novel.

In the context of the development of Joseon literati's understanding of the novel, Kim Dongin's *The Composition of the Novel* is significant in three respects in relation to "the world of truth" around which the novel was believed to revolve. First, it demonstrates the historical legitimacy of the novel as a modern literary genre tracing its pre-history and showing it to be the result of the historical development of narrative literature. Second, it shows the relevance of the modern novel in Joseon society as illustrated by

the contemporary novels in his era. On the basis of this assertion, thus, he even tried to map out the method for its composition. Third, it emphasizes the privileged status of the novel capable of creating “the world of truth.” In these three points, he explored the proper ways in which “the world of truth” was realized and showed them to be consistent only with the novel, and not with any other literary genres. In this regard, the novelist can create and rule over that world only by deploying the God-like omniscient point of view in his narrative. As a result, with this essay, for the first time in Joseon literary history, the “novel” was eventually deemed an autonomous and privileged genre with its own history and proper composition as in the three components and styles mentioned earlier.

For Kim Dongin, therefore, the modern novel demands a novelist’s creativity according to its own formal composition for achieving the internal unity and self-integration of the novelistic world, and “the world of truth,” realized by its formal elements like event, character, atmosphere, and plot. Most of all, however, “the world of truth” is the core of his understanding of the novel because it is the crucial factor which makes the modern novel a unique literary genre. In other words, unlike the other literary genres aiming at the factual reflection or representation of the real world, it is a form of writing for creating a truthful world though it is non-factual and non-experiential. For Dongin, this world is not consistent with the conventionally religious, philosophical and scientific models of thoughts, but only with the novelist’s cognitive, moral, and aesthetic capacities, and creative possibilities (Hwang Jongyon 273). From this viewpoint, indeed, the modern novel was deemed superior to any other form of writings. However, by simply aiming at the creation of the “the world of truth” separated from the real society and wrapped up in its own complacent little world of unity and integration, the modern novel was no longer subject to any demonstration of validity.

The more Kim Dongin became interested in the novel’s internal formal composition and its self-satisfied imaginary world, the less he was concerned with the external real world, its cultural significance, and such matters as the reformation of Joseon nations or the reconstruction of Joseon society.<sup>12</sup> As such, the modern novel enjoys living in the world of its own creation as

“the imagined place of freedom and liberation,” but, at the same time, it is a “pseudo-real place in the virtual world” (So Yeonghyen 235). To reiterate, the modern novel was not written for the purpose of transforming the real society to “the world of truth” or transplanting “the world of truth” into the real society. Rather, the more the novel was deemed to be asserting its superiority to the real society, the more it demonstrated its rupture from it. In other words, its superiority was achieved at the cost of its relevance to the real society losing the most important singular feature it once possessed – its political power. The rupture with the real life of “vulgarity, coarseness, dirtiness, and ugliness” and the creation of its own complacent little world of unity and integration was the only way to the world of “a true self, a true love, a true life, and a true living,” the true liberation, which was superior to any other political or social liberation.

### **The De-Politicization and Re-Politicization of the Novel**

The Joseon literati’s understanding of the novel was conditioned strongly by the limitations imposed by the Japanese colonial rule of Joseon. As shown in the earlier examples, Lee Kwangsu believed that the novel could help reform the pre-modern Joseon society, and thus, liberate it from Japanese rule. Basically, Hyun Chul and Kim Dongin shared the idea about the novel’s social importance although they thought about it only from the point of view of cultural reform or artistic reconstruction through narrating “a poetic truth” or creating “the true reality of life.” However, the more the modern novel was considered an independently privileged literary genre, the more its relationship with the actual and political conditions became weak and fragile. As shown in Kim Dongin’s argument about the novel, its privileged status could be achieved only by being uprooted from its real base: the political or social conditions of Joseon in this era. In other words, in the context of the Japanese colonial rule, the transcendental world of truth of the novel could be based on a recognition of the coloniality of Joseon society.

In this regard, it should be pointed out that the development of the Joseon literati’s understanding of the novel was conditioned by the change in the political situation around 1919. To prevent the resistance of the Joseon

intellectuals after the March 1<sup>st</sup> Independence Movement, Japanese imperialism had to allow more freedom of cultural activities than before although it was definitely limited to the cultural level, giving rise to a politics of collaboration. But even if this change was very important, it could not be assumed that their view of the novel as the locus of “truth” and an independent literary genre was the immediate result of a politics of collaboration. In this era, the Joseon literati believed in devoting their lives to art itself, or even, to the cultural reformation of colonial Joseon for the purpose of its true liberation. Ironically, however, it could be said that their understanding was not inconsistent with Japanese colonial policy in the early 1920s given the limited freedom of art imposed by the colonial government. In other words, “the world of truth” which they wanted to create could not be imagined without presuming the so-called literary world to be independent of any economic or political interests. In short, it was impossible to live in “the imagined place of freedom and liberation” without accepting the colonial rule. It could be said, as a result, that the development of the Joseon literati’s understanding of novel in the early modern period as a form of writing capable of creating an internally unified and self-integrated world was not merely due to a withdrawal from nationalist politics but also to the adoption of a politics of collaboration which left the colonial domination of Japanese imperialism basically untouched.

Therefore, it might be deemed symptomatic of the significance of these developments that KAPF (Korea Artista Proleta Federation) was organized in 1925, the same year of the publication of Kim Dongin’s essay “The Composition of the Novel.” At the very same moment of the novel’s rise as a distinct and privileged literary genre in Joseon, the challenge to this notion in an attempt to restore its political power was launched by KAPF through the continued effort to align the novel to its nationalist and socialist politics, the politics of resistance to the colonial rule. Most of all, this was due to the fact that KAPF’s criticism was aimed to convert the hitherto bourgeois notion of the novel. It was fashioned to become the new proletarian one that was meant to resist the Japanese colonial rule. In this regard, it could be said that the organization of KAPF exposed the Joseon literati’s politics

of collaboration by critically re-contextualizing their understanding of the novel from the perspective of nationalist and socialist politics.

As a result, the arguments about the novel in the early modern Joseon could be summarized in two ways. On the one hand, it can be said that the modern understanding of novel as an autonomous and privileged literary genre was acknowledged when the literati, in general, affirmed its autonomous and privileged status, as shown illustratively in the case of Kim Dongin. On the other, such an acknowledgement by the literati enabled a self-conscious questioning of this status by reflecting critically on its political significance, thereby exposing its collaborative politics in the colonial Joseon era. With their criticism, thus, the arguments about the novel had to engage with both of its aesthetic-formal side and political-ideological side, its autonomous and privileged status and its political implication. In other words, the politics of the novel had to engage with its formal autonomy, and its formal composition had to deal with its politics. Therefore, it could be said that in the mid-1920s, the earlier dichotomous conception of the novel either as a political means or a purely formal work developed into a notion that fused the two dimensions about it as a genre—whether its politics was intentional or not. With this development, the novel could be understood as a literary genre that is both aesthetic and political.

## Notes

All quotations in this article are my translations.

1. He was a novelist and an essayist, who had published hundreds of works including *Mujung (The Heartless)*, the first modern novel in Korean literary history. After returning from studying in Japan in the 1910's, he took part in the March 1<sup>st</sup> Independence Movement and preached modern ideologies based on liberalism and individualism. However, in the late colonial era, insisted that Joseon nations had to take part in a series of Japanese imperialist wars. Despite his blatant collaborative activities in the late colonial era, he is recognized as a pioneer of modern Korean literature due to his writings which were based on the Enlightenment ideology in the early modern era.
2. He was known as a pioneer of the modern drama in Korea, who had founded the Joseon Actor School (1925), managed the Joseon Theater (1927) for several months, and translated or introduced a lot of Western plays into Joseon including Shakespeare and Turgenev.
3. As a novelist, he self-published the first purely literary journal *Changjo (Creation)* in Joseon (1919), and led the "art for art's sake" movement in the 1920's, writing many short stories and essays. But in the 1930s, as a collaborator, he wrote a number of Pro-Japanese works. After the liberation from Japanese colonialism, he organized the nationalist literary organization, an anti-communist literary movement. Nevertheless, he is recognized as one of the best short story writers in Korean literary history.
4. He was a novelist, a playwright, and a literary critic who led the modernistic reformation movement of the play in the late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries by founding the literary journal *Waseda literature (早稻田文學)* in 1891. He became famous for translating 40 books on Shakespeare in the Japanese language.
5. For example, while the mainstream modern Japanese novel was *Watakushi-Shosetsu* (I-novel), a type of writing pursuing "direct self-expression" in Joseon, this type of novel was not dominant. In most cases, although they sometimes wrote literary works similar to *Watakushi-Shosetsu*, most of Joseon writers had a penchant for describing the objective reality by focusing on figures' actions or events, rather than for expressing directly their internal selves. The literary critics also shared that penchant, as evidenced by the fact that in the dispute of novel in the late 1930s—one of the most important literary disputes in Korean literary history—what they had in mind was the "Roman," the full-length novel that succeeded the Western realist novel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the literary genre

- based on the literary realism and anchored in bourgeois ideology. See Lee Jinhyoung, *Theories of Novel of the Colonial Korea in Late 1930's*. Somyong, 2013.
6. He was an intellectual who had learned from the Confucianism as a traditional science and, in the 1900s, preached the restoration of national sovereignty based on the reformation of Confucianism and the “righteous army” movement as the means for achieving the national sovereignty. In addition, he was famous for writing *The Painful History of Korea* (1915) focusing on Japanese invasion of Joseon.
  7. He was a historian who had written some biographies about the pre-modern heroes such as Uljimundeok, Lee Soonshin, and the like. After leaving Joseon in 1910, however, he became an independence activist leading Korean independence movements in Russia and China, writing his famous essay *A Declaration of Korea's Revolution* (1923) as a member of *Uiyeoldan*, the anti-Japanese military independence movement organization. For these activities, he is recognized as one of the greatest independent activists in Korean independent movement history.
  8. The modernity of *Blood Tear* could be found in its criticism of the corruption and the backwardness of the Joseon dynasty, affirming the importance of modern cultures and civilizations. Thematically, this novel revolves around the longing for a civilized world and the affirmation of “the freedom of marriage”—a marriage according to the free will of individuals, not conventionally upon the order of the family—as a mark of the civilized men.
  9. Lee Kwangsu's early novels, for example, *Mujung* (1917) and *The Pioneer* (1917) were referred to as “political novels,” as these works contained ideas meant to contribute to the awareness of the people about Joseon's political liberation from Japanese rule and the Joseon nations' spiritual reformation.
  10. In his article ““Hyun Chul's Arguments of Literary Art,” Park Taegyung demonstrated persuasively that Hyun Chul's view of novel had been shaped under the influence of Tsubouchi Shoyo and Tsubouchi Dosio's (坪内銳雄) discourses of modern literature which, around 1900, were dominant in the Japanese literary world. For example, this influence could be evidenced by his classification of the novel and the play under the same literary genre (Park Taegyung 376-377).
  11. In the 1910's, writers thought the play as a performance genre consisted of a well-plotted narrative structure, its own methodology of statement, and “the competed text.” From this notion of the play, however, the boundary line of novel and play may be erased due to their sharing of the fundamental feature of “the line of narrative.” This is the reason why the Joseon literati in this era accepted the firm affinity between the novel and the play (Kwon Boduerae 188-192). Thus, Hyun Chul also shared such a view.
  12. Kim Dongin's ideas regarding the cultural politics of novel could be illustrated by such statements as “let's transform our society to the purely artistic society

by substituting the ultra-infantile popular novel for the healthy literary novel, and the equation of the novel and decadence for the equation of the novel and culture” (Kim Dongin, “The World Which I Created” 20). From about the mid-1920s when he published his essay “The Composition of Novel,” however, such a statement could not be found in his writings anymore.



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